Cybermedia_CCC

Interviewed: Liliane Schneiter with Yves Mettler and Anne-Julie Raccoursier.
Interviewer: Beryl Graham
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[Critical Curatorial Cybermedia](#) postgraduate course at the [Ecole supérieure des beaux-arts, Haute école d'arts visuels (HES)](#) in Geneva, Switzerland. Yves Mettler is a former student and web manager, and Anne-Julie Raccoursier is a CCC assistant.

This interview draws on a face-to-face interview, email correspondence, and a presentation of the archive of the web site http://www.cyberaxe.org/ by Liliane Schneiter with Yves Mettler at the seminar *Curating Can Be Learned, But Can it be Taught?* May 19th 2005 at Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art, Sunderland, UK.

Beryl Graham: Your course Critical Curatorial Cybermedia is one of the few curating courses to explicitly mention new media (apart from the specialist course at MECAD, Barcelona). How did this happen, and why?

LS: Firstly, the name of the course: we didn't choose to use the word "new media" because we think it's a default word, and because we are not committed to media itself but to a conceptual yet historical change, which was for us more than a technology. The internet offers a unique chance to share knowledge, to connect people, to work on a research basis with other independent researchers. We call it Cybermedia to connect it to Science Fiction (such as the writing of William Gibson) and to differentiate the approach from that of a School of Applied Art – those technical skills like web design. The very first time we were on a discussion thread on the [*Thing.net*](#) NY with artist [Rainer Ganahl](#) was exciting – a 'moment of liberation'. We were very aware of Walter Benjamin's statement: "Work on with technique of your time. You will find the dreams and the nightmares of your time!" (He was himself working with radio for children, writing for billboards. The telephone and the movie changed his mind about how to represent and how to write the history of his time). We want to keep this unique philosophical, political network approach, and identify the net as our media, our space.

Before the CCC element of the course was launched in 1997, there was an existing course concerning curating on a formal level, launched by Catherine Queloz who directed the Sous-Sol art venue in Geneva (the archive of this venue is featured in the exhibition *[Curating Degree Zero](#)*

Archive). The Cybermedia part of the course is more concerned with 'editing' on the web and researching wider aspects of curating.

We launched CCC on a volunteer basis, knowing almost nothing about the technical side. The School is a classical fine art school, and the support originally came from theory – political, cultural and gender studies. There might have been 'one professor in the back with a new computer' but at the beginning we didn't even have an internet connection. The School did not have director for 2 years. There was no pre-existing 'WWW network culture' – it was an unknown media landscape, so we were working "on the edge", and to a certain extent we could do new, experimental things. Personal support from the Dean meant that we got a connection, and then very slowly built up equipment, technical knowledge and interest from the students through participation. There is no official money for web site hosting, so at first our site was hosted at Thing, then went banner-free. It now hosted outside the implementation of the School.

All of the Cyberaxe on-line learning materials are made by the students (with the staff) the students edit all of the sources including course documents. These are not technical students: they use low tech HTML, no Flash. They spend more time engaging in political discourse than in learning software, but free software is an ethic, so it really is more than just a technology. The site evolves very slowly, each year's materials has a new interface. This year is the first that there has been and funding for technical support, so we now have a web site manager/programmer.

BG: How much of the course content concerns new media as tool for education, interpretation or distribution (simply putting art on the Internet), and how much concerns the curation of specifically new media art (net art, interactive computer installations, etc.)?

LS: An important part of the course content concerns the re-reading of the Frankfurt School, specially Walter Benjamin's essays by "bundling" concepts and practices in cyberspace, into a networking mode (such as what is a screen, how to write on a screen, how to perform a dialogue, how to create a "Denkbild" (making a condensed image by digital techniques), how to use hypertext, how to play with several identities on the Web, how to use real time data, etc.). We enlarged the questions by re-reading Deleuze and Guattari about rhizomatic thinking: Thousand Plateaus = Thousand (prismatic) Windows. However, we also study the Luddites and Neo-Luddites, so as not to get too romantic in our passion for the web! So, we re-read Hakim Bey, and invited Jaromil of Rastasoft and other Open Source people.

