Distance Makes the Art Grow Further: Distributed Authorship and Telematic Textuality in *La Plissure du Texte*

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Text means tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth) we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web.
—ROLAND BARTHES, *MYTHOLOGIES*

Preamble

Roland Barthes' canonical statement contains an understanding of textuality that lies at the center of this chapter and indeed informed the project it sets out to describe. The term *telematics* has its origins in the 1978 report to the French president by Alain Minc and Simon Nora concerning the convergence of telecommunications and computers, particularly in business and administration.[1] *Distributed authorship* is the term I coined to describe the remote interactive authoring process for the project *La Plissure du Texte: A Planetary Fairytale*,[2] which is the principal subject of this chapter. My purpose here is to explore the genealogy of the project, how the concept of mind-at-a-distance developed in my thinking, and how the overarching appeal of the telematic medium replaced the plastic arts to which I had been committed as an exhibiting artist for more than two decades.

The project arose in response to an invitation in 1982 from Frank Popper to participate in his exhibition Electra: Electricity and Electronics in the Art of the XXth Century at the Musèe Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in the fall of 1983. Popper had written previously on my work,[3] and I was confident that his invitation offered a perfect opportunity to create a large-scale telematic event that would incorporate ideas and attitudes I had formed over the previous twenty or more years.

La Plissure du Texte: A Planetary Fairytale (LPDT) sought to set in motion a process by which an open-ended, nonlinear narrative might be constructed from an authoring "mind" whose distributed nodes were interacting asynchronically over great distances—on a planetary scale, in fact. As I examine it in retrospect, I see how a complexity of ideas can create a context for a work whose apparent simplicity masks a generative process that can bifurcate into many modes of expression and creation. It is the bifurcations of ideas specific to the context of *LPDT*—their branching and converging pathways—that I shall initially address in this chapter. The content itself is transparent, insofar as the text in its unfolding is its own witness.

The Pathway to *La Plissure*

It was the psychic systems that I had been studying since the early 1960s—telepathy across oceans, communication with the disincarnate in distant worlds—that led me, a decade later, to formulate ideas of distributed mind and the concept of distributed authorship embedded in *LPDT.* I followed

both the left-hand path and the right in pursuit of my interests in consciousness (I'm thinking here of the role of the left and right hemispheres of the brain in determining linguistic and cultural norms in Robert Ornstein's writings,[4] and of ideas drawn from the Sufism of Idries Shah,[5] Jung's synchronicity,[6] and Charles Tart's studies of altered states of consciousness).[7] I studied J. B. Rhine's work at Duke University on telepathy[8] and J.W. Dunne's theory of time, memory, and immortality[9] (a copy of Dunne's book was in the core library of Buckminster Fuller, whose planetary perspective and structural creativity was a further inspiration to me). I was at home too with kabbalistic and mystical thought, as set out by such writers as Papus,[10] Ouspensky,[11] and the Theosophists, and—at a level of generality but with huge impact on my imagination—John Michell's *A View over Atlantis*.[12]

Michell could be seen, in a sense, as attempting to lift Barthes' veil, "behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth)," the veil in this instance being the network of ancient sites, inscriptions, and monuments that dot the British landscape where I was brought up. And just as in Barthes' *Mythologies*,[13] Michell drew out meaning from what was apparently random and inconsequential. It was the narratives woven around the Neolithic, ancient, and medieval "spiritual technology" of my home region—Avebury, Silbury Hill, Stonehenge, and Glastonbury—that prepared me, at a very young age, for my subsequent study of esoterica and the sense of the numinous that later I was to find in cyberspace.

