# Interface as Utopia: The Media Art and Activism of Fred Forest

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## Introduction

### Fred Forest, Troublemaker

Fred Forest is fond of calling himself France's "most famous unknown artist."[1]  There is more than a grain of truth in this little bit of ironic bravado.  By any number of measures, Fred Forest should be a major figure in French contemporary art.  After all, he is one of the earliest pioneers and most inventive practitioners of video, telecommunication, and web art in France.  An unparalleled master in the art of rogue interventions in the printed press and other mass media, he should be considered an important precursor of today's culture jammers and tactical media artists.  Forest is also the cofounder of two noteworthy movements in the 1970s and 1980s—Sociological Art and the Aesthetics of Communication—and the author of five provocative books in French on the social and aesthetic (ir)relevance of art in today's world.  Active since the mid-1960s, he has participated in major international exhibitions and fairs like the Venice and Sao Paulo Biennials, Documenta Kassel, and Art Basel Miami Beach; and has created or shown works in twenty different countries.  Yet, in spite of these accomplishments, Forest has been largely ignored by the canon-making authorities of contemporary art in his home country.  He has never been represented by a major Paris gallery; has no work in the permanent collection of the Centre Pompidou's Musée National d'Art Moderne (MNAM); has never been promoted abroad by the French government as one of the stars of French art like some of his more high-profile contemporaries; and his first-ever retrospective in France did not

take place until 2013, when a relatively small but well-designed exhibition called *Fred Forest: l'homme-média no. 1* (*Fred Forest: No. 1 Media Man*) was held at the Centre des Arts in Enghien-les-Bains, outside Paris.[2]  His video and paper archives have been in the collection of the Institut National de l'Audivisuel (INA) since 2004—a rare sign of French institutional recognition of the historical significance of his work, albeit on the part of an institution that is not an art museum but, primarily, the national repository of France's television archives.  On the other hand, he was left out of the 2012 *Vidéo Vintage* retrospective covering the period from 1963 to 1983 organized by MNAM.[3]  Although Forest is not unknown outside France—he has been particularly active in Brazil and Italy, has created some memorable projects in central and eastern Europe, and has worked in the United States intermittently since 2005—there are few mentions of him in general historical surveys of contemporary art available in English, with the exception of a few works focusing on new media and a translation of Catherine Millet's survey of contemporary art in France.[4]

Yet this relative dearth of institutional recognition has not prevented Forest from becoming one of the living French artists most familiar to the general public in his home country.  Indeed, his public notoriety and institutional neglect have at least one cause in common:  Fred Forest is an incorrigible troublemaker with an uncanny knack for publicity.  Indeed, Forest's penchant for making trouble has goaded certain political and civil authorities into heavy-handed attempts to suppress his work (including arrests, police investigations, lawsuits, censorship, and other forms of intimidation) and has also alienated quite a few of the movers and shakers of the French contemporary art establishment—a favorite target of his over the years—while garnering lots of media coverage and burnishing his public persona as a

fearless critic of the status quo, a genial prankster, and a visionary who takes art out of the white box and into the public arena of the street, the mass media, and the internet. Imbued with his trademark over-the-top irony, Forest's most notable acts of mischief stand out even in a field of contemporary full of merry pranksters and *agents provocateurs.*

## Media Hijacker

Forest gained his first measure of notoriety in 1972, when he inserted a small blank space in the pages of the prestigious Parisian daily *Le Monde* called *150 cm$^2$ of Newspaper (150 cm$^2$ de papier journal)* **[Figure 1]**. Readers were asked to fill in the space with their own artwork, poetry, or commentary **[Figure 2]** and to mail their contributions to him for inclusion in a number of exhibitions. On one level, this intervention can be seen as something of a practical joke; however, it was motivated by the serious utopian intention of creating a small opening for spontaneous feedback and creative self-expression in a closed system of communication, wherein the flow of information is normally one-way: i.e., from the sources of power in the media, politics, and capitalism to the "masses." Repeated in varied formats in publications across Europe and abroad over the course of several years as part of his "Space-Media" project **[Figure 3]**, this emblematic action helped Forest win an early reputation as the man who "pokes holes in the media" (Vilém Flusser).[5]

In 1973, Forest went to Brazil, where he defied the ruling military regime's restrictions on public assembly and free speech with a series of actions that included *The City Invaded by Blank Space (La ville envahie de blanc),* a public intervention staged outside the official venue of the 12th edition of the Sao Paulo Biennial. Forest's so-called invasion centered on a mock

protest march in the streets of downtown Sao Paulo, led by a small group of demonstrators brandishing blank placards **[Figure 4]**. These were probably more provocative than actual anti-government slogans would have been since they simultaneously dramatized state censorship and represented the pure possibility of free speech while tantalizingly (and tauntingly) leaving the content up to each person's imagination. From the regime's standpoint, it must also have been in some respect harder to decide how to respond to such an enigma—a literally empty threat. The stunt could not easily be condemned as a typical instance of left-wing radicalism because it was, strictly speaking, devoid of ideological content; nor could it be indulgently downplayed as a flight of artistic fancy since it did not take place in the official confines of the Biennial and did not conspicuously advertise its artistic identity. Forest was himself surprised by the popular response to his action in the streets. He began with several hired participants, recruited from an agency that specializes in human billboards, a popular form of advertising in Brazilian cities (indeed, one might have mistaken the intervention for a publicity stunt); but it eventually drew large crowds **[Figure 5]**, which included not only curious onlookers, drawn to a public spectacle, but also willing participants who followed the procession through the streets, demonstrating their support for whatever it was that they saw in it and blocking traffic (always a good pretext for clamp-down).

Another component of Forest's Sao Paulo project was the setting up of an automated call-in center inside the Biennial exhibition hall **[Figures 6 – 7]** that allowed people to phone in messages of a personal, poetic, or (for the more daring) political nature to be broadcast by loudspeaker in the hall. It is no surprise that the military regime did not look kindly on his particular kind of artistic activism: agents of the DOPS (Department of Political and Social

Order), the military regime's feared secret police, were sent to the Biennial to shut down the artist's exhibit **[Figure 8]** and Forest himself was arrested and held in police custody. Were it not for the active intervention of the both the French Embassy and the Biennial's organizers, who helped secure his release, Forest's freedom and personal safety might have been in serious jeopardy on account of his seditious acts. Forest deviously succeeded in spoiling the regime's willingness to use the Biennial to craft a more liberal and tolerant image for itself—sham liberalism and shallow tolerance predicated on art's staying in the separate, rarified sphere assigned to it and not touching any raw political nerves in plain sight of the general public. Forest's provocative intervention in the context of the Biennial marked the beginning of a hundred-day sojourn in South America, during which he carried out several other noteworthy projects **[Figure 9]**.[6]

In 1977, Forest created one of the most highly publicized and arguably most potent works of his career when he staged a double parody of the speculative practices common to the real estate and art markets: *The Artistic Square Meter (Le m$^2$ artistique).*[7] For this action, Forest formed his own real estate firm, through which he purchased a small tract of undeveloped land in the country, near the Swiss border. He subdivided the tract into 100 tiny parcels each measuring 1 m$^2$ in area, which he officially registered as "artistic square meters" at the local land office. With the complicity of contacts in the press, Forest then placed professional looking advertisements in several prominent periodicals announcing the upcoming sale of the first artistic square meter lot at a public auction under the gavel of contemporary art specialist Jean-Claude Binoche **[Figure 10]**. Like so many other Forest projects, this intervention thrived on the ambiguity of its status. On the one hand, there was a nominal reference to art—

the source of a certain form of legitimacy that Forest could use to his own ends (for example, to use the complicity of art-loving journalists to obtain free advertising space)—even though there was yet again only blank space where one might normally expect to find a finished work. The work's artistic status was further validated by its inclusion alongside works for sale by recognized figures like Claude Chaissac, Erro, Simon Hantaï, Nikki de Saint-Phalle, Nicolas de Stael, and Victor Vaserely in the bound catalog that was prepared for the announced auction **[Figure 11]**. On the other hand, the project was conspicuously launched in a non-artistic venue (the business pages of a newspaper) and made a point of seeking sources of legitimacy outside the art world—namely, in the real estate market and the press. It simultaneously targeted different audiences (art aficionados, real estate investors, curious newspaper readers), in which it hoped to set off a series of questions. Was it art or a parody of art, real news or a publicity stunt, a legitimate business venture or a scam? Given this calculated ambiguity, the project also raised serious questions in minds of the authorities. In particular, the ads aroused the suspicion of both the police fraud division and the syndicate of French notaries, who lodged a formal complaint over art auctioneer's alleged infringement on the notaries' exclusive right to handle real estate transactions. Under suspicion of false advertising (What could be *artistic* about a tiny parcel of undeveloped land in the country?) and possible real estate fraud, Forest became the subject of a formal police investigation that included a lengthy (and often droll) interrogation at police headquarters and the dispatching of gendarmes to inspect the property **[Figure 12]**.[8] Ultimately, the public prosecutor's office issued an injunction prohibiting the sale. Undeterred by such legal obstacles, Forest instead auctioned off a substitute item, which he took great care to qualify as "non artistic": a square meter of common fabric purchased on the

morning of the auction from a neighborhood merchant and trod upon by the people arriving at the auction. This fabric sample cost Forest a mere 59 French Francs ($10 US) but fetched a sale price of 6,500 FF ($1,200 US) at auction. Contradicting Forest's own disclaimer, the renowned art critic and founder of Nouveau Réalisme, Pierre Restany, publicly affirmed the artistic status of the original artistic square meter (both the object and the concept) as well as the entire operation that just taken place (Forest's real estate enterprise, the press campaign, the game of cat and mouse with authorities, the auction, and the use of a substitute item) at an impromptu press conference held at the close of the auction [Figure 13]. However, Restany's expert opinion [Figure 14] was just a pro forma confirmation of a de facto reality, for it was, as usual, a combination of publicity, art world ritual, and the inflated market value established at auction that formed the real basis for the artistic status of both the actual item sold and the broader conceptual project … precisely the point that Forest was trying to make in the first place! Hence, Forest might have lost his legal battle, but he won his artistic wager by parlaying the predictable overreaction of the authorities to something that didn't fit neatly into the established categories of either real estate or art—both known for their rather shameless speculation—into lots of publicity, an ironic demonstration of the role publicity plays in driving up the market value of art.

For the second phase of the *Artistic Square Meter* operation, a new series of ads appeared in a number of French and foreign periodicals in the fall of 1977 [Figures 15 –16]. In an attempt to sidestep legal restrictions, Forest asked for sealed bids, which were opened at a ceremony held at the luxurious Hôtel Crillon in Paris, with a special appearance by an actress portraying Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. This ceremony was interrupted by a gang of ketchup-wielding

punks, but Forest still read the bids, many of which were nonsensical: ½ French Franc, 1 square meter in the shade of a Moroccan palm tree, 2 flower pots, and the like [Figure 17]. In order to have greater freedom to pursue subsequent versions of the artistic square meter concept, Forest bought a small estate in the town of Anserville, near Paris, where he created an "autonomous" *Territory of the Square Meter* (*Le Territoire du m²*) in 1980.[9]

Forest touched off another odd legal battle over the essence and value of art in 1982 when he discovered that employees of the Musée des Beaux Arts in Lausanne, Switzerland had accidentally thrown out documents that were part of one of his press projects in the course of routine housekeeping. The project, exhibited in 1978, was *The Home of Your Dreams* (*La maison de vos rêves*); and the discarded documents in question included hundreds of responses to an invitation to readers—a blank square similar to the one used for *150 cm² of Newspaper*—published in the local newspaper, *La Tribune-Matin,* to send in illustrations of their idea of a dream house [Figures 18 –19]. When the local authorities rescinded a museum offer to compensate Forest for the lost materials on the grounds that neither their artistic status nor Forest's ownership of them could be firmly established, Forest sued. Following a protracted series of hearings and appeals, the Vaud Canton government's refusal to compensate Forest for his loss was not only validated but the artist was ordered to pay damages to the Swiss authorities [Figure 20]. Forest's response, in 1990, was to "declare war" on Switzerland—a war waged in the form of a tongue-in-cheek but no less harassing letter writing campaign targeting a range of public officials and other parties: e.g., the President of the Vaud State Council (a daily letter over the course of four months) [Figure 21], a regional military commander asked to commit resources to a search for the lost items [Figure 22], the local mental health service

asked to treat Forest for the depression caused by his traumatic loss, and a manufacturer of organs asked to donate instruments for a ceremony commemorating the disappearance. Forest's brilliant epistolary action/social sculpture, which he called *The Lost Work* (*L'œuvre perdue*), undertaken in his official capacity as President of the sovereign Territory of the Square Meter, fiendishly tested the limits of his correspondents' patience, professionalism, and deference to the public to great comic effect and elicited more media attention and discussion than the original press work in question.[10]

While the Swiss authorities might have seen Forest as more of a nuisance, those in Bulgaria took the threat he posed more seriously when, in 1991, he donned a pair of fluorescent pink sunglasses and headed for Sofia, where he waged a surreal public campaign for the presidency of Bulgarian national television, which he promised to make more "utopian and nervous" (*Fred Forest for President of Bulgarian Television / Fred Forest président de la télévision bulgare,* 1991). With the complicity of a handful of Bulgarian intellectuals and journalists, Forest leveraged his romantic aura as a French artist and the intellectual prestige of his position as a professor at the Sorbonne to gain credibility in the eyes of the local media and public. Coming weeks before critical parliamentary elections, the unsolicited candidacy of the foreign interloper did not sit well with the rulers of the Balkan nation, which was then still slowly emerging from decades of Stalinism. Surprisingly, however, the sitting president of the Bulgarian broadcasting authority, Oleg Saparev, accepted Forest's challenge to participate in a nationally televised debate—out of an apparent desire to display his democratic *bona fides*— before quickly reversing course and backing out.[11] The highlight of his brief stay in the Bulgarian capital was a farcical motorcade through the streets of the city center featuring

escorts on horseback bearing gutted television sets and rabbit-ear antennae, and old limousine once used the former Communist head of state, and Forest wearing his rose-colored sunglasses [Figure 23]. Although he had planned to stay in the country longer and even go on a campaign tour in the provinces, Forest hastily left Bulgaria soon after the motorcade and a final press conference [Figure 24], having been told that his personal safety could no longer be guaranteed. In his own words, Forest performed like judoka throughout the operation, leveraging the power of the media and using his adversaries' own cumbersome bulk and inherent, bureaucratic inability to react quickly and decisively against them to gain a brief tactical advantage—just long enough to make his point. This is particularly true of Forest's painfully war of nerves with Saparev, who fell into his trap and only backed out when it was already too late, after having given Forest far more prestige than he deserved and made himself look ridiculous and cowardly in the process.[12]

Forest's approach to the media is similar in many respects to the Situationist practice of *détournement* as theorized by Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman.[13] However, his work does not simply appropriate material from the mass media for the purpose of giving it deviant new meanings in avant-garde contexts, where it is read against the grain of the dominant logic of the society of spectacle by people intellectually and ideologically predisposed to such counter-cultural deviation. He actually infiltrates media, takes over the controls like a hijacker—in French, the verb *détourner* means "to hijack" as well as "to deviate" from intended purposes— and uses his expert knowledge of their workings and weaknesses (e.g., their tendency to confer legitimacy on fact and fiction alike) to make the media themselves do things they were not designed to do.[14] Eschewing what he sees as the inherent dogmatism and elitism of the

Situationnists, his public interventions are designed for a broader audience and attempt to elicit a more playful and optimistic sense of utopian possibility. In his best work, he operates entirely in public and turns the controls over to average users, making them responsible for the meaning (or nonsense) conveyed through the hijacked system. Given this modus operandi, he is probably closer to both the prankster spirit of culture jammers and the hacker logic of tactical media insurgents than the Situationists, who are customarily cited as their precursors.[15] One person who understood quite well the subversive tactics employed by Forest was Derrick de Kerckhove, an important collaborator of Forest's in the 1980s. In a short essay published in *Art press,* de Kerckhove described Forest's approach as "the inverse of terrorism." By this, de Kerckhove meant that like a terrorist, Forest used information as weapon, counting on the media to amplify the destabilizing effect of sensational events in public space that seem to occur out of nowhere, taking people by surprise and grabbing their heightened attention for a brief time; and he uses the predictable overreaction of authorities, an expression of their paranoia and embarrassment, as the second step in a chain reaction of escalating events that he can further exploit. However, unlike a terrorist, Forest causes no real damage and his intent is not to tear the community apart by mobilizing its basest instincts (fear, the scapegoat mechanism, prejudice, censorship, etc.) but to make it stronger by mobilizing its creative energies in a positive way.[16]

In addition to being a prankster and a hijacker, we can also think of Forest as a trespasser and a poacher, two metaphors used by Michel de Certeau, whose writings about popular culture, urban space, and everyday life influenced Forest and who, according to Forest, made a strong personal impression on him as well during a discussion-filled shared ride from an

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editorial board meeting in Paris that they had both attended. For Certeau, the transgressions of the trespasser and the poacher, like those of the workplace pilferer and the heretic, were models for the artful tactics used all the time by ordinary people to fleetingly reclaim the spaces, products, and messages of the dominant culture. These spaces and the objects they contain, which Certeau calls *lieux propres,* are tightly ordered according to the strategic prerogatives, special interests, and ideological paradigms of the powerful as if they were restricted preserves. Instead of overturning the existing order, which is improbable, ordinary people resist on an everyday basis by cutting corners, tinkering with the things with which they are forced to make do, and dreaming against the grain. This is what Forest does and asks others to do when he invites them to join him in trespassing in media space.[17]

But isn't all still *just art?* Like the Situationists and countless other members of the avant-garde through the years, Forest's provocative interventions didn't change society and what was left of them in the end was just material traces on display in art spaces, even if one insisted that what mattered most (an act of media hijacking, a utopian experiment in communication, etc.) had already taken place elsewhere, outside the white cube. However, this has never been a source of anguish for Fred Forest. It matters little to him whether what he does is seen as art or something else, as long as it makes people think. Indeed, for Forest, if art has any meaning and purpose at all it is as a socially relevant epistemological exercise. Moreover, while he has tended to produce work that is not very marketable (and ill-suited to exhibition) and is probably more at home on the margins playing the role of the brazen pirate and the fool who speaks the inconvenient truth than he would ever be among the art world aristocracy, Forest has nothing against artists making money from the sale of their work ...

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provided that it is honest money! For these two reasons—his utopian belief in art's social and epistemological relevance and his equally utopian insistence on honesty in the art world— Forest's most relentless efforts to cause trouble have always taken aim at business as usual the "closed" and "corrupt" milieu of the contemporary art establishment.[18]

**Art World Gadfly**

It is ironic that the action for which Forest is perhaps best known in France, as well as the one which probably has made him the most enduring enemies, was technically not even an artwork even though it clearly involved an element of performance: his 1994-97 litigation against the Centre Pompidou/MNAM. Forest sued under French laws requiring transparency in the official business conducted by public institutions. His original objective was to force it to reveal the terms of its recent acquisition of a work by the German conceptualist Hans Haacke, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971).[19] Forest maintains that his action was neither directed against Haacke personally nor an indictment of the work in question.[20] In fact, he considers Haacke's early works, including *Shlapolsky et al.,* as examples of the kind of socially relevant form of contemporary art that he respects. Moreover, it would be hard for anyone to dispute the justification for including such a legendary and seminal work of social system-conscious art in the Pompidou collection. The court case was, Forest insists, a civic-minded protest against a secretive acquisition process – for him, essentially equivalent to insider trading in securities – that allows for particular works to be acquired for a specially negotiated price that is a good deal for all involved – namely, the artist (income and prestige), the gallery (a lucrative commission and the enhanced market value

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of its stock of the artist's work) and the museum (an exclusive addition to its collection that is likely to continue to accrue value as a result of the favorable market dynamic that the acquisition has generated) – with the possible notable exception of the French taxpayers, who ultimately foot the bill without access to the books. Forest was also suggesting that the integrity of even the best and the brightest in contemporary art is compromised by the deal-making dynamic of the art system, a money-making racket capable of turning even the most radical artists into lucrative brands. In a sense, Forest was trying to do to the Pompidou's acquisition of Haacke's work what *Shlapolsky et al.* itself had attempted to do the real estate dealings of alleged New York slumlord Harry Shlapolsky at the time of its creation and highly controversial and ultimately censored first showing at New York's Guggenheim Museum.

