

	PDA	Wireless	Nomads
	Video	Essays	

CURATOR'S STATEMENT

I got my first PalmPilot in 1997 after seeing one at the ISEA conference in Chicago. It reminded me of the pen-based tablet-sized handheld computers I used to work with in the engineering field in the mid-80's, and even it seemed that there was incredible potential for creative expression with mobile devices. Since then, and even since the purchase of my first Palm Pilot, handheld and nomadic technologies have proliferated at an amazing pace, infiltrating the mass culture through devices as banal as the tamagotchi (virtual pet), and in the form of pop cultural manifestations such as the PADD handheld device in the various Star Trek series. The expansion of distributed network devices, handheld computers, and nomadic technologies like GPS units are saturating the First World to the point where it is difficult to not have some sort of handheld or embedded device somewhere in one's life. In a way, the move towards embedding computing in all manner of smart devices is a distinct move from moving computation off the desktop onto the body and into architectural space, hinting at the possibility for ubiquitous computing.

The original vision of this exhibition was to focus on work created for these devices as a form of cultural intervention, and in a sense, an inverted sense of this vision seems to be true. It seems that the expansion of these technologies into the larger culture seem to have been a form of intervention in themselves, as the lives of those within the technological culture, as well as a large number of those in the mainstream culture have had their lives impacted by these devices. The cultural impact of the cellular phone and pager cannot be denied, and the popularity of devices such as the various flavors of handheld computer is ever expanding, creating a new web of interconnected devices, much like a technical metaphor for the Deleuzian rhizome. So, to invert and reiterate, it appears that the work itself does not seem to have intervened in the cultural milieu, it is the technology itself that has performed its own form of intervention within society.

In the online media, futurists are projecting 'the death of the World Wide Web' through the emergence of distributed networked devices, large numbers of wireless and embedded products, as well as the coming of new computational strategies for online interaction. While forecasting the imminent death of the World Wide Web, may elicit a Twain-esque remark that the reports of its imminent death may be slightly exaggerated, such commentary does represent the potential for a significant paradigmatic shift in distributed network technologies. Perhaps there may be a change developing in the way humans use networking technologies and their resultant expressive and representational practices. The proliferation of small personal devices, embedded processors, as well as objects that are connected, but operate in a more cellular fashion may create a more distributed, nomadic interaction with objects and one other. This exhibit is only one possible manifestation of the how these changes may be occurring, and how they are being represented through artistic practice.

ABOUT THE WORK

In regards to the work received, I was both surprised and reassured in regards to my assumptions about this genre of creative expression. Even though my interest in embedded, distributed, and handheld computation as art medium stems from the mid - 80's, the field of expression through these devices is still quite nascent; a finding that I find both exciting but also expected. The overall quality of work submitted was excellent. However, only some of the pieces stood out as truly exceptional, and qualified as being work that aptly utilized qualities of the devices that were not extensions of previous forms.

Another aspect of the work that surprised me was its variety. From intercommunicating clothing to expressive icons for cell phones to interventionist 'bots, the reflection of this work as being representative of an extant cultural thread has revealed itself. The variety of the work, although there was an expected concentration around extensions of existing cultural forms into the new delivery platforms, was almost as divergent as the types of devices covered in this show. As mentioned previously, there were pieces that were extensions of genres like net.art that were reformatted for the PDA, and this was welcome, but expected.

The genre that has migrated to the handheld that was totally unexpected for me was that of video. Although advertisements like that of the Nortel delivery of live video to the speaker using a Cassiopeia (upside down) should have made this obvious, palmtop video reveals itself as one of the largest subgenres for information appliances. But then this brings one back to expectations and the subjective criteria for inclusion - in short, the curatorial criteria for relevance for a show such as this.