Modern science and technology also exerted a huge influence of the thoughts that led to *LPDT*. *Scientific American* was consulted as frequently as *Art Forum*, quantum physics infected art theory, and the metaphors of biology infiltrated my visual thinking. But it was principally cybernetics that led me to my subject and prepared me for the telematic revelation that was to take over my ideas about art. The works of Ross Ashby,[14] F. H. George,[15] and Norbert Wiener[16] inspired my thinking about networks within networks—semantic and organic—interacting, transforming, self-defining in a way that later narrative nodes could do in *LPDT*. My thoughts about participation and interaction in art were consolidated with Whitehead's issues of organism,[17] Bergsonian notions of change,[18] and McLuhan's ideas about communication.[19] These concerns, amongst others less easily defined, led me inexorably to my project.

As a painter and dreamer, I had always found associative thought more productive to my creative process than strict rationality, but quite early in

my work, systems thinking[20] and theories of growth and form[21] were equally important to me. Process philosophers and systems thinkers are generically optimistic if not explicitly utopian, just as cyberneticians are always in pursuit of the perfectibility of systems. Their outlook is necessarily global in every sense. I was making works in the early 1960s that was semantically open ended and invited viewer participation, such as those that were shown in my first London exhibition of change-paintings and analog structures.

In April 1970, I published "The Psibernetic Arch,"[22] which sought to bridge the apparently opposed spheres of hard cybernetics and soft psychic systems (discovering in the process, for example that parapsychology was being researched in the Laboratory of Biological Cybernetics at Leningrad University). During my tenure as dean of the San Francisco Art Institute in the 1970s, I consulted the tarot and threw the *I Ching* on a regular basis. In this context, Brendan O'Regan, research director at the Institute of Noetic Sciences in Sausalito, California, approached me to participate in a TV documentary. The institute was led by Willis Harman and had been founded by the astronaut Edgar Mitchell. O'Regan had been a senior associate of Buckminster Fuller.

The documentary (destined for coast-to-coast transmission) was to survey the current state of psychic research, including, in my case, an interview with Luiz Antonio Gasparetto, a Brazilian psychic who demonstrated the ability to paint four paintings, each in the style of a different "modern master," simultaneously with his feet and hands. He "incorporated" the personalities of these deceased painters and claimed to "walk and talk with them" on a daily basis. At the filming it seemed that practically the whole of the community of parapsychologists, analysts, therapists, and transpersonal psychologists of northern California was assembled to watch the demonstration.

In the course of this induction into the Bay Area world of the paranormal, I developed a friendship with Jack Sarfatti, one-time associate professor in quantum physics at the University of California at Berkeley and a founder of the Esalen group, said to have influenced the ideas of Fritjof Capra[23] and Gary Zukav,[24] whose books on mysticism and physics were to become widely read. Fred Alan Wolf, author of *Parallel Universes*,[25] among other influential books, was also a part of our meetings. Through O'Regan I was introduced to Jacques Vallée, popularly recognized as a French expert on unidentified flying objects (UFOs), on whom the character played by Francois Truffaut in the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was based. That great mythic

Hollywood film of the 1970s—even, in my estimation, of the century—appeared to start out as the study of creative obsession, whose raw material was any household rubbish (a perfect metaphor of the Arte Povera of the period), but became an expression of human longing for communication with the cosmos, a metaphor for science in search of meaning in outer space.

Vallée had joined Doug Englebart's lab at Stanford Research Institute in 1971, in which the idea of on-line communities was being explored and in which the development had begun of some basic tools, such as the mouse and an early form of hypertext. When ARPANET opened up in 1972, the momentum accelerated. Some of the behavioral and social effects were quickly recognized. One of Vallée's tasks was to build the first database for the the Network Information Center, which comprised no more than a dozen sites at that point. Later he met Paul Baran, who had invented packet switching at RAND and who was his mentor in a new Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) project to study group communications through computers. In 1973, under ARPA and National Science Foundation funding, Vallée, Roy Amara, and Robert Johansen, based at the Institute for the Future, built and tested the first conferencing network, the Planning Network System (PLANET).

