

# Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media

MARGOT LOVEJOY With a Foreword by Carter Ratcliff

Margot Lovejoy, Professor of Visual Arts at the State University of New York at Purchase, received a 1988 Guggenheim Fellowship for her multimedia installation work. Her art has been presented internationally in exhibitions such as Electra, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, and New Media II, Malmö Konsthall, Sweden, and is included in the permanent collections of many museums. She has been using electronic media tools in her work since 1973 and is the author of articles, essays, and book reviews for the Alternative Museum in New York City, *Print Review*, *Print News*, and the journal *SubStance*.



**Postmodern Currents: Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media** explores in detail the growing impact of video and computer technologies, and of the Internet, on aesthetic experience and examines the emerging role of the artist as social communicator. It recounts the involvement of such artists as Jenny Holzer, Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, Gary Hill, and Laurie Anderson, among others, with electronic media and discusses the important economic, social, and aesthetic issues these new technologies imply. As Carter Ratcliff explains in his Foreword, "Postmodern Currents is an indispensable guide to an area of culture that is treated as marginal but has already become more central as the electronic media more powerfully define us and our world. Lovejoy singles out for close examination the artists who . . . experiment with advanced technology not for some definable gain but for the sake of making it a more helpful mediator between individuals and institutions. Shaped by aesthetic motives, technology will be better at shaping us."

REVIEWS

"Lovejoy's determination to view the electronic arts in their totality reflects her knowledge as an artist and as an observer of how computers and electronics are providing new connections between art forms."  
—Roger Malina, Executive Director, *LEONARDO* magazine

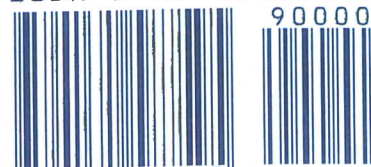
"A much needed history of postmodern art . . . delineates the relationship between today's electronic technologies and cultural change, thereby formulating a comprehensive and forceful social philosophy of our technical civilization . . ."  
—Joseph Nechvatal, *MEANING* #6

"... a comprehensive examination of the relationship between art and technology . . ."  
—Cynthia Navaretta, editor, *WOMEN ARTISTS NEWS*

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POSTMODERN CURRENTS

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MARGOT LOVEJOY



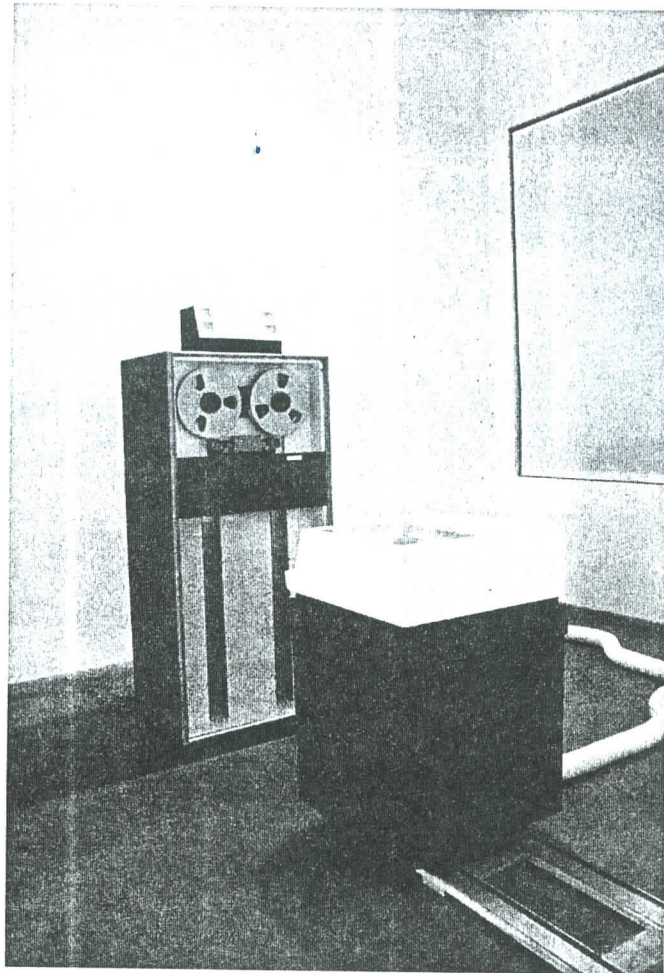


Figure 116. Jon Kessler, *Marcello 9000*, 1994. Mixed media with audiotape, lights, and motors. A pair of refrigerator-sized computers exchange fiery insults in a lover's tiff, with sound taken from the soundtrack of Fellini's *Dolce Vita*. The woman computer turns and departs along a short track shouting "Let me live"—but later returns to once again engage the argument. (Courtesy Jon Kessler and Lubring, Augustine, and Hodes Gallery)

