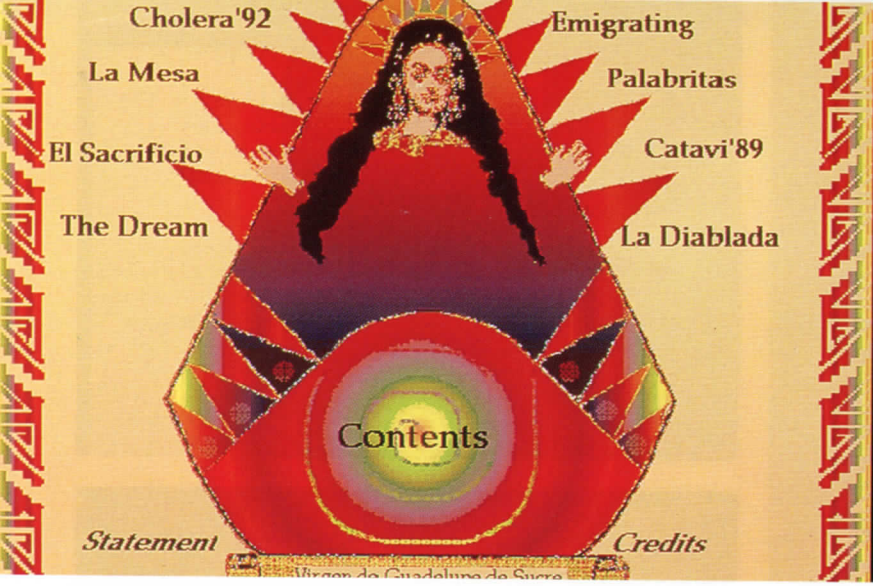


Left: Lucia Grossberger-Morales, Sangre Boliviana, 1992. Right: Victoria Vesna, Virtual Concrete, detail, 1995.

Antilinear

REDEFINING TEXT WITH TECHNOLOGY

Berta M. Sichel

"Aperto" is a Flash Art *"virtual" exhibition, curated to highlight art trends and work currently being shown in a particular city or region. It will soon be available for viewing on* Flash Art*'s upcoming new Web site.*

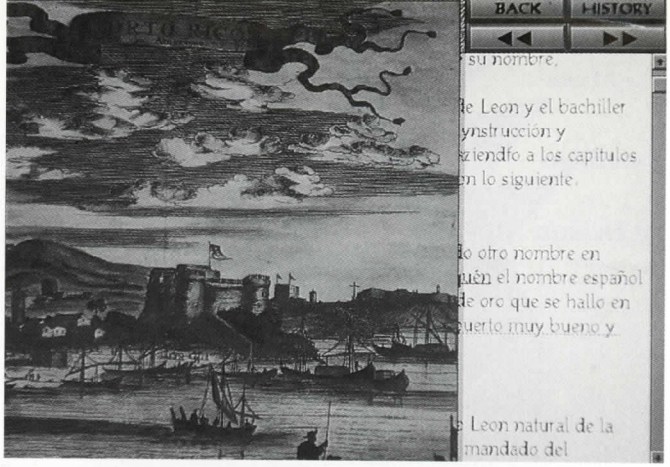
In the broad context of contemporary visual culture, it has been said that technology is culture. Technology's ability to produce "spectacular cultural forms" contains a potential transgression of human limits allowing us to reach "new human finitures and new psychogeographies."[1] Not confined within the boundaries of these virtual tri-dimensional spaces, *Antilinear* is mainly concerned with the re-definition of such century-long concepts as text, visualization, movement, and center.

Going from the "tactile" to the "digital," the metatext of the interactive artworks by the five artists included herein reinforce the theory that the current feasibility of all these remarkable means of recording, transferring, and communicating information compels us to accept nonlinear thinking. This is an idea that appears in Roland Barthes' writings and other contemporary theorists including Derrida, who uses terms such as link, network, or matrix to discuss the possibilities of nonlinear narratives. In addition, these works incorporate processes and strategies rooted in the 1960s and 1970s such as conceptualism, performance, and body art. In some cases, such as Victoria Vesna's *Virtual Concrete*, Armando Rascon's *Multicultural Reading Room* or Jenny Marketou's *Electric Eve*, the use of interactive media is part of a larger installation; the others stand alone in a computer screen. In these works, a collection of information is stored in and manipulated by a computer; yet the computer, the machine itself, becomes "invisible," as Christine Paul has noted. It is the database structure which becomes "the medium" and the "user/reader" may even be understood as part of this medium." Networks of "alternative path" hypertext and/or hypermedia databases are different from "art on line" (or artworks created for, and transmitted only through the Internet) or digital art (images created using computer graphics software). They are systems linking passages of text with images and presenting the information in a different format symbolizing the recent major shifts in information technology.

Vesna's *Virtual Concrete* (1995) sets ups a confrontational dialogue between the human body and its location in a technological environment. The only work included here that is also available through the Internet (http://www.arts.ucsb.edu/concrete), it addresses the idea of the digital body and remythologizes the ontological status of electronic places. As she rewrites the interactions between the body and its place as subject matter in contemporary art, as well as in our technological society, Vesna presents a new set of conceptual and material elements. For Vesna, who lives in Santa Barbara, California, technology is more than just a machine that is too complicated for us to understand. This conceptual perspective impregnates her work with a systematic dimension expanding the line joining art and its audience. "Techno-imagination" itself reflects expansion.

