

Paris Connection: a project in critical media

by Randy Adams

***Paris Connection** focuses on the web.art being done in Paris by six artists: Jean-Jacques Birgé, Nicolas Clauss, Frédéric Durieu, Jean-Luc Lamarque, Antoine Schmitt, and servovalve. Via interviews, profiles and other writings, Paris Connection offers perspective on the artists individually and as a loosely-knit group. It isn't a curation of their work; it's a project in critical media about their work. Paris Connection features writing about the work of these artists by me, Helen Thorington, Regina Célia Pinto, Roberto Simanowski, and Carrie Noland. It was co-published and co-produced by four sites around the world: turbulence.org (New York); dichtung-digital.de (Berlin); arteonline.arq.br (Rio); and coriolisweb.org (Toronto).*

Jim Andrews, writer/programmer/web.artist



In her introduction to *Paris Connection*, Helen Thorington says, "I want to experience art first, study it after." Founder and producer of New York-based turbulence.org, a not-for-profit organization actively supporting net art since 1996, Thorington was first drawn to the work of these French artists by the "synthesis that was achieved" between Nicolas Clauss's interactive visual work and the simplicity and appropriateness of the sounds created by Jean-Jacques Birgé. A co-produced project with an international scope - 15 people from 7 countries worked

on it, writing and translating into English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. *Paris Connection* is an example of network discourse across cultures. Here you can interact with and study new media at the same time.

Thorington explains how the project began:

Indirectly with turbulence and myself. In 2002 we initiated a new section on the turbulence website called "Guest Curators". It was to be a place where outside, primarily artist-curators could introduce artists they feel are particularly important or whose work they feel has been ignored. I asked Jim to be a part of this feature on a regular basis. The thing most valuable to us is the multi-lingual component, allowing people who would not otherwise come to our site to do so, and others who do come but are not really English-speaking to understand what is there. For us personally, it is important that the work contains critical analysis as well as interviews and the artists' works.

Thorington refers here to Carrie Noland's excellent analysis of digital poetics, which focuses on the digital poem entitled *nurb*, by servovalve (pseudonym for the French author-programmer Gregory Pignot), one of the people featured in *Paris Connection*. As a professor at the University of California in Irvine, California, Noland teaches about avant-garde poetry, painting, and performance. Noland explains the circuitous route that led to her involvement in the project:

Last summer I was asked by Thom Swiss, who had read my work on poetry and technology, to give a paper on digital poetry. Since I knew absolutely nothing about digital poetry, I began to hunt around on the web, check out friends' websites, attend conferences on electronic literature, and so on. Eric Vos turned me on to "webartery" and, anxious to learn more about the nuts and bolts of creating poetry with digital instruments, I wrote to Jim Andrews, told him my predicament, and asked him if I could join his listserve. He was extremely gracious. Once I was plugged in, I sent out a question about Flash as a tool

for writing poetry and received tons of helpful responses. In return, Jim and several others asked me to send them my finished essay. After Jim read the essay, he invited me to contribute something to Paris Connection. And that's how it all came about. Jim is a lot of fun to work with, a generous spirit.

Paris Connection includes interviews by Jim Andrews with all six artists. His experience with programming adds an extra dimension to the introductions and interviews. Andrews has long held that cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary dialogues are necessary to foster an understanding of and gain support for new media. As noted by Geert Lovink, in his recent book *Uncanny Networks*:

It is certainly easier and more rewarding for todays intellectual to withdraw into his or her own work than it is to engage. Interviews are all about creating contexts, together with chats and debates, reviews, links, and other reference systems. The genre fits very well into the general tendency to break down the text and create a social-technological knowledge environment. Interviews are one of many sorts of imaginative text one can use in creating common, networked discourses.

