"Spinning at Computers" or the Art of Conversation

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INTRODUCTION

As a part of the "Hamburger Datenkunstbewegung der 80er" (hamburgian data art movement of the eighties) we experimented in a playful way with computers and telecommunication systems to use them for human exchange. As a result we are now "Spinning at Computers", what means, having a playful "to and fro" between people in tangible and associative ways. This is an artistic process, created by the involved persons, an art without spectators.

"Spinnen am Computer" (Spinning at Computers) is the name of a seminar at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg, in which Prof. Antje Eske has been working for more than ten years to develop conversational Net.art. Conversational games or parlor games are based on the games played in the historical salons. Together with the art facilitator Tatjana Beer, she tested these games for use in intercultural communication in two Spinning seminars of the International Women´s University, ifu.

A playful "to and fro" as well as testing forms of social contact and expression means in our case using sound, color and short films or the possibility to express oneself by utilizing links, graphics and word processing. The conversational interchange happens via parlor games, IRC- or swiki-chat, et al.

A. ART AS A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

Both, in the history of art and in contemporary art, collaborative processes are far more common than usually known, as well in strictly hierarchical groups as in loosely associated groups of individual artists.

Especially for Net.art "collaborative process" is a term that does not take effect and maybe covers up. The term as well implies production full of determination as an open, conversational-seeming co-production.

Net.art-typical conversation as a matter of fact is no co-production, because there is no work of art produced and presented to others. It is a flow of improvisation, because one never knows where its final destination is. It refers to the history of art, in this case the Salon Culture, and originates out of the exchange between people. One has to strife for no objective. A result only could be, collecting the "dregs of life", a kind of moral humus, which is the basis of social change in a homeopathical way.

B. AESTHETICS

Conversation, which means mutual contact, is not included in the general idea of art. However there are references in the history with sufficient art-terms to legitimize this internet-typical art: e.g. Ars Sermonis, Baroque dance, Salon Culture, Costume (Masquerade), Romantic Sympoesie, Jam Session. Alsleben and Eske defined them detailed in the "NetzkunstWörterBuch" (ISBN 3-8311-2259-8)

Conversational art runs diagonal to the kinds of art (e.g. music, literature) and the species of art (e.g. opera, sculpture), which always turn to an audience. Probably it constitutes a separate "sphere of art" beside those kinds of art, which create products.

In June 1999 a conversational art-event took place, which connected the history of art with the Net.art. A group of artists (italian and german) initiated an Internet-chat. Brought into being by Kurd Alsleben and Antje Eske. This chat runs similar to a parlor game, described in the 16th century by Baldassare Castiglione in his book "Il cortegiano".

We initiated the chat by laptop and mobile phone from just that place, where 500 years ago Elisabetta Gonzaga, Duchesse of Urbino/Italia, regularly met with a dynamic circle of women and men, to talk together, dance, play parlor games and engage into other activities.

We also connected ourselves with the conversational tradition by playing parlor games, which originate in the French salon culture of the 17th and 18th century. For in the French salon culture, with its roots in the Italian Renaissance, people sought new forms of connecting with each other and of committed human communication and intimacy.

Figure 1. The conversational circle of Elisabetta Gonzaga in the Sala delle Veglie, Urbino (1503-1508). Engraving: Fra Simone Ferri, 17th century

Net.art parlor games depend on the change of medium; here the associative leaps between word and image, in which sense or nonsense unfolds via vertical elevators from the unconscious (Surrealism). "Nonsense, as a particular variant of imagination ... creates space on the boundary of possible concepts ... [where one can meet and] which not only releases us from the usual strictures of ideas and conduct but also permits a distancing cheerfulness and a new appearance for people, objects and their constellations" (Dieter Baacke)

C. INTERACTIVITY

In connection with conversational Net.art it is necessary to make a difference between human/machine-communication and human/machine/human-communication, because only the last type of communication means conversation. The term "Interactivity", adapted by Cybernetics from Sociology, emphatically does not make this difference. That's why, as a mixed term, it is not helpful for the mutual art of human conversation.

An essential experience of conversation by parlor games, too, is to get the chance, changing the own perspective: One can look, together with others or alone, at the cards of a complete stack (done by the software HyperCard or HyperStudio, e.g.), in which several players have referred to each other by clicking on the keys that link the various responses. And so involved one can follow the wild leaps of ideas, calmly and for as long as it takes until the penny drops. Whoever has just grasped the message, automatically cries "Aha!" a sign that the change of perspective has just been accomplished and the players limits have been extended a little bit. He or she is able to become aware of the others "Otherbreadth" (Anderweite), what means to feel the breadth of the different possibilities of the other, which one can only experience in part.

