

**Immaterial Material:  
Physicality, Corporality, and  
Dematerialization in  
Telecommunication Artworks**

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The last 150 years have been a period of intense dematerialization. New media and telecommunication technologies such as the telephone, radio, television, and on-line networks such as the Internet have dramatically changed our sense of time and space. The increased speed of machine-supported movement with trains, cars, and planes adds to this new sense of space. Although the distances between various different places remain objectively the same, the increased speed with which we are able to cross the territory in between has created a new perception of these spaces.

With telecommunication media, this modernist experience has become even more elementary. With new media such as the telegraph, telephone, and Internet, the body itself plays no role at all anymore in the communication of a message from one point to another. Whereas trains, cars, or planes still move bodies and material goods from one location to another, with telegraph or telephone it became possible for the first time to move messages without any material aspect at all. The discovery of electromagnetic waves in the late nineteenth century by Heinrich Hertz marks the great divide between the material and the telematic age, which is characterized by the split between message and sender, between signal and body. After that discovery, it was no longer the body or a material object that had to travel to communicate information, but rather it was invisible and immaterial waves transporting signals from one point to another, from station to station.<sup>1</sup> These technical advances created a space, or rather, nonspace, that was previously beyond the imagination: a (non)place in which time and space collapsed into one another and which was accessible potentially from everywhere, by everybody, and at all times.

This development has been further radicalized by the introduction and dissemination of computers and computer networks such as the Internet. Here the signals have been broken down into the smallest imaginable elements, zeros and ones that not only can be transported over long distances in an instant, but also can be processed, channeled, filtered, searched, and revised. The immaterial data traveling over these networks not only move information from one place to another, they can also manipulate processes in the physical world, be they Web cams, automated teller machines, or Internet-controlled telerobots.

These new means of telecommunication punch "a hole in space"—not coincidentally the title of one of the first telecommunication art pieces, a television-satellite link between Los Angeles and New York by Kit Galloway

and Sherrie Rabinowitz, who operated under the name Mobile Image.<sup>2</sup> *Hole-in-Space* is only one of many art projects that try to come to terms with the new “space” that has developed “within” the telecommunication network space. Created in 1980, it belonged to the first wave of artworks that employed communication satellites for artistic purposes and is one of the earliest and conceptually most interesting examples of the artistic use of an electronic telecommunication network. The piece is part of the ongoing attempt to use these new, immaterial networks for the creation of art. Be it the telephone, the fax machine, the bulletin board systems of the 1980s and early 1990s, today’s Internet—every new telecommunications medium has been tried out as a tool by artists. One of the most important aspects of the telecommunication networks that these artists examined was the immateriality of the media they worked with. Just as was the case with video art—but to an even more extreme extent—the telecommunication media were intangible and without physical presence, a quality that was frequently addressed by the works that were realized for these media.

This chapter concerns itself with the historic exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, which took place at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1985 and addressed the issue of immateriality, and the concepts about the *immatériel* developed by its curator, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. I will examine how *Les Immatériaux* attempted to grapple with the difficult task of showing something that was by definition “immaterial” and therefore almost impossible to present in a traditional exhibition. This topic has been an important issue in the art that exists exclusively within new telecommunication spaces and that, because of its very immateriality, has presented numerous problems for galleries and exhibitions that wanted to show these works. The press release for *Les Immatériaux* talked of a “nonexhibition,” because many of the phenomena that were presented were hardly visible or not visible at all, therefore difficult to show in an exhibition: “The subject of the show itself calls the traditional methods of representation of an exhibition into question, the tradition of the salon of the 18th century and the gallery.”<sup>3</sup>

*Les Immatériaux* was troubled by some of the same problems that haunt every show that tries to incorporate projects that have been created for telecommunication networks. Although the show chose some very different approaches to exhibiting “immaterial materials,” its subject matter was very similar to that of many arts projects that use telecommunication media, es-

pecially the Internet. In particular, very early Net art projects from the mid-1990s showed a strong sensitivity to the issue of immateriality and its artistic consequences. It almost seems as if the earlier in the short history of Net art these pieces were created, the more conscious they were of the special qualities that the medium they worked with entailed. Some of these works will be the subject of the second part of this chapter.