Our concern is primarily with net art (in France we use the term net art as it is more political than web art). For example, the students know Raqs Media Collective, the Institute of Network Cultures, the collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia, Josh On's *They Rule*. We start by looking at low-tech artworks such as Alexei Shulgin and Natalie Bookchin. The students work with the

particular issues of online identities and real-time data – around 60 have made a home page under a fictional identity, an avatar. They often collaborate to share the technical skills. The common and shared aim toward net art project is: conceptually sharp, visually compelling and attuned to the political moment.

In making educational materials, they share their links and bookmarks, so that it is a network, not just a collection of individual essays or art projects. For our collaborative project on banner art (referencing Felix Guattari) it was easy to find out how to set it and which kind of exhibition mode we wanted. We were inspired by the work of Oliver Ressler on *Alternative Economics/Alternative Societies*.

YM: *On/Offline* (2001) is an example of curating presentations in the real world: It was a presentation of the whole *Cyberaxe* archive.

LS: The students discussed how to present virtual space in a material space, and decided that virtual space is real time, interactive, so in response to the heaviness of the physical world, we just printed screen shots as a completely static display. It was a radical gesture, and I didn't expect it.

The G8 in Geneva in 2003 was an important event for CCC: We participated in the SOIA Summit of Interventionist Art curated by Forde arts venue. We worked with *indymedia*, and showed information streaming and a Wiki/Blog for the 3 days of the G8, in a building near Geneva. There was a riot, and the students were trapped in the building, and I got a call at midnight, because they were very afraid and the police were coming. They were at the interface of everything: France and Switzerland, streaming and speaking, immaterial media and material media like photographs and video. We organised a colloquium for people from all over Switzerland including former students, about the web as a medium for activism.

BG: Is new media art considered as 'just one of the contemporary arts' or does it demand different knowledge?

LS: The specialist knowledge concerns an accurate awareness of the digital era: Mechanical reproduction, connectivity, interactivity, Nano-science, multiplicity, semantic webs, the logic of indexation, neural nets and the fractalisation of knowledge. It is another kind of sensibility and culture. All of our students speak another national language, we have to connect with those cultures too. We have to be a multiplicity in one person.

YM: But his does not mean we ignore our history of art …

BG: What kinds of theory are useful to the students?

LS: We are influenced by our influenced by our classical roots, and the course is based on critical theory, the re-reading of the pioneering thinkers

(Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse …), the Situationists, Foucault, Sylvere Lothringer on Guattari, but also Chomsky on the media, Arundhati Roy, the Krokers and the collective Ctheory. We also read fiction: authors like Kathy Acker, and Science Fiction including William Gibson. Walter Benjamin was also interested in Science Fiction novels, and opens up a world of representation, of new cities of glass and iron. There is thus a history of predicting the future, which results in some very unpredictable research.

YM: We are art students, and tend to be aware of a history of literature, rather than philosophy, so Science Fiction can be a useful starting point.

Are your students taught any technical knowledge of new media?

LS: Some would like to have more technical knowledge than we can offer them. For example, making things like computer-game clips is difficult in a fine art school not dedicated to technology, but we have done that, for example, with *EdgePark*. As for theory and practice, to catalyse technique and critical conceptual knowledge takes time for both …

YM: We work on two levels: The first is an introduction to simple and low-tech techniques (basic HTML), for artists or curators, and the second is using the net tools for a guided navigation on the web, for education, and people can participate, such as the blog, so the tools and the net art are integrated. Some others do get into PHP but this takes too much time for most students.

AJR: The issue of open source and free software is a very important question in all schools, because of pressure from software companies, so the students use free software.

YM: Yes, although this can be very difficult to implement: Apple Macs come with the commercial software already installed, and we don't have the time to be proper programmers, so we have to ask 'how far is that our job'? It's a real tension. I was a fine art student, then a CCC student, and now I am the only technical support for CCC. I was self-taught in technique when I was at CCC, so we have very 'home-made' technical support.

LS: I prefer that. Although each summer-time for 5 years, we spend our vacation editing the web site! And making so many errors! However, we did this on a deliberate critical level, because we didn't want to be dependent on someone who 'knows much better'. Each year we improve by a modest level, but we are aware of the lack of a search engine, for example. The navigation of each annual edition changes according to the contents and practices that emerge that year (e.g. the implementation of a blog or the connexion with a discussion thread). It's a balance between this and low-tech, low budget. We don't want expensive and 'heavy' pieces. Technology is not only a tool, but also part of an economic or social system. So, we use Wikis and blogs, *Datahammer* software (by Glucose software), discussion lists – a real dialogue. It is immersive history, fully implicated, a corporate

body of production. Someone in this seminar said that curating can't be taught, but I say it can be taught, or rather co-taught as a co-operation between students, teachers and alumni. This means we don't sleep much!