Vallée had founded a company called Infomedia in San Bruno, California, to provide the worldwide network for PLANET, offering access to huge databases and extensive computer conferencing facilities. PLANET was originally designed for use by planners in government and industry, who were unlikely to have any previous computer experience, and so was designed from the beginning for maximum ease of use. Commands were made as simple as possible, and the system was designed to be operated with just a few keys on a specially built portable telecommunications terminal. The PLANET application later evolved into the application Notepad, a global conferencing system that was used by a number of corporate clients such as Shell Oil.

From Psi to Cyb

Although the mystique around Vallée's UFO research was fascinating, I was much more drawn to what was for me at that point the equally mysterious world of computer-mediated telecommunications. Introduced by O'Regan to Vallée's organization and hands on to the technology at the Stanford Research Institute, I found it particularly exciting that Texas Instruments portable terminals, with rubber acoustic couplers to a telephone handset,

enabled the user to connect with the network from just about any public telephone, and in many world capitals, free.

Just as earlier, I had had an awakening flash to the value of cybernetic theory to underpin my "interactive" art practice,[26] so too here I saw in computer networking the possibility for a new connective medium for my art. I already had a sense of its aesthetic potential. Although the direct link between this new communications technology and big business and the military could be darkly problematic, I felt from my very first encounter that telematics could provide the means for enlightened artistic and poetic alternatives.

My first task was to secure funding to set up a network project that could test out my ideas. The National Endowment for the Arts awarded funding, and portable Texas Instruments 765 terminals were dispatched to Douglas Davis, Jim Pomeroy, Don Burgy, and Eleanor Antin, in the United States, and Keith Arnatt, in the United Kingdom. Vallée generously made PLANET available to us for twenty-one days.

By the time this first project (dubbed "terminal art" by the British press) got underway, my base had moved from the Bay Area to the United Kingdom. There my greater access to France enabled me to witness the first steps in the "telematization of society"—at least of business—resulting from Minc and Nora's report: *la programme télématique.*[27] In the context of French culture, my reading now followed a path through the structural linguistics of Saussure[28] and the structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss[29] to Foucault's archaeology of knowledge and on into the semantically ambiguous domains of Derrida and full blown poststructuralism.[30]

In 1978 I presented a postmodern credo at the College Art Association annual meeting in New York on a panel convened by Davis.[31] This drew upon the implications of second-order cybernetics,[32] which reinforced the understanding of interactivity in the creation of meaning by which I had theorized my own art practice. Equally potent at that time was Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind,*[33] in which the term *mind at large* appears, originally coined by Aldous Huxley in *Proper Studies,*[34] which had been a set book in my grammar school days.

In my thinking at that time, the work of Barthes stood at the center of the literature on semiotics, with its emphasis on how meaning can be elicited from the apparently most trivial or disregarded things. Not withstanding the excellence of Eco's magisterial *A Theory of Semiotics,*[35] or my forays in the 1960s into the pioneering work of Charles Sanders Peirce,[36] it was Barthes'

Mythologies[37] that captured my imagination with its combination of satire, humor, and the deconstruction of myths. In 1977 the Canadian artist Mowry Baden introduced me to *The Pleasure of the Text*, which in my view achieved an unrivaled level of importance in the otherwise jaded academic field of "literary criticism." Barthes also took the tired debate between Marxism and psychoanalysis up a level to a much more human perspective:

No sooner has a word been said, somewhere, about the pleasure of the text, than two policemen are ready to jump on you: the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman: futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion. An old, a very old tradition: hedonism has been repressed by nearly every philosophy; we find it defended only by marginal figures, Sade, Fourier . . .[38]

Within the hedonistic literature of these marginal figures, it was precisely Fourier's universal theory of passionate attraction[39] that inspired my utopianism, a passion that extended to the text, that is to say, gave freedom to make (give/receive) narrative pleasure in the open-systems context of nonlinear (asynchronic) time and boundless (nonlocal) space. In short the telematics of utopia: to be both here and elsewhere at one and the same time, where time itself could be endlessly deferred, as indeed could the finality of meaning. I was ready for Derrida's *différance*,[40] seeing difference functioning often as an aporia: difference in neither time nor space, but making both possible.