With 15 people from 7 countries writing and translating for the project, Andrews worked long hours in a "cockroach-infested apartment" in Toronto, Canada - studying the work of the artists presented in *Paris Connection*, composing and replying to emails, and designing the web pages. When first contacted, multimedia author and artist Jean-Jacques Birgé explains: "I took seriously that crazy idea Jim was fighting for. I did not know him before. We receive a lot of propositions that we cannot follow, this one seemed serious enough to me! I've tried to help the best I could." Artist and programmer, Antoine Schmitt says: "I got involved when I responded to an email of Jim (whom I already knew online on some other topics) on Rhizome about a work of Mark Napier and Fred Durieu. I wanted to point him to my work, which was similar to the ones he reviewed, but older. At that point, Jim was also in contact with other artists on the net, and it turned out that we were all from Paris."

One of the hosts and producers of *Paris Connection*, Regina Célia Pinto (an artist and researcher from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) believes that:

The critical process being established through Paris Connection may be a first in Brazil. Through it we are working side by side with "foreigners" (strictly speaking). Many times, that which is farthest away is closest at hand. I think sincerely that this kind of work could change the world step by step. To work with people of another culture is an opportunity to create links of friendship and for me it is a way to peace. I feel that the project has not had all the feedback it deserves, but I think too that it is a question of time. Much water is going to roll below the bridge yet.

Paris Connection received a five-column [article](#) in the French daily, *Libération*, and a small mention in the New York Times. But absolutely no coverage in Canada, Andrews home country. Nancy Paterson, electronic media artist and Coordinator of the AIR (Artist in Residence) program at the Centre for Creative Communications in Toronto, where Andrews was AIR while coordinating the project, says:

While he was in residence, together we worked on setting up a web publication: www.coriolisweb.org - this was a collaborative project between Jim, myself, and Jason Baerg (who has also applied to be AIR at the Centre). Jim developed the first feature for [coriolisweb.org](http://www.coriolisweb.org): Paris Connection. There's very little funding/support for development of this sort in Canada, this in spite of the fact that we clearly lack a Rhizome quality resource for media artists. And most websites which feature Canadian artists do so in a very basic and unimaginative way: listing names and links to streaming video, etc. They are good sites, but simply telephone book listings - essentially inadequate, and very unsupportive for digital poetics. This is what Jim, Jason and myself hope that [coriolisweb.org](http://www.coriolisweb.org) will address.

The value of *Paris Connection* is lasting. Thorington explains: "There has not been much feedback here. Actually I didn't expect much, as what seems to happen on turbulence is a slow-growing use of its works, by artists, educators and museum/gallery/festival curators. While I have no concrete evidence indicating the value of the collaboration, I suspect that it has increased the visibility of the project and of each individual site." Schmitt echoes Thorington's views: "Any feedback? Actually and strangely not really. But these things always happen slowly in time. And yes, I think that these sorts of publications are valuable. Even though they are arbitrary, as they gather people whose work has not much in common, it creates a momentum bigger than the sum of the parts. And everyone profits from this momentum."

Email interview with Jim Andrews [10 Apr 2003 09:03:27]

Adams >> I don't want to dwell on the works presented in Paris Connection because of course the site itself covers this material, but could you explain what drew you to these French web.artists? Is there an inherent difference between their creations and, say, the work of North American web.artists? I suppose, also, can you categorize what it is they do? Is it hypermedia, web.art, net.art, new media? Or a synthesis that defies categorization?

Andrews >> I didn't know they knew one another before I corresponded with some of them. When they told me they knew one another and collaborated occasionally with one another, I began to see how their work relates and forms an extraordinary larger body of work. It isn't identifiable as a style like the rectilinear style of datafied net.art is identifiable, but if you know a range of multimedia net.art, you recognize the élan and decidedly artistic focus of the six French artists. It's often ingenious in its coding (Durieu and Schmitt in particular) and yet well-realized artistically. It is an experiential art, as opposed to a strictly conceptual art. There's no lack of 'concept' in much of it (particularly in servovalve and Schmitt), but it is experiential in its interactivity and relative richness of media; people of different mentalities and nations can all experience the work in different ways. The audience is not solely other artists, and the audience is not strictly North American. The above general qualities are not specifically French, I don't think, but they are well-suited to French culture.