BG: Steve Dietz considers new media art in terms of 'behaviours' (Connectivity, Computibility, Interactivity) rather than media. Do you consider new media art in different categories?

LS: We can't function with categories, because we know that they form a threshold, not a web. Our position is not a behaviour, but a political position, concerning the awareness of the masses, and therefore perhaps relates more to an awareness of advertising (re Guy Debord) and mass communication. It's not our terminology to say 'the media', but 'the era', the digital era.

AJR: It is not reducible to a conventional artworld aesthetic, for example our web site represents both a tool and a practice.

LS: It's like the 1969 conceptual art exhibition "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form". Its immersive media, and the media is the context, and the context is not a behaviour, it is more critical, more political and more organic.

BG: Is there an audience for new media art?

LS: Internationally, and on the net, yes, but in the local art centres, the audience has to be developed. In Switzerland, the very first specialist centre for new media art is located in Basel, called [plug-in]. There are several cultural histories in Switzerland linked to several languages and traditions. So the German part of Switzerland is often more aware of Net culture and art process than the French part.

Education and collaboration can help with developing audiences: Our art school is opening a new media postgraduate programme called *Immediat*. The programme is a connexion between two schools, the fine art school and the applied art school. Courses dedicated to Internet culture, to Net art, or to analysis of web resources are however rare.

BG: In relation to audience, CRUMB researcher Ele Carpenter is researching activism, and had a question concerning Walter Benjamin's identification of the blurring boundaries between consumers and producers. Concerning your web site, are the audience also the producers?

AJR: The audience primarily is the students, plus alumni, and plus of course the networks of each of the students.

YM: From the web statistics, about 90% of the visitors are indeed our own students or staff, who also produce – including distance-learning students who join the "e-classe". It is in French, so that effects the audience, but we do get visitors from Sweden, Japan, USA, Arab States.

We edit the site, and on the Blog or Wiki the 'audience' can add their own material, but on the main site, this is not possible to do automatically yet, because we don't use PHP. But people can email material to us.

LS: We have some technical challenges that effect the participation: Like it was difficult to find an Open Source Blog software. Unfortunately we are behind the state proxy: This means you cannot upload files, do ftp, messenger, blog, and students must do that from home, if they have a home account. We are an Art School not a University, so that makes a difference in accessibility, for administrative reasons which may hopefully change in a few months.

BG: Where and how do your students see new media art? (festivals, Internet, magazines?)

LS: Mostly by the 'navigating sessions' – these are the core of the course for students who are not very familiar with net art. Each year, we keep a collective set of annotated links to our favourite web sites. Also some magazines like *Mac Underground, HackerVoice*, *Ctheory* or sometimes *Wired*.

YM: Some students arrive with no idea of the internet, but some, especially foreign students form places like Brazil, already have a network, and are connected on-line so that they can communicate with their friends.

AJR: For actual gallery spaces, there is also [plug-in] – the first space in Switzerland dedicated to net art and installation.

LS: A few students visit the *Viper Festival* in Basel or *Ars Electronica* in Linz (Austria). We were at the very first *Imagina* festival in Monaco, France, and now we have a kind of micro-festival inside a festival dedicated to video art in the Centre pour l'image Contemporaine. For the first time, in September 2004, we had a symposium on interactive media where we were invited to present our research on virtual communities.

BG: Can you give me some examples of what students do after graduation (for example freelance work, or in institutions)?

One of the best outcomes is to see students working in a team, and operating in a networking. Most of them are independent or freelance, but not isolated. Three of them are working on a web site meate (a collaborative web site for contemporaneous subjectivity in a mutating world and gender studies). Others are working on local and global squatting culture and living modes,

connecting street and web actions, others are working with virtual communities in Brazil, in former socialist countries or with the Iranian diaspora in Europe. From 2004, some of these projects are listed in the *Communautés en ligne* part of the Cyberaxe site. In 2005, some of the actions and events co-curated by former students can be found in an "e-carta" PDF.

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