

Public Key: an encrypted art in a transparent society

The transparent society that is emerging doesn't seem to be the one that the cybernetic intended, a rational democracy where feedback protocols would have assured an optimal regulation of common behavior. In fact, with the development of information technologies, instances of power do not become transparent to citizens, but rather citizens become transparent to instances of power. In addition to the transparency claimed by governments (nothing that citizens do should escape the authorities) is the transparency as understood by the transparent data processing the user takes no notice of.

The world of art is also organized according to this asymmetrical reciprocity. The processes of legitimization escape artists to a large extent and nothing they do eludes the control of a media system that instantaneously records and recycles all attempts at subversion into entertainment. In this context, it becomes increasingly uncertain that the form of an exhibition is viable as a critical measure. In a transparent society artists should devise secretive forms and cryptic art.

Cryptography is the art of rendering a message unintelligible to those who are not on its receiving end. Art has always had a cryptic dimension, one that is more or less involuntary and acknowledged. But at a moment when art no longer seems like a micro-culture among others, elitist strategies are evolving toward more communal strategies. Encoding has become a condition of survival in the face of domination by the mass media and its related industry and products. Escaping to the protected space of an artistic institution at the very moment this space risks losing all legitimacy by continuously adapting itself to the demands of the neo-liberal set, art only retains its independent nature at the expense of an encoding

process that renders it compatible with other social practices while allowing it to maintain its autonomy.

When speaking of cryptic works, one refers to artistic projects that are not commercial, not media driven, not spectacular, not decorative, not institutional. They are projects that risk being situated outside of the artistic institution and risk not explicitly proclaiming their status as artworks. The works presented in this show cannot conform to these criteria since they are actually shown. But because they are declarations of intention or illustration, they could indeed indicate a new perspective, one that reconsiders artistic practice at the center of the informational paradigm.(1)

Philippe Blanc

Philippe Blanc finished his artistic training as a developer, and doesn't claim any artistic activity. He is also the developer of the "bot" engine which was presented by the **Cercle Ramo Nash** at the Guggenheim Museum (*Premisse* 1998). The project presented in *Public Key* centers on the default naming of images recorded by digital cameras. Users of these cameras often put their photos on-line without making an effort to change their names. Result: millions of images on the Internet carry the same name. For example, all the original photos taken with a Nikon camera will be named DSCN001. Blanc has programmed a search engine that scans the network and creates a slide show conjoining all images it finds by methodically following its digital classification. All of this yields a complete record of all that is photographable.



Philippe Blanc DSCN slide show, 2002
web search software and video projector

Dr. Brady

The insurance of anonymity and respect for private life is often achieved through the use of a pseudonym. In the art world, the use of pseudonyms and heteronyms have essentially reflected criticism of bourgeois ideology on the part of the artist, a



Dr-Brady ASCII art print, *DNA Series*,
2002 Laser print on A4 paper

concept founded upon the myth of the genius. On the Net, the use of a pseudonym hints at an obviousness of sorts. Everyone can own as many identities as he wants, according to his activities. In each forum a specific personality is determined by a set of themes and communities. The use of a fantasy name con-

stitutes a sort of encoding of identity that protects the user and guarantees his or her freedom of expression. But if the fictitious personality in question engages in a more radical discussion, he or she does not bear any less the responsibility of the one who takes on that personality in a given community. One must not lose sight of the fact that these communities of metamorphosis exchange and produce actual ideas. Peter Brady's work situates itself essentially in the conversational realm. Between two showings of IRC (Internet Relay Chat) (2) he loosens up by devoting himself to the art of ASCII (3), but with a singular constraint: he uses only the four letters of the genetic code.

Cercle Ramo Nash

Two rules have been progressively imposed since the inaugural shock of the ready-made. The first is to find an idea, a gesture, an object sufficiently foreign to those already identified as potentially artistic, so as to produce a variation whose legitimacy can only be resolved by its author. The second is to remain amused and distracted. The combination of these two rules has defined the dominant trait of the prevailing aesthetic in recent

years: exoticism. Something exotic, or foreign to the art world (4) is at once interesting and faraway. It commands attention by its difference and it creates



Cercle Ramo Nash *Furby colloquium*,
2000 12 Furby dolls, base and electronic
device

a tension as far as its artistic appreciation is concerned. The more something seems debatable (as far as its status as art is concerned) the more its chances are big for its promoters to augment their authority in case of success in its negotiation. The Cercle Ramo Nash tries to escape from this power scheme by paying more attention to the critical significance rather than on the statutory definition.