After Forest won the first round of the legal battle and MNAM was ordered to release the purchase price of the Haacke's work, Forest promptly demanded the purchase prices of all new acquisitions since 1980. The museum administration refused and Forest once again sued, initially winning his case before the Tribunal Administratif in Paris before losing on appeal and being ordered to pay damages by the Conseil d'État, the highest court in France for matters involving administrative actions of the State **[Figure 25]**. The Council based its decision on the principle of the protection of trade secrets in a particularly unique, volatile, and fragile market: i.e., the art market. The rationale was that the State would be unable to compete for major works on the open market and that public knowledge of the special terms on which the State relied to purchase such works could seriously destabilize the market and undermine the future of the national collections if they were to be revealed. Pierre Restany, who supported Forest's litigation against MNAM and later wrote the preface to the artist's book about the affair **[Figure**

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**26]**, warned the artist: "They will never forgive you for these attacks because you are not challenging them on aesthetic grounds but on the very source of their power."[21]

Forest has made a career of being a thorn in the side of the art establishment, using what he considers different types of mirrors to reflect its true aspect. For example, he used his Sony Portapak in 1974 to deconstruct the social ritual of the art auction in *Video Portrait of a Collector in Real Time* (*Vidéo-portrait d'un collectionneur en temps reel*); and again in 1975 to similar effect at the 13th Sao Paulo Biennial in *Biennial of the Year 2000* (*Biennale des années 2000*). In 1987, he published an opinion piece on "The Social Responsibility of Art" in the *Kölner Stadt Anzeiger*[22] **[Figure 27]** while also issuing a press release **[Figure 28]** (summarized in an adjacent article in the same issue of the paper) revealing the existence of an "invisible system-work" (*The Golden Mean and the Force Field of 14,000 Hertz / Le Nombre d'Or et champ de fréquence de 14.000 Hertz*) consisting of the ultrasound signals produced by 15 tiny transmitters he had hidden, again uninvited, in the exhibition hall at Documenta 8 in Kassel **[Figures 29 – 30]**—a force field right under the noses of the participants and public, but which they could no more see than the powerful force field of money and vested interests that invisibly permeates art. In 2004, he launched a simulated *General Strike of Artists* (*Grève générale des artistes plasticiens*) using a number of websites **[Figure 31]** and an appearance on France Culture radio, which apparently seemed real enough to an annoyed Ministry of Culture that officials threatened to withdraw ministerial patronage of one of the websites if it didn't end its association with the project. In 2006, Forest protested the underrepresentation of local artists and the stranglehold of corporate sponsors and major galleries on that year's edition of

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the Sao Paulo Biennial, by organizing his own alternative, open source biennial online (*The Biennial of the Year 3000 / Biennale des années 3000,* 2006).

More recently, in September 2011, he attempted to create an unauthorized invisible square meter installation (*The Invisible Square Meter*), again using ultrasound transmitters, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The intervention was designed to get people to reflect critically on some of the issues raised by the museum's acquisition of Tino Seghal's ephemeral performance/installation piece *The Kiss* (2007) as well as the Centre Pompidou's recent acquisition of a similar piece by Seghal – among them, institutional infatuation with trendy relational art that does not necessarily extend to its historical antecedents (e.g., the work done by Forest and his contemporaries) and the very material (i.e., financial) considerations that underpin the seemingly immaterial. It was also meant to prompt comparisons to the Occupy Wall Street movement that had just begun days earlier in Lower Manhattan. Its intended use of ominous contraband electronic devices also played off of still strong post 9-11 paranoia a few days after the tenth anniversary of the attacks. When the MOMA administration, as expected, did not allow him to carry out his plan, Forest turned the ensuing public confrontation with museum officials into an impromptu performance called *La Conversation,* which allowed him to make most of the points he had hoped to make through the prohibited ultrasound sculpture. In the end, he momentarily disturbed the museum's institutional force field instead occupying it with an alternative one of his own. A few months prior to his intervention at MOMA, Forest succeeded in creating a much bigger stir at the Centre Pompidou when he showed up at the *Vidéo Vintage* exhibition to protest his unjust from the major retrospective of the art form he had helped to pioneer in France. After the

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presentation of a petition objecting to the museum's biased curatorial decision, signed by a number of prominent figures in art and culture, Forest staged a protest performance that involved having himself bound from head to toe in 1970s-era Portapak videotape **[Figure 32]** and then asking the exhibition's visitors to cut him free. Forest returned to MoMA again in 2014 (May 9) to stage yet another unauthorized performance, called *Sociological Walk with Google Glass, or the Enhanced Visit at MoMa* (*Promenade sociologique avec Google Glass, ou visite augmentée au MoMa*). Like his first attempted intervention at the venerable New York institution, it was meant to call attention to the marginal status of performance in museums of modern and contemporary art and other issues of institutional aesthetics and politics; however, Forest avoided trouble with museum authorities this time by presenting his intervention as an ordinary visitor's stroll through the museum's galleries, although the sight of an elderly man wearing Google's latest invention and being filmed while touring the museum's collections was certainly attention grabbing and was likely to be seen as an instance of performance art by anyone with minimal background knowledge about contemporary art (i.e., just about any other visitor there that day). Both its functioning and official status as a work of performance art were essentially off-site, where MoMA had no jurisdiction – namely, on the Web, where it was already invisibly a work in progress via the Google Glass interface, and where it was publically presented as such by Forest and his collaborators both before and after the fact.

All of the actions described in the preceding section and throughout this introduction were publicity stunts, though not in the vulgar sense of sensational exploits calculated to make the artist a celebrity, which is a put-down often used by Forest's detractors. Embedded in the media and using publicity as a raw material, they are critical explorations of art's complex

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relationship with publicity and of publicity in the broader sense of the function of the public sphere in an open society. They are also indicative of Forest's keen interest in all of the components of modern communication: its institutional and technical infrastructure; the political, social and economic forces that affect the circulation of information; the possibilities for feedback and interactivity inherent to different means of communication; the contested ideologies to which they give rise and are in turn subjected; and the effect that these means have on our consciousness. Forest's publicity stunts are an important part of his *œuvre* and must be taken seriously, but his reputation ought not to be based on them alone for he is more than just a talented prankster. An overlooked pioneer in the artistic use of video, the printed press, television, radio, telephones, telematics, electronic message boards, multimedia systems, and the Internet, there are few other contemporary artists of his generation who have done as much to probe the varied terrain of the modern media landscape as Fred Forest.

**Accidental Intellectual**

Forest's penchant for the production of ostensibly uncollectible "transmedia events" and his strategy of cultivating his troublemaker persona may help to explain why he never became a hot commodity in the art world but they have not prevented him from having a fair measure of critical acclaim and success. His work has won the Grand Prize for Communication at the Sao Paulo Biennial (1973) and the City of Locarno Prize at the Locarno International Festival of Video and Electronic Arts (1995), and has been curated by the likes of René Berger, Pierre Restany, Frank Popper, Harald Szeeman, and Robert C. Morgan. In 2004, his substantial archives, including all of his work on videotape, were deposited in the Fonds de Creation

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Contemporaine of France's Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, thanks to the foresight and diligent efforts of INA's Gilbert Dutertre, thus making Forest's *œuvre* an official part of the national cultural heritage of France while bypassing France's less appreciative national museums.[23] Prior to the 2013 French retrospective of his work in Enghien-les-Bains, his work was the subject of two modest retrospectives held outside of France: *Circuitos paralelos: retrospectiva Fred Forest,* at Paço das Artes in Sao Paulo (2006); and *Art and Society: The Work of Fred Forest,* at The Slought Foundation in Philadelphia (2007).[24]

Recognition of the importance of Forest's work has always been quicker among the intelligentsia than in the art world per se. Forest has received critical accolades from a long list of prominent sociologists, philosophers, and cultural theorists interested in issues of communication, media, and technology including Marshall McLuhan, Jean Duvignaud, Vilém Flusser, Edgar Morin, Abraham Moles, Paul Virilio, Mario Costa, Derrick de Kerckhove, and Pierre Lévy. Out of all of the major figures in intellectual and cultural life with whom Forest has been associated throughout his career, the two most influential were undoubtedly Flusser and Restany.

The Prague-born philosopher Flusser (1920-1991), who taught in Sao Paulo in the 1960s and early 1970s before moving to France in 1972, is well known for his groundbreaking essays on photography, design, nomadism, telematics, the interface concept, and the impact of digital media on culture.[25] Today a major reference in the field of media theory, Flusser was Forest's philosophical mentor, collaborator (a dozen projects and joint public appearances between 1972 and 1991), and among his most insightful interpreters in the formative years of

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Sociological Art [Figure 33].[26] Forest and Flusser first met in 1972 through René Berger, whom Flusser had contacted in his official capacity as a member of the organizing committee of the 12th Sao Paulo Biennial, scheduled to take place the following year. Flusser was looking for European artists to include in a special section on communication. Flusser never returned to Brazil and he and Forest saw one another on a regular basis for several years while Flusser was living in France. Their relationship was often stormy and Flusser bluntly criticized Forest for compromising the potentially greater intersubjective quality of his communication works by putting himself too conspicuously in the foreground; however, he also called Forest his "food for thought" and in one important essay wrote that the mirror effects found throughout Forest's work, in particular in his use of video, exemplified a new post-objective epistemology (more on this essay later). For his part, Forest claims that no university coursework could have compared to the philosophical education he received at animated dinner table discussions with Flusser and Moles, another an important figure in media theory. In addition to making Flusser the subject of his video *The Professor's Gestures* (*Les gestes du professeur,* 1974), Forest also dedicated his work *The Hole* (*Le Trou,* 1988), to Flusser. An intervention in the regional daily *Nord-Matin,* the work featured a large black circle in the center of a page, which the readers were instructed to cut out: "With a pair of scissors / Cut a hole / A real work of art / To look through / To look beyond appearances / A hole that will help you look at life on the other side."

Forest's relationship with the guru of Nouveau Réalisme was of a different nature. Like Forest, Restany (1931-2003) was born and had grown up in French North Africa (Morocco, in Restany's case) and this fact created a special bond between the two.[27] Coincidentally, Forest first met Restany, like Flusser, in 1972 and the person responsible for introducing them to one

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another was again René Berger, who was the organizer of an art conference which they both happened to be attending. Restany was already somewhat familiar with Forest's work, in particular the small blank space he had published in *Le Monde* in January of the same year. He was to become a staunch champion of Forest's work over the course of the next thirty years [Figure 34], advising the artist on his work in progress, curating several exhibitions in which Forest's work appeared, and publishing over twenty critical texts on Forest's artistic practice between 1974 and 1999.

The sociological perspective was a key element in Restany's theorization of Nouveau Réalisme. Sociological reality *was* the new reality that the Nouveaux Réalistes endeavored to present. In the movement's first manifesto Restany offers his idea of art as "a sociological relay at the critical stage of communication" and later writes that the one thing all of the diverse artists associated with Nouveau Réalisme had in common was their "recognition of the expressive autonomy of the sociological real."[28] Given these interests, it is no surprise that Restany was drawn to the project of the Collectif d'Art Sociologique, of which Forest was a cofounder, and to Forest's subsequent independent work in communication and media art. Indeed, the affinity Restany saw between Forest's work and Nouveau Réalisme was very much in evidence at the closing ceremonies of a retrospective of the work of artists Restany had supported throughout his career, *Cette culture qui vient de la rue* (*This Culture That Comes from the Street*), held in 2000 at the Galerie Municpale of Vitry-sur-Seine. Here, Restany invited Forest and Jean-Pierre Raynaud to join him on the stage as he made his closing remarks, publically singling out the two artists as the most worthy successors to the famous movement he had founded.

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There are several recurring themes in Restany's essays on Forest and his work. One is the sheer charisma and generous sense of humor of the man he called the "media prophet" with a "Colgate smile." He considered Forest's charming and gregarious demeanor indicative of a humanist ethos and optimism that set Forest's work apart from the cynicism that permeates so much of contemporary art. Another was Forest's emphasis on anthropological understanding and ethics (Truth) over aesthetics (Beauty) as a basis for artistic practice. Finally, he regularly pointed out Forest's and Yves Klein's common interest in the spiritual properties of the void. The following excerpt, from an essay Restany contributed to Forest's self-edited catalog *100 actions* (1995), eloquently sums up all of these themes:

> Fred Forest raises issues and sets an example. He is certainly the artist who first grasped the true importance of communication, not as a series of systems designed to convey reality, but as a space—an autonomous territory where self-expression becomes the norm through contact with others in the same social environment. Furthermore, I believe that this realization has given him repeated opportunities to demonstrate his own normalcy as a form of indifference. Indeed, Fred Forest is doubly indifferent, in other words, radically indifferent. He is indifferent to "traditional" artists, who continue to work with easel and canvas, using the proper oil paints and the right colors; and he is also indifferent to (i.e. different from) the pure specialists in information. This normalcy in the form of indifference is characterized by what strikes me as Fred Forest's greatest quality, his human touch. At the core of each of his interactive platforms and simulations, there is a fundamental human quality that sets him apart from artists and communication specialists alike. [...]

> Fred Forest's idea of humanity is an interactive one. It corresponds to both a need and an extremely strong desire to get people to participate in the

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operation.  It also corresponds to a popular form of humanism based on dignity and the love of man.  I think that the best evidence of this heartfelt humanism can be found in the public response to Fred Forest's prompts and invitations.  His interventions tend to be viewed favorably by the general public and elicit strong currents of uninhibited and good natured participation.  Forest's projects have an impact unlike that of everyday communication systems and most other artistic propositions.

This brings us back to the paradox of space-time:  Fred Forest's true artistic terrain is the space-time of oblivion.  Just one look at his extensive press coverage will suffice to get a sense of the manifold repercussions of his actions.  At the same time, people seem to have only a sketchy idea of Fred Forest that often misses the point.  Many consider him a dilettante who blithely flits back and forth between communication, publicity, journalism, and experimental art.  I recognize that this impression derives in part from the underlying logic inherent to Fred Forest's work.  He is indeed playing a game, playing one side [media] off of the other [art]....  Still, what really matters to Fred Forest ... is to be true to himself and even more so to his inner conviction that his action is not gratuitous, that its ultimate objective is not be remembered, not some form of inscription, but to work on the essence of human interaction, something which is only made possible by the suspension of normal time in his interventions.  Such is the love of man that he finds in the eternal present of his actions. [...]

Yves Klein anticipated the great adventure of the immaterial and threw himself into the void.  Klein's void was part of the alchemy of truth....  At the heart of this void, this dense void that is of the cosmos and the origins of the universe, "there is a fire that shines and a fire that burns," Yves Klein used to say.  This metaphor also applies to the great adventurer of communication that is Fred Forest.  He knows that there is a fire that shines in the heart of the immaterial void of communication, the fire of the present moment of interaction; as well as a fire

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that burns, the fire of oblivion.  I personally have a lot of faith in Fred Forest's practice as I happen to believe that his aesthetic of communication leads to a broad-based humanism that is the key to our earthly and cosmic salvation.[29]

From Forest's point of view, what he and Restany shared above all was a strong sense of optimism, which had its source in the *joie de vivre* both had acquired in their North African boyhoods and extended to their shared utopian faith that "above and beyond the negative effects that it might entail, ... [technology] also favors the emergence of a new mode of being together."[30]  Sounding a more intimate note in a 1999 email to Forest, Restany wrote:  "We have done so many things together; I hope that we'll be able to do many more.  In the orbit of the aesthetics of communication, your relational ethics is the rocket bearing my dreams of telematic wandering:  you are my planetary extranet."[31]

Forest has never made a living as an artist.  Like many of his peers, he has had a parallel career as a teacher, holding a number of different academic positions.  Between 1974 and 1978, he taught art at the Ecole Normale Supérieure de l'Enseignement Technique in the Paris suburb of Cachan.  Between 1975 and 1993, he taught video and media theory at the Ecole Nationale d'Art de Cergy, also in the Paris region, where he was for a time the colleague of Orlan and the conceptualist Bernar Venet.[32]  Between 1986 and 1990, he was also a visiting professor at the University of Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, where he conducted a public seminar on "Art, Communication, and New Technologies."  He held a similar visiting position at the University of Paris VIII, Saint Denis, the home of a cutting-edge interdisciplinary program in Arts and Technologies of the Image (under the directorship of Edmond Couchot), during the 1989-90 academic year.  Between 1995 and 1998, Forest held a chair in Information and Communication

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Studies at the University of Nice, Sophia-Antipolis, which co-sponsored a new public seminar on the Aesthetics of Communication with the Nice Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain.

Forest's academic career was highly improbable in at least one respect:  he does not have a high school diploma, having left school with the equivalent of an eighth grade certificate, eventually going to work for the French postal service, first in Algeria and later in France.  However, years later, he took advantage of special provisions that allowed certain highly qualified individuals to apply for candidacy for a French state doctorate (*doctorat d'Etat*) without the prerequisite undergraduate degrees or graduate coursework, on the basis of the applicant's prior professional accomplishments and publications in the designated field.  An intellectually voracious autodidact, Forest was awarded this prestigious advanced degree in the humanities in 1985, at the age of 51, by the Panthéon-Sorbonne branch of the University of Paris following the submission of a voluminous portfolio of his work in addition to a formal thesis bearing the title *Expériences d'Art sociologique et communication artistique.*  True to form, however, Forest turned his thesis defense in the historic Louis Liard auditorium at the Sorbonne (January 18, 1985) into an ironic multimedia performance that questioned the very premises of the academic exercise in which he was participating **[Figure 35]**.  The jury—made up of Abraham Moles (president), Bernard Teyssèdre (thesis advisor), Jean Duvignaud, Dominique Nogues, and Frank Popper—expressed some reservations about the scholarly quality and methodological consistency of the thesis but nonetheless awarded Forest the degree with honors on the basis of the nearly twenty years of groundbreaking artistic practice of which the thesis was a theoretical overview.[33]

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Again like many of his peers in the field of contemporary art, Fred Forest is an artist-theorist.  Writing is an integral part of his practice and his record of publication is extensive:  scores of articles in newspapers and magazines around the world; texts for dozens of exhibition catalogs and project websites; more theoretical texts and in-depth interviews in scholarly journals and art publications like *Leonardo, Design Issues, Communication et langages, Art press, Opus international,* and *+ – 0;* and no less than nine books—including two extensive self-edited retrospective catalogs, five books laying out his vision of art and its place in society, an illustrated survey of art on the internet, and a sort of artistic and intellectual memoir comprised of sketches of 100 individuals from different walks of life (ranging from art and ideas to politics and entertainment), both famous and obscure (including several close friends and family members), who have made a strong impression on him at various stages of his life.[34]

One common explanation of the phenomenon of the artist-author-theorist suggests that as art has become more abstract and conceptual, the original "work," or artistic gesture, serves merely as the basis for interpretative praxis, which is *performed* by curators, critics, scholars, journalists, the public, and the artists themselves.  The latter have an understandably important personal stake in the ongoing discourse on the meaning and significance of their production—a discourse over which they might have some special "authorial" influence but no control.   In other words, in this equation, art, a complex nexus of sensation and ideation, is finally the result of interpretive performance much like music results from musicians' interpretation of a composer's score in performance:  it is fundamentally both "conceptual" and "performative," whether it specifically identities itself as such or not.  Similarly, what one typically considers the "work"—the object, performance, action, imagery, sensory input, information, or intellectual

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problem produced by the "artist"—is only raw material, a pretext, a substratum, or a set of cues (like the musical score) for the hermeneutic process of art.  A less exalted explanation is that artists' theoretical writings and other efforts to contextualize and explicate their own work are just another means of adding to the already voluminous corpus of secondary documentation of all sorts designed—primarily out of self-preservation (the need to leave an lasting trace) and self-interest (the need to produce objects that can be viewed and eventually sold)—to re-objectify essentially dematerialized forms of artistic practice that might have no more than a most fleeting resonance before dissolving into the thin air of oblivion.

Neither of these explanations neatly fits Forest.   It is clear that little of his participative and event-specific work would subsist or make sense without textual/documentary backup, something in which Forest has had to play a very proactive role throughout his career given his rather marginal and contentious position in the art world.   In other words, Forest is not as content with oblivion as Restany obligingly suggested.   This is the rationale behind the retrospective catalogs of his own work that Forest has compiled, which include the self-published *Forest Vidéo* (1980), followed by the commercially published *100 actions* (1995) and *Un pionnier de l'art vidéo à l'art sur internet: art sociologique, esthétique de la communication et art de la commutation* (2004).   It is also the justification for the copious documentation available online on the website of the Web Net Museum (<http://www.webnetmuseum.org>), which Forest launched in 2001, and which features a permanent and regularly updated retrospective of his work.[35]  Until the completion in 2010 of a French doctoral thesis in France by Isabelle Lassignardie in the form a well-documented *catalogue raisonné* based on the INA

archives, these self-edited catalogs and Forest's website were the only sources of detailed information about Forest's nearly complete works.[36]

Furthermore, Forest has not been shy about enlisting the interpretive help of people like Flusser, Restany, Costa, and de Kerckhove, it should be emphasized that most of his projects are relatively simple in design and pointed leave the business of meaning up to the public.  They do not assume a connoisseur's familiarity with the intellectual underpinnings of contemporary art and rarely require expert decoding even when they are of a more philosophical nature.  In other words, they are meant to be meaningful to a more general public on an intuitive level and it matters little to Forest if the members of this public considers them art or not.  Accordingly, Forest's descriptions of his own work are usually brief, straightforward, and (like the works themselves) full of humor.

