

Cyberprovincialism

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It is a common assumption of cyber-anthropologists, that an increase in virtuality leads to an increased level of internationalism, cosmopolitan lifestyle, and a global, borderless image space. [Rath, 1987] [Fassler, 1999] [Ascott, 2000] The national territories supposedly dissolve, borders become meaningless and cultural differences melt into a ubiquitous image space, sound-pool and hypertext archive. The pilot projects of telematic art, connected the teepees of First Nation chiefs with European media centres [Ascott, 1989] or Wien with Vancouver - creating a virtual supermerger city called "Wiencover". [Grundmann, 1984] or well connected spots on the map like the MIT, Centre Pompidou, ZKM

In his essay, "Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?" (1990), Ascott tries to "embrace" a mankind built from a variety of nations, cultures, languages and historical backgrounds via digital technology and bring them together in a melting-pot of telematically mediated consciousness. Ascott's notion of a "unified planetary consciousness" is definitely a humanistic approach to harmonize a diversified population of a globe in war, it is however also an ideological notion. I will try to show that Roy Ascott's "Telematic Embrace" squeezed the beloved one to the level of stifling rather than caressing him or her softly.

The theoretical framework, Roy Ascott and colleagues built their assumptions on, were based on the writings of Norbert Wiener, Heinz von Foerster, the I Ching, and Pierre Teilhard de Jardin, who himself heavily draw from Henri Bergson and Peter Russell. Russell suggested that a "global brain" would emerge as an evolutionary step in a global transition from geosphere via biosphere to noosphere. After the tectonic plates have shifted and rearranged the terrain, and after a Darwinian evolution has arrived at a human of our type, a process of consciousness-based evolution would transform the planet once more. The "noosphere" as a final evolutionary step would unite individuals of all nations, languages and cultural coding (fashion, music, lifestyles) on the basis of a flexible platform of digital communication. To dramatically understate what Roy Ascott had in mind one could say that his "planetary consciousness" was a "Super Second Life" enriched with sex, drugs and a bit of philosophy. This may sound cynical but the artworks Ascott and other artists produced, definitely had predecessor function to "Second Life" settings and to the conceptual base of various contemporary international networking projects.

An art-history of projects that can be labelled “attempts to expand locality” would probably include:

- 1950ies **Family of Man.**
Photographic Exhibition 1955
curated by Edward Steichen for MOMA New York
- 1980ies **The World in 24 Hours**
Fax, Slow Scan TV, Telematic Installation, 1982
Robert Adrian X, a.o.
- Wiencouver IV.**
Collaborative Text-Sound Performance, 1983
*An imaginary city hanging invisible in the
space between its two poles: Vienna and Vancouver.*
Hank Bull, Helmut Mark, Zelko Wiener u.a.
- Aspects of GAIA: digital pathway across the whole earth.**
Shared-authorship multimedia installation 1989
Roy *Ascott* with Peter *Appleton* (sound),
Mathias Fuchs (communications), Miles Visman &
Robert Pepperell (programming), a.o.
- 2000s arsgames. A-MAZE a.o.
Eve online, Entropia Universe, Second Life,
Social Networking tools

The usual assumption of techno-positivists is:

An increasingly sophisticated set of communication tools, new media and digital technologies will expand locality, i.e. these tools will provide access to the individual a growing part of the total of landscapes, cityscapes, public and private sites, or micro-localities of all kind.

The post-war decade of the 50ies framed expanding localities in the ideological setting of the “family”. The exhibition consisted of a series of black/ white photographs displaying people from different continents, races, religions, and cultural backgrounds. You might want to read Susan Sontag’s critical account of the exhibition and the ideology contained within. The post-war decade of the 50ies showcased the expansion of locality seen from the perspective of an average American, middle-class, and patriarchal family. Shows like “The Family of Man” staged locality and the expansion thereof as an adoption of new family members governed by the decision of the family’s father.

Less patriarchal, but equally problematic were pieces like *Aspects of GAIA*, a project commissioned by *ars electronica* in 1989, that the author was involved in. *GAIA*, the goddess of the earth is as a mother goddess less aggressive than the family of man, and *Ascott*’s soft “embrace” points towards a change in style on expanding locality. The project was however closely linked to Californian cyberspace ideology and *Streichen*’s family turned into a slightly drugged post-hippie commune with a majority of white Western males and a few exotic fellowtravellers on board. Again, what *Ascott*, *Robert Adrian X*, and the *Western Front* and in the camp of literature *William Gibson*, *Bruce Sterling* and friends designed was the attempt to expand locality. The texts and the artistic projects were open to minorities, contained feminist, pacifist and anarchistic thoughts en masse and was non-hierarchical to a high degree. There was however a

clearly visible super-structure in the form of access pathways to then expensive technology and a filter through the demand for English language skills. I am not saying here that the project of expanding locality has failed in the 1980ies, but I am worried that the system-inherent filters on full expansion might have counterbalanced the efforts to include non-English speakers and thinkers, third world countries, women or Non-Westerners.

Aspects of GAIA, assembled material sent from participants from all over the planet. The global consciousness was reframed in a software environment facilitated by an organisational strategy and structure implemented in straight English. It is apparent that a global brain or a meta-consciousness would have to rely on a linguistic link in the form of a language to make communication amongst the units of the global brain feasible. If the global brain spoke many languages at the same time the brain would certainly demonstrate signs of multiple identity disorder and disintegrate rather than integrate aspects of the planet.

Contemporary social networking environments attempt to look internationalist, multicultural, multilingual and cosmopolitan as well. SecondLife promotes an open and free toy society of semi-anonymous avatars from all around the globe, who peacefully share islands, clubs and shopping malls. The potentially cross-cultural 3D agora turns out to be as Philistine as can be, a petty bourgeois low-cost paradise with garden gnomes, ducks on ponds and ornamental trees in pink and white.



The islands and meeting spaces attract groups of similarly styled visitors who quickly agree to fall back into their regional jargon, dress code and political conventions. Go to "France Pittoresque", to "Japan Resort", or to any of the SecondLife art places to find out how locally restricted and narrow-minded the World Wide Web can be. These locations are characterised by an extreme homogenisation of appearance and talk. Foreign languages are not strictly forbidden - they are often cherished as exotic and cool -, but

the practice is less than monolingual, it is controlled by a totalitarianism of jargon below the level of language or even dialect.

SecondLife is a conglomerate of cyberprovincialism rather than an international community. I would like to suggest that there is a counter-trend to expanding locality in Virtual Worlds, a user-generated trend of imploding locality. Locality collapses into a digital Mega-suburb of gym-trained, cyber-solarium tanned bores who have set their daylight zone to eternal noon.

It is interesting to observe historical forms of how expansion of locality has been attempted to be accomplished.

Locality beyond national borders has been understood as

- International Solidarity
- Internationalism
- International Design
- Globalisation
- Cosmopolitan Culture
- Cosmopolitan Cultures
- Cosmopolitanism
- Cosmopolitical Action
- Cyberspace
- Noosphere
- Planetary consciousness
- Telematic Embrace
- Cyberprovincialism

by different authors at different moments in time.

It is to be hoped that "Cyberprovincialism" is not going to be the last stage in the dialectics of expansion and implosion of locality.

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