My interest in signs, in semiotics, and in myths was also fed by Vladimir Propp's study of narrative structure and the morphology of the fairy tale.[41] Propp's investigation of folktales sought a number of basic elements at the surface of the narrative. He showed how these elements correspond to different types of action. His structural analysis of dramatis personae, and his focus on behavior that recognized that actions are more important than the agents, chimed well with the interest that I had in process and system. In the fairy tale, by his account, there are thirty-one functions that are distributed among seven leading dramatis personae: the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero (or antihero). I was especially attracted to the idea that each character actually represented a center of action more than a simple persona, and that whatever specifics of a given magical narrative, the protagonist, from a state of initial harmony, follows a sequence of actions: discovers a lack, goes on a quest, finds helpers/opponents, is given tests, is rewarded, or a new lack develops. The question

that suggested itself for *LPDT* with its distributed authorship was: How might the narrative evolve in a more nonlinear way, written from inside the narrative, as it were, with each dramatis persona seen within him- or herself as the protagonist?

Pleating the Text

LPDT was to be a project involving multiple associative pathways for a narrative that would unroll asynchronically according to the centers of action that determined its development. The outcome would be multilayered, nonlinear in all its bifurcations. I had previously set up a project as part of Robert Adrian X's "The World in 24 Hours," an electronic networking event at Ars Electronica in 1982. My project was to have participants at their computer terminals around the world toss coins for the first planetary throw of the *I Ching*. Reflecting on this later, I wrote:

As I recall we got close to number 8, PI Holding Together/Union but the bottom line was -X-, which transformed the reading into number 3, CHU *Difficulty at the Beginning,* which was undoubtedly true. In fact looking at the emergence of networking for art, the offspring of this momentous convergence of computers and telecommunications, the commentary on CHU is particularly apt: *Times of growth are beset with difficulties. They resemble a first birth. But these difficulties arise from the very profusion of all that is struggling to attain form. Everything is in motion: therefore if one perseveres there is the prospect of great success.*[42]

For "The World in 24 Hours," Adrian employed the ARTEX system, an electronic-mail program for artists on the worldwide IP Sharp Associates (IPSA) time-sharing network. It was initiated as ARTBOX in 1980 by Adrian, Bill Bartlett, and Gottfried Bach to offer artists a cheap and simple alternative to IPSA's business-oriented program, with the final version, AR-TEX, being completed a few years later. This was an e-mail network for artists, a medium for text-based telecommunication projects, and a means of organizing on-line events. During the ten years of its operation, about a dozen artists used it regularly, and anywhere from thirty to forty others might be involved at any one time.

I met with Adrian in Vienna to elicit his involvement in *LPDT,* gaining his agreement to manage the complexity of ARTEX as the organizing instrument of the project's communications infrastructure, outlining the

need to use the telematic medium to engender a world-wide, distributed narrative: a collective global fairy tale. With the network as medium, the job of the artist had changed from the classical role of creating content, with all the compositional and semantic "closure" that implied, to that of "context maker," providing a field of operations in which the viewer could become actively involved in the creation of meaning and in the shaping of experience that the artwork-as-process might take. Canadian sponsorship was secured (Adrian was a Canadian national, IP Sharp was a Toronto-based company, and I had been at one time president of the Ontario College of Art), and the Canadian Cultural Center in Paris provided basic funding for the project, accommodation, and a planning base.

On July 13, 1983, I posted on ARTEX a description of the project and a call for participation. At the same time pamphlets and press announcements were circulated. Artists and art groups in eleven cities in Europe, North America, and Australia agreed to join the project.