databank, the text of Tolstoy's family diaries. At yet a further intertextual level of relationships, he inserts dreamlike images that are condensations of his feelings. While the viewer is free to move quickly and easily through the piece, Weinbren exerts control of the interactivity in one or two places where the viewer is not allowed to pass on at the high point of the intense climactic scene, such as when Tolstoy's character murders his wife.

Other artists interested in creating interactive alternatives to film are John Sanborn and Peter Adair. In *Smart Money*, which is designed to teach teenagers about money and credit, Adair uses a film narrative interspersed with a learning game procedure, where students make decisions about spending and saving issues in their lives. Although he designed it to be played only once, Adair has noticed the students play it again and again—first as a practical help, then as

fantasy. John Sanborn uses a choice mode as interface for a demonstration film he designed for a movie theater audience, who can use joysticks as a kind of "voting" device.

### Creating an Interactive Aesthetic

The central issue in creating a non-linear media work is how the artist viewer relationship is altered and played out in the work. Some artist producers wish to retain a narrative format to sustain the emotional tension associated with film. Such artists are interested in issues of character and story development. Other artists want to create open spaces in the work where viewers can play and fantasize.

Driven by market forces, and extremely rapid technical evolution, interactive technology has entered the mainstream of mass audience entertainment, advertising and publishing. Much basic territory has already been explored.

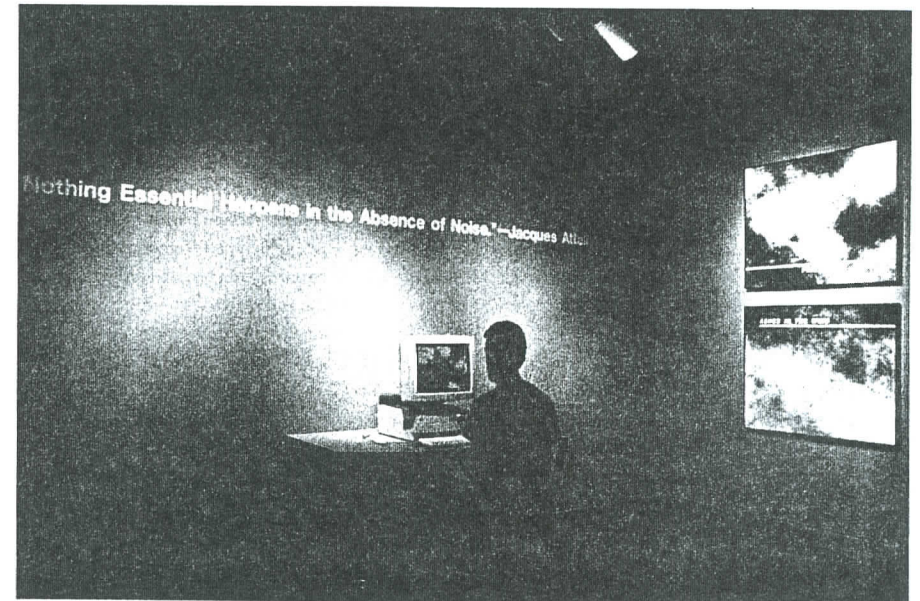
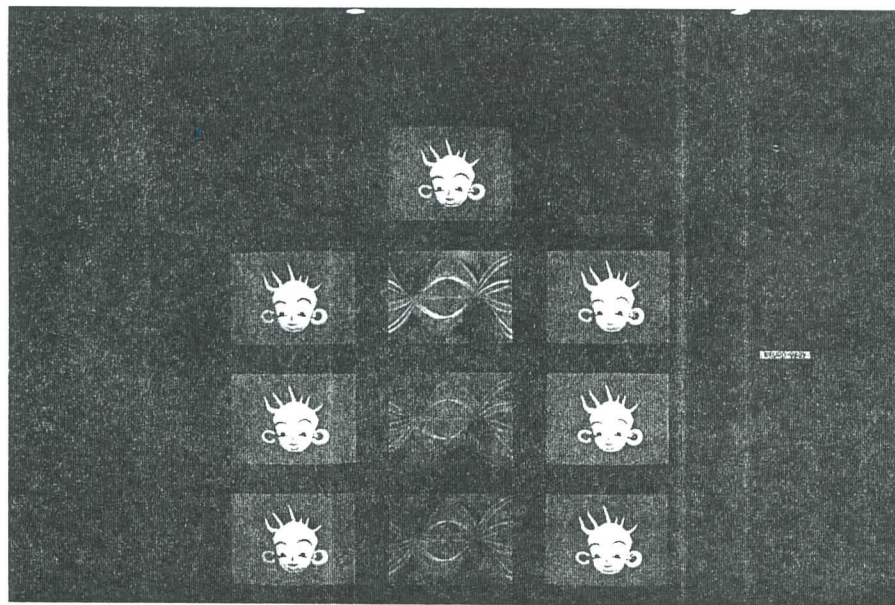