This expansion is also a feature of Lily Diaz's *Simultaneous Views of History* (1990-95). Born in Venezuela, raised in Puerto Rico, and living between Finland and New York, three years ago Diaz spent several months in the Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain, compiling sources related to the practice of visualization by European explorers in sixteenth-century Latin America. *Simultaneous Views...* overlaps layers of data that can be constructed through hypermedia design. Since hypermedia can present different views of synchronous discourses, it can be compared to a medieval palimpsest: in this database historical materials are juxtaposed in order to show the different versions of the same historical events.[2] At heart, she is dealing with one of the most contemporary phenomena of presenting information about the same topic from diverse viewpoints. This is one of our daily dilemmas arising from the monopoly of information by the "mega communications" international conglomerates.

The use of hypertext and/or hypermedia to make art, or access information, presents artists with an opportunity create works using the process of "inner-directed" rather than "other directed" — as it happens on the Internet chat lines.[3] This inner-direct movement, or the fluctuation of open-ended texts, is also present in *Electric Eve* (1995) by Marketou, a New York-based artist from Greece. Smaller than Diaz's database which now has 300 "pages," Marketou's work compiles an assemblage from several video tapes she produced in the past year, all addressing topics cov-



Above: Armando Rascon, Occupied Aztlàn Database, 1994.
Right top: Lily Diaz, Simultaneous Views of History, 1990-95. Bottom right: Jenny Marketou, Electric Eve, 1996.

ering the broad discipline of women and sexuality. The link between fragmented pieces of information is now possible through the architecture of the database and an image of an "eye" is the visual element assisting the viewer in navigating through the piece. *Electric Eve* allows the viewer to open multiple windows on different sections of the document, giving it a flexibility and transparency, creating a new aesthetic system.

This aesthetic, created by a computer-mediated textuality, appears in Grossberger-Morales' *Sangre Boliviana* (1992). An "art disk" work, *Sangre Boliviana* is different in its capacity to access and distribute information through many branches at a very high speed and reach its potential of real-time interactivity. This CD-ROM contains nine interactive, multimedia computer pieces and one introduction — the overview or map page that allows the viewer to switch between lexias (blocks of information) that otherwise lack common navigational links.[3] Each piece explores Grossberger-Morales' personal relationship with Bolivia, where she was born.

In Rascon's installation *Multicultural Reading Room* (1994-95), the presence of several "reading paths" shifts the balance between the writer and the viewer/reader. This non-sequential "writing" reminds one of Derrida's suggesttion that the center is just a function — not an entity or reality. In this context, Rascon's new textuality moves the viewer into a new writing space.[4] Part of the installation *Occupied Aztlàn Database* (1994), makes a virtual link that reconfigures several texts previously experienced through the printed media, all of them dealing with the border and Chicano culture in the U.S. Rascon grew up in the border town of Calexico, California, where the confluence of cultures defines the living experience. His work — as well as that of Grossberger-Morales and Diaz — fulfills the desire of today's *flaneur*: to be connected to the world, but at the same time close to home, to his/her history and culture. For Rascon, Grossberger-Morales, and Diaz, hypertext applications intend to both imitate the brain's ability to make associative references and to present the potential of linking their art and audience with issues that belong to Latin American tradition. For them, the movement of returning to one's culture becomes a way of re-writing and re-interpreting the past, while intersecting it with the present. The past, Arjun Appadurai says, "is not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory." Rather, it has become a "synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios."[5]

Considering the pervasive authority of technology, science, and media in contemporary Western society, this influence not only extends to business and commerce, but also to "the fundamental changes that they have caused to the existing relationships between art, entertainment, and society."[6] Indeed, there is not yet a place in the cultural universe for such art objects. In a technoscientific culture, aesthetics are in the hands of that culture's institutional structure, and in this case — multinational corporations. Consequently, in the cultural environment of a technoscientific society, there is a tension between artistic practices and the new conditions required for the reception of an artist's work and enlargement of their audience. These practices have been stifled until recently by those who fear the loss of tradition. Actually, within this context, the most important innovation of *Antilinear* is not the use of the technology in an art context, but the acceptance of a new concept — new technologies have permitted the re-definition of geographical and cultural borders, the creation of nonlinear discursive practices, and the "transformation of the (art) object into information."[7]

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1. Don Slater, "Photography and Modern Vision." *Visual Culture* Ed. Chris Jencks (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 230.
2. Lily Diaz, "Simultaneous Views of History...," in *Leonardo*, 257-264.
3. Terence, Harpold, "Conclusions," in *Hypertext Theory*, ed. George P. Landow, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 189-222.
4. George Landow, "Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology," in ibid., p. 23.
5. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in ibid., p. 324.
6. Roy Armes, *On Video* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 94-98.
7. Michael Phillipson, "Managing Tradition: The Plight of Aesthetic Practices and Their Analysis in A Technoscientific Culture," in *Visual Culture*, pp. 202-217.