In November of that year, each participant was allocated the role of traditional fairy tale character: princess, witch, fairy godmother, prince, etc. Beyond the simple idea of a fairy tale, I did not suggest a story line or plot: The artists were simply asked to improvise. The result was that as a result of the differences between time zones and the nature of improvisation, the narrative often overlapped and fragmented, leading into a multiplicity of directions (figure 13.1).

La Plissure du Texte was active on line twenty-four hours a day for twelve days: from December 11 to 23, 1983. With terminals in eleven cities, the network grew to include local networks of artists, friends, and random members of the general public who would happen to be visiting the museum of art space where the terminals were located. Over the three-week period of the project hundreds of "users" became involved in a massive intertext, the weaving of a textual tissue that could not be classified, even though ostensibly the project was to generate a "planetary fairytale" (figure 13.2).

Each participant or group of participants in the process could interact with the inputs of all others, retrieving from the large memory store all text accumulated since they last logged on. The textual interplay was complex, working on many layers of meaning, witty, bawdy, clever, academic, philosophical, entertaining, inventive, shocking, amusing—assimilating the great diversity of cultural contexts, value systems, and intellectual interests of the participants, located in Honolulu, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Paris,

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FROM ASCOT TO NEXUS SENT 15.43 20/12/1983

LE MAGICIEN :
UNE GLISSADE D'AUTEURS HORS DU CONTE ET
ET HORS DU SOUPER
WITHOUT END
_____
            APRES LES CATACLYSMES QUI DETRUISIRENT
            LES VALEUREUX PARTICIPANTS DE NOTRE SERIE
            ANTI-DALLAS
            APRES LA FIN DE LA BETE SOUS LES TROPISMES
            DU MAGICORDINATEUR
            A
             R
             I
              A
              N
              R
               H
                O
                 D
            REVELE AU MAGICIEN QUE LES ESPRITS AYANT
            VECU DANS UN CONTE DE FEE SONT RELACHES
            DE SON CHATEAU-PURGATOIRE
            PAR LA PROCHAINE GRANDE RHOD (ROUE) ILS
            QUITTERONT LA CORONA BOREALIS ET REGAGNERONT
            LA TERRE
              POUR CAPTER LE RETOUR DES ESPRITS
               POLYEDRIQUES
                (IL ETAIT SEUL SUR LA PLANETE DES
                  REQUINS AFFAIRES ET DES POILI-
                    TICIENS A-VIDES)
          L'ALCHIMAGE
            MET A  CHAUFFER
              UN ATHANOR   AU SOMMET DE L'ETNA
_____        _____
DU CREUSET MONTE UNE VAPEUR LEGEREMENT PARFUMEE AU
SAFRAN ET DE CETTE MEME COULEUR SOLAIRE
DU CREUSET SORTENT DES ETRES SANS NOM NI FEE
LA GLISSADE INFINIE DES PERSONNAGES DU CONTE
NOW IT'S LATE IN THE NIGHT  I CAN SEE A BEAUTIFUL PASSAGE
OF WHITE TRANSPARENT CLOUDS OVER THE DARK SKY
UNE GIGANTESQUE EXPANSION DE LETTRES UNE GLISSADE D'AUTEURS
EN QUETE D'AUTEURS...
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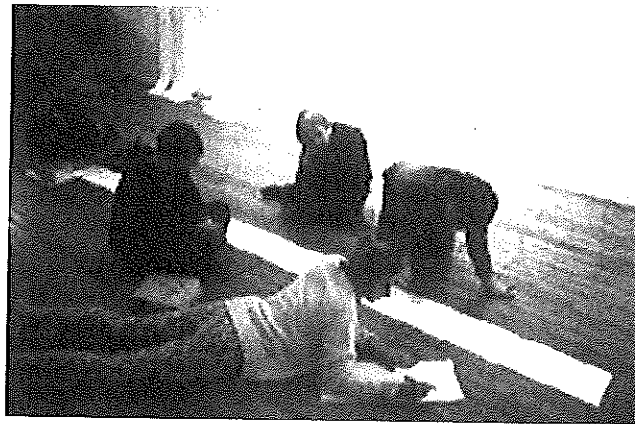

Figure 13.1   Sample printout of *LPDT* texts.