Figure 117. George Legrady, *Equivalent 11*, 1993. Interactive installation with computer monitor and keyboard. Interested in exploring the threshold between cognitive perception and cultural interpretation, Legrady asks viewers in *Equivalent 11* to consider the process by which we normally "read" images, (especially familiar photo representational ones) and the submerged social and historical structures of the cultural conditioning in which they exist. A computer program produces cloudlike images whose tones are controlled by typed-in text by the viewer. When key words stored in the data base are matched with those of the viewer, disruptions to the image-making process ensue. Later, the computer reveals previously entered words which match those in the current field. He asks questions about the relationship between ordered information (signal) and random information (noise). When a "noisy" image cannot be interpreted according to conventional experience, it becomes dependent on other sources for understanding it. (Courtesy George Legrady and the International Center for Photography)

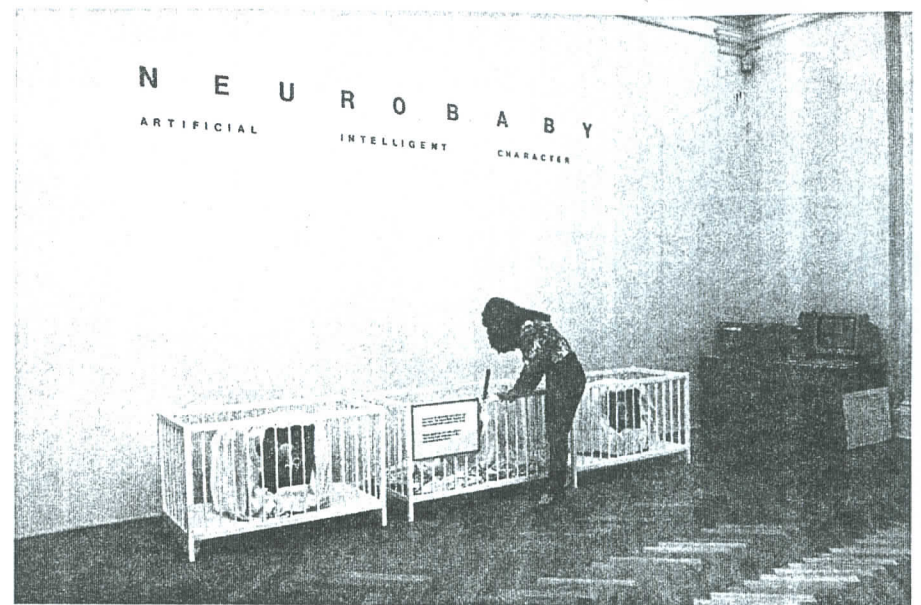




**Figure 118.** Naoko Tosa, *Talking to Neuro Baby*, 1994. Created in collaboration with Fujitsu Laboratories. An interactive performance system with voice input response and neural network software. With *Neuro-Baby*, we have the "birth" of a virtual creature with computer generated baby face and sound effects made possible by neurally based computer architectures. It represents an interactive performance system capable of recognizing and responding to inflections of the human voice which can trigger changes in facial expression of *Neuro Baby's* "Emotional Space." *Neuro Baby's* logic patterns are modeled after those of humans, making it possible to simulate a wide range of personality traits and reactions to various experiences. Tosa comments: "I created a new creature that can live and meaningfully communicate with many modern urban people like ourselves who are overwhelmed, if not tortured by the relentless flow of information, and whose peace of mind can only be found in momentary human pleasures. *Neuro Baby* was born to offer such pleasures . . . It is a truly loveable and playful imp and entertainer."