Figure 2. Conversational circle in the Hyperspace (1999) during International Women's University ifu. Photo-Collage: A. Eske, 1999
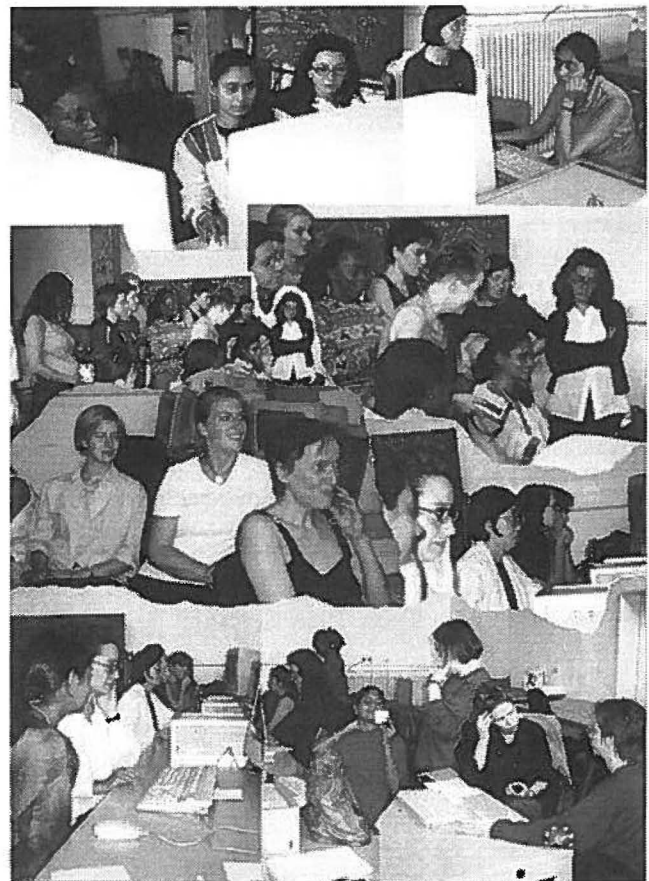
Following is a short description of seven net.art parlor games to illustrate a method of conversational exchange:

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1. The first game is a version of *Silent Mail* (known in English as Chinese Whispers or Telephone) translated to HyperCard, in which a word or a short sentence is written by a player on the first "card" of a stack and, after a change of computer these writings are visualized on a second card by another player. At the next change the pictures are again interpreted in word form. Since the monitor always shows only the last card, the players soon loose track and the entire group becomes interlinked and connected.

2. The second game, *Metaphor*, is a round of introductions. The object here is to find out, which picture everybody wants to draw of oneself. Game rule is, trying to render a visual metaphor in several pictures. With a little programming these pictures can be turned into a movie.

3. The third game, *Visual Effects,* brings gestures, facial expressions or voice into the computer conversation quasi-metaphorically, since a link can be modified by means of visual effects in different speeds and image amalgamations.

4. and 5. The fourth game, *Jumping Jack*, and the fifth game, *Hyper Into*, are connected with responses. Unlike a letter, for example a card can be added directly at any place of the surface. This is done by laying a link in form of a button, which directly connects words, pictures or films to the response. "In Hypertext, the KEY (in German TASTE) can actually become a tactile surface between two statements, similar to the touch of skin on skin (making contact)" Volker Lettkemann.

6. The sixth game, *Les galères du bel esprit*, refers directly to the French salonière Anne-Louise du Maine (1676-1753), who played a similar game with her conversational circle in the Salon d'Aurore. Each player draws a lot with four rhyme words, in this case from a tin box instead of the original lady's cloth pouch. The words are intended for use in composing poems, which changed during the next step in a visual form like a picture, a small film, an effective transition, etc. Our experiences with this game show, that the change of medium between word and image touches deep layers because something forgotten from the unconscious sometimes was brought to light.

7. The seventh game is a chat. Either *a poetic or a picture chat*. In those cases, where Net conditions do not provide for chats in words and images, poetic chats (haikai renga, limerick, etc.) permit us to make associative leaps even without pictures. In order to multiply the associations, word links that transports a background of meaning, sentimental metaphors, and nonsense words are tossed into the exchange.

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