Les Immatériaux was a landmark in the development of a discourse on the postmodern society. It not only promoted Lyotard's philosophy but also played an important part in the Central European debate on the shifts in society, technology, and labor that went on in the 1980s in the writings of thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Friedrich Kittler, among others.<sup>4</sup> Many of the topics the show touched upon were also addressed in the telecommunication and Internet art that appeared in the 1990s, mainly out of Europe. In some cases, it is even possible to show that a number of telecommunication and Internet artists and theorists either saw the show or at least had significant information about it. However, many more of the activists of the telecommunication and Net art period of the 1990s did not see the show or even know about it, yet they dealt with some of the same subjects; so it appears that Les Immatériaux dug up, almost instinctively, ideas that were about to surface in the arts in the following years.

Les Immatériaux was an original exhibition that touched on a number of topics from very different fields and disciplines, including art and philosophy, automation and microelectronics, telecommunication and computerization. "It is important for philosophers to deal with subjects, that are none of their business," Lyotard pointed out in an interview. "It is not our intention to sum up the new technologies in this exhibition (in part, because they make any kind of encyclopaedic knowledge impossible) or to explain how they work. All it attempts is to discover and raise a sensibility that is specific to Post-Modernism, and we assume that it exists already. This new sensitivity is still hidden, though, and not conscious of itself."<sup>5</sup>

The show was to highlight the technologies that were prerequisites to what Lyotard had called "la condition postmoderne" in one of his best-known books.<sup>6</sup> Modern telecommunications technologies were among the most prominent examples of these technologies that the show put forward, and Lyotard frequently stressed that these technologies transcended matter and corporeality. In an interview on the show, Lyotard added:



The term "immaterial" refers to a somewhat daring neologism. It merely expresses that today—and this has been carried through in all areas—material can't be seen as something that, like an object, is set against a subject. Scientific analyses of matter show that it is nothing more than an energy state, i.e., a connection of elements which, for their own part, are not understandable and are determined by the structures which each have only a locally limited validity. The increasing mutual penetration of matter and spirit which is equally clear in the use of word processing systems is now felt in the classic problem of the unity of body and soul shifts.<sup>7</sup>

And in a conversation with Jacques Derrida, he added that *Les Immatériaux* "designate a structure, in which there is no room anymore for the traditional difference between intellect and matter."<sup>8</sup>

As a synopsis of the postmodern information and service society, *Les Immatériaux* not only put a great emphasis on the influence that the new methods of on-line communication might have on our life, it even included an on-line conference with a number of philosophers and journalists, conducted during the show on Minitel, the state-sponsored French on-line system.<sup>9</sup> The conference participants included Daniel Buren, Michel Butor, and approximately twenty other French intellectuals. Lyotard commented: "The experiment seems to me to be especially interesting in terms of how all the times of writing are changing: the time of inspiration, the time of re-reading one's own text, the time where one has the text in front of oneself, the time to check with other texts. And in relation to time this experiment has to be examined."<sup>10</sup>

This on-line conference was an early attempt in collaborative writing, networked discourse, and moderated on-line debate that both precedes and resembles the many similar projects that have taken place on the Net since. Mailing lists such as *nettime*, *re:code*, *Rohrpost*, and *Spectre*, as well as the many discussion projects that take place on-line for a limited time, have since taken up and popularized this concept. Both the show in general and the on-line writing in particular exerted a strong influence on the development of a discourse on on-line media and of a network-specific art.<sup>11</sup> For example, German artist and hypertext researcher Heiko Idensen points out *Les Immatériaux* and the possibility of a sophisticated intellectual on-line communication that he encountered at this show as one of the major reasons that he wanted to get involved with computer networks as an artist and critic.<sup>12</sup>

