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INTERVIEW with Tina LaPorta

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Q1.

davidRieder -> How or where do you situate your work as a media artist?

... who are your audiences ...

i situate my work in overlapping, sometimes contradictory spaces-- both ideological and physical. my work has crossed over from old media to new, private space to public-- interweaving techno-theory with feminist perspectives concerning subjectivity.

[Image] in 1996 i produced an experimental television show that aired on manhattan cablevision. in this on-going series i took on the role of the flaneur, moving through the emerging high-tech spaces in new york city underscoring my anonymous presence and heightened sense of alienation, here.

in terms of the site, or the medium and it's distribution capacity: i was intrigued by the idea that a tv channel surfer could accidentally happen upon my program unknowingly. they may not even be aware of the fact that what they were viewing was intentionally created as an art piece. but, by becoming mesmerised by the visuals and sounds, the viewer would become aware that what they were watching was radically different from the overproduced, anti-individual, commercial programs casting only one channel away on either side of the spectrum.

i saw creating work intended for cable television as a form of site-specific public art. but

what really

intrigued me even more than just that, was the fact that this public art was viewed within the private space of one's home. this placement of a public medium within the 'private' zone of the home creates a curious dynamic of displacement. creating the ability to have a kind of distant access to the public realm. always being just outside of it, unable or unwilling to immerse oneself completely in the space of the public which the container of the home can provide.

(in some ways i see this public/private interplay an extension of the feminist reference: 'the personal is political' ... something i witnessed first-hand while photographing during the height of the anti-abortion protests at women's health clinics in the late 80's, early 90's.)

i continue to use a public form situated within [Image] the private realm as my primary medium in my current internet-based work. this is especially visible in my work Distance where i become a voyeur in CU-seeme video conferencing forums then morphing into full participation in my latest work-in-progress. it is within this zone of synchronous, multi-linear remote communication where i find myself exploring expressions of identity and sexuality on the internet.

Q2.

davidRieder -> Of the five senses, sight is still the predominate "interface" through which users interact with themselves and with each other in computer environments. Visuality seems to be an important concept or metaphor in several of your works. In the explanation of your project, translate{} expression, linked off of net.works + avatars, I read you to imply that it was the way in which the computer interface makes visible "that which is generally hidden" that led you to an understanding of how the "organic and the mechanic come in to contact - blurring the boundaries between the two." And, on the first page of your project, Shifting, a haunting, looping voiceover makes an implicit argument about the (im)materiality of sight when it states, "In ... Visible ... In ... Visible." Read in conjunction with several other pages in which the fragments of images of a woman are animated in disconnected sequences, you seem to be using visuality as a thematic vehicle in your explorations.

Can you expand on the role of the visual - of the in/visible - in your work? How else does the visibility of code open up new understandings and experiences of the body and subjectivity? Do you see this focus changing in your work?

one of the more significant bodies of work i developed after my photo-documentary project Choice, (1989-1992) was Translate { } Expression, 1994.

informed by the politicization of women's reproductive capacity, the impulse toward individual, special interest and state control of women via their bodies, a strong sense of alienation emerged within me.

[Image] while developing my work in a somewhat high-tech computer environment i began to feel that sense of alienation re-emerge. working with computer software intended for industrial design embedded within a unix based operating system proved to be a very different experience from immersing myself within a real-world political conflict. both were very different contexts, to be sure, but still finding myself working with a machine of sorts be it actual or symbolic.

there is no doubt that my interest in representing the struggle for reproductive autonomy present in women that i explored in the single image works in 'Translate { } Expression' would not have been created with out my previous experience making 'Choice.' one difference in 'Translate { } Expression' was my development of a machine aesthetic. the constant feeling of alienation from the outside world through my immersion in a technologically based environment was expressed by creating an "alien" other. was this wire-frame model to be a stand- in for myself?

in the sound piece which accompanies the visual work, i mimicked the scenario of the "pygmalion." creating an invisible situation where the stereotypical male programmer sitting at a computer creates for his own pleasure a she-bot. she is the creation of his code, whose existence is dependant on his mastery of the technology-- she says, "you can reboot me, don't unplug me."

this work marks a struggle for me in the representation

of female subjectivity as fully expressed or even acknowledged by the other. my ambivalence as to whether technology, either as an artistic tool or a social construction, will drown out our voices or be used to amplify them is evident here.

Q3.

matthewLevy -> One way of envisioning one's practice ... is in terms of conversation.