A similar point can be made about Forest's more theoretical writings.  With a few exceptions, these texts are relatively straightforward and refreshingly free of abstruse jargon and the obligatory references to the corpus of contemporary critical theory, its intellectual stars, and fashionable concepts.  They not lacking in subtlety and show a certain natural literary flair, not to mention lots of irony and humor.  However, they offer the earnest reflections of someone who writes from the double vantage point of an outsider—someone who clearly doesn't want to sound like another art world sophisticate—and what the French call *un homme de terrain,* i.e. someone who is firmly grounded in practical experience as a practicing artist and a longtime observer of the politics, conceits, and venality of the art establishment.   A complement to his artistic projects, Forest's more theoretical writings spell out in detail his

lifelong commitment to two essential positions that he has stuck to with remarkable consistency in spite a number conceptual shifts and changes in media that have occurred during the course of his career.  The first is that most of what is commonly lumped into the category of contemporary art—such as it appears in museums, galleries, major international art fairs, and trade journals—has become too market-driven, aesthetically obsolete, intellectually insipid, and socially disconnected.  The second is that it should be replaced by a new "art of the present" that is massively participative, anthropologically relevant to the life experience of the general public, as immaterial as the space of information and communication that must be among its primary foci, and not overly beholden to the logic of commerce, which is more interested in marketable commodities than existential meaning.  Forest's vision of art is clearly a utopian one, but as he likes to emphasize, it exemplifies a form of utopia that he likes to consider "realistic."  Forest has devoted his life's work to making utopia more realistic through the design and implementation of special user-friendly interfaces making use of words, images, information, mass media, new technologies of communication, multiple modes of space and time, provocative and downright amusing action in the public arena, and unusual forms of interaction.

**Overview**

Chapter Two of this study will begin by charting the early evolution of Forest's artistic vocation, which began as a self-taught painter while he was still employed by the French postal in Algeria.  It will focus on the pivotal moment in the late 1960s when he turned away from conventional plastic forms to newer and more unconventional media and genres such as video,

interventions in the printed press, and direct interaction with the general public, which he saw as more directly "plugged into" everyday social reality.   It will then examine how these experiments in socially relevant art took more definitive shape in the mid-1970s in the theoretical and collaborative framework of the Collectif d'Art Sociologique, which Forest cofounded with Hervé Fischer and Jean-Paul Thenot.  It will then focus more closely on Forest's pioneering work in video by examining the different uses he made of the medium and how these were considered indicative of a non-objective, or post-objective, epistemology based on mirror effects and critical displacements in the field of observation by Forest's friend, philosophical mentor, and intermittent collaborator, Vilém Flusser.

Chapter Three will pick up Forest's story in the early 1980s, when he distanced himself from what he had come to see as the doctrinal rigidity of Sociological Art as an organized movement in favor of "trans-media events" that allowed for greater degrees of simulation, symbolism, and sensory stimuli—such as the translation of his trademark "artistic square meter" concept into the ongoing operation of a simulated independent territory known as the Territory of the Square Meter.  The chapter's central focus will be on the theory and practice of what Forest and Mario Costa called the Aesthetics of Communication, which consisted in experimental investigations of the sensorial, aesthetic, spatiotemporal, epistemological, psychological, anthropological, and ideological ramifications of the telecommunications environment that had become a basic reality of human life while being ostensibly ignored by contemporary art.  It will present and analyze different examples of "metacommunicational art" created by Forest, whereby he designed fanciful new interfaces that "crossed," or combined, different media—namely, radio, television, the telephone, and telematics—in

unusual ways that were intended lead immersed spectators and actively participating members of the public to confront certain salient characteristics of the telecommunications environment that they not yet noticed or taken the time to think about.  The chapter will conclude by looking at how Forest's work began to change in the late 1980s, including, on the one hand, more conventional types of multimedia installations and performances; and, on the other hand, taking a more ethical turn in response to a number of environmental and geopolitical challenges.

Chapter Four will begin in the 1990s, when Forest wrote extensively about his vision of an "art of the present" that he called upon to replace contemporary art.  He articulated this vision at the same time that contemporary art was being vehemently taken to task for its alleged social irrelevance, fame-and-fortune-seeking venality, and aesthetic nullity—all points he had been making  for years—during the French "Quarrel of Contemporary Art."  It will treat the central role that new technologies of information and communication play in Forest's idea of the art of the present—in particular the internet, which he came to see as triply important to art given its status as an omnipresent social reality (something that no true art of the present could ignore), a new public forum for art that potentially allowed artists to bypass the closed circuit of the elitist contemporary art establishment and appeal directly to a broader audience, and an exciting new medium in its own right that every bit as revolutionary as video was in the 1960s and 70s.  The chapter will then consider Forest's own pioneering work in web art, which included the playful *détournement* of ubiquitous and hegemonic interfaces, exploration of the effect that the internet and its attendant democratization of the phenomenon of telepresence in real time have on traditional cultural paradigms of space and time, and both festive and

more contemplative and ritualistic exercises in online liminality from the late 1990s (e.g., Time Out, The Techno-Wedding, and The Center of the World) through the early 2010s (e.g., The Traders' Ball and Ebb and Flow: The Internet Cave).  It will conclude with a brief summary of the series of works that Forest has created in the online metaverse of Second Life.

Chapter Five, the Conclusion, will reconsider Forest's life's work from the standpoint of his reinterpretation of the concept of utopia that eschews its traditional overreliance on the visual paradigm of projection and instead takes the two-way interactive feedback loops of the interface paradigm as its model, a paradigm shift that Forest considers more "realistic."  It will touch on touch on some of the theoretical and practical ramifications of his equation of interface and utopia.  Namely, it will examine how Forest posits that the central task of utopian humanism today is no longer to project a vision of the ideal society in a virtual realm that lies outside the parameters of space and time thought to constitute everyday "reality;" but to start with the fact that the virtual already permeates everyday experience in the form of the real-time communication environment, or mediapscape, and to fully integrate that virtuality into a reconstituted sense of reality through art.  In other words, what interests Forest most in the utopian interface of the real and the virtual is not the capacity to project oneself across the threshold of the interface into the virtual/ideal; but to follow the information flow back across it into the real—an experience which is, in Forest's best works, just as marvelously liminal.  On the practical side, the final chapter will review several of the most prevalent distinct types of utopian tropes of media interfaces—the true crux of his work since the late 1960s—to which his equation of interface and utopia has led.

## Introduction: Illustrations



**Figure 1:**  Edition of *Le Monde* featuring Forest's intervention, *150 cm$^2$ of Newspaper* (1972).
[Source:  Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 2:**  Examples of reader responses to *150 cm$^2$ of Newspaper* (1972).
[Source: *Communication et langages*, no. 18, 1973]

**Figure 3:** Further blank space interventions in the press that were part of the ongoing *Space Media* project.
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 4:** The mock street demonstration staged in Sao Paulo for *The City Invaded by Blank Space* (1973).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 5:** Forest leading the procession in downtown Sao Paulo (1973).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 6:** Newspaper announcement of Forest's call-in operation for the Sao Paulo Biennial (1973).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 7:** Forest's installation at the Sao Paulo Biennial (1973).
[Source: INA video archives]

**Figure 8:** The police arriving to shut down Forest's installation at the Sao Paulo Biennial (1973).
[Source: Personal Archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 9:** Forest leading the *Sociological Promenade in Brooklin,* Sao Paulo (1973).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 10:** Newspaper advertisement in *Le Monde* for *The Artistic Square Meter* (1977).
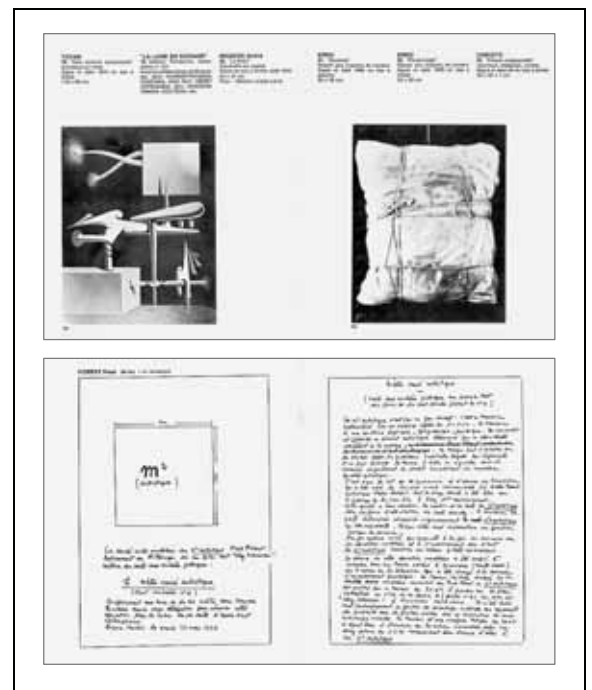[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

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**Figure 11:** Excerpts from auction catalog featuring the first "artistic square meter" lot (1977).
[Source: Jean-Claude Binoche, *Tableaux d'aujourd'hui*]

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**Figure 12:** Transcript of Forest's police interview in connection with *The Artistic Square Meter* (1977).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

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**Figure 13:** Pierre Restany speaking at the auction for *The Artistic Square Meter* (1977).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 14:** Pierre Restany's declaration concerning *The Artistic Square Meter* (1977).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

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**Figure 15 (left):** Advertisement in *Le Monde* for the second phase of *The Artistic Square Meter* (1977).
**Figure 16 (right):** Ad rejected by *Newsweek* for the second phase of *The Artistic Square Meter* (1977).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 17:** Article in *Libération* reporting on the second phase of *The Artistic Square Meter* (1977).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 18:** Blank insert in *La Tribune* (Lausanne) for *The House of Your Dreams* (1978).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 19:** Article in *Le Matin* (Geneva) publicizing Forest's project, *The House of Your Dreams* (1978).
[Source: *Correspondances: l'œuvre perdue,* exhibition catalog]



**Figure 20:** Article in *Le Matin* reporting on Forest's legal battle with Swiss authorities (1989).
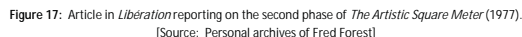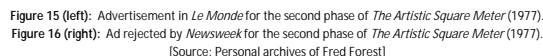[Source: *Correspondances: l'œuvre perdue,* exhibition catalog]

**Figure 21:** One of Forest's letters to the president of the Vaud State Council, epistolary campaign (1990).
[Source: *Correspondances: l'œuvre perdue,* exhibition catalog]

**Figure 22:** Response to Forest from the Swiss army command, epistolary campaign (1990).
[Source: *Correspondances: l'œuvre perdue,* exhibition catalog]

**Figure 23:** Forest's procession through the streets of Sofia, campaign for the presidency of Bulgarian TV (1991).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 24:** Forest's news conference in Sofia, campaign for the presidency of Bulgarian TV (1991).
[Source: INA video archives]

**Figure 25:** Article in *La Tribune* (Paris) reporting on Forest's legal battle with the Centre Pompidou (1997).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 26:** Forest's book on the state of contemporary art and his battle with the Centre Pompidou (2000).
[Source: L'Harmattan Editions]

**Figure 27:** Press release announcing Forest's stealthy intervention at Documenta Kassel (1987)
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 28:** Forest's essay on "The Social Responsibility of Art" in *Kölner Stadt Anzeiger* (1987)
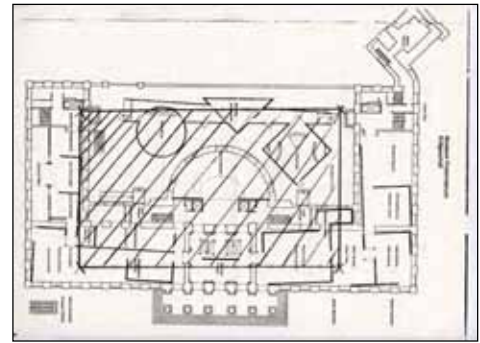[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 29:** Preliminary Sketch for Forest's *Force Field of 14,000 Hertz* intervention at Documenta Kassel (1987)
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 30:** Forest planting ultrasound transmitters at the Friedricanium, site of Documenta Kassel (1987)
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 31:** Forest's online call for a general strike of artists (2004)
[Source: GIGA website, <http://declerck.chez.tiscali.fr/giga>]



**Figure 32:** Forest's protest performance at the Centre Pompidou *Vidéo Vintage* exhibition (2011)
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 33 (left):** Forest with Vilém Flusser (1972)
**Figure 34 (right):** Forest with Pierre Restany (1976)
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 35:** Still from multimedia presentation for Forest's thesis defense at the Sorbonne (1985)
[Source: INA video archives]

Chapter One

## *Sociological Art*

Nothing from Fred Forest's early years would have suggested that he would one day become an important artist. Forest was born on July 6, 1933 to a *Pied-Noir* family in Mascara, Algeria, where his family owned a hardware store in the French quarter of the city **[Figure 1]**. His formal education ended upon his completion of the eighth grade **[Figure 2]** and earning of a modest *certificat d'études primaires*. Following in the footsteps of his countrymen "Facteur" Cheval (1836-1924) and "Douanier" Rousseau (1844-1910), Forest is a self-taught artist who initially made a career as a civil servant: like Cheval, with the French postal service, from 1954 to 1971, first in Algeria and then in France, where he relocated in 1962. Forest says that he first started dabbling in painting while still a young boy, on Sunday afternoon family outings in the countryside outside Mascara, imitating the example of a favorite aunt who painted still lifes of the fruits and vegetables that were later cut up and served for lunch atop heaping bowls of couscous. He credits the sunshine and the sensual environment of desert, rugged mountains, and deep blue sea of his Algerian boyhood as the sources of the tremendous reserves of energy he has tapped throughout his career as an artist.[1] Between 1958 and 1965, he achieved a modicum of success as a painter, participating in several small group exhibitions in Oran, Marseille, Paris, and New York. His first solo exhibition was held in Algiers in 1967.

While Forest's early work as a painter is a fairly conventional mix of freestyle figuration and lyrical abstraction, two sources of influence on his later practice of dematerialized communication art were already at work on his mindset in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One was his work experience with the postal service. Forest says that he acquired his first intuition of a network aesthetic by sorting the mail going through the Mascara post office to and from points around the world and monitoring the telephone switchboard the post office operated— the blinking lights serving for him as poetic symbols of anonymous individuals in search of meaningful connections across time and space.[2] Prank calls and deliberately crossed signals at the switchboard represented his first playful attempts at what was to become an artistic trademark, the subversion of media interfaces.

Forest's experience as a European resident of French Algeria, or *Pied-Noir*, who lived through the bloody Algerian War (1954-1962) and mass exodus of *Pieds-Noirs* following Algerian independence in 1962 represents a more subtle influence on his later work. A community caught on the wrong side of history, the *Pieds-Noirs* are collectively identified with both the bitter legacy of French colonialism and the trauma of the Algerian War. Their complicated multipolar identities as non-Arab Algerians, French-speaking colonists of diverse ethnic and religious origins, and French nationals of the Mediterranean *Outre-Mer* were forever transfigured by their forced expulsion from was for many their multi-generational homeland and later by their perceived status as second-class citizens and pseudo-foreigners in the French mainland, their principal place of asylum.[3] Forest's own story is achingly illustrative of this conflicted history: he left Algeria in 1962, just before independence, hastily abandoning his home and virtually all of his worldly possessions in the wake of a colleague's brutal murder and

threats against himself, a representative of the French state, and his family. Although he has never addressed either the Algerian War or the fate of the *Pieds-Noirs* directly in his work as an artist, they figure prominently in both his world view and sense of identity[4] and are partly responsible for the development of three key facets of his artistic frame of mind. The first is his general aversion for ideologically rigid views of history and society, which tend to oversimplify complex situations and dehumanize people on the basis of what they are thought to represent. Hence, Forest's own militancy is tempered by generous amounts of humanism and humor. The second is his instinctive disdain for the elite milieu of contemporary art in France, which epitomizes for him the snobbery and self-satisfaction of the well-heeled and refined French upper *bourgeoisie*. Forest happily casts himself as an uncivilized ruffian in opposition to the smooth operators of the Parisian art world. The third and perhaps most important of all is a tendency to dissociate the concepts of territory and community from geography—an attitude that made him particularly receptive to the virtual spaces of modern communication.

### Immersion in the Everyday

Between 1967 and 1970, Forest's art underwent a transformation. 1967 was clearly the pivotal year, for it was in 1967 that Forest carried out his first "sociological" experiment as an artist, *The Family Portrait (Le portrait de famille).* For this project, he distributed a tract asking the residents of the housing complex in L'Häy-les-Roses (Paris suburbs) where he himself lived to contribute a photograph or some other document or artifact representing their family **[Figure 3]**. He even offered to come by and personally take a Polaroid snapshot of any families wishing to participate. The material he assembled formed the subject of three successive

exhibitions: the first one in the lobby of the main building of the housing complex; the second one in the local cultural center, and the third one in the Grand Palais in Paris. Forest's project was a timely reflection of growing public interest in the sprawling government-subsidized housing complexes on the periphery of France's major cities, *les habitations à loyer modéré,* or HLM. Experts and the media were beginning to see these architecturally uninspiring and hastily built *cages à lapin,* or rabbit cages ("chicken coops" in the American vernacular), as emblematic of the ills of a postindustrial society in which aggressive modernization, chaotic urbanization, large-scale migrations from rural regions and the former colonies, and the repression of the working classes—coupled with omnipresent media indoctrination into a lifestyle of passive consumption—had led to the alienation of the masses, famously described in emblematic works of social criticism like Henri Lefèbvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (1st French ed. of vol. 1 in 1947, vol. 2 in 1958, vol. 3 in 1981) and Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1st French ed. 1967).[5] Already true to his later form, Forest sought to work against the grain of these stereotypes by giving his working class subjects the opportunity to project a more realistic and positive image of their own making.

By far the most significant event in 1967 was Forest's introduction to video. In this year, he obtained a Sony CV-2400 Portapak video recorder from Sony France **[Figure 4]**. His unit was one of just three prototypes of the equipment adapted to European norms that the company was making available as part of a promotional campaign. Forest learned of their existence from Pierre Schaeffer, the director of the French national broadcasting authority's (ORTF) audiovisual research division (Groupe de Recherche Image), an important center for early artistic experiments with new media. Thus, just two years after Nam June Paik's legendary Portapak

footage of Pope Paul VI's 1965 motorcade in New York was shot and shown at the Café à Go-Go in Greenwich Village, and prior to its commercial availability in France, Forest was among the very first artists in the world to use the Portapak.[6]  His first experimental Portapak tapes, *The Telephone Booth* (*La cabine téléphonique*) and *The Wall of Arles (Le mur d'Arles)*, date from the same year, although they were not exhibited at the time.  Shot from the window of Forest's apartment in L'Häy-les-Roses, *The Telephone Booth* consists of raw footage of vehicular and pedestrian traffic in the street below **[Figure 5]**.  While Forest's original intention might well have been simply to record several minutes in the life of a typical suburb, there is a subtle poetic quality to the footage, which revels in its real-time presence and frames the corner telephone booth as a symbol of the remote location's connection to a network of points beyond—a notion reinforced by the breeze gently shaking the branches of a nearby tree and by the somewhat distorted background sound of music playing on a radio in Forest's apartment, which combine to create the impression of a space immersed in pulsating waves of electronic signals.  Part surveillance tape, part meditation on the body language of spectatorship, part neo-Surrealist allusion to the mysteries lurking just below the mundane surface of urban life, *The Wall of Arles* focuses on a wooden barrier around a construction site in the southern French city, which aroused the curiosity of the passersby, who stepped up to look through its cracks and holes **[Figure 6]**.

Forest's first formal exhibition making use of video, *Interrogation 69,* took place in May 1969, in the reconverted gothic chapel of Sainte-Croix in the city of Tours.  *Interrogation 69* **[Figure 7]** was an interactive multimedia environment featuring live closed circuit video of the installation space on wall-mounted monitors, slide show projections onto the fluorescent

surfaces of 15 "screen-paintings" (*tableaux-écrans*), scale models of telecommunications satellites, an IBM computer, and electronic music composed by Luc Ferrari (an associate of Pierre Schaeffer).  Forest's installation juxtaposed the iconographic and media culture of the middle ages and the present; however, in the immediate aftermath of May 68, it also became a gathering place for activist students and countercultural artists in the provincial city and was covered in the local and national media, making it the first well publicized video installation in France.[7]

Several years later, Forest was to declare with typical avant-garde hyperbole that he had stopped "making art" in 1969 and had henceforth devoted himself exclusively to experiments with more socially relevant media like video.[8]  In reality, he had continued producing *tableaux-écrans* **[Figures 8 – 9]** and had also worked an illustrator and political cartoonist for two newspapers— *Combat,* a leftist paper started under the Resistance, and the business-oriented *Les Échos*—for several years after this symbolic turning point.  One outgrowth of his work as an illustrator for *Combat* was a comic strip character called Globulus, an amorphous blob of living flesh that resembled a disembodied human brain—a sardonic witness to the mindless culture and existential absurdity of the day **[Figure 10]**.  He had also continued to show some of his more conventional works at several individual and group exhibitions through the early 1970s.  The statement is nonetheless true to the extent that it reflects the fact that he was becoming increasingly convinced that traditional plastic objects were inadequate to express what in his view constituted the crux of contemporary reality: mass media, mass culture, technology, the communication revolution, the global village, the shift from an industrial economy to a service and information economy—which, in his view, similarly required artists to change from being

makers of things to being providers of services—and the resulting phenomena of dematerialization and dislocation that affected all aspects of culture.  Forest came to believe that art should be made with media more characteristic of the age.  Video was an obvious example; however, he would soon start experimenting with other quintessentially modern media—namely, the press, radio, television, and telephones.  In sum, information itself would become his medium.