In reflecting on the subjective criteria of relevance for a show in an emerging field such as this, there had to be a slight balancing act between critical evaluation and a slight suspension of judgment. As is my usual curatorial style, some work that might not have focused as tightly upon the theme, but evoked some fascination was still included as in this case, the exploration of the genre's potential held equal importance to that of the focus on the topic as such, although the redefinition of 'cultural intervention' solves this.

What was lacking in some of the entries was representative of a larger conundrum in technological art. Most of the pieces received utilized certain aspects of the technology that were intrinsic to that platform or medium, but frequently artists did not exploit the technical capabilities of the device in a way that truly revealed a level of virtuosity. This leads to the old problem of interdisciplinary virtuosity - the artist/programmer. Although there are many artists who are becoming fluent in the language of technology and technologists who are becoming articulate in the aesthetic, the way out institutional structures are constructed (the art/science dichotomy, for one example) create sizeable impediments to cross-disciplinary dialogue and resultant literacies.

Lastly, in viewing the practical 'holes' in the entries, it was surprising how closely a majority of artists stayed within the constraints of the major platforms or within the confines of previously extant expressive forms. Obviously this tactic is designed to deliver the content to the largest possible viewer base, but some incredible options exist for cultural intervention at the distributed level, like nomadic robotics using the readily available Lego MindStorms robotics kit, and distributed infoworks through the inexpensive and versatile Cybiko teen PDA that can support 30 or more units in a connected cell. In addition, devices that are capable of interesting interactive capabilities are being created frequently, and between the problems inherent within scaling the learning curve of programming a new device and the potential Ephemerality of less popular platforms, artists rightly should hold these smaller niches suspect. However, they also miss the possibility for radical interventions and groundbreaking work.

A Change in Curatorial Structure

Until now, my stance on construction of a curatorial project has been quite standard in making a call, adjudicating the work, and then assembling the pieces within the 'gallery' space. However, taking into consideration the nascent quality of the work in a number of pieces remained in beta stages of development at the time of the original opening date. As a side note, my only criticism was that these were mainly from established artists. Because some of these concepts were intriguing to me, I added two components to the

exhibition that ran counter to the traditional format.

First, I constructed a 'still in beta' section to accommodate works in progress that I felt were interesting enough to mention. It is my hope that by then end of the 'accretion' period that I will describe next, many of the beta versions will join the finished works in the exhibits.

Secondly, also in response to the developmental nature of a portion of the work, is that I adopted a 'accretive' model of curatorial assemblage. That is, in addition to the original date of exhibition, the acceptance criteria for works is being held open for five months, closing in the middle of October. The hope here is that through subsequent discussions of the show on the various online forums that a larger corpus of stronger and more diverse work may reveal itself for inclusion in this show. The concerns with this approach are already manifesting themselves in that some artists have seen this practice come into being and have subsequently lost their urgency in having work completed for the initial opening. This may follow certain principles in cognitive science in that adding more time for the solution of a problem does not result in a proportionally better solution set, or even higher rate of completion. As this process is experimental, this exhibition will serve as the testbed for this approach. More than a few will be watching.

Hopes/Summary

In creating any curatorial project, the experience is always as much one of learning and exploration as in my artistic endeavors. On one hand, I am slightly disappointed that it has taken over fifteen years to see art emerge in the convergent genres of handheld technologies, but then I am heartened to see this exploration beginning now. While the exploration of media transmission of video, sound, etc. is of great interest, I urge artists to become more intimate with the technological underpinnings of their platforms (myself included). Within, I surmise they might find functions in which they may find an articulation of their concepts which were unthought of before. Also, the potential for connectivity in infrared beaming, wireless networks, and other communications methods offer a rich environment for the development of uniquely suited works and cultural interventions that are quite worthy for further inquiry.

I hope that this show is the first that begins to tap this emerging technological meme of the hand, mobile, and wireless, and that in successive exhibitions (such as Buckhouse's upcoming project), we will see a further articulation of the concepts brought up on this show.

Patrick Lichy 2001

[Back to Main](#)

Curator Email:
curator@voyd.com