Also - and this may be the most distinctively determining factor - they have at their disposal an extraordinary range of experience and skill in arts, media, and programming. Each of them is strong artistically in different (though often intersecting) spheres, and they collaborate well. Their work shows the value of strong collaboration and cooperation dramatically. There are few such loosely knit groups in the world that have the technical skill and diverse artistic strength to collaborate using a tool like Director.

Durieu, Schmitt, servovalve, and Lamarque program with an artistic and sensual focus that you don't see often. Clauss has a tremendous sense of various arts and media and how they can be synthesized. Birgé is strong both in audio and as the main collaborator with the rest of the group. Servovalve performs in clubs with the work he displays on the Web and is taking visual music in exciting directions, and he is quite clever in his synchronisations of the visual and sonic.

Paris Connection received a lukewarm reception on Rhizome Raw, which is primarily a New York-based list. A thinker about net.art back channelled me that:

"The unspoken reactivity against Paris is that the French art implicates veracity of the individual voice, the individual experience, the individual conscience, because of its experiential qualities, based in human sensation, and memory. Thereby challenging the ascendancy of data."

I was surprised to receive this, but it does make sense. There's an interesting engagement with data

visualization and consciously pixelated, primarily conceptual net.art that has a necessary history in computer art, given the historical constraints on bandwidth, processing speed, and storage, and those limitations and history are strongly celebrated on Rhizome Raw. But the French art, and work of similar quality on the net, illustrates the emergence of art for the net that is capable of being experiential as opposed to relying primarily on conceptual abstraction. That it should be done so well in Paris reminds one of the issues raised in the above quote and the experiential élan of French culture. This sort of work has not received the attention or wide audience it deserves.

Adams >> Can you speak a bit about how the project came together? How did you approach the various producers?

I had produced some [profiles of web.artists](#) for Helen Thorington at and she wanted more. So Helen and I talked about it at length and Helen was a great advisor throughout the project and wrote a terrific piece about the work of the French artists. Her turbulence.org is one of the most intrepid sites in Web.art and has been for years. She focusses on synthesis of arts, media, and programming. I met her in the 80s when she was producing New American Radio, which did for radio/audio art what we are trying to do more broadly now in multimedia net.art.

Roberto Simanowski was in Toronto for several of the months I was in Toronto and we formed a friendship there - I'd also met him earlier in Seattle - and I wanted to work with him. Dichtung-digital.org's focus is digital poetics and he was happy to move into more exploration of multimedia - he has moved dichtung-digital into analysis of not solely digital writing but also broader digital art.

Regina Célia Pinto and I have worked together previously and had decided that we wanted to do more work together. Her arteonline.arq.br is one of the main sites of cross-fertilization between North American and South American Web.artists and writers. And she also publishes work more broadly international.

Nancy Paterson in Toronto was looking for a project while I was artist in residence that networked widely. Nancy is known for her interactive digital installation work. She coordinates the Artist in Residence program at The Centre for Creative Communications in Toronto, and we wanted to put together the initial project for a new site called coriolisweb.org we started at the school.

Carrie Noland had, independently, written about servovalve. She teaches French literature and poetry at the U. of California at Irvine, which is apparently where Derrida chills. So all these things, together with our shared desire to create an international project about great international art, came together. I had originally asked Ana Maria Uribe, who translated the project into Spanish, for a piece for Paris Connection, because I admire her visual poetry, but she volunteered to translate the project into Spanish. Jorge Luiz Antonio and Alexandre Venera, who worked with Regina on the Portuguese translations, are friends and they found the project one that they were interested in participating in. And there were many people from webartery and elsewhere, including Philippe Castellin, Patrick Burgaud, Millie Niss, and Olivier Crete who volunteered to do French translations of the project.