The social, political, and cultural ferment of the 1960s and early 70s provided the backdrop for the transformation of Forest's idea of his vocation as an artist, as it did for so many others of his generation.  The starting point for what we know as contemporary art as distinct from modern art, the 60s gave rise to the "dematerialization"[9] of the traditional art object and the proliferation of countless new forms of expression:  Fluxus-type actions and games, happenings, performance, community-based activist art and collaborative experiments in public participation,[10] body art, land art, conceptual art, op art, kinetic art, minimalism, mail art, social sculptures (Joseph Beuys), intermedia (Dick Higgins), installations, and a slew of Neo-Dadaist practices following Duchamp that incorporated found objects and everyday materials of no particular aesthetic value.[11]  And then there was video, truly the newest medium of all, in so many different declensions:  Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell's earliest experiments in the *détournement* of television; video as a compliment to performance-based art or a component of installations (Vito Acconci, Valie Export, Martha Rosler, Joan Jonas, Peter Campus, Bruce Nauman, David Hall, Dan Graham, et al.); guerilla television and documentary filmmaking (collectives like Videofreex, Raindance, and TVTV), expanded cinema (Gene Youngblood, Jeffrey Shaw and Eventstructure Research Goup); and more experimental forms of video that played

with the unique technical properties of the medium (Woody and Steina Vasaulka).[12]  Many of these artistic currents were shaped by the radical political discourses and anti-establishment rhetoric of 1960s, as well as by new ideas from fields like media theory (Marshall McLuhan), semiotics and structuralism (Umberto Eco on the "open work" and Roland Barthes on the "death of the author"), information and systems theory and cybernetics (Norbert Weiner).  The influence of the latter was particularly strong in the early works of Roy Ascott (c. 1964) and was and was foregrounded in the *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition held at the London Institute of Contemporary Art in 1968, the art criticism and theoretical essays of Jack Burnham (1968-69), and the Burnham-curated exhibition *Software* at the Jewish Museum of New York in 1970.[13]  The work of art was becoming "open system" that invited feedback.[14]

This dizzying array of new ideas and forms of expression and the unorthodox individuals groups that practiced them challenged the traditional genres of art and the fragile humanistic assumptions that modernism had kept alive even as it pushed the boundaries of the traditional media to the limits and struggled through some of the most horrific events in human history:  assumptions about originality, meaning, the individuality of the artist, the personal nature of the work, authorship, and the creative process; assumptions about the boundaries between art and politics, art and everyday life, art and commerce, high culture and popular culture, creators and spectators; and assumptions about the role of galleries, collectors, museums, and critics.  They also challenged a number of society's core legal and moral norms such as those concerning freedom of speech, plagiarism, property, privacy, the body, sex, obscenity, religion, tolerance, democracy, and diversity.  However, as unconventional as it might have been, some of the most experimental and controversial work was quickly accepted by institutions—albeit

not without trouble. This, Nathalie Heinich tells us, had the effect of turning transgression into a new form of tradition (i.e. an expression of authority that compels adherence, not unlike classicism); and it skewed the once subtle interplay between artistic nonconformity, contentious reception (in the arenas of critical and public opinion), and institutional validation—viewed as a historical progression in the mythic view of modernism. Heinich suggests that this paradigmatic and perhaps mythical three-stage progression could now be likened to a frenetic three-way game of "hot hand" in which career-savvy artists (under tremendous pressure to translate transgression into brand identity), permissive institutions (quick to canonize), and volatile public opinion (an unstable concoction of benign indifference, distinction-seeking desire to keep up with the latest trends, and sporadic eruptions of reactionary condemnation) struggle to keep pace with one another.[15]

While New York might well have "stolen" the idea of modern art from Paris in the wartime and postwar years, the French art scene in the 1960s and early 1970s was still alive with new trends and ideas—some imitating what was being done in New York and other international art hot spots and others charting a course of their own, in some cases more distinctly "French."[16] In addition to the Yves Klein and the Nouveau Réalistes group, considered the French answer to Pop Art on account of its focus on the detritus of mass culture,[17] the French scene featured prominent members of the Fluxus community (Robert Filliou, Ben Vaultier, Daniel Spoerri), provocative practitioners of performance and body art (Michel Journiac, Gina Pane, Orlan), creators of happenings (Jean-Jacques Lebel), conceptualists and neo-conceptualists (Daniel Buren/BMPT, Bernar Venet, Sarkis, Jean-Pierre Raynaud, Bertand Lavier, Christian Boltanski, Annette Messager), and experimenters in video art (Forest, Jean-Luc

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Godard, Chris Marker, Jean-Christophe Averty, Robert Cahen, collectives like SLON and Les Cent Fleurs).[18] Noteworthy groups included GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel), which sought to combine a demystifying and impersonal approach to art (simple optic, kinetic, or minimalistic objects) with an appeal to hands-on participation by the public;[19] the Figuration Narrative painters, who sought to distinguish themselves from both Anglo-American Pop Art and French Nouveau Réalisme through paintings that treated material from mass culture with a greater degree of social criticism;[20] and Supports/Surfaces, which sought new relevance in painting by creating works using each of its components (canvases, easels, etc.), both separately and in unorthodox combinations.[21]

The radical political and cultural upheaval of May 68 casts a long shadow over this period of artistic mutation in France.[22] While Fred Forest was not a direct participant in the events of May and was not particularly enamored of leftist dogma, he was, like so many other artists of his generation, influenced by many of the ideals to which May gave such spectacular form. Four soixante-huitard objectives in particular were to become key characteristics of his subsequent work: (1) power is to be taken away from repressive and paternalistic institutions turned over to the people; (2) alienated individuals and oppressed groups of all kinds are to be encouraged to speak out in their own voice;[23] (3) the elitist barriers between "art" and "everyday life" are to be broken down, liberating the creative potential latent in the latter; and (4) the subversive function of the carnivalesque is to be embraced.[24] Between 1967 and 1970, Forest was still dabbling in art forms grounded in such ideas. Over the next several years, he would find ways to give this dabbling a more coherent rationale and greater stylistic consistency.

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### The Sociological Art Collective

Forest's subsequent work as a media artist took shape in the framework of the two movements he cofounded: Sociological Art and the Aesthetics of Communication. From 1974 to 1981, he was a member of the Collectif d'Art Sociologique.[25] The three founding members of the Collective, none of whom were artists by training—Forest, the former postal worker and self-taught painter and videographer; Hervé Fischer, a graduate of the prestigious École Normale Supérieure with degrees in philosophy and sociology who taught at both the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs and the Sorbonne; and Jean-Paul Thenot, a practicing psychotherapist [Figure 11]—started conferring about their common "sociological" approach to art in 1972. In 1974, the three attended meetings with the critics François Pluchart and Bernard Teyssèdre and a broader circle of like-minded artists—Thierry Agullo, Jean-François Bory, Jocelyne Héry, Michel Journiac, Bertrand Lavier, Serge Oldenbourg, Gina Pane, and Joan Rabascall—but were the only ones interested in forming an official group based on the sociological paradigm.[26] Launched as a three-man enterprise by Forest, Fischer, and Thenot in October 1974—its first manifesto was published in the October 9, 1974 edition of Le Monde without the support of the other artists who had taken part in the preliminary discussions—the Collectif d'Art Sociologique sought to set itself apart from both conceptual art and movements that engaged in various forms of social activism by framing its activities in epistemological terms as field experiments whereby the actively participating members of the public would gain the kind of empirical insight into their social environment that they could then use to bring about change.[27] Forest summed up this approach when he wrote:

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The specificity of Sociological Art resides not only in its questioning of art itself but above all in the critical analysis of society that it provides through an "*interventionist sociological praxis.*" This logic of *sociological praxis* establishes *Sociological Art* as an instrument of action in response to social and individual reality. *Consequently, "sociological art" is not art. Nor is it the sociology of art. It is an ethical and practical approach to life that bases its methodology on the empirical development of sociological praxis operating under the pretense of art, or if one prefers, under the cover of art.*[28]

If the members of the Collective weren't really artists, they were hardly sociologists either. For them, sociology—an academic discipline with a normative set of methodologies, a hierarchical organization as a professional body, and certain ideological assumptions about how society functions—was a reflection of the repressive sociopolitical order that they hoped to change. Whereas professional sociologists conducted controlled experiments (i.e. they maintained control over them), the Collective intended to relinquish much of the control to the participants themselves so as to avoid the typical imbalance of power between researchers and subjects that they claimed only served to reinforce the preconceived ideas (and thus the hold on power) of the elites. Although the Collective made use of some of the tools and trappings of social science research (documentary video, subject feedback, academic seminars, etc.), they nonetheless saw their own experiments as "platforms for deviance" and "subversive short circuits" that would open temporary breaches in the barriers erected by holders of power to prevent ordinary people from meaningful self-knowledge and self-determination.[29]

It would not be inaccurate to consider the Collective's mode of operation a parody of sociology. In this respect, it exemplifies the strong current of "social science fiction" that art

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historian Craig J. Saper sees running through the the twentieth-century avant-garde. Social science fiction can take many different forms; however, the two most common traits, both of which are clearly found in the Collective, are the utopian desire to improve modern society and the formation of what Saper calls "intimate bureaucracies": official-sounding organizations and ad hoc networks that both parody the bureaucratic structures that have proliferated in modern society and offer alternatives to bureaucratic organization in the form of loose structures that allow more intimate and dialogical forms of communication to occur. Saper treats examples that range from Fluxus and Mail Art to the pseudo-corporate shenanigans of the Vancouver-based N. E. Thing Company (1967-1978), Anna Freud Banana's experiments in "bananology," and J.S.C. Boggs's bartering transactions using special counterfeit money. Other notable examples include such quasi bureaucratic agencies as John Latham and Barbara Steveni's Artist Placement Group (founded in 1966) and Joseph Beuys' Bureau for Direct Democracy by Referendum (Organisation für Direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung, created at Documenta 5 in 1972). Saper further argues that the intimate bureaucracies created by modern and contemporary artists are key precursors of later networked art making use of telecommunications systems like the Internet.[30]

As valid as it might be to consider Sociological Art a parody of sociology or a form of social science fiction, one must still keep in mind that this quality is only one part of a more complex equation. Forest and his partners adamantly maintained that what they did was neither art nor science. Sociological Art saw itself as a utopian interface between Sociology and Art; it operated in the creative tension between the two poles represented by the two terms in its name and played sociology and art off of each other. It wasn't just a *parody* of sociology, but

an *aesthetic form* of sociology (different from the scientific form); nor did it just use art as a *cover* for "sociological praxis," as it claimed, but was an *epistemological form* of art (different from the plastic or conceptual forms). One has a much easier time accepting the second part of the equation because one is used to the anything-goes fuzziness of art, which does not have rigorous parameters. The first half of the equation is harder to grasp precisely because science does have rigorous parameters. Hence, it is appropriate that the scientific pole in the term should be represented by the adjective (a quality of the thing) and the artistic pole by the noun (the thing itself); and it is also natural that in concrete terms what the members of the Collective did was "hosted" by the art community (only a small number of unorthodox sociologists were ever interested in it), and was later subsumed by art history (one certainly won't find any mention of it in sociology textbooks, unlike the sociology of art, which is an accepted subfield of the discipline). To understand what the Collective tried to do, one must not attempt to resolve the tension between sociology and art at the heart of the equation even though the equation itself is as evanescent as Joseph Kossuth's definition of Conceptual Art as "art as idea as idea." The person who understood this creative tension the best was no doubt the media philosopher Vilém Flusser, who was closely associated with the movement and saw it as the manifestation of a new post-objective epistemology:

> Here are two truths that mirror each other and cancel each other out in the mirroring process: [Sociological Art] ... *is truly an artistic endeavor only from the sociological point of view, and truly a sociological one only from the artistic point of view.* From a sociological point of view, it is absolutely not a sociological endeavor but a caricature of one. And from an artistic point of view, it is absolutely not an artistic endeavor, but a caricature of one. [...]

> The multiple illusions that hide behind this name were hidden from its inventors themselves.... Luckily, they fell into their own trap. This is the great "beauty" of the model of action being proposed: it's a series of optical illusions, a series of mirrors that can't be controlled from the "outside," from some vantage point of metaphysical transcendence; however, we also serve as mirrors in this model as surely as we are "trapped" in it [...] Do Forest and his companions really (that is, naively) believe that they are engaging in sociological art? Such a question is beside the point—it has already been rendered obsolete by our abandonment of the objective point of view.[31]

In addition to a certain number of joint ventures—for example, public interventions in Perpignan (1975), Neukirchen, Germany (1975), and Venice (1976, as official participants in the 76th Biennale, as part of the French delegation curated by Pierre Restany)—each member of the Collective pursued individual projects that reflected his own personal inclinations. A number of projects by Hervé Fischer fell into the category of "hygiene of art," a sort of deconstructionist sociology of art using the language of contemporary art itself: hand-towel rolls imprinted with crude handprints loosely hanging on the gallery walls and on which spectators were invited to wipe their own soiled hands [Figure 12]; small works of art on paper (both Fischer's and other artists') torn to shreds and preserved in tiny specimen bags with official rubber stamped labels [Figure 13]; and the Pharmacie Fischer, where one could have prescriptions [Figure 14] filled for a variety of physical and mental conditions—pills that made it easier to vote, watch TV, fall asleep, get excited, listen to violin playing, believe in something, make love, be an artist, be original, enjoy a vacation, and so on [Figure 15].[32]

Not surprisingly given his training and profession training and clinical practice, Thenot was the one who adhered most closely to the methodologies of the social sciences. In

particular, he practiced "art-therapy" and "social-therapy" in the form of opinion surveys about a variety of topics that revealed hidden existential themes behind the apparently inane. Examples include the kind of animal people would like to be; what they thought of different materials such as marble, silk, or cardboard [Figure 16]; or their amateur appraisal of the commercial value of various works of art. The statistical results of these surveys were then carefully tabulated and displayed on graphs and charts. Thenot also drew up and mailed out official "attestations of existence" [Figure 17] in which he declared not only that he existed but that he took the problems of both art and life seriously in spite of the fact that he had never committed certain acts widely recognized as artistic. Those enumerated in the first of these attestations were thinly veiled jabs at some of the trendy movements and artists of the time: Land Art ("I hereby certify that I have ... never dug a hole, a trench, or an excavation in any desert), Joseph Beuys ("... never covered any objects or fragments of objects with lard and adhesive tape), Daniel Buren ("... never displayed alternating green and white vertical bands in certain European cities"), César ("... never expanded tons of polyurethane foam"), etc. Thenot's most ambitious projects included the organization of contests conducted through the mail involving a range of challenges such as proposals for unusual permutations of everyday objects or "progressions," closed circuit television programs the contestants would like to create, or nominations of artists to take the place of the official selections for the hotly contested exhibition *Douze ans d'art contemporain en France, 1960-1972* (*Twelve Years of Contemporary Art in France, 1960-1972*), also referred to as *72-72,* which was supposed to showcase the work of the 72 French artists most representative of the period.[33]

Forest's own "interventionist sociological praxis" under the "cover" of art employed a variety of methods and different "platforms for deviance." Prominent among them were his groundbreaking utopian *animations de presse,* or actions in the press (a genre he invented and continued to develop over the course of four decades[34]), like *150 cm² of Newspaper;* and his provocative and ironic public interventions, like *The City Invaded by Blank Space* and *The Artistic Square Meter,* which sought to create openings for critical thinking and free expression by playing different social forces and channels of communication against one another, with the active complicity of the general public. However, his favorite tool remained video, which he prized for its portability, real-time immediacy, "low-fi" aesthetic, and feedback potential. One of video art's founders in the late 1960s, Forest was also one of its most inventive practitioners throughout the 1970s.

### Video as Sociological Praxis

The German critic Heinz Peter Schwerfel divides Forest's video work from the 1970s into six categories.[35] *Documentation video* is the first one. Using his Portapak, Forest videotaped virtually everything he did as an artist in the 1970s and early 80s. The purpose here was to record for posterity complex and ephemeral public events, of which there might otherwise have been no material trace aside from some still photography and written accounts, which fall far short of capturing the spirit of the live event. The tapes in this category are not really performance videos, nor are they solely documentary in nature. In the first place, we are not dealing with performances in the usual sense of the term. Forest categorically rejects the notion that he is a performance artist and prefers to use terms like "action" and "event" to

describe what he does, which is not scripted performances necessarily centered on the person or body of the artist—possibly staged specifically to be viewed in video format—but open-ended and unpredictable events which the artist set in motion but in which the extensive public participation, chance, the impact of social circumstance beyond the control of the artist are the defining characteristics. Furthermore, in Forest's case, videography was not just a means of recording an event but often helped to *make* the event—a fact Forest knowingly exploited. *The City Invaded by Blank Space* offers a good case in point. Forest says that his Portapak acted like a magnet drawing people to the street procession, helping to transform a rather insignificant handful of people, recruited by him, into a large crowd capable of tying up traffic in downtown Sao Paulo for two hours. Perhaps the onlookers sensed that the presence of the camera signified that the event was in some way important and wanted to get a closer look, perhaps to solve the mystery of the event by solving that of the man wielding the camera. Was he a reporter, an underground filmmaker, the leader of an opposition group, or an undercover agent? Once it attracted more people to the event, the presence of camera probably played a role in changing many of the passive spectators into active participants: bringing out the natural actors in some, perhaps enticed by an opportunity to get a portion of their allotted 15 minutes of fame by playing to the camera; while others simply marched along in quiet solidarity, their social, political, and individual self-awareness heightened by the mirror effect implicitly introduced by the recording device.

*Dialogical video* represents the second type. Although the interactivity of the medium was already a cliché in the 1970s, the video work in this category was interactive in a broader sense.[36] The actual making of the videos in this category was just one part of an open-ended

process of dialogical communication extending through multiple phases. The process typically begins with Forest the cameraman and his subjects engaged in conversation as Forest films the encounter. The open format of the exchange subtly affects both parties. Forest's sheer presence, use of the camera, and speech (questions, debate, and small talk) alter the behavior of the subjects, whose body language and verbal responses in turn affect the way the videographer acts. The next stage typically involves public viewings at which the tapes are analyzed by the original participants, experts, and audience members. These public viewings are also often taped for further viewing and analysis. The best example of this category is *The Professor's Gestures* (*Les gestes du professeur,* 1974), which was part of a larger series called *Gestures in the Professions and Social Life* (*Les gestes dans les professions et la vie sociale,* 1972-1974). The series examines the characteristic movements, gestures, and body language of selected representatives of different professions at work. The original tape features Forest filming Vilém Flusser at the latter's home in Fontevrault, France, giving an impromptu lecture on his developing phenomenological theory of ... human gestures. Forest responds to the animated professor by making gestures of his own with the camera, which elicits further gestural reactions and verbal commentary from Flusser. The dialogical nature of this exchange undermines the hierarchical distinction between subject and object, observer and observed, and, on two separate occasions reverses it: first, when Flusser attempts to catch a reflection of Forest in a small hand-held mirror **[Figure 18]**; and later, when Forest hands the camera over to Flusser and briefly allows himself to be filmed by him. This tape initiated an ongoing dialog between Forest and Flusser that included several public viewings.[37] One of the most visually rich of the tapes in the series is *Les gestes du coiffeur* (*The Hairdresser's Gestures*), which

studies a hairdresser at work in his salon and takes full advantage of the complex mirror effects in the salon to investigate multiple layers of self-consciousness and interaction of those present (Forest, the hairdresser, his clients, and other visitors to the salon) **[Figure 19]**.

*Performed video* constitutes the third category. Once again, one should not confuse this works of this type with performance video (i.e., recorded performances). In this case, Forest does not simply *videotape* performance; he *performs* video. In other words, the making of the video itself is the basis of a live event that uses video's unique properties as a social media of great immediacy and reflexivity to offer a critical or satirical perspective on some aspect of contemporary culture. *Video Portrait of a Collector in Real Time* (1974) is perhaps the best example of this category. Giving an ironic new twist to the age-old tradition of the artist's portrait of his patron, *Video Portrait of a Collector* involves Forest's videotaping of the auction at which the video work in progress (i.e., the unedited auction tape) is simultaneously being sold. As the bidding progresses, Forest pans the audience with his Portapak, rapidly shifting focus from one bidder to the next as they spiritedly vie for possession of the tape on which the winning bid will be immortalized in a final close-up **[Figure 20]**. In lieu of the traditional description of the work for sale, the auction catalog simply noted the size and make of the blank tape to be used and stated Forest's intention to complete the portrait by filming the collector in close-up eating three meals at home on the same tape as the auction footage. The sale of videotape was predicated on the purchaser's acceptance of this condition and the work itself would not be considered whole or finished without out it. Not every work in this category is as centered on the artist's live performance with the camera as *Video Portrait of a Collector,* which, it must be said, was itself also designed to get other people to "perform" for the camera.