Many artists are already rejecting as too linear and simplistic options which provide the viewer with only one choice. Branching programs have a greater array of choice options; the viewer must actively search to find gateways to the next experience such as in the CD-ROMs *Myst* and Laurie Anderson's *Puppet Motel*. This type of choice is more challenging, intuitive, and allows for more associative connections to occur. Two further interaction interface types allow the viewer either to add texts or images, to the work or to establish new aspects of the program's capability in the form of new links to other sites or by importing new materials to the site.

As of today, a large group of pioneering artists are already involved in creating an interactive aesthetic and set of standards for clarity and functionality of the user interface. Their work in exploring the new media involves types of patterns of interaction.<sup>28</sup> Examples are: circular interaction; time sequenced inter-



action; and the way individual events influence other events and permits access. Other questions are: what navigational actions and user control input points need to be present for the content of the work to be expressed; what form do the system responses take which could lead to further viewer action; what screen design and type of movement and sound will be used. In providing guidelines for multimedia work, Apple Macintosh advises several major fundamental operating guiding principles for a successful outcome. First, the user must be made to feel in control of the piece. Second, fundamental concrete metaphors must be established which are then supported by all the visual effects and sound elements. Third, users must be able to loop through the work and must always be able easily to find a way out.

Those artists who choose to design interactive multimedia systems and effective interfaces for viewers (users) of their work face even more daunting tasks than those of historically analogous interdisciplinary artists in video, film, installation, performance. Aside from creating the *mise-en-scène* and the context and metaphoric associations of the work, its movement, sound, and acting, they must also give primary consideration to viewer interaction. This means abandoning the traditional approach to create meaning through controlled linear structures. So far there are no defined criteria and no canon for this expanded media, although there are technological restraints. Its *raison d'être* is to break open old boundaries and to experiment with new artistic possibilities for art and communication. Mindful of the Bauhaus motto: "form follows function," function and aesthetic are closely allied in forging from hypermedia a new cultural form.