So it was a big effort by a lot of people. The work of the French artists is international art and Paris Connection was an international effort to present their international art to an international audience. Paris Connection is, I feel, a strong statement about the international dimensions of the net and the power to communicate across geographic and cultural boundaries.

Adams >> While in the process of gathering material, interviewing the artists and organizing the participants, what role did the Centre For Creative Communications play in Paris Connection? Was it at

all helpful being in Toronto while working on this? Or could you have developed it from your home in Victoria?

Andrews >> I could have developed it from Victoria, but I don't think I would have. The impetus to do a project of this scope was, in part, a product of being artist in residence and the need to produce a project that networked widely. It was a full-time project for me and Regina and Ana Maria for several months, with others working something less than full-time but still many hours. Being in Toronto as artist in residence gave me the time and imperative to do this sort of project.

Adams >> One thing I have noticed about working online is the number of coincidences or moments of serendipity that occur while collaborating with people from across the planet. Can you think of any particular moments that made you feel you were on the right track? That you were part of something special?

Andrews >> When Ana Maria volunteered to translate the project into Spanish, after I asked her for something much smaller, I felt that the project had reached a kind of scope that was very encouraging, and for Ana Maria to make that sort of commitment to it was inspiring. Also, when Alexandre Venera, Philippe Castellin, Millie Niss, Patrick Burgaud, and Olivier Crete volunteered to do French translations, this was a great help to presenting the project in French, which we really wanted to be able to do.

Adams >> I know you have past experience in conducting interviews while working at the University of Victoria's radio station and are quite comfortable in the role of moderator. Your experience at webartery and the regular defib interviews with international members working in web.art or net.art must have been of some value, as well? You call Paris Connection critical media. Can you expand on this, generally? What makes it different from more traditional radio interviews? Chat interviews? Or even this email interview? Can you point us to other examples of critical media?

Andrews >> The main sites in English concerning analysis and criticism of web.art are, in my opinion, Roberto Simanowski's [Dichtung Digital](#) and [Electronic Book Review](#). But they are not so much devoted to web.art as to writing on the net. There are also sites such as [Neural.it](#). that are more brief in their analysis and are more like 'news' and short reviews, perhaps, and serve the function of providing links to interesting new work. And then there are the email lists such as rhizome raw, webartery, syndicate, etc. where there is dialog about net.art. I see that trAce is now providing a range of coverage and analysis of net.art, and that's great to see.

There is very little writing about multimedia net.art. And the writing one sees about multimedia net.art tends to be somewhat touristic in its nature, ie, written by people interested in something else, mainly, such as literature or hypertext or visual art or gallery art etc. Paris Connection is an attempt to focus on criticism and analysis of especially outstanding multimedia net.art.

And we attempted to incorporate hypermedia and design into the project in a way that contributed to the statement as opposed to producing work that was solely writerly. I wanted a project that wasn't simply knowledgeable in its writing about this art but was savvy in its use of media in critical media.

Adams >> I know Paris Connection was covered in Libération from France and got a mention in "Cross-Cultural Ventures With Digital Artworks" by Matt Mirapaul, in the New York Times. Did it get any coverage in the Canadian press? Or other countries?

Andrews >> There was no Canadian coverage. The Libération article was translated into Spanish by the Argentinian press and the Brazilian press ran a short article on it. Libération and The New York Times

have people specially devoted to digital art, but that doesn't exist in Canada, even with the Globe and Mail, the country's best paper. Paris Connection was my attempt to move to Paris, Rio, Berlin, and New York without leaving my cockroaches in Toronto.

