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patrick lichty on Sat, 19 May 2001 03:35:48 +0200 (CEST)

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[Nettime-bold] Alpha Revisionist Manifesto

- *To:* <list {AT} rhizome.org>
- *Subject:* [Nettime-bold] Alpha Revisionist Manifesto
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Concept White Paper

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An Alpha Revisionist Manifesto

FINAL RELEASE

12/17/00

In the technological sector, having a product 'in Alpha' refers to a product that is in development, frequently little more than a fully developed idea in the process of implementation. The 'Beta' stage follows, which is the final consumer testing that precedes release of a product (software, hardware, etc.) to the public. This follows an industrial tradition that includes such New World cultural icons as Detroit's concept cars, but a promise of progress is no longer enough for technological society. We are now in a period of the Alpha Revision.

In previous times such as the 1950's, development was closely guarded, with peeks of, or brief glimpses at objects-in-progress, only to climax in the glorious debut of the newest Philco television, Chevrolet automobile, or latest motion picture. In the past, the industrial production culture guarded its developing projects closely. The need for primacy in the promotion of ideas and products in the increasingly accelerated culture of the 80's and 90's technological markets became ever more pronounced, and required announcements to be made while concepts were in the 'Beta' stage. The marketing of a product or concept increasingly moved back in the development arc, and in that period the prevalent timeframe was that of the final testing phases. In contrast to this, the current technological culture is one that feeds on hype and diminished expectations of the real.

History was once a prime driver of society. Philosophical and artistic movements have often looked to the past to revitalize the present and strategize the future. McLuhan mused that artists lived in the present, making them seem visionary while others looked to that very same past. In the McLuhanist shift, the present became the focus. However at the turn of the second millennium the shift increasingly turns to the future. History is hopelessly ephemeral in the digital culture, the present is a bore, and it takes far too long for projects to get out of beta. The acceleration of culture demands the consumption of ideas at their peak of freshness, instead of waiting two years from Microsoft's announcement of the X-Box for delivery of the physical object. So, to insure primacy of the idea in the larger community, and to maximize mindshare for that idea, the concept must be released as soon as possible.

This is reinforced by the inability of actual objects and events to satisfy our expectations. The release of the Playstation II in the USA met with 50% shortages of delivered systems from projected numbers and even with the latest technology the machine has a scant twenty-five games at time of release. When the most current computer system is brought to market, the chip manufacturers frequently have a version a little faster that is not quite ready for release. But in the case of the Pentium III and Windows 98, the new chip or operating system only reinforced the discontinuity between the hype and any hope of its consummation.

Even being an artistic visionary is not enough. McLuhan's present fails our expectations of the future. At the prestigious 2000 Ars Electronica technological arts festival, the top prize did not go to any Internet art practitioner per se, to science fiction writer Neal Stephenson. Fin de millennium culture is not even satisfied with the next big thing; its interest is the next blip on the radar two to ten years out. The new object of desire becomes the next upgrade for failed technological expectations; the most up-to-date applied fictive piece that may or may not come to fruition; the next cultural vaporware.

In Lunenfeld's essay, "Demo or Die", he describes a culture at MIT of researchers demonstrating their ideas so that they can continue in their acceptance, funding, etc. through a ritualistic series of PowerPoint lectures and prototype displays. This culture has bled into the art world, as artists 'demo' their works with the same tools that corporate executives employ to generate excitement about their "Next Big Idea". In this way, the capitalistic production culture of symbols in the dot-com world has inscribed itself on the artist, this time the technological artist, and the Internet artist in particular.

The artist has returned to the creation of objects, although contemporary projects may be largely symbolic in nature. With the lack of physicality inherent in digital art, and net.art in particular, the art symbol is objectified in the form of the installation. However, as with the execution of the physical object, the execution of the online installation falls short of expectations, as is evident in the Ars exhibition's refusal to give the top award to any artist who actually created an installation. Due to numerous factors such as systemic incompatibilities, quality of the machine used to see the work and so on, the qualitative experience of the installation is almost always a disappointment compared to the spark of imagination that an alpha revision announcement conjures.

It might be said that this manifesto is merely another extension to the Conceptualist legacy, and this is not an incorrect assumption. However, the cultural shift represented by digital art is that the obliterated physical referent is reborn in the symbolic, that the embodiment of the subject has moved from the cyborg to a corpus of information. In so doing, net.art pieces, even in the form of Brechtian descriptions of happenings, are reiterated as symbolic objects through these shifts in discourse and representation.

What are left as satisfying experiences in the digital are merely allegories to, and functional prototypes of, works-in-progress that may or may not ever be created, depending on interest and funding. The Alpha Revision art project signifies that which is not fully conceptualized or executed, even symbolically, except for the germ of an idea. If there are the 50 or so recorded concepts for such symbolic works (this treatise refers to digital art), these are in fact works in themselves, and the art which could come from these concepts is distinctly different and potentially less satisfying than the images convoked by the concepts. As with the alpha revision announcement, the desire invoked by an upcoming product is far more powerful than what the release of the work/product itself will engender. In fact, the conceptual aesthetic of the information world is linked to the creative potential imbued within the description of an intervention or work, and not necessarily the work itself.

Therefore, the option now exists to have the work one imagines creating spread through the rhizomatic web of the electronic noosphere, for description is enough on its own. Perhaps, due to a sort of refusal to let go of past forms of expression, the artist will likely continue to create occasional works, but far more will still be in 'alpha' because the likelihood of having the power, time, or money to execute them all is very, very slim.

The past is no longer good enough,

The present is a disappointment,

The future takes too long to arrive,

Culture is now in alpha revision.

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