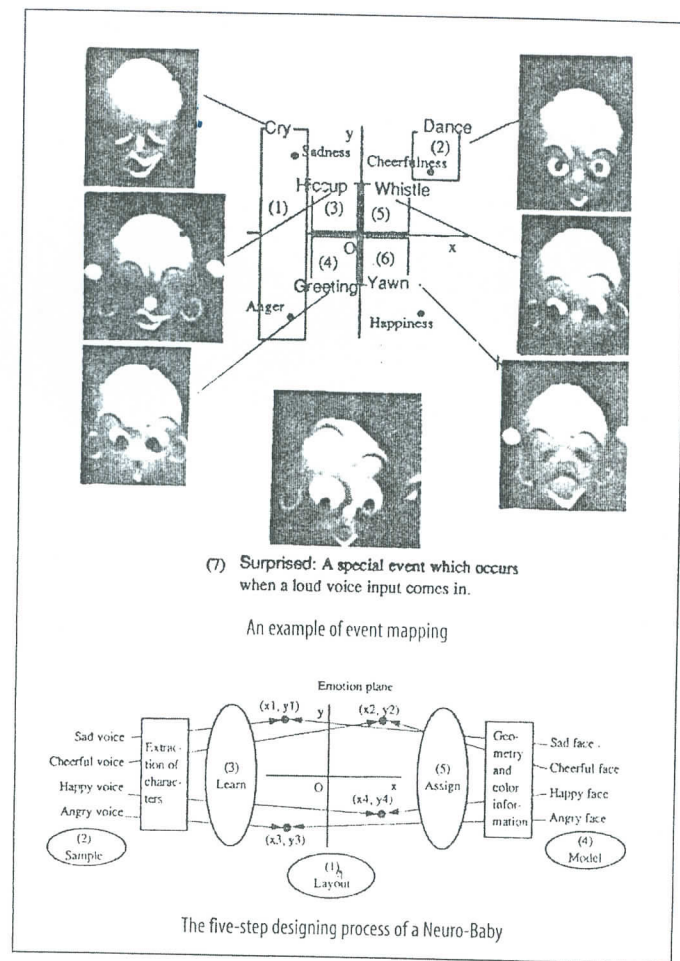


Figure 119.  
Naoko Tosa, *Talking to Neuro Baby*, (detail)  
1994. (Courtesy  
Naoko Tosa)

Crafting work where there are pathways, nodes, links, networks, and connecting loops between visual, sonic, textual, and graphic elements calls for enormous skill. Multifaceted procedures and coding require collaboration, a difficult task in a culture which promotes heightened individualism. Interactive multimedia brings us into the type of collaboration that makes a film, a theater piece, or an opera production a reality. The collaboration can be one where the director/producer is in charge of others; or it can be a more open-ended one where there is equal input and joint decision making by all of the players. The latter, more democratic model is full of difficulties, but on the whole, produces the most innovative work. As the culture changes, increased collaboration will be necessary.

In the future, technological advances will include alternative inputs to the keyboard or the mouse. Video and computer games are not the only models. Virtual Reality (VR) hardware now exists for head and hand motion; for the use

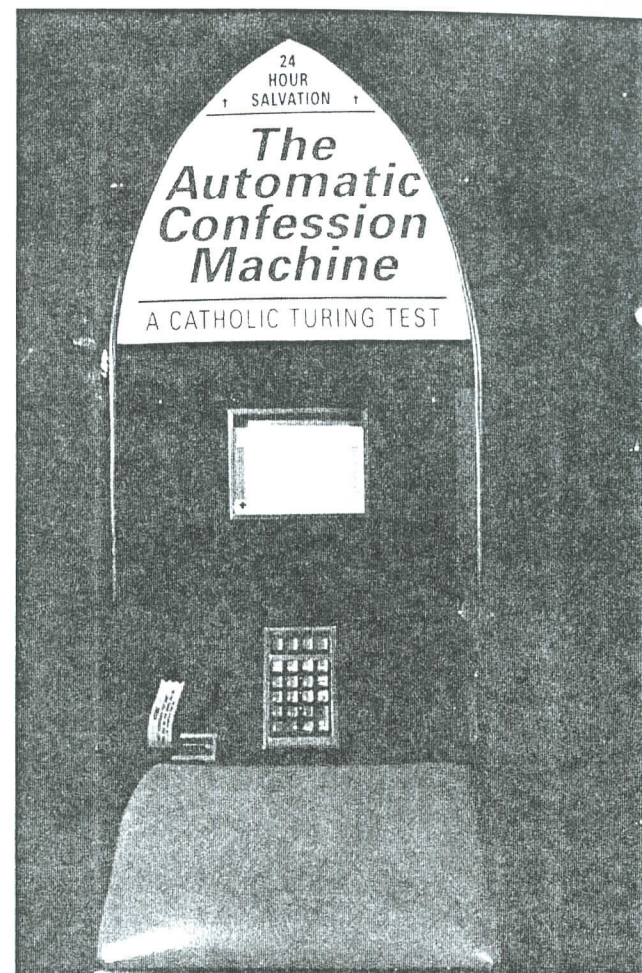


Figure 120. Greg Garvey, *The Automatic Confession Machine (ACM)*, 1993. Wood, plexiglass, fluorescent neon light, interactive computer program. Put off by the commercialization of religion (pay for your sins through offerings with a credit card), Garvey came up with the concept of creating a computing program through which one can make a confession to God through the auspices of a computer. He wants his work to represent a warning against the inexorable intrusion of commercialism which may redefine spiritual needs as yet another commodity to be researched, marketed, and packaged. The kneeling penitent uses a keypad to enter any venial or mortal sins or sins against the ten commandments. At the end of the program he or she receives a print-out of the balance of required penance. The sinner is then required to make a digital leap of faith and surrender to the belief in the power of "Silicon Absolution." (Courtesy Greg Garvey)