In other examples, this social and collective dimension of performance is foregrounded and Forest's work with the camera, which could be either prerecorded video or live, serves merely as the catalyst for an interactive and/or collaborative performance or social simulation—by definition, sociological (i.e., critical) or utopian in nature—in which the members of the public take the lead and Forest either blends in with the other participants or stays behind the scenes. Furthermore, in these other examples the project does not usually result in a final tape that can be identified (or confused) with the work itself. *Biennial of the Year 2000* (1975) in Sao Paulo represents one example of this subcategory. For this project, Forest wanders around the 13th Sao Paulo Biennial 1975, where he videotapes the proceedings with his Sony Portapak. Other participants, visitors, and journalists have the opportunity to view and discuss Forest's footage in a hall contiguous to the official venue—Forest was not an invited participant in the Biennial but the location of his exhibition obscures this fact and gives his rogue venture added legitimacy—as if it were an anthropological artifact produced by an earlier civilization **[Figure 21]**. Another example is *The Passengers of the Capitol Express* (*Les voyageurs du Capitole,* 1972), in which five teams of five people in separate compartments were asked to collaborate on a story set in a train using video material provided to them alongside input from other media interfaces, such as live commentary from the artist over an intercom system.

*Video installations and environments* make up the largest and most varied category of Forest's work in the video medium and include such noteworthy examples as *Archaeology of the Present: Electronic Investigation of Rue Guénégaud* (*Archéologie du présent: investigation électronique de la rue Guénégaud,* 1974), *Restany Dines at La Coupole* (*Restany dine à La Coupole,* 1974), *Madame Soleil Exhibited in the Flesh* (*J'expose Madame Solei en chair et en os,*

1975), and *The Video Family* (*La famille Vidéo,* 1976). In this category, video is just one element of an interactive multimedia space (the printed press is another typical component) again designed to call into question certain social realities. There is once again an event-like quality in works of this type and Forest again plays an active though not necessarily attention-grabbing part as the event's host, commentator, and videographer (as per his standard practice). The members of the public are once again called upon to be more than passive spectators although their relationship to the video medium itself is here closer to the traditional stance of a visitor to an exhibition: i.e., they watch and reflect. What is unique here is that the entire multimedia platform is designed primarily to bring different social spheres into contact or to open closed social spaces to destabilizing input from the outside. To be more specific, in each of the examples above, it is the physical space and social sphere of the contemporary art milieu that is implicated. In *Electronic Investigation of Rue Guénégaud,* Forest uses a closed circuit video installation to bring the raw reality of a Parisian street into an art gallery (Galerie Germain) and the aesthetic space of the gallery into the street. *Restany Dines at La Coupole* revolves around a videotape of the influential art critic Pierre Restany eating a frugal lunch of franks and beans (*cassoulet*) in the kitchen of Forest's modest suburban apartment **[Figure 22]**. The tape is then played on a monitor "seated" at a table in the posh Parisian café **[Figure 23]**, well known as an art world haunt, and conspicuously served with all the customary aplomb and courtesy by the staff of the establishment, as if it were a live client—all just a few feet from the table where the real Pierre Restany, identically clad, is dining in the midst of friends, associates, and groupies. In *Madame Soleil in the Flesh,* video is one component of the multimedia environment at the Musée Galliéra in Paris that is the setting for the daily public audience held by Madame Soleil

**[Figure 24]**, the renowned French astrologist and pop culture icon with the allure of a Parisian concierge or someone's granny. She is placed on display before a crowd that includes both bourgeois art lovers (many of whom might not take astrology seriously) and more downscale fans (many of whom might otherwise never set foot in an art gallery)—as if she is a living work of sculpture, an anthropological artifact, or a wax museum curiosity. The point of the exercise, Forest explains, is not just to expose the irrational subconscious of popular culture—and art— and the media's contribution to the cult of personality in both, but also to get the strange mix of people to interact and discover for themselves what they have in common and what they don't. *The Video Family*—an installation in a vacant apartment in Cologne in which video monitors **[Figure 25]** represent the different members of a fictional average German family (Frank and Ulla Video and their three children, Andrea, Fabian, and baby Kerstin)—is at one level a commentary on the preponderant role of television in contemporary society and domestic life, replacing traditional forms of face-to-face interaction and leisure, such as a grandparent's fireside stories about the old days, with lethargic evenings in front of the TV set. However, the installation is also the pretext for a social experiment involving the confrontation of two very different publics that were invited to visit the apartment: apartment hunters who saw an ad in the classified section of the local newspaper **[Figure 26]** and art world professionals and connoisseurs who received an elegant formal invitation to the opening of an exhibition at the same address.[38] Again, it was hoped that the people had something to learn from one another while discussing the whimsical installation pieces and swapping stories and tidbits about apartment hunting.

*Communal video projects* designed to empower specific groups of citizens represent the most pointedly "sociological" category of Forest's video corpus. The best example of this type of work is *Senior Citizen Video* (*Vidéo-troisième âge,* 1973), for which Forest and a team of researchers led by the sociologist Jean-Philippe Butaud conducted a week-long experiment at a home for retirees in the Mediterranean coastal town of Hyères (Provence).[39] The primary goal of the experiment is to help the elderly residents make their own videos about life in the home **[Figure 27]**; however, video production is just one component of a broader program of social interaction that disrupts the established patterns of daily life and imbalance of power in the home (submissive residents vs. controlling staff), and brings a touch of vitality to the drab lives of the people relegated there by a society in whose eyes they have outlived their usefulness. It is not too surprising that the films made by the retirees tend to be rather trite and that the teams of residents are never quite able to work with the video equipment in a fully independent way and therefore require a lot of hands-on direction from Forest and his collaborators; however, the nightly group discussions about the work in progress prove to be surprisingly wide-ranging, amusing, and liberating. Ultimately, it is this *prise de parole* rather than the artistic or sociological merits of the short films that gives the operation its meaning.

*Interventions on broadcast television* are the final category outlined by Schwerfel. Here, Forest can be placed in the broad current of art video of the 1960s and 1970s that cast itself as a form of anti-TV.[40] Forest's projects on broadcast television are varied and extend through the 1980s and early 1990s, when he increasingly combines television with other media in ambitious projects that offer the general public alternative interfaces for accessing and processing mainstream programing. In the more modest context of Sociological Art, some of the actions

on broadcast television take the form of utopian *actes gratuits* like Forest's *Sixty Seconds of Blank Screen* (*Soixante seconds de blanc,* 1972) on French national television's second channel—part of the *Space-Media* project that also includes the iconic *150 cm² of Newspaper* published in *Le Monde*. Others are absurd practical jokes like his *Snapshot of the Television Viewer* (*La photo du téléspectateur,* 1976), taken at the end of an interview on Belgian French-language television [Figure 28]. The most inventive are attempts to use television as a platform for more interactive and imaginative uses by the viewers than the medium normally allowed at the time. Some of these experiments also attempt to counter television's tendency to stymie active forms of community by using the medium as a pretext to bring together people with the ultimate goal of their continued interaction in the outside world. The best example of this type of action was *TV Shock / TV Exchange* (*Télé-choc, télé-change,* 1975), a series of two programs on a national channel that invited viewers to share small objects of special sentimental value. The objects are shown on TV prior to actual exchanges of objects between participating viewers. A prescient experiment in social media—indeed, Forest is essentially asking members of a networked community to post revealing artifacts of their private lives online (in public) and to "friend" one another through the network—the television programs are followed-up by several face-to-face social gatherings that bring together the participants, including a reunion at the foot of the Eiffel Tower.

**Flusser on Forest and Epistemological Mirrors**

Focusing on Forest's video experiments, which he considers a "method for moving beyond the crisis of objectivity" (401) that lies at the heart of a broader cultural crisis, Vilém

Flusser's 74-page essay "L'art sociologique et la video à travers la demarche de Fred Forest," which is included in the volume *Art sociologique: dossier Fred Forest,* is perhaps the most insightful and intellectually ambitious critical appraisal of Forest's work ever written. Flusser starts with a basic description of the methodology at work in four of Forest's actions from the early 1970s, and returns to them at the end of his essay to offer a more detailed critical analysis. He cites *Biennial of the Year 2000* as an example of the "ironic reification of a social phenomenon by another social phenomenon of the same order" (361) that temporarily removes the phenomenon under scrutiny from its present context of uncritical experience by examining it from a fictitious historical perspective. In *The Professor's Gestures,* he writes that Forest observes a social phenomenon (i.e. Professor Flusser philosophizing) while "accepting more consciously as he proceeds the fact that this act of observation changes both the phenomenon under observation and the observer" (363).

In *Senior Citizen Video,* Flusser is more interested in the complex interplay of perspectives set in motion by the project than the way in which the retirees are "altered" by the experiment in do-it-yourself documentary or "fascinated" by their alterity as it emerges before their very eyes on tape. Flusser argues that it is only normal that each party to the experiment should try to "use" the others. For instance, the professional sociologists invited to participate see Forest and his video art project as a fortuitous means to an end, which is to conduct a more serious study of a specific social environment; the retirees use the presence of the well-meaning Forest and his team as an excuse to have a little fun and thereby escape the numbing monotony that is their daily lot; Forest takes advantage of a unique opportunity to stage a "sociological" operation that could also enhance his standing as an artist in spite of his

claim to have given up art for sociological praxis; and Flusser himself, who was part of Forest's team, sees the experiment as an opportunity to observe Forest at work and critique his methodology. These different perspectives are most evident, and at odds, at the nightly group discussions, which both Flusser and Forest consider more interesting than the actual videos produced by the retirees. However, in spite of the fact that each party attempts to use the others while considering its own perspective to be that of a "metadiscourse," a collaborative ethos is sustained, resulting not only in practical cooperation; but also, according to Flusser, in a mutual relativization of discursive perspectives and a tentative "synthesis of discourses" (364-5). Since Flusser has the last, metadiscursive word as author of the essay, he faults Forest for his tendency to make himself the center of attention in flagrant violation of his stated objective of self-effacement in favor of popular feedback, which Flusser attributes to Forest's narcissistic tendency to see himself as the "Don Quixote of our society" (365).

Finally, Flusser turns to *Space Media,* which includes the "artistic" blank space in *Le Monde,* and which Flusser considers Forest's most successful experiment in Sociological Art. Flusser commends Forest for deftly avoiding the two traps that artists typically fall into when facing the question of whether or not to work with the mass media: the intoxicating aura of celebrity that sometimes comes with success at the price of an artist's critical perspective; and the social irrelevance of those who eschew the media out of principle and remain confined to the small, elite sphere of the avant-garde, art world insiders, and educated connoisseurs (366). Flusser says that Forest skillfully apples the principles of both cybernetics and game theory (367) in this project: he is an "anti-journalist" (424) who "games" the media's own "gaming" of his action. He ultimately succeeds in putting critical distance between the public and the media

and "pokes holes" in the latter that allow information to flow exceptionally in the other direction (426).

The key to all of these actions—except for the last one, which Flusser includes to make a more general point about Forest's methodology—is Forest's "manipulation" of video as an epistemological mirror in a way that is indicative of a new type of non-objective, intersubjective epistemology (409), which Flusser considers a potential remedy for the far-reaching crisis of objectivity that has beset the modern world. For Flusser, this crisis entails a double loss of faith in science's capacity to help us understand the world objectively and in humankind's ability to use that understanding to make the world we live in objectively better over time—two articles of faith (science and progress) that lie at the heart of the Enlightenment view of modernity. According to Flusser, science became "objective" only by usurping the vantage point occupied formerly by God in the middle ages and thereby assuming His objective and omniscient perspective on the world (369). However, we now readily acknowledge the demise of the modern myth of man as a quasi-transcendent "thinking subject" that scans the surface of the world from the objective vantage point of mathematical and scientific reason and dispassionately and reliably interprets the empirical data taken in by its detached, probing and imperial gaze (370). Flusser maintains that the discrediting of this modern myth does not necessarily have to lead us to nihilism because we humans still possess the ability to "step back" and create an artificial distance between us and the world—a tactical, critical distancing that can be the source of relevant observations that we can in turn use to effectively act in and on our world. However, Flusser warns that we must come to terms with the fact that tactically stepping back in this way leaves us still immersed in the world and that the critical perspectives

that open up as a result of such tactical retreats are therefore immanent to the world; which means that their truth value is relative rather than objective and that none may truly claim to be *inherently* better than any other (370-1). There is no supremely objective standpoint from which can we judge whether one mode of knowledge is better than another. Hence, nihilism can be avoided but "existential doubt shall become a basic living condition of the future" (372). Two corollaries of this realization are that the western ideal of objectively "pure investigation" (i.e., unaffected by the subjective position of the investigator) is nonsense and that the rigid separation of the disciplines between those that are objective (like sociology) and those that are subjective (like art) ought to be loosened.

Flusser argues that to get over the debilitating anxiety caused by the pervasive doubt and increased subjectivity that characterize the postmodern world view, we need to embrace non-objectivity as "the process by which mankind long, alienated from reality by a series of ideologies of which science [i.e. positivism] was the latest in a long line, can reconnect with concrete things" (373). We also need to realize that "one must simply create distance between oneself and the world by means of artifice."[41] In support of this notion, he reminds us that the tools (or interfaces) we formerly thought of as instruments of objective empirical inquiry (such as microscopes) themselves rely on artifices or optical illusions that get us to look at the world from different and unusual perspectives (379).

Flusser makes the mirror the paradigm of the new non-objective epistemology because it is a device that introduces an artificial distance between us and the world whereby a different perspective of our situation in the world—one in which we are included—opens up to us (379).

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For Flusser, video represents a new type of mirror device that is particularly valuable from an epistemological standpoint. Flusser is careful to point out that his theory of mirrors differs from classic specular theories of knowledge in two major respects. In the first place, there is no one "true" mirror of the world such as the divine mind or science. In the second place, the epistemological benefit that we can be derived from mirrors depends directly on our creative ability to "manipulate" them, in particular, by deliberately setting them up so that they "mirror each other opening up recesses within recesses in [a process of] infinite regression" (380). The following passage from Flusser's essay on Forest offers a fuller characterization of his notion of non-objective, specular epistemology:

> The epistemology to which I am referring posits that "knowing" proceeds from one's having brought about a vision in a mirror wherein one sees the subject and the object suddenly appear together. This theory of knowledge is not the result of a speculative method or an operation performed on the object one seeks to know, but instead involves the revelation of a concrete relationship between an object and a subject in a mirror that has been manipulated on the spot. Furthermore, according to this theory, "knowing" becomes a process that takes place simultaneously on multiple levels in the abyss [of infinite regression] created by the play of mirrors reflecting one another. We know, and we know that we know, etc., ad infinitum. This abyss is of course the place left vacant by the death of God. It is a methodologically useful place. One can always step back a little further into the abyss by using mirrors that are still more refined. This is an entirely new concept of the progress of knowledge… To live according this theory in the fullest sense is to dive into the mystery … of "homo absconditus" by means of the manipulation of mirrors. This in turn means that it makes no sense to insist on making a distinction between what is "mirrored" and what "mirrors," between "reality" and "fiction." Just as there is no "supreme

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mirror" to mirror all of the other mirrors, neither is there a reality that is not mirrored. Everything that is mirrored in a mirror constitutes a mirror in its own right, which mirrors another mirror. The abyss of mirrored mirrors opens up in every direction (381-2).

Flusser concludes this part of his essay with a formula that applies to Forest's media experiments well beyond the Sociological Art years: "Reality is the place where I find myself thanks to my manipulation of mirrors" (382).

Flusser goes on to describe two epistemological tricks at the heart of Forest's artistic practice, both of which involve the manipulation of mirrors. The first is the foundational trick of "Sociological Art" itself, which (as we have already seen from Flusser) involves a cunning methodological and epistemological mirroring of sociology in art and art in sociology. The second relates to video's inherently intersubjective mode of temporality. In order to help us understand what is happening in Forest's video works, Flusser compares video temporality to cinema temporality. Flusser reminds us that video is a form of memory on tape and that it has three dimensions: the two dimensions of the flat surfaces of the both the monitor and the tape and the third dimension of linear time. This much is true of cinema, too; however, whereas the temporality of film is essentially an optical illusion, video is inherently temporal: "Video is a mirror that moves in linear time. In other words, the temporal dimension of film results from the rapid projection of a linear series of flat surfaces (an 'illusion'), whereas the temporal dimension of video mirrors the temporality of the scene itself" (404). Because of this, Flusser affirms that film can be 'edited' whereas video cannot" (405). What he means by this paradoxical remark is that that the filmmaker's art is largely an art of editing. He or she

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interacts with the actors performing various scenes, the cameramen shooting the scenes, etc., but this interaction takes place off camera and therefore does not impact on the scene being shot in real time. The filmmaker stops the action, discusses what he or she wants, and goes to another take. The final work is put together in the editing process. The videographer on the other hand, especially one working with a Portapak and attuned to inherent properties of the medium like Forest, has a different sort of interaction with his or her subjects in real time. In the first place, when there is a monitor present, both the subjects being filmed and the videographer can observe the scene as it unfolds as if they were simultaneously inside and outside the scene. Those being videotaped are not merely objects of the videographer's aesthetic and critical gaze but possess the same aesthetic and critical gaze themselves through the feedback provided in real time by the monitor (a mirror just like another mirror, in which they can see themselves) and their ability to observe the movements of the videographer as he or she works; and they may use the information gleaned from this dual monitoring to influence—again in real time—both the scene and its presumptive author. Videographer and subjects become more like partners in the manipulation of the video mirrors. The monitor is clearly a mirror, but so is the videotape—a mirror not only of the scene being filmed but also indirectly of the monitor's mirroring of the scene as being filmed: a mirror in a mirror (405). The fact that videographers can and often do work more like cinematic filmmakers—stopping action to confer with subjects or crew members, carefully editing footage to make up the final product, etc.—and the standard practice of using video on the sets of cinematic film shoots— for real-time monitoring and more rapid review than one has with daily rushes—only serve to further underscore the fundamental difference between the two media.

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Flusser summarizes the epistemological properties of video in the following terms:

> Video is an intersubjective epistemological instrument. In other words, it is an instrument with which I can view reality [collectively] with the others who find themselves with me in the same situation. In fact, the very way that video functions, its magnetoscopic vision, compels intersubjectivity. The others who are with me in a given social context use video to view reality and themselves in it just like I do. This is what makes video a preferred instrument for a post-objective sociology (411).

According to Flusser, what specifically sets Forest apart from many of the other artists experimenting with video at the same time—who sometimes insist on framing it as an expanded form of painting, performance, television, cinema, or photography—is that he is fully conscious of its "epistemological dimension" (407) and "perhaps he alone has grasped the true function of video ... [as] an instrument for research in social reality" (410). While Flusser gives Forest credit for devising other types of intersubjective epistemological mirrors, such as the socio-critical blank spaces he inserts in the press and electronic mass media, he goes on to complain that Forest too often gets in the way of intersubjective ethos of his own projects (i.e. he likes to look at himself in the mirrors he employs), making them more *subjective* than intersubjective, and more *artistic* than sociological. This criticism notwithstanding, Flusser's long article is nonetheless quite a strong endorsement of Forest's approach.

Aside from the specific examples Flusser considers in his essay, the mirror paradigm he discerns in Forest's non-objective, epistemological use of video is omnipresent in his work throughout the Sociological Art period and beyond. Other noteworthy examples include *The Hairdresser's Gestures, Electronic Investigation of Rue Guénégaud, Video Portrait of the*

*Collector in Real Time, Biennial of the Year 2000,* and *Restany Dines at La Coupole.* However, mirror effects are also to be found in works where the use of video is secondary to so "social sculptural" elements such as *Madame Soleil* and *Video Family,* in which different publics mirror each other; and in a particularly intricate way in *The Artistic Square Meter,* which makes hardly any use of video except for archival purposed. In this last example, the fields of art, real estate, and journalism mirror (i.e., both reflect and refract) each other and conjointly subject the value-producing function of publicity common to them all to a critical *mise-en-abîme* ... with a little additional help provided by the legal system.

### Electronic Investigation of Rue Guénégaud

Mentioned in passing but not analyzed by Flusser in his essay (although he was a key participant in the project), was perhaps the ultimate example of the sociological-epitemological use of video in Forest's *œuvre: Archaeology of the Present: Electronic Investigation of Rue Guénégaud,* from 1973.[42] The project's basic premise is to bring the space of Rue Guénégaud into an art gallery (Galerie Germain) and the space of the gallery into the street via real-time closed circuit video. Both spaces are subjected to sociological (and aesthetic) defamiliarization and shifting critical perspectives that produce strange feedback-like effects—the street becoming an aesthetic *objet trouvé* and a specimen for sociological analysis in the gallery; and the effete world of the gallery becoming just another cultural byproduct (or just more visual clutter) in the democratic public space of the street in a postindustrial metropolis. Live video of the street is brought into the gallery via an outside façade-mounted camera that must have looked like video surveillance equipment to the average passerby. In the gallery, the street

video appears in two places: on a bank of monitors with no commentary, where one can presume that it was taken by visitors at face value as raw here-and-now reality; and projected, nearly life-size, onto a large screen placed flush against one of the walls of the gallery, where it is discursively framed by a caption: "In this era, Rue Guénégaud was..." **[Figure 29]**. The goal is to get people to look at the present as if it were the past, to elicit a different sort of critical perspective by introducing an artificial distance in historical time. This ruse must have been a little perplexing given the fact that the exact temporal provenance of the video is left somewhat unclear although it certainly did not from some bygone era, as the ironic caption seems to suggest. Other cues from the setup strongly suggest a live feed. For instance, the caption below the big screen further indicates that the video document on display comes from May 1973, the time of the exhibit. And next to the big screen there is an electric clock-calendar framed by a caption that reads "On the screen, Rue Guénégaud at ...," which is being filmed in real time via a separate video closed circuit. However, one could easily overlook the clock in spite of the fact that it was essentially part of the big screen installation. To make matters more complicated, the live video footage of the clock and accompanying caption was displayed only on a small monitor in the gallery's picture window, viewable only from the street, placed in juxtaposition to an identical monitor offering a panoramic view of the gallery interior and not the street outside. The video footage of the street displayed on the big screen inside the gallery could just as easily been shot hours, days, or even years earlier. Here Forest is toying with the skepticism towards modern media that is a conditioned response of the jaded inhabitants of the society of the spectacle. The setup itself doesn't make it possible for one to see oneself in the street on the screen in the gallery because one has to leave the street and

cross the threshold of the gallery to see what is on the screen, and by the time one can do so the street outside is already another world (filled with strangers) than the one that one was just seconds before. Again, close scrutiny of the monitors in the display window cannot help one solve the mystery conclusively since the footage of the clock displayed on one monitor is ambiguous in its own right, the footage of the gallery interior displayed on the other monitor does cover the big screen display but so reduced to a size that it is difficult to make out the details, and one has to step out of the field of the exterior façade-mounted surveillance camera in order to come in close enough to see what is displayed on the monitors in the picture window at all. One would have to conduct one's own experiment—i.e., engage in the manipulation of mirrors—with the help of a willing accomplice (for example, by sending a friend outside to jump up and down in front of the camera while one stays posted in front of the big screen) in order to independently verify the video's live status. This is classic Forest: always keep the public guessing. Moreover, the trick caption below the big screen is also intended as a critique of how museums function as sites of memory (another focus of Forest's work over decades) by incorporating material into the cultural canon of the community and conserving what is significant in its past, a cultural enterprise fraught political, social, and economic complications that tends to become even more problematic when contemporary art is the object since this often entails the immediate present's instant transformation into "history."