Are there particular writers and artists with whom you see yourself engaging in a conversation via your work?

conversation.

my work Distance emerges out of the dislocation of conversation. while lurking on CU-seeme reflector sites, i observed real-time conversations unfolding amongst intimate strangers logged on from dispersed geographical locations. mesmerized by not only the stream of video displaying pixelated images of each participant, but also being taken in by the flow of text appearing on my screen-- i wanted to understand the ways in which identity was being expressed, played out and revealed through this emerging medium.

at the same time, i was reading luce irigaray's book 'i love to you.' in this text she looks at gender differences in expressions of subjectivity through spoken communication. it was through my simultaneous reading of irigaray and a growing obsession logging onto CU that i began to develop not only the visual structure of Distance by also the conceptual layering of the text.

in irigaray's text she points to the avoidance of "elle" as an active subject in language. in thinking along these lines, i was intrigued by the ways in which women communicated and how they were received as active participants by the other(s) in this space. while constructing the text for Distance, i articulated the position of the narrator as female, although leaving the mystery of her visual identity intact.

extending the conversation.

in my work, Distance in Real-Time: an eye to the ear remix, i composed a series of questions concerned with

how we use communication technologies: do we use these media to facilitate and extend communication or as a tool for the avoidance of contact, or intimacy between each other? One question i posed was: is technology a veil?

"Just another mask to put on. A shell, a veil, call it what you will. A wall."  
- Jun-Ann Lam

in the spirit of CU interactions and by opening [Image] a dialog amongst geographically dispersed individuals in the field of new media art, i sent this series of questions to several e-mail lists. this initiated a process of opening my work up to a public, integrating their responses to my inquiries into my working methodology. thus bringing an exterior view upon my own internal reflections.

speaking subjects.  
without the mediation of the internet, in Distance in Real-Time: an eye to the ear remix, i open the conversation up in RL with an emphasis on the voice. here again, i pose similar questions concerning our relationship with technology to other media artists and theorists who live and work in new york city.

while working with individual audio files i proceed to cut and paste their responses into a new document, creating an aural dialogue that simulates a conversation that could easily occur in a CU chat room. the result becomes a self-reflexive dialog which articulates the nuances of living in a society obsessed with technology. will these contemporary technological advancements in communications brings us closer together or in contrast, pull us further apart?

Q4.

edrieSobstyl -> tina, i'm especially intrigued by this part of your response:

On Tue, 10 Oct 2000, Tina LaPorta wrote:  
> the 'private' zone of the home creates a curious dynamic of  
> displacement. creating the ability to have a kind of distant  
access

- > to the public realm. always being just outside of it, unable or
- > unwilling to immerse oneself completely in the space of the public
- > which the container of the home can provide.
- > (in some ways i see this public/private interplay an extension of the
- > feminist reference: 'the personal is political' ...

i used to be a radio broadcaster, so the idea of distant access to the public realm appeals to me - and i believe that access is present in many/most contemporary "household" technologies (radio, tv, telephone, perhaps even anything electric). from a feminist perspective, i wonder what the political potential or goal of this public/private interplay can be - it seems to me that being \*unwilling\* to immerse oneself in the space of the public from the safety of the home could be given a fairly conventional, stereotyped feminine reading, while being \*unable\* to do so could be given a directly patriarchal one. what i'm trying to press you on is this: for feminist politics, is flaneuring enough? do we seek to break down the artificial and often oppressive barrier between public and private, or to continually reinscribe it?

for feminist politics, is flaneuring enough?

good question.

is being present enough? is speaking enough? is activism enough? is art enough?

ultimately, i think that feminist artists will always be criticized especially by other feminists for not being or doing enough for feminism. we will always be thought of as lacking in our effectiveness in bringing the feminist project forward in the public sphere, irregardless of our own economically impoverished state.

when i was photographing anti-abortionists blockading women's health clinics i did not take on the role of an activist per se. although it might be easy to say that i was merely a voyeur, but the truth is that i was never a neutral observer. i knew exactly how i felt about this phenomenon-- the politicization of an extremely personal circumstance, and so i set out to represent this through visual means.

was my art enough? are my eyes enough? is my voice

enough?

in one sense i say no, it was not enough. not because i wasn't out there physically helping women access clinics but because there were almost no public outlets for the distribution of my work either within the art-world or outside of it in mainstream and feminist press. consequently, a public dialog that my work could have initiated never occurred.

is the medium enough?

my television program was mostly a meditation on being present. sustaining a presence in the physical realm of the city then distributing my subjective experiences via cable casting to an anonymous public. this work carried no overt political viewpoint, although using this mass medium for artistic means certainly carried with it cultural-political implications. this period marked a more internal contemplative period for me and the work reflects this back.

is the internet enough?

this remains to be seen. an unfinished work, an unanswered question.

Q5.

edrieSobstyl -> i appreciate the depth with which you've answered this question, and the important questions you raise at the end of your discussion. in particular, this one:

On Thu, 12 Oct 2000 02:42:52 -0400 Tina LaPorta wrote:

- > will these
- > contemporary technological advancements in communications brings us
- > closer together or in contrast, pull us further apart?

as you know, there's a lively debate among tech studies folk about this very issue - one that's taken on new form with the advent of cybertech, but which has been with us for 2 centuries in various forms. i'm asking you to speculate on your own rhetorical question -- what do \*you\* think these advancements will do?

i'm asking you to speculate on your own rhetorical question -- what do you think these advancements will do?

