1-20-2000

Editors Notes

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Recommended Citation

Stalbaum, Brett (2000) "Editors Notes," *SWITCH*: Vol. 13 : No. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol13/iss1/11
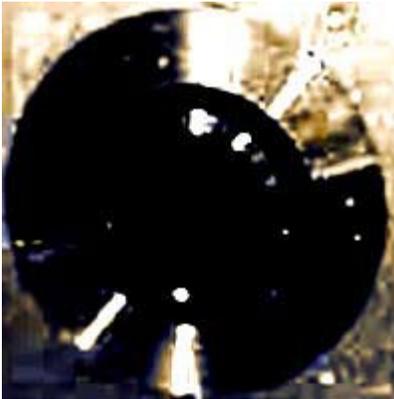
DATABASE

Editors Notes

Brett Stalbaum on Jan 20 2000   **issue 13**

Editors notes for database issue.

One of the most important developments of the 20th century was the proliferation of the database into every fiber of Western cultural fabric, (which of course has had profound global impact). The rise of companies such as Microsoft, Amazon, Sun Microsystems, Wal-Mart, AOL, and Oracle Corporation are among the notorious manifestations (including the Internet itself), that have in one way or another reaped the benefits of database. From "just-in-time" delivery and picking systems to inventory, process, and financial management, database enables significant and culturally transforming productivity gains that are manifested ultimately in the distribution of atoms and the actual. No doubt, the roots of this revolution can be traced through figures such as George Boole, Charles Babbage, Ada Lovelace, Kurt Gödel, Claude Shannon, Alan Turing and E.F. Codd, but the changes wrought by this revolution have been most intense in the very recent past.-

In general, artists had tended near the end of the 20th century to underestimate the degree to which database and network mediate the distribution of the real, often confusing the Baudrillardian concept of hyperreal with terms like unreal or imaginary. This led to a lot of storytelling and legend building, but only rarely to work in which agency was developed or expressed in collaboration with data itself. Data is at least real, if not more so. In this issue of Switch, we set out to explore the issues of data and database, in terms of both ontological questions, and how they impinge upon various worlds of art. But you don't need to speak Structured Query Language to rapidly access Switch v5n3, because these editorial notes provide a reasonable guide.

One example of an art world which is being impacted by database is treated in Arts, Crafts, and Globalization, wherein Steve Cisler, data traveler, activist and former member of the Advanced Technology Group at Apple Computer, takes the reader on a journey that exposes how trade networks impinge upon the world of crafts, collectables, and tourist trinkets.

Artist and former Silicon Graphics marketing manager for European operations, Frank Dietrich, expands upon his seminal 1986 essay Digital Media: Bridges between data particles and artifacts. In reading the 1986 article, I was reminded (once again), that many of the interesting and provocative problems inherent in digital media are not "new" discoveries of the current "net.art" generation, but rather that there is a tradition of mature thought in technology art that has been largely ignored in the present euphoria over networks. In Data Particles - Meta Data - Data Space, Dietrich expands his previous analysis of the properties of data particles to include speculation about meta data, navigation, and tranformation rules, as the directions in which further investigation should proceed.

In Memory_Archive_Database, Steve Dietz, the new media-curator for the Walker Art Center, gives his perspective on database as art form. This is done from his unique position inside one of America's most renowned and progressive art institutions.

Eugene Thacker parses recent developments in bio-engineering in his Database/Body:

Bioinformatics, Biopolitics, and Totally Connected Media Systems. In the process, he adds a great deal of connective tissue between these events and the work of theorists such as Manovich and Kittler on new media. Ultimately he uses this to develop a Foucaultian analysis of contemporary genetic databases as surveillance systems. This is an important piece of work (imho), especially given the increasing numbers of artists who are moving into various bio-technologies as fine art media.

In Ontology of Organization as System, Joel Slayton and Geri Wittig give a detailed theoretical account of datum as autopoietic agency. This essay represents something of an inversion of the tact taken by Thacker and even Dietz: instead of looking at the effects (social and ontological) that database has on life or art, Slayton and Wittig seek to map out the social and ontological qualities of the datum itself. Alongside Dietrich's notion of the data particle, we get a glimpse into the secret life of data.

In the The New Performer: Data as Performer and Performance, Sheila A. Malone looks specifically at how database has entered into contemporary performance art. In VisiCalc to Cybernetic Babylon, Don Tanner looks at the history of VisiCalc, reminding us that a spreadsheet program was the first killer application of the personal computer revolution.

In previous editorial notes for Switch (those that fell near the yearly turn of the calendar), I had felt it necessary to give something of a recap of the year's events in the network art world. But this year I give special thanks to Rhizome's Alex Galloway for giving me the century off. In net.art Year in Review: State of net.art 99, Galloway provides his honest view on that world from his position near the eye of the storm. The only eulogy I desire to add to his would be one for the romantic notion of the artist-genius, or the meme of the artist as voice in the wilderness, whose sensitive individuality is opposed to the artistic constraints of "the academy." I see no reason to carry these 19th century problems for the arts into the 21st. They no longer apply in a multi-nodal world where collaboration is simply more interesting, and Starbucks has usurped the Salon in any case. Many argue that 2001 is the real end of the millenium, so I hold out hope for this particular eulogy under next year's tree.

Speaking of toys, Switch continues to bring our readers interviews with the most important artists and thinkers who are presently puzzling over the problems of new media in the arts. Perhaps one of the watershed events for the heroic imaginary of the art world, (also rapidly becoming a cautionary fable in the business world), is the domain name battle between the Swiss art ensemble etoy.com and the California toy retailer eToys.com. Geri Wittig spoke with the etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER in the midst of this battle.

Also, Inna Razumova interviews new media theorist and scholar Lev Manovich, whose writing on database has become extremely influential in the network art world. And finally, Paula Poole presents a collection of interviews taken from participants in the openX symposium at Ars Electronica 1999, including, among others, Mark Tribe, Rachel Baker, Olia Lialina, and RTMark.

Happy 2K
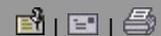
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