The archaeological-sociological (i.e., social science fiction) perspective is represented symbolically by artifacts from the street displayed in a large trash bin inside the gallery and is further emphasized by audio recordings of observations and critical commentary from the field (the street) from a panel of intellectuals (Vilém Flusser, Edgar Morin, René Berger, and Pierre

Restany), played continuously inside the gallery via loudspeaker.  One's actual physical presence at Galerie Germain in Rue Guénégaud at specific time on a particular day during the exhibition of Forest's project could be validated for all of posterity by having a personal time card stamped by the sort of device that shift workers use to clock in at their place of employment.  As mentioned, the gallery interior's projected presence in the street is made possible by a third closed circuit video installation producing live footage that could be viewed on a monitor in the gallery's display window.  The ambiguity of this "object" was not just temporal, but ontological.  Is it art, a cultural artifact, video surveillance, a publicity stunt, or something else altogether? The answer depends on the perspective of person looking at it:  the curious *flâneur,* the contemporary art aficionado or insider attending the gallery opening, the distracted pedestrian on an errand, the skeptical or enthralled critic, one of Forest's guest commentators (Flusser and company), etc.

Perhaps the best way to grasp the complex mirroring/mirrored *mise-en-abîme* structure of the project would be to try to imagine the proliferating, layered, and conflicting perspectives of a hypothetical pedestrian making his or her way up Rue Guénégaud towards the gallery [Figure 30].  To begin with, you are just an average person innocently walking down this particular Parisian street:  a subject taking in the street scene in general and observing the other people who happen to enter your field of vision, as well as an object of the gaze (disinterested or probing) of others in the street.  It is easy imagine how your perspective might be affected by the gaze of others.  Perhaps you momentarily try to look at yourself the way you imagine that the others are looking at you.  Perhaps you even adjust your bearing in an attempt to appear more dignified, nonchalant, or alluring—playing one of the many roles you lapse into

when out in public.  The others do the same, and we already have an interesting play of mirror images.  This is something that each of us does on a daily basis whether we find ourselves on a street in Tokyo, Toulouse, or Toledo.  Your perspective might well to change somewhat as you approach the gallery.  Perhaps you notice the elevated video camera taking in the street scene: you are being watched in more purposeful way but you don't necessarily know why or by whom (the Paris police, a voyeur, Big Brother?).  Your self-consciousness naturally intensifies a little.  Perhaps you scrutinize your appearance and behavior, looking for signs that could be misconstrued as suspicious.  A few steps more and you might notice some commotion near the gallery's entrance.  Perhaps you even notices one bearded man (Forest) filming another bearded man (Flusser) speaking into a small microphone.  Now you are the witness to an event of some sort.  If you don't cross over to the other side of the street, you will maybe even be subjected to a person-in-the-street interview, to be seen later by thousands on television!

You eventually arrive outside the gallery and there you see the monitors in the window.  You might notice right away that one of them is showing the inside of the gallery, where a street scene is being projected onto a large screen.  The street scene you happens to be a part of? Probably.  You begin to feel the effects of a *mise-en-abîme* and take a moment to ponder it.  If you want to understand what you are seeing more clearly, you can take your eyes off the monitor and gaze directly through the window, or better still, go inside to see for yourself what is going on.  So, you cross the threshold.  You might not be consciously aware of it (yet), but you are "liminally" crossing over into an alternative sphere of reality—an odd sort of utopia, a place that is neither here nor there, inside or outside, of the concrete realm of the city street or the ethereal realm of the artist's imagination.  Just as you cross the threshold, you seem to be able

to take all of it in simultaneously:  the street over your shoulder, the window display and monitor with its video of the gallery interior in your peripheral vision, and the actual gallery interior with its large-scale projection of the street scene; however, it is likely that you do not yet fully comprehend exactly how all the pieces of this strange puzzle fit together.  Next, as a new arrival in the gallery you momentarily revert back to the elementary duality of being both an observing subject and an observed object, except that this is a pseudo-sacred space, an ART gallery, a place where you are expected to have special visions (of Beauty?), or at least contemplate others' special visions; and the other people one observes and who probably look back as you step in through the doorway are presumably "art types." If you know even a little about contemporary art you probably realize rather that you are not just viewing art but taking part in it, and was already doing so (as a performer or a raw material?) without your explicit knowledge or consent when you were still in the street minding your own business—a realization that is likely to further affect your self-awareness, bearing, and behavior.

If Forest has gotten his stagecraft right, your gaze should automatically be drawn to the both large-scale video projection on the screen against the gallery's back wall and its enigmatic caption.  Have you traveled back in time? Are you witnessing the past or the present?  If it's the latter then wouldn't your own image have been up on the screen at some point, perhaps just seconds before your arrival—to be ignored, scrutinized, or ridiculed by the others present in the gallery just as you might be ignoring, scrutinizing, or silently ridiculing the people you now see up on the screen?  The exact temporal relationship between the screen and the street is little hard to work out.  The caption using the imperfect tense seems to suggest that you are seeing something ancient but there is little to differentiate between what you are seeing up on

the screen and what is presently happening out in the street.  It looks and feels contemporary, even immediate (the nearby clock displaying the time and date, which you just now notice, clearly suggests the latter); however, the footage could have been shot at any recent moment in time.  After all, the news segments you watch on T.V. every night at dinnertime often use file footage to "illustrate" what is "currently" happening in the world.  Slowly, the hypothetical past dissolves into an eternal present ... until you start focusing on yourself again.  Have you already made your appearance on the big screen?  If so, is your recent past now doubly, irretrievably past?  Could your appearance be repeated at some time in the future if the tape is replayed at some point?  If this is a possibility then your image has been given new life, new promise, and new uncertainty; perhaps even an aura of micro-celebrity.  Could this be part of your 15-minute allotment of fame, or perhaps something more enduring?  Someday in future (after you're dead and gone?) people visiting the Louvre will be wondering about the enigmatic woman with the cough or the pompous man who stops to adjust his tie just as Amélie Poulain's neighbor wondered about the young woman with the glass in Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881).  Then again, perhaps the camera didn't even capture your image out in the street.  Then it is as if you have come and gone, lived and died, completely unnoticed without having left behind the slightest trace—even though you're here now, looking at this screen in this gallery, like a ghost who has come back to haunt Rue Guénégaud, or a soul in limbo (a negative utopia), outside of the human parameters of time and space.

After contemplating the past/present street scene for a while and perhaps beginning to examine your own existence from the same artificially historical perspective (the perspective of your mortality?), you visit the rest of the exhibition.  Your perspective changes the more you

understand the setup. You confront your opinion of the project with both the artist's "official" perspective, which is not explicitly spelled out but is hard to miss; and the opinions of others present (both laymen and experts), which you glean from the questions, conversations, and commentaries that fill the gallery with the sound of their chatter. If Forest has succeeded, you should begin to assume the perspective of the sociologist critically examining the sociological reality condensed in Rue Guénégaud on this particular occasion, and perhaps also that of the art critic pondering the aesthetic reality embodied in this particular work by Forest. What kind of society produces art like this? What can art tell us about this kind of sociological reality? Are you dealing with the same sociological reality in Rue Guénégaud as in your own street, or this same street twenty years ago, or an analogous street in Stockholm, Sydney, or San Francisco? First, you are just an innocent pedestrian; then, an intrigued (or perplexed) spectator; after that, ideally, a more active and more self-aware participant; and perhaps ultimately both a sociologist and a critic. There is a lot to think about; however, you have to get going. Right before leaving, you are given the opportunity to make your presence here official. You have your time card stamped—the fragment of a artwork that you have produced with the help of a simple machine and can take home with you. Then, you cross the threshold again, perhaps more aware of the liminal nature of the gesture the second time. You leave Galerie Germain behind and head back into the outside world of the street, perhaps not quite sure whether you are stepping into the past, present, or future. Your everyday dual status as both an observing subject and an observed object is somewhat skewed (at least momentarily) by the multiple mirroring/mirrored perspectives of something soon to be called "Sociological Art." You look at everything and everyone, yourself included, a little differently. You comes upon a street sign

indicating "Rue Guénégaud" and recalling Heraclitus' famous aphorism you conclude that one never steps into the same street twice.

**The Legacy of Sociological Art**

Sociological Art was the source of a number of elements that were to become enduring features of Forest's artistic practice. One is his quasi-scientific approach to art. Art is construed as a research enterprise tasked to help people understand, respond to, and ultimately reshape the social environment and media landscape in which they live; and individual projects are set up as experiments in the field designed to test certain hypotheses concerning contemporary society and to offer working prototypes of alternative modes of social interaction. Most of these experiments begin by disrupting usual patterns of perception—something achieved through a variety means including provocative public interventions that present average people with unorthodox combinations of familiar cultural structures; the deviation of media from their normal modes of operation through the insertion of "parasitical" bits of information (or non-information) in the established mass media or the operation of his own parallel circuits of communication; and the creation of mirror-like feedback effects that make people confront their own image and socially conditioned ways of seeing.

Another legacy of Sociological Art is Forest's rejection of object-based plastic art in favor of communicational events that are "plugged directly into" the everyday social environment. Following this principle, Forest strives to bypass the traditional venues of the art world whenever possible, and when this is neither practical nor desirable in the context of a specific project, he "pokes holes" in these venues, too, so that the messy and complex reality of the

outside world can filter in. Furthermore, Forest saw his sociological artworks as immaterial entities consisting entirely of the relational dynamic and intersubjective knowledge that emerged out of public participation in the events media interventions he orchestrated. This was over 20 years before Nicolas Bourriaud popularized the idea of "relational aesthetics" as practiced by artists like Vanessa Beecroft, Henry Bond, Angela Bulloch, Liam Gillick, Douglas Gordon, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, Jorge Pardo, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Gillian Wearing.[43] Although the special "sociological" interfaces Forest sets up might be located in a gallery or give rise to documentary byproducts that are later placed on display in one, the work itself does not *reside in a fixed representation of reality* in the form of *an aesthetic object* (or anti-object) to be *contemplated* by the public; it generally *presents itself as an immaterial aesthetic dynamic of (sociological) reality* set in motion by the public's *direct interaction* with (and through) *information in flux.* Put more simply, Forest's practice entails a triple shift from an aesthetics of representation, objects, and contemplation to an aesthetics presentation, information, and interaction. Forest sums up the relational aesthetic inherent in Sociological Art in the following passage dating from 1977:

> Breaking with most of the movements that preceded it ... [Sociological Art's] goal is not the production of images, or textual imagery, *but the establishment of systems of relations. Systems of relations that consist in experimenting with utopian models ... superimposed on concrete social situations.* It is society itself in the form of everyday life that constitutes its research laboratory, its preferred field of investigation. Hence, the "works" created do not involve concrete "art" objects, but emergent inter-relational processes.[44]

A related idea, also developed in the context of Sociological Art, is that the artist is much more a service provider than a content provider. Forest operates under a moral imperative to

turn over as much control as possible to the public. The artist develops the project concept, oversees the design and implementation of the interface, and serves as the facilitator if not the host of the event, but the participating members of the public are responsible for actually *making* the work ... or make it *work.* There is nonetheless true artistry in the creation of a project's media interface or social infrastructure, particularly when one considers that Forest has had very little support from the either the art market or the French government's cultural bureaucracy and has been forced (or has chosen) to adopt a "do-it-yourself" approach to putting together the different components his exercises in communication require—a fact recognized early in his career by perceptive commentators like Flusser, Abraham Moles and Derrick de Kerckhove.[45] Indeed, the Herculean behind-the-scenes campaigns Forest has had to undertake in order to carry out some of his bigger projects—e.g. obtaining free access to the mass media, persuading potential allies to join forces with him, overcoming official resistance, and meeting other logistical and technical needs with little or no outside funding—are themselves masterpieces in relational aesthetics. It is in this need/compulsion to do things himself with limited resources that we see that Flusser missed the point somewhat when he berated Forest for not getting out of the way more. The artist's charismatic persona as the charming rogue can be an important component not just of the event itself, where does run the risk of standing in the way of the full empowerment and intersubjective action of the participants, but also in the behind-the-scenes efforts to pull it off in the first place. In this latter context, his persona is a form of personal and cultural capital that he may invest in the preparatory stages of a project in lieu of money.

Finally, Forest's experiments in Sociological Art also lead to a more acute awareness of space as something that is socially constructed. This awareness owed something to his familiarity with Michel de Certeau's early writing on the subject and perhaps even more to the work of Henri Lefèbvre—in particular, his magnum opus, *The Production of Space* (1ˢᵗ French ed. 1971). In this work, Lefèbvre outlined how the spaces of late capitalist societies were the result of the complex interaction between everyday uses and perceptions (*le perçu*); specific spatial theories, representations, and designs (*le conçu*); and the evolving collective imaginary (*le vécu*).[46] One result of Forest's exposure to these intellectual influences and his efforts to apply them in his work was that the concept of utopia for him no longer implied just a figure of speech or an idealistic ethos. He came to see the artist's mission as to create what he was later to call "realistic utopias"—real functioning spaces that result from alternative forms of social production and temporarily alter the prevailing equation of *perçu, conçu,* and *vécu* in current normative social constructions of space. As a result of this new way of thinking of space sociologically, three related utopian constructs were to become trademarks of Forest's work for the rest of his career: parasitical *blank spaces* introduced into the media landscape, *artistic square meters,* and the concept of *immaterial territoriality.*

**Figure 1:** Postcard of Mascara, Algeria.
[Source: Joseph Nakam contribution to the website *Mascara Algérie de ma jeunesse,* <http://www.p-rubira.com>.]



**Figure 2:** Fred Forest at age 15 in 8ᵗʰ grade class picture, Mascara (1949).
[Source: *Fred Forest, l'homme-media no. 1,* exhibition catalog]

**Figure 3:** Contributions to Forest's *Family Portrait* project (1967).
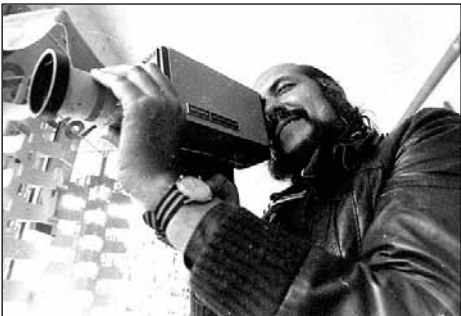[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 4:** Forest with his Sony Portapak (c. 1967).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 5:** Stills from *The Telephone Both* (1967).
[Source: INA video archives]

**Figure 6:** Still from *The Wall of Arles* (1967).
[Source: INA video archives]



**Figure 7:** Forest's multimedia installation, *Interrogation 69*, Tours (1969).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 8:** Untitled "screen painting" (1969)
[Source: *Photographie nouvelle*, no. 50, 1971]



**Figure 9:** From left to right, Patrick Bernard, Luc Ferrari, and Forest at the *Salon nouveau langage*, Paris (1971).
The abstract paintings by Forest in background were used for "screen paintings" projections.
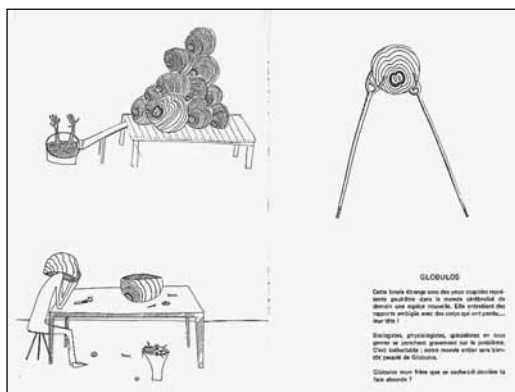[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 10:** Examples of Forest's Globulus drawings from brochure *Du graphisme à l'audovisuel* (1971).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 11:** The members of the Collectif d'Art Sociologique – Hervé Fischer (left), Jean-Paul Thenot (center left),
and Fred Forest (right) – confer with Joseph Beuys (center right) at the Venice Biennale (1976).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 12:** Hervé Fischer, *Hygiene of Painting* (1975).
[Source: *Collectif Art Sociologique: théorie, pratique, critique,* exhibition catalog]



**Figure 13:** Hervé Fischer, *Torn Up Art Works* (1971-74).
[Source: *Kunstforum International,* Vol. 27, No. 3, 1978]

**Figure 14:** Hervé Fischer, *Fischer Pharmacy*, prescription (1975).
[Source: *Collectif Art Sociologique: théorie, pratique,* critique exhibition catalog]



**Figure 15:** Hervé Fischer, *Fischer Pharmacy*, display of pills (1975).
[Source: *Collectif Art Sociologique: théorie, pratique, critique,* exhibition catalog]

**Figure 16:** Jean-Paul Thenot, *Survey,* opinions about wood as a material (1974).
[Source: *Kunstforum International,* Vol. 27, No. 3, 1978]



**Figure 17:** Jean-Paul Thenot, *Attestation of Existence* (1970).
[Source: *Kunstforum International,* Vol. 27, No. 3, 1978]

**Figure 18:** Vilém Flusser holding up a mirror in *The Professor's Gestures* (1974).
[Source: INA video archives]



**Figure 19:** Forest filming the hairdresser at work through the shop mirror in *The Hairdresser's Gestures* (1974).
[Source: INA video archives]

**Figure 20:** Stills from *Video Portrait of a Collector in Real Time* (1974).
[Source: INA video archives]



**Figure 21:** Scenes from *Biennial of the Year 2000,* Sao Paulo (1975).
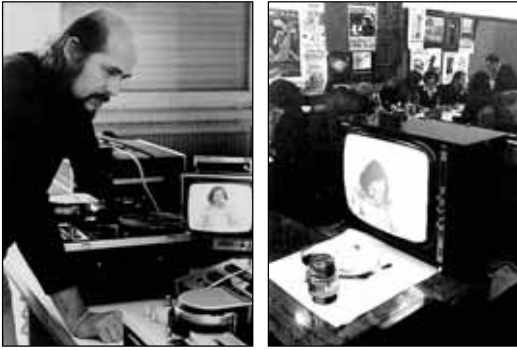[Source: INA video archives]

**Figure 22 (left):** Fred Forest editing video for *Restany Dines at La Coupole* (1974).
**Figure 23 (right):** Scene from the live action *Restany Dines at La Coupole* (1974).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 24:** Scene from the live action *Madame Soleil Exhibited in the Flesh* (1975).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 25:** Television set representing the son in *The Video Family* (1976).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 26:** Classified ad in the rentals section for *The Video Family* (1976).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 27:** Participants in *Senior Citizen Video,* Font-des-Horts retirement home, Hyères, France (1973).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 28:** Still from *Snapshot of the Television Viewer,* live broadcast on Belgian television (1976).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

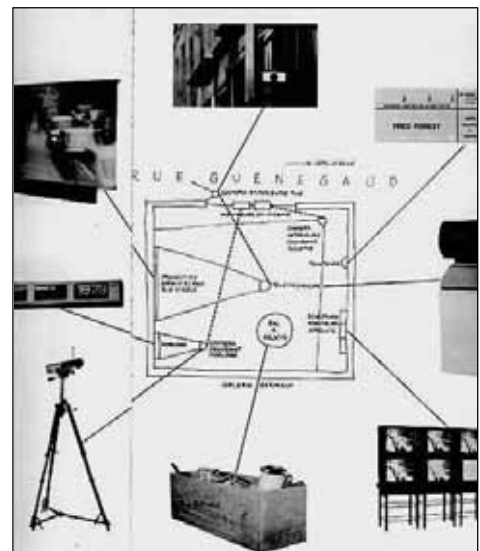**Figure 29:** Diagram of the installation created for *Electronic Investigation of Rue Guénégaud* (1973).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 30:** Stills from a television documentary on Forest's *Electronic Investigation of Rue Guénégaud* (1973). [Source: INA video archives]

## Chapter Two

## *The Aesthetics of Communication*

While many of the approaches and preoccupations of Sociological Art were to remain permanent fixtures of Forest's work, some important changes in his outlook nevertheless occurred in the 1980s. In the first place, he had become more aware of the limitations of the May 68-inspired rhetoric that informed both the theoretical declarations of the Collectif d'Art Sociologique and many of its projects. One might say that Forest came to the realization that Sociological Art was in reality art operating in the guise of sociological praxis and not the other way around. Furthermore, after a period of stasis and internal disagreements over both theory and practice, the Collective formally disbanded in 1981. These clashes often pitted Forest, who was always more interested in making art (and, perhaps, also a name for himself), against the more theoretically inclined Fischer, who took Sociological Art's analytical and scientific vocation more literally. In his newer projects, Forest was already placing greater emphasis on symbolism, simulation, and the sensory – the traditional stuff of art – while still maintaining his commitment to social relevance. However, he also started to shift his attention somewhat from the sociological and ideological limitations of non-interactive mass media like print and TV to the intriguing environmental and experiential properties, or "immanent realities," of telecommunications systems that were inherently interactive by nature, whether such

interactivity was already a commonplace practical reality (e.g. telephones) or something still more esoteric for the general public at the time (e.g. computers and telematics).