Adams >> You began the webartery list back in 1998 and it very quickly attracted people from all over the world. The following post is from the very beginning of the webartery and is interesting when read in context with what you have done with the Paris Connection, but also with the present situation in Iraq:

*From: Jim Andrews jandrews@xxxxxxxxxx.xxxx
Date: Thu Dec 17, 1998 7:38pm
Subject: international dimension of webart poetics*

"To me, one of the most exciting possibilities of webart practice and theory, webart poetics, then, is the international dimension ... Of course, most recently, the bombing of Iraq by the U.S. again - for which there is sadly large support in the U.S. (right or wrong it is sad that the support is so strong) - would ideally be met with such a large international NO that military actions could be discouraged. The Web, with its world-wideness, seems to offer a tantalizing opportunity for a kind of international fellowship that may be new on the mass-communications level. Surely it is a noble aspiration for Webart to further that larger goal as much as possible."

There are several questions that can be linked to this post. For example, the question of whether communications technology has made this a better world?

Andrews >> Has communications technology made a better world? Well, if people have access to international information, then propaganda becomes a harder sell. Looking at the current situation, domestic TV, radio, and newspapers dominate the media landscape in all countries. The Internet contains a wealth of international information, but international boundary crossing is not a big factor in any country. You have to go looking for it. And sites are easily subject to denial of service attacks even by fourteen year olds, never mind military organizations and corporations which can shut down far too much of international communication over the Internet at their whim. The Web is 'defenceless' in this regard. It relies on good will. But sometimes important things come from defencelessness.

Adams >> Finally, what are the rewards in producing co-publications/collaborations like Paris Connection? And whither now?

Andrews >> It was inspiring to work with Regina, Ana Maria, Roberto, Nancy, Helen, and the others so closely. And with Jean Jacques Birgé, who edited most of the French translations.

Co-publication amplifies projects both in terms of audience numbers and in stature, since it is a strong statement about the value of a project for various sites to co-publish it; it says many people believe it has value. Co-production has the benefit of being able to produce a project of this scope whereas any one of the sites the project was published on probably couldn't have done it alone.

As to the future for me, well, like most people, I'm a bit depressed about the future at this point. We see a future involving diminished power and credibility of the United States, of ongoing defensive postures, of threats of terror and abrogation of individual liberty, and ongoing slaughter as TV entertainment. And hard economic times around the world. I am pressing ahead with a new ambitious project in interactive audio for the Web that involves about a year or more of programming and design, and about six months of recording music, sound, and making animations/videos. But I have no funding for it at the moment and do not know how long I will be able to remain working at this full time. But hopefully a way will emerge. I

trust it will. I still have a sense of excitement about making types of net-based multimedia art that the world has never seen, and a sense that the joy and wonder of the experience of art is disarming and brings us closer to a better world, particularly when the experience can be shared across international borders of all kinds. And I look forward to working more with the people of Paris Connection and others around the world.

Many thanks, Randy, and to trAce also.

Jim Andrews has published vispo.com since 1995. It is his 'book' in PDF, HTML, Java, DHTML, downloadable Windows executables, Flash, and Shockwave. He is a writer, visual poet, programmer, mathematician, and critic. He attempts a synthesis of arts, media, and programming toward the ABC's of a new art. <http://www.vispo.com/>

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Links:

Paris Connection:

(Rio, Brazil)

<http://www.artonline.arq.br/>

(New York, USA)

<http://www.turbulence.org/>

(Berlin, Germany)

<http://www.dichtung-digital.org/>

(Toronto, Canada)

<http://www.coriolisweb.org/>

Helen Thorington:

<http://new-radio.org/helen/>

Ana Maria Uribe:

<http://amuribe.tripod.com/>

Jorge Luiz Antonio:

<http://vispo.com/misc/BrazilianDigitalPoetry.htm>

Millie Niss:

<http://www.sporkworld.org/>

Webartery:

<http://www.webartery.com/>

Lovink, Geert. "Uncanny Networks: Dialogues with the Virtual Intelligentsia." The University of Michigan Press, 2003.

<http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=9545>

trAce Links

Nicolas Clauss: Flying Puppet By Randy Adams

<http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/Review/index.cfm?article=31>