> will these contemporary technological advancements in communications

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i sense a disconnection. from others and from our selves.

we are trying, rather desperately i'd say, to make a connection using any techno apparatus we can get our hands on.

make a call and leave a message on an answering machine. be sure to call when you know she won't be in to pick up. avoid direct communication.

how many e-mail addresses do you have?

busy, busy, busy.... can't get through 'til you log off the net.

voice mail.... some one pick up the phone, please!

have you ever tried to "reach" someone with a cell phone? always available never accessible. trying to make contact with absence seems to be the name of the game these days. underscoring our failed attempts to communicate.

once a connection has been established, bits and pieces of words dropping out are barely heard dispersed between gaps of silence and strange echo's... the texture of the technology appears to make a stronger statement than it's user.

technology has taken center stage and we are just the audience here. caught up in some kind of illusion of connectivity.

is the apparatus to blame for our communication breakdowns, or are we?

how do we know who we are any more? who has time for contemplation, reflection?



we're so busy working to pay off our cell phone bills, hardware upgrades, software upgrades, more ram, faster net connection, etc... there's no time left to initiate contact with an other.

what is intimacy? where can i find it? [Image]

think of cybersex ... that which enables the possibility of having an active sex life without any physical contact whatsoever. safe sex for sure. so safe there isn't any room for emotions here anyway. what does it mean to enjoy the presence of an other when it's their absence we are most engaged with? it's our choice to remain distant.

do you sense an emotional vacancy with the majority of people you encounter in RL anyway? it's as if we're all tuning in to different channels, none of which transmit a signal back to the other.

Q6.

davidRieder -> In the statement at the end of your piece, Distance, two sentences stand out. The first is at the very top, the second at the bottom. The first is a quote from Irigaray: "Women are the guardians of communication." The second, a personal observation: "While observing a constant stream of simultaneous video and chat, an intersubjectivity emerges-- a syntax unique to on-line culture."

Can you expand on any possible connections or disconnections between these two statements? In the latter statement, I hear you saying that you observed (experienced?) the emergence of an intersubjectivity out of the "constant stream," the flow, of communication. What are some of the impacts of this kind of emergence for women? For men?

I hear you saying that you observed (experienced?) the emergence of an intersubjectivity out of the "constant stream," the flow, of communication. What are some of the impacts of this kind of emergence for women? For men?

for one, as an artist "this emergence" has opened up my work to an audience that may never be exposed to my ideas in any other situation precisely because the internet appears to be more democratic than traditional

art world structures. through this medium i have emerged as an artist situating myself amongst my peers positioned on a global scale. within this context i have been a part of an on-going, unfolding dialog which is just as crucial to the development of my work as it's distribution.

sure, there are still old world biases and anxieties present in individuals on-line but that seldom affects the ability for the work to show through. this is not the case however, when the traditional art world intervenes and presents itself on the web. in this situation, the same old scenarios of inclusion/exclusion apply.

another, entirely different situation that comes to mind, is that of expressions of identity and sexuality on-line specifically on the level of personal interaction. the net offers the ability to remove physical risk from any social equation, within this context experimentation and other non-physical forms of risk are able to (re)surface. this is of particular interest and appeal for women today.

logging onto a CU-seeme sex chat room, you will notice that there are still very few women present. as usual, being a woman, the attention from all the men in the room is directed at her. (this may not be the case in RL where more barriers are up.) some men appear to confuse the open chat rooms with sex clubs. the women who log on are not professionals, they are not present exclusively for male pleasure, but are seeking the possibility for an alternative form of pleasure for themselves through interaction and engagement. once engagement is initiated, there is the possibility of remaining in the public room or "going private." either way, this presents an entirely different form of sexual interaction for women who exist outside the sex/porn industry. the ability to explore anonymous and spontaneous sex in the safety of her own home without physical risk, may grow in appeal for women.

Q7

davidRieder -> One final question: where do you see your work moving towards in the next few years?

while most of the work i'm currently developing is net-specific, i'm increasingly becoming interested in bringing the virtual back into the domain of the real.

[Image] for example, i recently presented a performance piece which was an extension of a work that i'm currently developing through my residency at the alternative museum. in this new work, i have been recording many internet-based artist's and theorist's vocal responses to a series of questions i pose to them concerning communication and expressions of identity on the internet. these ideas first began with my piece Distance which used CU-seeme reflector sites as a point of departure.

the performance took this structure and format and conceived of it in a real-time setting layering both live and remote audience participation. a month or so prior to the performance event, i sent out a call for remote participation to a couple of new media related e-mail lists i'm active on. i asked the participants to log on to a specific CU reflector site during the night of the performance.

in the performance space the remote participant's responses to my inquiries were seen and read simultaneously with the responses of a live member of the audience. through the microphone, her voice was intentionally echoed to mirror the dual realities simultaneously present in the performance space.

unlike my web-specific work, this piece opened up my working process, rendering it visible to the audience present. it also offered me an opportunity to experiment with a different format-- performing my process in real-time rather than uploading my files for archival viewing.

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