The shift is signaled clearly in a solo manifesto Forest published in *Le Monde* in 1980 entitled "Art sociologique (Acte II)" **[Figure 1]**. He begins by reminding his readers of some of the basic principles of Sociological Art, to which he still professes allegiance: "*Sociological Art takes sociological facts provided by its environment as its raw material. It acts on these facts using a multimedia approach. It reveals societal traits by means of a critical and interrogative methodology.*" He introduces the next section of the manifesto by declaring in boldface "TODAY, SOCIOLOGICAL ART ENTERS THE SECOND PHASE OF ITS DEVELOPMENT," and then goes on to explain: "Henceforth, it shall prioritize its symbolic function in society in the area of representations of the present age (the use of simulacra and critical distancing); in contrast to its first iteration, which was exaggeratedly scientisitc, it is now shifting towards greater sensuality of experience, playful exaltation, and the qualitative nature of human communication." He then explains the three principles that will guide the new orientation of Sociological Art in a manner that quite closely characterizes his own personal work for the past decade: RELATION (an application of systems theory, interdisciplinarity, the work of art as an open system characterized by unpredictability, the interactive participation of the public, meaning derived from context, the artist as service provider), ORGANIZATION (creation of specially designed operational platforms of communication, situation in the everyday environment, primacy of action over aesthetic objects and scripted performance), and INFORMATION (impact of new technologies, art for the information age, modes of transmission and reception, and interference with messages ). The Manifesto concludes with the

declaration: "Sociological Art is an art of information."[1] Forest is not only asserting his artistic independence here; he is also translating the influence that Abraham Moles has had on him. One of the first thinkers to apply information theory and cybernetics to aesthetics, Moles compared artists to programmers, argued that a work's value derived not from its truth content but from its machine-like operational consistency and ability to generate great complexity with an economy of means, and outlined the dawning "age of telepresence" in which distance is becoming irrelevant as an organizing principle of social life.[2]

### From Sociological Art to the Aesthetics of Communications

Before he began experimenting with telecommunications systems, however, he first tried his hand at more playful forms of "intimate bureaucracy" (Saper). One such project was *The Territory of the Square Meter* (*Le Territoire du M²*, starting in 1980), which involved setting up a self-proclaimed independent state based on the artistic square meter paradigm on the premises of his weekend home in the town of Anserville (Oise Department), near Paris. Forest converted much of the living quarters, a dependency on the grounds of a subdivided 18th-century estate, into a seat of government complete a crisis management center (with a red-colored hotline telephone), a room for state receptions, and other typical official-looking facilities **[Figures 2 – 3]**; and invited members of the public to become citizens of the Territory by purchasing a subscription to a specific square meter section of the grounds **[Figures 4 – 7]**, which entitled them to visit the Territory **[Figure 8]**, participate in mock public works projects, and receive special communiqués from the Artist-President-for-Life.[3]

Another example is *The Stock Exchange of the Imaginary* (*La bourse de l'imaginaire*, 1982), which involved the compilation and valuation of both real and concocted news items submitted by the public. Each day, the items were "publicly traded" at an exchange based at the Centre Pompidou – an interactive event space that also served as the nerve center of an ad hoc multimedia network. The site had as much the feel of newsroom or a wire service headquarters as a trading floor: in addition to the big trading board on which the values of the news offerings were indexed daily [Figure 9], there were phone lines, answering machines, telex terminals, video monitors, Télétel[4] terminals, and an editorial staff on duty to process and display the incoming dispatches [Figure 10]. At the end of each day of trading, visitors were polled to determine the most popular news item of the day and the relative value of all of the items listed on the board were indexed according to the resulting ranking. More successful than the Territory due to its high-profile location, its organization as a special event of limited duration, and the publicity and support it received from both the Centre Pompidou (grudging, according to Forest) and partners in the media, the Exchange represented an insightful reflection on the status of the news as a marketable commodity produced in response to public demand—i.e., a societal horizon of expectations that marketplace forces play a role in shaping. It was also as an interesting exercise in community-building based on the sharing of stories that often evoked unexpected eruptions of the bizarre, the funny, the serendipitous, the horrific, the sordid, or the tragic in everyday life—the raw material of the everyday collective imaginary.[5] Appropriately, the project focused on news items included in the general category of *le fait divers.* This term has no exact translation in American English ("miscellaneous news" would be a functional equivalent) but refers to the section of a French newspaper, or broadcast

segment, where one typically finds both police blotter-type reports (especially crimes of passion and more sensational acts of violence), news of the weird, and stories highlighting human foibles. This section continues to be among the most popular among readers of the local press in France. There were indeed plenty of typical items of this sort contributed to the Exchange by members of the public; however, much to the delight of Forest, many of the contributions proved to be exercises in creative writing that parodied the genre using dark humor, word play, or homespun wit. For example, one contributor poked fun at the French summer vacation rituals by writing: "The serial killer of the Oise [Department] has asked us to inform you that he will be replaced by the serial killer of the Ain during his annual summer vacation between June 15 and July 12. Furthermore, the serial killer on call this weekend will be serial killer from Seine-Saint-Denis."[6] This is exactly how one of Forest's interactive platforms is supposed to work: the titular artist creates an open system but the art actually arises from the creativity of its users.

In 1983, following up on their initial meeting at the Artmedia conference in Italy, for which Forest had been invited to create a work involving broadcast television (*Here and Now*), Forest and Mario Costa, a professor of aesthetics at the University of Salerno, formed the Groupe International de l'Esthétique de la Communication to promote artistic research into the sensory, cognitive, psychological, aesthetic, existential, and anthropological properties of telecommunications media.[7] They were later joined by the media theorist Derrick de Kerckhove, Marshall McLuhan's former assistant and the newly named director of the Marshall McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto.[8] Compared to the Sociological Art Collective, which had a mock institutional structure, a common core of

theoretical and operational principles, and an emphasis on collective action, the Group was a very loose association of artists and theorists with a shared interest in telecommunications and telematics.[9] While the Group's members collaborated on art projects, exhibitions, conferences, and publications, each affiliated artist maintained a distinct artistic identity in terms of both the themes they explored and how they used media and technology. While the core group of artists were mostly French (Jean-Claude Anglade, Stéphan Barron, Marc Denjean, Jean-Pierre Giovanelli, Forest, Philippe Hélary, Jean-Marc Philippe, Christian Sevette), a wide array of artists, including some of the biggest international names in telecommunication art, maintained ties with the Group and occasionally collaborated on projects with core members. The list includes Robert Adrian, Peter d'Agostino, Roy Ascott, Roberto Barbanti, Giovanna Colacevich, Daniel Dewaele, Eric Gidney, Natan Karczmar, Tom Klinkowstein, Piotr Kowalski, Mit Mitopoulos, Antoni Muntadas, Pietro Grossi, David Rokeby, Tom Sherman, Norman White, Horacio Zabala, and Wolfgang Ziemer-Chrobatzek.[10]

The Aesthetics of Communication Group saw itself as filling a void in contemporary art. While many contemporary artists were keenly interested in the mass media and had come to see the concepts of communication and information as central to how both modern society and art functioned in general – indeed, these dispositions were a large part of what defined contemporary art – their focus had been primarily on the social and cultural ramifications of the mass media (especially television) and on the countercultural and formal expressive potential of new electronic media like video (i.e. video art as the social and aesthetic antithesis of commercial and state-run television). For instance, this was essentially the perspective of the Sociological Art Collective in the 1970s. Yet television was just one aspect of a broader

telecommunications revolution which encompassed a wide array of technologies including telephones, computers, and satellites – now networked and operating together in various configurations – and which was changing not just how people got their information and functioned socially and politically, but also their most intimate experience of reality. The Aesthetics of Communication Group sought to be at the forefront of a more concerted multidisciplinary effort to make sense of this broader revolution. In particular, it wanted to focus attention on the largely ignored but no less profound effect that the technologies behind the revolution were having on *sensory experience and perception,* which it saw not only as an anthropologically relevant undertaking for art but also as more faithful the original meaning of "aesthetics"—derived from the Greek *aisthētikos* ("of sense perception") and *aisthanesthai* ("to perceive")—as opposed its more common definition in terms of the understanding and appreciation of beauty and form in the plastic arts.

Forest presents these effects as three-fold in the Group's 1985 Manifesto, which he wrote.[11] In the first place, the new technologies extended the range of our dominant senses of sight and sound and had important implications for touch and proprioception as well. In the process, they carried us into "strange new realms of space and time" (15/23) in which certain deep-seated spatiotemporal paradigms of perception were undermined by the experience of strange new phenomena like telepresence, ubiquity, and the telematic capture of sensory data; and new constructs based on the shape and feel of prevalent telecommunications interfaces began to take root in human consciousness. Furthermore, real time had displaced real space as the operative frame of the communication environment and the traditional distinction between past, present, and future had broken down in favor of a hegemonic and urgent here-and-now

comprised increasingly of media input, which might be either truly live and direct (and thus considered more "real") or in various ways simulacral (recorded, fabricated, etc.) – a critical yet often exceedingly blurry distinction.

As Forest explains in the Manifesto, space and time were not merely subjects of Aesthetics of Communication-based art—they were its "raw materials" (14/22), just like oil paints or watercolors were for the painter and stone or wood for the sculptor ... or information and social structures for the sociological artist. Both Forest and Costa stressed this idea when they asserted that the communication artist worked not by giving unique form to matter like a plastic artist, transcribing an artistic vision or narrative into imagery using mechanical means like a photographer or filmmaker, or questioning philosophical or societal norms through intellectually compelling artifacts like a conceptual artist; but by "problematizing" media space-time through specially designed interfaces.[12] Their adoption of the notion of space-time from physics reflects their awareness of the extent to which the two constructs are inextricably related in everyday experience, especially on a subconscious and intuitive level that they wanted to make more explicit. Forest was especially struck by the notion that humans' sense of time was for centuries a function of their sense of terrestrial space but that modern telecommunications brought about a reversal in this equation whereby space is becoming more and more a function of time insofar as people who are connected in real time via telecommunications may think of themselves as somehow being together in a shared space regardless of the distance that separates their actual physical locations. This space is the synthetic byproduct of a technological process. In everyday experience, space-as-a-function-of-time is on the rise relative to time-as-a-function-of-space, but cannot replace it altogether. The

two constructs coexist, often in strange juxtapositions and hybrids that Forest explores in his art. One of these is a relationship of commutation whereby one switches back and forth (sometimes literally) between one spatiotemporal register and another.

A second area of emphasis was the notion that the new technologies of communication gave rise to "an added dimension of 'reality,' where new kinds of relationships between human beings were being created." This was an "abstract" and "dematerialized" sort of territory, which Forest characterized in the following terms that are strikingly similar to the way the internet was characterized a decade later:

> A space of encounters on platforms of communication. A social space of communication created by the technological infrastructures that have been superimposed on physical space.... [A] vast and dense matrix forming an invisible network through which messages travel and feelings are exchanged.... Media space as the new and preferred arena of human interaction. A surface of dialog dredged from the void by communication technology like polders reclaimed from the sea.... [A] space where relationships "manifest" themselves in the form of information (12/20).

The point was that this new territory or dimension of reality was both a *mental projection* based on paradigms derived from the vocabulary of landscape and architecture (not to mention a mythical realm, given popular names like "electronic global village" and "cyberspace"); and *something real,* with a distinct shape and feel of its own. The utopian cast of this fascination with information space is obvious; however, Forest and Costa felt that the myth often prevented people from meaningful awareness of the decidedly more complex and ambiguous

sensory reality and so they favored artistic projects in which the mental, the mythical, and the sensorial would collide to the distinct advantage of the latter.

Finally, there were more anthropological ramifications to consider—namely, the fact that an ever increasing share of everyday human experience, from business transactions to personal relationships, was taking place in this dematerialized realm. It followed that the new technologies were having a profound effect on human *sensibility.* They changed what it felt like (and hence meant) to be in love, to desire, to be politically active, to work, to play, to learn, to believe, to make believe, to be oneself, to encounter the other, to be present, to be absent, to be at home, to be in public, to be together, to be alone, etc. Waxing lyrical and citing both the physicist Fritjof Capra (*The Tao of Physics*) and the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (*Steps to an Ecology of the Mind*), Forest suggests that they even contributed to the development of a more dynamic and holistic view of the world as a nexus of stimuli and data in constant flux and that human consciousness was itself "part of a global beat made up of an infinite number of distinct little rhythms" (15/23).

The intellectual and aesthetic project of the Aesthetics of Communication Group had a number of points in common with the contemporaneous work of the philosopher Paul Virilio, who argued that technological advances in the areas of transportation and communication had created a new world in which speed was the organizing principle. Such a world could no longer be *represented* according to an "aesthetic of appearance" based on slow emergence and persistence over time but had to be *presented* according to an "aesthetic of disappearance" characterized by rapid movement, instability, dematerialization, and displacement. Formally

trained as an artist specializing in the medium of stained glass, Virilio took most of his initial examples from photography and cinema but was inclined to see the communication works by Forest and others in the Aesthetics of Communication Group as compatible with his own preoccupations. While Forest eventually became wary of Virilio's increasing techno-pessimism, the two collaborated on a few occasions in the 1980s (Virilio was also a citizen of Forest's Territory of the Square Meter) and discussed their respective approaches to modern communication and aesthetics in an article published in *Art press* in 1988.[13]

### Experiments in Metacommunication

Forest and his associates in the Aesthetics of Communication Group agreed with Virilio that conventional forms of plastic art were ill-suited to deal with such profound changes in the environment of everyday human experience. In the Manifesto, Forest outlined a new theory of art as "metacommunication" (13/22) designed not to convey any particular message but to reveal something about communication itself. To accomplish this, the artist, whom Forest likened to an "architect of information" (12/21), was to create special micro-environments of communication in which certain salient but normally hidden features of the media themselves could be revealed. As was the case in Sociological Art, the work of art did not *reside in* some unique combination of matter and form realized by the artist; it *emerged from* self-conscious interaction with the technological milieu of media, and other people, through the interface devised by the artist. In other words, communication artworks were "transmedia events without a definite location." [14] They were like the "invisible, blazing, and magical

configurations" traced all around us every second by the massive influx of electromagnetic signals (11/19) that constantly coursed through the ether.[15]

The metacommunicational quality of such works of art derived from two additional factors. In the first place, the artist subjected the different means of communication used in his ad hoc systems to a process of defamiliarization, which Forest describes in great detail in the Manifesto:

> [For] me, it is always a matter of developing a meta-discourse ... that is layered over the dominant discourses of communication in order to set in motion a process of jamming or hijacking of the dominant codes of communication, or destabilizing the specialized fields of communication. [...] In reality, my goal is to create ... plausible states of uncertainty on the part of the user. For instance, by endeavoring to send messages through the mass media that are structured in such a way that they contradict one another ... thereby creating a breach, a paradox, a critical examination. Each of these specially contrived communication situations ... is meant to force the users to search for some [alternative] form of order or structure ... by stimulating his imagination and eliciting his participation, even his complicity, in the deliberate transgression of the codes with which I am confronting him (13/22).

This resembles Forest's practice of Sociological Art; however, whereas Sociological Art tapped into existing mass media platforms and pointedly left open the utopian possibility of more meaningful communication taking place in them as a result of the disruption of the status quo, his practice of the Aesthetics of Communication often entailed the creation of his own special closed circuits comprised of different media combinations and attached no more than

secondary importance to any messages that might actually be conveyed because, as Marshall McLuhan might put it, the message would distract attention from the medium.

In the second place, the metacommunicational artwork had certain quasi-spiritual connotations. In the Manifesto, Forest likened the use of new technologies of communication to Zen because of their similar capacity to dissolve conventional ways of thinking, heighten one's awareness of the present, and renew one's intuitive relationship to basic elements of reality such as time, space, energy flow, and the body. The metacommunicational use of these technologies envisioned in the Manifesto was meant to accentuate these meditation-like effects. Writing in the same issue of *+ – 0* in which the Manifesto was published, Blaise Galland notes that Forest's method dating back to the Sociological Art phase resembled the "negative epistemology" of Zen, which does not seek to uncover the truth of things by dissecting the objects or phenomena under scrutiny in order to get at their essential underlying components, but instead limits itself to demonstrating what that object or phenomenon is *not.* Zen is often deliberately nonsensical, answering a portentous philosophical question with a gratuitous gesture, an enigmatic utterance, or stubborn silence designed to reveal the absurdity of the question itself and raise the truth-seekers to a higher plane of consciousness where the inherent contradictions of our usual categorically narrow way of thinking are overcome. There is little to see that makes much sense in many of Forest's projects, but his goal, Galland suggests, is nonetheless to make "Seers" out of the members of his public. Galland goes on to say that this tendency is evident in the new desire Forest demonstrates in his Aesthetics of Communication-based works to "reveal" to his audience the true nature of its "relationship to the world" (i.e., the hyper-technological environment) by playing with the concepts of past,

present, and future so as to create a "temporal paradox." This, Galland writes, is an ideal way to bring about the much desired sudden flashes of awareness of "the Eternal Present of the mystics." As added proof of Forest's Zen master-like intentions, Galland quotes from a passage in Forest's doctoral thesis in which Forest urges his contemporaries "to turn your gaze towards nascent things and look squarely at what is right in front of you."[16]

Forest's own metacommunicational artworks fall into three broad categories. The first consists of multimedia actions that most closely resemble Zen koans. Notable examples include *Immediate Intervention* (*Intervention immédiate,* 1983), *Here and Now* (*Ici et maintenant,* 1983), *Electronic Blue, Homage to Yves Klein* (*Bleu électronique, hommage à Yves Klein,* 1984), *The Past-Present Network* (*Le réseau passé-présent,* 1984), *Celebration of the Present* (*Célébration du présent,* 1985), *Planetary Telephonic Sculpture* (*Sculpture téléphonique planétaire,* 1985), *The Broken Vase* (*Le vase cassé,* 1986), and *Big String* (1987, in collaboration with Stéphan Barron). The media used in these actions include telephones, television (both broadcast and closed circuit), video, radio, audio recordings, motorcycle courier, and live performance. All touched on the paradoxical nature of media space-time, juxtaposed with the physical space of the outside world as customarily perceived and the closed inside of the gallery or other cultural venue where they were staged. The general method employed in each case was a crossing or layering of different media—Forest is fond of saying that by crossing two media he automatically creates third one—and of the different dimensions of time and space they make manifest. All attempted to demonstrate that our normal constructs of time and space are every bit as artificial as the media used. Another way of looking at these works is to consider that each gives rise to hybrid space-time of its own that only makes sense in the

limited context of the action itself, but only once one stops trying to *make* it make sense using preexisting categories—a lesson that also holds true for the hybrid spaces we encounter through different interfaces (architecture, modes of transport, computers, telecommunications media, etc.) on a daily basis without wondering about them beyond their practical uses.

*Immediate Intervention* is an absurdist media performance that plays with several different modes of space and time and varying degrees of presence and absence. On closed-circuit television monitors installed in the gallery where the performance nominally took place, spectators view ostensibly live video of Forest from a remote location, somewhere in a telephone booth. The intervention begins when the remote, live Forest calls the number of a telephone placed in before the public at the gallery. After chatting with the artist for a few minutes to formally authenticate the live quality of the event, an assistant places the receiver next to a tape recorder, which he then turns on. The tape is a recording of yet another avatar of Forest, remote both in time and space yet present via technology just like the phone booth Forest, albeit in voice only, asking a series of questions about mortality and other existential issues that the live Forest is to answer: a conversation between a man and his subconscious, his disembodied alter ego, or perhaps his own ghost. In order to avoid creating all too plausible, or clichéd, illusion of ubiquity, the answers provided are completely out of sync with the questions. For example, when asked about his own inevitable death, the live Forest answers his alter ego by giving his favorite recipes.