Florian Faelbel

One sometimes has the impression that art exists as a means for professionals to exchange lists of names with one another. These lists, from one to another, creates variables that seem to make sense. Each one's worth measures up to an art dealer's skill in manipulation. The work of Florian Faelbel questions this uninterupted circulation of proper names in the micro-milieu of art. By displaying one inordinately long list of names at the entry of an exhibition it implies that every artistic attempt is necessarily inscribed in a social collective and cooperative work so that it becomes impossible to define the beginning and end, all of which renders problematic the notion of authorship. Thus the majority of works shown in galleries today owe a debt to data entry tools (word processors) and Photoshop-like software. The list of Photoshop developers indicates a list of artists in the same way a group show temporarily scrambles the play of recognition. It's a sort of homage to anonymous heroes who profoundly transform the culture by inventing the tools on which we are all now dependent.

Richard Kongrosian

Technical choices are often unconfessed political choices. Since "9/11", new security laws have been adopted in numerous countries in the wake of our collective emotional shock. Most of these provisions undermine individual liberties and were voted into law with haste, and without any public debate. We are all potentially under surveillance. Global positioning satellites have the power to locate us and identify us through our mobile phones; the *Echelon* system intercepts our e-mails; *Carnivore* invites



Richard Kongrosian *Model for
Control Society Roof box*, 2002

itself into our home computers. By modifying a standard roof case to suggest a radar antenna of an AWAC airplane, Richard Kongrosian transforms the gallery's minivan into something equivalent to a surveillance vehicle. It's a question of making sensitive the accelerated emergence of a controlled society from which it will become more and more difficult to escape.

Alexandre Lenoir

Alexandre Lenoir systematically documents his own idea about sculpture. It's an investigation he's undertaken since 1980 and his focus is on contemporary forms of the picturesque. The complete catalog of works can today be considered like an obsessional

hermeneutic, susceptible to the deciphering of potential works everywhere. It shows that by arriving at a certain level of elaboration the micro-culture of contemporary art can emancipate itself of all institutional support to become a manner of seeing autonomously. The aesthetic criteria derived in the context of exhibitions find themselves reactivated in inappropriate situations but nevertheless conserve their relevance outside

of power structures that inevitably constitute all negotiation on the statute of displayed works.

Martin Tupper

For Martin Tupper, a press release is the real site of the



Martin Tupper *Compatible ASCII*, 1998 Sheets of steel, magnets and press releases 8 x 12 feet

exhibition. Occupation of a particular space with various artifacts during a given period is no longer a pretext for the dissemination of a statement. With *Compatible ASCII* Martin Tupper confronts the material character of a work that must still occupy a space to assure its legitimacy and the fluidity of its values, which must be able to be negotiated in the conversa-

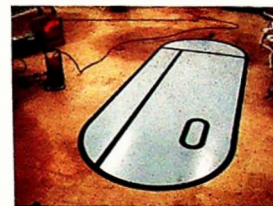


Alexandre Lenoir *Planting a tree in front of the gallery*, 2002

tion of the community on the basis of certain arguments enunciated in a text. In one way, in the network era, the work has gone into text mode. It is coded in ASCII like little fantasy drawings of "ASCII art," which can be integrated into e-mails without weighing them down.

David Vincent

Ideas circulate better than objects. The theme of teleportation, introduced by the father of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener, saw no obstacle to the idea of sending a human body through a telephone line (a concept popularized by the TV series *Star Trek*). This is at the center of David Vincent's project. His work takes off from transfers crossed with multiple references between two cultural parallel universes, contemporary art and science fiction. With a vocabulary that approximates decoration and bricolage more than it does sculpture, Vincent puts into place a platform from which art and artists can be dematerialized and teleported into social spaces other than the gallery.



David Vincent *Autodestruct charge*, 1998 Alkide urethane paint, 124 x 44 inches

Angeline Scherf
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(1) The sociologist *Manuel Castell* offers to speak of informational paradigms in order to designate the entire complex of ideas, values, technologies, practices and behaviors, which characterize network society.

(2) Internet Relay Chat: on-line discussion or "chat" rooms.

(3) American Standard Code for Information Interchange: the information code that defines the display of the letters of the alphabet in seven bits. ASCII art was the first graphic form in the history of information. It produces a schematic or design by using only characters available on a common printer.

(4) Exoticism in the traditional sense, in the rapport of different cultures, is only one particular case in the generalization of import-export operations of contemporary art. The most common everyday use is the most banal, and perhaps completely exotic, in an exhibition.