Les Immatériaux incorporated some works by artists that from a contemporary point of view can be considered to be groundbreaking for artistic practices on the Internet and with other telecommunication media: some conceptual artists and some preconceptual minimalists such as Joseph Kosuth, Dan Flavin, Giovanni Anselmo, Robert Ryman, and Robert Barry. Marcel Duchamp, who has frequently talked about his concept of an "anti-retinal" art, was also included. So the show presented some of the most prominent conceptual artists, whom Lucy Lippard wrote about in her book *Six Years*, as well as the art she referred to in the book's famous introduction as "dematerialized": "Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or 'dematerialized.'"<sup>13</sup>

This, of course, would also be a good definition of some of the Net art of the following years. Much of the art that was presented at Les Immatériaux was a direct predecessor of telecommunications and Internet art, which is also not only dematerialized, but also unpretentious, ephemeral and (an aspect that is often overlooked) mainly cheap to produce. These qualities are an important source for some of the motifs that appear quite frequently in early Net art pieces: references to physical space and the body, so-called gateway projects that try to connect the virtual space of the Net with the "real world," and projects that address human identity and its trappings in an on-line environment.

Les Immatériaux was structured into a number of sections that had titles such as "Peintre sans corps," "Tout les copies," "Memoires artificielles," "Homme invisible," or "Théâtre du non-corps." Each of these section titles would make perfect sense as chapter titles in an imaginary study on motifs in Net art, because all of the topics they represent are addressed in early Net art pieces, and none of them would have any significance if it weren't for the immateriality of on-line media. The absence of the body, the ease with which endless copies of a digital "original" can be produced, faked memories, and the vanishing of identity and body are all topics of telecommunication and Net art for a good reason: They play upon distinctive qualities of the very media that are used for telecommunication. Digital and communication media have produced a number of recurring motifs, and these motifs mirror the technical infrastructure of telecommunication network architecture.

Some prime examples of early telecommunication art were the projects that the Canadian N.E. Thing Company, Ltd., produced in the late 1960s

and early 1970s. A newspaper article described one of the company's concepts for the use of the international telex system as follows:

So one can imagine the telex at General Motors sounding a sprightly prelude of bell ringing, followed by the N.E. Thing Co. logo ("the world's only telexable logo"), then the admonition: "DON'T LOOK AT THIS UNLESS YOU ARE READY FOR ANYTHING," followed by an invitation to consult the N.E. Thing Co. on "IMAGINATION . . . THE G.N.G. . . GROSS NATIONAL GOOD . . . IDEAS . . . ANYTHING," at their offices in Vancouver or Ottawa.<sup>14</sup>

Needless to say, the N.E. Thing (pronounced "anything") Company, Ltd. (NETCO) wasn't a proper company that was offering its services to a blue-chip company like General Motors. It was instead an art project by Canadian artists Iain and Ingrid Baxter. Long before the short period of "business art" in the eighties and nineties, the couple marketed themselves as a company that provided "art services" to the art market. Connected to the conceptual art movement of the late sixties, when such art was still called "idea or information art" by many critics, the Baxters registered N.E. Thing as a company in 1969. Its provincial incorporation lists the expressed objects:

- i. To produce sensitivity information:
- ii. To provide a consultation and evaluation service with respect to things:
- iii. To produce, manufacture, import, export, buy, sell, and otherwise deal in things of all kinds.<sup>15</sup>

N.E. Thing's "business activities" earned the Baxters not only an invitation to a number of major international exhibitions of conceptual art but also a membership in the Vancouver Board of Trade. In a show at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, they set up an office as their headquarters in the museum and published their corporate archive in *The N.E. Thing Co. Ltd. Book*.<sup>16</sup> But most importantly in the context of this chapter, they, along with Hans Haacke and his installation *News* (1969), were among the first artists to use the telex for artistic purposes. In the context of their ironic inhabitation of commercial and bureaucratic institutions, this makes them the forerunners of the many attempts to establish fake institutions and companies within (electronic networks) by artists such as etoy, Stuart Rosenberg, IRWIN, Heath Bunting, and Rachel Baker.