Figure 13.2   Narrative center of action: fairy godmother. Students of Norman White at Ontario College
of Art, Toronto.

Figure 13.3   Narrative center of action: the fool. Robert Adrian X and Tom Klinkowstein,
San Francisco.

Vancouver, Vienna, Toronto, Bristol, Amsterdam, Alma in Quebec, and
Sydney (figure 13.3).

In some instances a dramatis persona would be no more than one or two
artists grouped around a desktop computer; in other cases an artist group
would meet regularly in its media center to move the narrative along on-line.
Others made a full-scale performance, as with the witch in Sydney, where
each evening, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the evolving narrative
text was downloaded and read out to the gathered participants, representing
the witch, who in turn collaborated in further production of the text. In al-
most every case the individual node of the narrative network was itself a hub
networking out to other individuals or groups in its region, collectively con-
stituting the mind of the dramatis persona at that location. The Musée d'Art
Moderne in Paris was the principal hub, the home of the magician.

La Plissure du Texte was effectively a watershed, a fulcrum point in my
work. It showed me the importance of text as the agent of practice, not
merely of theory, and it demonstrated the potency of distributed authorship
in the creative process. The project passed without comment in the art press,
just as the 1986 Venice Biennale international on-line conference project
Planetary Network in the Laboratoria Ubiqua, organized by Tom Sherman,
Don Foresta, and myself as international commissioners, received no atten-
tion. It was too early; the art world would take a long time to catch up. It
wasn't until 1989 with my telematic project *Aspects of Gaia: Digital Path-
ways across the Whole Earth,* installed at Ars Electronica, that for me interac-

tive telematic work was granted a place in the art world. Even then, the festival itself was completely marginal to the orthodox international art fairs at that time.

1989 was the year that the term *interactive art* was inscribed in the canon of practice with such texts as "Gesamtdatenwerk," which I published in *Kunstforum* that year.[43] A year later the Prix Ars Electronic established interactive art as a major category of practice. I instituted the first honors degree in interactive art at Gwent College (which led five years later to the creation of the CaiiA-STAR doctoral program, and then to the *Planetary Collegium*).[44]

Conclusion: From Propp to Popp

This chapter has broadly indicated some of the pathways that led me to *La Plissure du Texte* and to the formulation of a practice that I have theorized as telematic art, a form of "telemadic" connectivism. The telemadic journey has taken me from Paris to California, from Vienna to Toronto, and from the deepest part of the Mato Grosso in Brazil to Japan, Australia, and Korea. It is a journey propelled by a fascination with myth and with a conjunction of ideas addressing artistic, scientific, and esoteric practices. My interest throughout has been in nonlinear structures and metacommunication, both in respect of online narrative, and in terms of consciousness and nonordinary realities.

As for my current work, there has been a passage, from ideas of mind-at-a-distance invested in nonlinear narrative (including the "centers of action" of Vladimir Propp)[45] set in telematic space, toward the new organicism in biophysics and research into biophotonics of Fritz-Albert Popp.[46] Propp's ideas have long been absorbed in my approach to collaborative process, as I have shown in the structure of *La Plissure du Texte*. Popp's field of biophotonics, which follows the work of Alexander Gurvitch, lies ahead of me, arising initially from my study of shamanic practices in Brazil, and especially the ethnobotany of psychoactive plants. The biophotonic network of light emitted by DNA molecules, as Popp has argued, may enable, through the process of quantum coherence, a holistic intercommunication between cells. So from the emergent planetary network of telematics, to the embodied biophotonic network of living entities, there is the potential for continuity and connectivity, the transdisciplinary aspects of which it is my present purpose as an artist to pursue.

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