The telex was a perfect medium for establishing a "virtual identity" for a pseudocompany such as N.E. Thing. In the dematerialized territory of electronic communication, it gave the company respectability. Unlike the Internet, the telex network was difficult to access and available only at high prices that mostly companies could afford; individuals were rare among the customers of the telex companies because of the prohibitively high costs. N.E. Thing was sponsored by a communications company for its experiments. When Iain Baxter talked to a reporter from the *Vancouver Sun* describing his fascination with the telex, he almost sounded like early Net art enthusiasts: "It's an open channel. No one can stop the telex from working because it's a twenty-four-hour-a-day communication hookup. As soon as you dial the number you are really into that office and then, depending on the personality of the people and their attitudes and so on, well it's up to them what happens. . . I'd like to find out what the machine can do, what are the processes inside it that can provide new ways of looking at our total environment."<sup>17</sup>

N.E. Thing used the telex not only to establish its "virtual identity," but also to send instructions to remote galleries and museums about how to set up its pieces:

In the Company's interpretation of McLuhan, communications media were used to an advantage by sending telex and telecopier messages from geographic, political and economic peripheries, creating what Ingrid [Baxter] called an aesthetic of distance—a means through which the Company could traverse time and space, inserting its presence in territories that it would otherwise be excluded from. Furthermore, communication works were also a cheap, easy, quick and portable means of artistic demonstration which allowed for an infiltration of national and international corporate and artistic systems that traverse geo-political boundaries.<sup>18</sup>

Creating pseudo-identities and -entities on the Net has been an important subject for on-line artists ever since.

With the telex system as with the Internet, the data were by definition "everywhere and nowhere" at the same time, because transmission of the data took place in a telecommunications network. The data "materialize" only when accessed from a telex machine somewhere (or anywhere) else. This "space" is characterized by dematerialization. Without any physical existence and physical distances, it plays no significant role on the Net. When N.E. Thing used the telex system, it did not only operate in this environment,



it reflected in its work the very qualities of this nonspace. Like the Net artists of the 1990s, N.E. Thing created a number of installations and on-line pieces that dealt precisely with the problematic question of location and space in an on-line environment and that often attempt to make the exchange of digital data on the Net physical again.

When Rosalind Krauss wrote her seminal essay "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism"<sup>19</sup> in 1976, she observed how a particular formal quality of the then-new medium video became a subject of the works of many video artists. The fact that video is able to record and transmit at the same time, producing instant feedback, led to a huge number of works by artists such as Richard Serra, Nancy Holt, Vito Acconci, and Joan Jonas that dealt with the possibility of turning the human body into the central instrument and subject matter for this recording. "The body is therefore as it were centered between two machines, that are like the opening and the closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; the second is the monitor, which reprojects the performer's image with the immediacy of a mirror,"<sup>20</sup> Krauss wrote and identified this phenomenon in the works of a number of video artists.

Similar mechanisms are at work in projects that were created for the Internet and other telecommunication media. Whereas one of video's capacities is the possibility of recording and transmitting, in the case of on-line media, the "material" of telecommunication and Net art is exclusively immaterial data and "immatériaux," to use Lyotard's term. The most successful on-line projects are native to their medium, because they make use of the specific formal qualities of that medium and turn those qualities into subject matters of their work. The pseudo-entities and companies, the relationship between real territory and corporeal cyberspace, the correlation between human and "data body" are central topics to Net and telecommunication art, because they also deal with one of the most significant properties of Net and telecommunication media. By "semiotizing" the phenomena of the real world, the Net opens up very specific gaps for artistic intervention. Although fakes and works that deal with the contradictions between the physical and real and the virtual and immaterial are not limited to Net art but have been dealt with in other, more traditional art forms, in the environment of the Internet and its technical structures, they have an even greater relevance.

As quoted earlier in the chapter, Lyotard said in an interview that Les Immatériaux "attempts to discover and raise a sensibility that is specific to Post-Modernism, and we assume that it exists already. This new sensitivity

is still hidden, though, and not conscious of itself." Telecommunication and Net art works try to express this "new sensitivity." They make us conscious of the immaterial phenomena that have developed within telecommunication technologies. They don't do it with a theoretical approach, they do it by actually engaging with these "immatériaux," by taking these new conditions, with which we have grown familiar so very quickly, to an extreme in order to create an opportunity to experience them again and make them unfamiliar again.

### Notes

1. See also Peter Weibel, "Techno-Transformation and Terminale Identität," in *Telematik-NetzModerneNavigatoren*, ed. Jeannot Simmen (Cologne: Buchhandlung Walter König, 2002), 8–15.
2. Frank Popper, *Art of the Electronic Age* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 136–138.
3. From the reprint of the press release in Jean François Lyotard et al., *Immaterialität und Postmoderne* (Berlin: Merve, 1985), 11–12. Translation of all German sources by the author.
4. Probably because of language constraints, the show seems to have had much less of an impact in the English-speaking Anglo-Saxon world. However, a very thorough discussion of the philosophical implications of Les Immatériaux is Anthony Hudek, "Museum Tremens of the Mausoleum without Walls: Working through Les Immatériaux at the Centre Pompidou in 1985" (M.A. thesis, Courtauld Institute, London, 2001).
5. Lyotard et al., *Immaterialität und Postmoderne*, 33.
6. Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979).
7. Lyotard et al., *Immaterialität und Postmoderne*, 22.
8. *Ibid.*, 23–24.
9. *Ibid.*, 26.
10. Lyotard et al., *Immaterialität und Postmoderne*, 56.

11. For an extended discussion of the early history of these artistic telecommunication experiments before Internet art, see Tilman Baumgärtel, "Net Art: On the History of Artistic Work with Telecommunications Media," in *net\_condition: art and global media*, ed. Peter Weibel and Timothy Druckrey (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 152–162.
12. See interview with Heiko Idensen in Tilman Baumgärtel, *net.art—Materialien zur Netzkunst* (Nuremberg, Germany: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 1999), 46–54.
13. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), vii.
14. Joan Lowndes, "'Easel' is a Telex," in *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Landscape: Works by Iain and Ingrid Baxter 1965–1971*, ed. Nancy Shaw and William Wood (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, Fine Arts Gallery, 1993), 48–49, 48.
15. William Wood, "Capital and Subsidiary. The N.E. Thing Co. and the Revision of Conceptual Art," in *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Landscape: Works by Iain and Ingrid Baxter 1965–1971*, ed. Nancy Shaw and William Wood (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, Fine Arts Gallery, 1993), 11–21, 12.
16. *The N.E. Thing Co. Ltd. Book* (Vancouver and Basel: NETCO and the Kunsthalle Basel, 1978), unpaginated.
17. Vancouver Sun, January 9, 1970. Cited in Joan Lowndes, "'Easel' is a Telex," in ed. Nancy Shaw and William Wood, *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Landscape: Works by Iain and Ingrid Baxter 1965–1971* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, Fine Arts Gallery, 1993), 48.
18. Nancy Shaw, "Siting the Banal," in ed. Nancy Shaw and William Wood, *Works by Iain and Ingrid Baxter* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, Arts Gallery, 1993), 25–41, 32–34.
19. Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in ed. Gregory Battcock, *New Artists Video* (New York: Dutton, 1987), 43–64. Reprinted from *October* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1976).
20. *Ibid.*, 45.