According to Isabelle Rieusset-Lemarié, the work is both an ingenious deconstruction of culturally conditioned notions of immediacy in communication and a prescient demonstration

of virtual space before the notion became commonplace. Forest plays with the fact that people still tend to think of immediacy in communication in terms of face-to-face presence and generally consider long-distance communication as inherently lacking such immediacy because it does not have the sensory or emotional impact of face-to-face communication and formerly involved a significant time-lag in the case of older, terrestrial media – for instance, the time it takes for a surface mail letter to reach its destination. Thus, a long-distance medium connects people across distance but also underscores the distance between them. Furthermore, a common view of modern, electronic means of telecommunication is that they diminish emotional immediacy even as they facilitate temporal immediacy. Television is the most regularly cited example of this phenomenon as it is thought to anesthetize the isolated and detached viewer even as it brings the world into his or her living room. Yet these common notions are at least partially contradicted by everyday experience. To ascertain this, one simply has to pick up the phone. The telephone is not only a perfect illustration of real time's growing ascendancy over real space in the conduct of everyday life; it has also added a new dimension of emotional immediacy to human interaction. A telephone call might be incapable of generating the *frisson* of a caress, but who would dispute the notion that hearing the voice of an absent loved one directly in one's ear on the phone has greater sensual and emotional immediacy than reading his or her script on a page? Remote immediacy has become such a trivial part of everyday life that we barely notice it anymore. Forest's goal in *Immediate Intervention,* Rieusset-Lemarié suggests, is to break through this triviality and get people to see this strange, paradoxical new reality for what it is. He defies us to say with certainty where the immediacy in this *overly mediated intervention* comes from. From a purely aesthetic

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standpoint, the spectator is left to ponder where the performance itself actually *takes place.* Was it in the gallery, the phone booth, the recording studio, on the monitor, over the phone lines, in the great void between these various points in space, or perhaps in the eternity of the afterlife? Can there be performance art without immediate access to the artist's body, which is usually considered one of the defining characteristics of the genre? These questions are perhaps ultimately unanswerable and yet one thing remains certain: something powerfully immediate did take place *somewhere* in spite of all the ambiguity—in some synthetic "here and now" or meta-location that was the combined byproduct of all the crossed media (each with its own spatial and temporal parameters) to which the spectators were subjected.[17] Rieusset-Lemarié concludes that Forest wants to leave the spectators with the idea that by "transgressing the taboo of the immediate" (i.e., the equation of immediacy with physical presence), one can lay claim to such synthetic spaces as "actual utopias."[18]

*Here and Now* **[Figure 11]** offers an object lesson in mixed signals about our deceptively simple but actually rather arbitrary categories like "past," "present," "future," "here," and "there" by featuring multiple avatars of Forest mindlessly counting ad infinitum: one on a prerecorded video featured on a live television broadcast that can be viewed on a monitor at the local cultural center where the event is staged Italy; another in the flesh standing before his audience at the center; yet another on live closed circuit video of the very "same" Forest (the one in the flesh) counting in person, shown on a monitor placed right next to the monitor displaying the local broadcast, just a few paces from the "real" Forest counting; and four tape players playing an identical audio recording of Forest counting, differentiated only by their non-synchronous playback.

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*Electronic Blue* **[Figure 12]** is a poetically evocative homage to Forest's fellow artistic plier of voids, Yves Klein, in the form of a 15-minute-long live broadcast on Italian local television comprised solely of electronically synthesized International Klein Blue—an "invisible system-work" consisting of the Hertzian waves filling the great void through which they traveled, carrying the encoded IKB, as well as a distributed monochrome sculpture consisting of the thousands of television sets displaying the decoded IKB on their screens. The broadcast is coupled a special event in a museum featuring a live long-distance telephone connection with Pierre Restany in Paris, whose extemporaneous reminiscences about his dear friend Klein are simultaneously translated into a pulsing blue light inundating the space where the event is held.

In *Celebration of the Present* **[Figure 13],** Forest places a phone call to a nearby television studio from a theater where he sits up front at a table with his back to the audience. The actual telephone corresponding to the number to which he has placed the call is shown in close-up on a television monitor placed directly in front of Forest and visible to the audience: it is tuned in to a live local broadcast from the station in question. As soon as the telephone on television starts to ring Forest puts his receiver down without hanging up, exits the theater, hops on the back of a motorcycle, and is driven off out of sight at break-neck speed. Six minutes later, after a wild ride through the streets of town to the station's broadcast studio, he appears on screen to answer his own phone call!

Another type of metacommunicational work entails special telephone-based interfaces that allow the public to engage in whimsical exercises in remote agency.[19] In one of these, *Telephonic Rally* (*Le rallye téléphonique,* 1986), a virtual off-road race was conducted over

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telephone circuits and carried live on France-Inter radio like a real sporting event **[Figure 14]**. Race participants had to make a series of phone calls to people in different locations (their correspondent at each stop along the way would reveal the number for the next leg of the race) en route to the finish line: a telephone to be answered by Forest himself in Cologne. The radio broadcast offered up-to-minute coverage and race results, color commentary by a France-Inter journalist, droll interventions from the artist, and listener calls. The work combined a simple premise with complex logistics, solitary individual participation with inclusion in an ad hoc network of participants, private space (the phone in one's home) and public space (the air waves), the everyday frustration of having to reach people on the phone (while the clock keeps ticking) and the thrill of a sporting competition (also while the clock keeps ticking), telephone transmission space with radio transmission space, and the illusion of an ethereal form of transport in information space with the material reality of phone calls needing to transit through physical space along land lines and through switchboards like automobiles on a multi-stage rally circuit. In an unassuming and playful way, *Telephonic Rally* hoped to draw its audience into the kind of philosophical meditation on "dromology" (the logic/logistics of speed) and the ecology of trajectory later developed by Virilio.

There was several works like *Telephonic Faucet* (*Le robinet téléphonique,* 1992), in which people near and far used the telephone to fill a bucket in Turin. Each anonymous local or long-distance call to a specially advertised number triggered the electronic valve of a faucet that automatically spewed a few ounces of water into the bucket, which was located in a special installation at the historic Mole Antonelliana.[20] Forest's phone and faucet pieces **[Figure 15]** combined the kind of juvenile amazement for gadgetry typically encountered in school science

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fairs with a sense mystery and poetry. In the case of *Telephonic Faucet*, the people calling from remote locations were deprived of feedback and therefore had no way to gauge the effect that their calls had on the overall progress of the operation other than to picture the scene in their mind's eye. Publicity for the event **[Figure 16]** merely hinted that the faucet would be shut off once water started overflowing onto the precious marble floors of the famous landmark. By contrast, the people at the exhibit could plainly see the immediate effect of the anonymous phone calls yet could only imagine their exotic (or parochial) provenance and the people at the other end of the line operating the valves remotely. The small wonders of long-distance agency thus came at the price of incomplete knowledge or mastery of the remote places to which one was connected via technology. For those physically present at the exhibit and those telepresent alike, however, there was the same elegantly simple image flowing water as a metaphor for the flow of electromagnetic signals through network circuits carrying information around the world at stupendous speed, making physical distance and manmade borders more and more immaterial.

The final main category of metacommunicational works by Forest consists of ambitious net/works that constitute fully operational parallel circuits of mass communication relying on specially created alternative interfaces, the layering of different media on top of one another, and the pirating of existing infrastructures and content. Social sculptures à la Joseph Beuys, these works typically elicited the involvement of a large audience within the general public. Examples include *The Stock Exchange of the Imaginary, Babel Press Conference* (*La conférence de Babel,* 1983), *Communicating Space* (*L'espace communicant,* 1983), *Learn How to Watch TV by Listening to Your Radio* (1984), *Watchtowers of Peace* (*Les miradors de la paix,* 1993), and

*From Casablanca to Locarno: Love Updated by the Internet and Electronic Media* (*De Casablanca à Locarno: l'amour revu et corrigé par Internet et les medias électroniques,* 1995). The tone, subversive intent, and degree of direct public participation (hands-on interaction with the system, contribution of content, feedback, etc.) in each of these projects varied; however, all were based on the principles of creating an independent channel of communication and heightening critical awareness of the mode of operation of the networks involved.

*Communicating Space* consists essentially of an independent micro-network of 40 telephones that operate as a "wild" offshoot of the French national phone system by allowing users (visitors to the *Electra* exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris) to call one another or people on the outside free of charge with all calls in the system and voice messages left on its answering machines broadcast in real time over loudspeakers at the museum venue. Here, one could encounter a strange juxtaposition of the private and the public, the anonymous and the personal, in the relatively small space packed with equipment if one placed a random call picked up by a total stranger just a few feet away, whom one could attempt to get to know, or make small talk with, as everyone else in the room listened in through the public address system. The project also made use of newspapers, radio, and telematics.

*Babel Press Conference* hijacks news and political commentary programing on the radio—chiefly, Europe 1 Radio's influential "Club de la Presse" talk show—and rebroadcasts it via a temporary alternative program – specially created for the circumstances by Forest – along with critical analysis and droll commentary on the source material by the artist and his own

team of journalists, special guests, and listeners calling in on the air. Carried by a small independent FM station, Radio Ici et Maintenant ("Here and Now Radio"), this pirate broadcast originated from a remote studio that was part of a larger multimedia installation on the theme of political discourse. Forest's principal collaborators were a team of young journalists from the magazine *TEL* (*Temps, Littérature, Economie*). The invited guests included prominent politicians like Huguette Bouchardeau (Minister of Environment), Jean-Philippe Lecat (Minister of Culture) **[Figure 17]**, and Bernard Stasi (Vice President of the National Assembly); intellectuals like Philippe Sollers and Abraham Moles **[Figure 18]**; and the advertising executive Jacques Séguéla. The guests were given the freedom to speak their minds about the Europe 1 broadcast and their style of commentary ranged from partisan rebuttals to academic analyses of style and structure; however, the illicit nature of the broadcast and its setting in the satirical *Babel Press Conference* installation were meant to encourage a tone of irreverence and mockery. The installation proper featured video monitors positioned around a conference table simultaneously playing tapes of speeches given by eight prominent world leaders **[Figure 19]** and a "database" of other speeches represented symbolically by jars of alphabet macaroni **[Figure 20]**. Although the overall spirit was supposed to be rather lighthearted, a tenser dynamic began to develop when Forest's team of journalists attempted to assert greater control over the broadcast (their professional standing and connections effectively gave them leverage in terms of the political guests), which they sought to turn into a quasi-official platform for serious political commentary—a clone rather than a deconstruction of the source program. Seeing this as a betrayal of the iconoclastic intent of the operation, which involved challenging political double-talk and not producing more of it, yet recognizing that this not altogether

surprising development also represented an valuable opportunity to illustrate an important point about the link between control of the media and political power, Forest took the unusual step of hacking his own pirate broadcast, surreptitiously tapping into its audio transmission with the help of sympathetic technicians at the project venue (Galerie Créatis, Paris) to make caustic and farcical statements on the air that seemingly came from nowhere and effectively undermined the authority his own team's discourse, destroyed the seriousness of tone of the proceedings, and caused a near riot on the set! [21]

*Learn How to Watch TV* **[Figure 21]** utilizes an ad hoc network of 10 independent community-based FM stations[22] to broadcast 3 hours of alternative audio content to be used with the official video content available on French television while the official audio is muted. The alternative audio includes irreverent commentary and serious media criticism from Forest and his invited guests, instructions given to the audience—e.g., to change channels, to move around the house, to close their eyes and meditate, etc.—and listener/viewer input through on-air call-in lines. This work was a brilliant example of Forest's principle of crossing two forms of media to create a third, hybrid form; but it also reflects the kind of thing ordinary people do all the time, for example, when someone watches a sporting contest on television but *listens* to the radio broadcast of the same contest, or keeps the muted television on in the background for company while listening to music and doing housework. However, jamming official media content and replacing it with alternative content was just one of the project's objectives.

In his own analysis of this project, published in the academic journal *Communication et langages,* Forest stresses four additional considerations: [1] the educational benefit of

inserting "calculated aberrations" (e.g., disrupting the normal pairing of audio and video content) into the mediascape as means to get people to notice how the media really function; [2] the spiritual benefit of getting people to take a brief time out from the usual structure and mundane content of their everyday lives to focus their attention on things that really mattered; [3] the social benefit of using media to create a temporary experience of enhanced community along the lines of what Joseph Beuys called "social sculpture;" and [4] the aesthetic benefit using the immediacy of the electronic mass media—their definitive experiential characteristic, in his view—as both the raw material and subject matter of art. Forest's article places particular emphasis on this last point:

> I must confess ... my own fascination with the riveting media rituals we are invited to witness when technology offers us opportunities to experience the power of a live event in all of its "immediacy" and irreducible contingency. There is surely something metaphysical and religious about the mythical hero Armstrong when he takes his first uncertain and awkward step on the barren surface of the Moon. However, beyond the ritualistic stagecraft of television, it's ... the sheer *instantaneousness* of the situation that overwhelms ... the modern individual—instantaneousness shared by millions of viewers throughout the mediasphere, beyond space and time. This type of situation appeals deeply to my aesthetic sensibility. Artists could never be indifferent ... to such a fundamental aspect of modern communication. Still, I would like to stress that artists are by nature more inclined to focus their attention on the more marginal side of [this] instantaneousness.... Failures, glitches, slip-ups, gaffes, and interruptions of service are their preferred objects of observation, reflection, and analysis. The technical difficulties that suddenly disrupt the live broadcast from the Elysée Palace are clearly more important ... than anything the French

president could ever say. More important in that the breach opened constitutes a sort of "recovered time" that gives us back to ourselves.[23]

*Learn How to Watch TV* can be considered a sort of anti-media event, or anti-spectacle. Part of the power of the mass media—television in particular—is derived from their ability to tap into the basic human need to set aside moments during which members of a community—a local, national, or global audience—can gather together for a special event that transcends their everyday lives and embodies the community's values. Presidential inaugurations, the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games, royal weddings, and ceremonies paying tribute to the victims of great tragedies are among the most spectacular examples of televised communal events given their high level of pageantry and national or international scope; however, there are more routine examples of this type of event as well, such as the evening news and televised football games on Sunday afternoons, which give fans an opportunity to demonstrate their support for the local favorite team. At their core, each of these examples reenacts the distinction between the sacred and the profane.

Framed as a collective time-out taken in the mediasphere—like his earlier experiment *Sixty Seconds of Blank Screen* (1972) and the later, more explicitly ceremonial *Time Out* (1998)—*Learn How to Watch TV* imitated the basic formula of such special moments of television but with several critical differences. In the first place, Forest's broadcast did not consist of *coverage* of a location-specific gathering, making it available to the masses not fortunate enough to be there in person, although it did incorporate a live event in a real place— a festive gathering in front of the Grand Palais in Paris, the staging ground for the operation, where Forest and his team of commentators were gathered on a special stage, not unlike clerics

officiating at a liturgical rite **[Figure 22]**. The two events, the media event and the public gathering, were essentially independent. Forest, his commentators, and the technicians could have performed their duties hidden from public view inside a studio. Nevertheless, the public event at the Grand Palais was not an insignificant adjunct but an integral part of project. In the first place, corresponding more closely to the genres of public performance and collective happening, it helped to frame the entire enterprise as art and was publicized accordingly. Furthermore, bringing people together face-to-face for festive public gatherings, particularly in urban space, has been an important feature of Forest's work. He views such gatherings as socially essential and possessing unique qualities that media cannot hope to capture. However, for Forest, the opposite is also true: the immediacy of live media events is also unique and socially relevant, although it is rarely used to its true full potential given that the orchestrators of such events usually prefer to try to get the audience to buy into the illusion that it's somehow the same as actually being there. Forest does not fall into this trap/cynical game because he recognizes that the logic of immediacy is different in each case and this frees him to exploit the inherent properties of each type of immediacy. Indeed, for him, public events in physical space and events in media space are complementary and, when artfully combined, can enhance one another as long as one is mindful of their non-equivalence. Still, in this particular project, what happens over the airwaves in the invisible interface between people's television sets and their radios is clearly more important than what takes place outside the Grand Palais. In this sense, the relationship between the two events represents an inversion of the logic that normally applies when a public event is transposed as a media event since it is the media event here that lends its aura to the public event rather than the other way around. Although, here,

too, Forest breaks with precedent (i.e. an event elevated by the magic aura of the cameras there filming it for thousands or millions to see) because nothing is being telecast here save for what was already programmed by the French TV authorities in total ignorance of Forest's project – both the live gathering and the main event that takes place entirely in mediaspace are wholly invisible on television.[24] Indeed, live radio is the crucial medium in the project: without it, there is no event of any kind. However, yet again the medium's relationship to the event is more complicates than usual, for while radio makes the event it is does not do so as a radio broadcast of an event; and the radio program would make very little sense without the TV video feed off of which it feeds (whereas the television programing would without the alternative radio audio content ... there just wouldn't be any media art project). TV, radio, and public space operate here as parallel circuits that Forest is crossing in unconventional ways.

Another difference between typical media spectacles and Forest's anti-spectacle involves the relationship between form and content. Most televised spectacles involve both mystification and over-determination: a conscious effort to hide the artifice behind the impressive effects produced, which the audience is expected to accept on the basis of faith; and a highly scripted reenactment of familiar material that leaves little that is to happen or to be said to chance. In contrast, Forest's project is based on demystification insofar as it breaches the carefully crafted synthesis of audio and visual content in television—a disruption of service that in and of itself is supposed to heighten the viewer's awareness, *a contrario,* of how television "normally" functions as both a media and an environment—and utilizes parasitical audio content designed to get people to adopt a more critical perspective on the medium (or at least not to take it so seriously). Furthermore, Forest's radio broadcast was an anomalous,

unpredictable, and relatively unscripted occurrence:  it was a planned accident and ought to have seemed relatively chaotic and incoherent – delightfully so, Forest hoped – to most viewers/listeners.

Finally, *Learn How to Watch TV* posits a different model of community.  Most ritualistic spectacles on television posit an audience that is hypothetically consubstantial to a given community—the *trompe-l'œil* immediacy of the entire community watching and thereby collectively taking part in the same live event when, in fact, many are not tuned in for a variety of reasons (poor timing, indifference, antithetical personal taste or conviction, etc.); and they are designed to generate "solidarity in the absence of consensus" (David I. Kertzer) by embodying the tacit universal acceptance of the certain communal values and norms that exist on a higher plane than the competing interests and ideologies that typically divide its often fractious members.[25]  However, they are also predicated on limiting the role of the audience/community members to passive spectatorship with little or no opportunity for autonomous participation or expression of a contrary point of view.  In contrast, the community posited/created by Forest's intervention is a smaller affair of willing and potentially active participants.  Certainly, Forest hoped that his audience would feel some of the magic of collective immediacy by taking part in a special event together with other likeminded people.  However, Forest's project preserves and even encourages a fair measure of individual autonomy in both thought and action.  Moreover, what the audience was being asked to do was clearly not to tacitly demonstrate their acceptance of established societal norms and values as conveyed by television.  On the contrary, they were called to momentarily turn television's and hence society's conventions upside down.   In the final analysis, Forest's model of

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community in this intervention was more like the unruly *communitas* of carnival than the orderly community of the societal status quo.  This carnival logic had been implicit in many of Forest's prior media and public interventions.  Over the course of the next 30 years it was to become much more explicit.

*The Watchtowers of Peace* (*Les miradors de la paix,* 1993) involves the broadcasting individual peace messages from people in different countries into the former Yugoslavia via radio and loudspeakers mounted on three metal towers set up on the Austrian border with Slovenia **[Figure 23]**.  One of the most ambitious and altruistic undertakings of Forest's career, *Watchtowers* mobilized newspapers and wire services as far away as Japan, television networks in three countries (France, Germany, and Austria), and radio stations reaching each of the countries that formerly made up Yugoslavia (including station B92 in Belgrade).  A fourth tower is set up as an installation in a Paris gallery that also serves as the setting of a concert for peace, a gathering of French personalities demonstrating their support for peace in the region, and a visit from Danielle Mitterrand, the wife of the President François Mitterrand.[26]

Forest's endeavor was no more likely to change the situation on the ground than any other utopian scheme for making peace in the region; however, it offered an antidote to the spectacular logic of news media coverage, especially on television, this and other armed conflicts and other human tragedies throughout the world.  As a highly structured form of media spectacle, television news brings heart-wrenching images of human suffering and evil from the four corners of the world into the viewers' homes (often in real time), creating a false sense of proximity/immediacy.  However, it also effectively keeps the events occurring at a safe

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distance in spite of the indignation, pity, and other strong emotional responses that it tends to elicit.  It does so in two ways.  In the first place, spectacular news coverage limits viewer engagement to passive contemplation.  The viewer is morally dispensed from acting because it is already enough that he is concerned enough to has chosen to "witness" the tragedy or turmoil by turning in.  In the second place, the news invariably frames the events as taking place in an exotic elsewhere, such as war-torn or natural disaster-ravaged land on the other side of the world (or economically disadvantaged and crime-ridden neighborhood on the other side of town).  The news deceptively abolishes physical distance but maintains social and cultural distance.  The screen is a border as impregnable as any.

By contrast, Forest's *Watchtowers* project attempts to undermine this spectacular logic in a number of different ways.  In the first place, it gives the concerned citizen an opportunity, albeit a quite modest one, to actually respond to events literally as if he or she were counseling a friend or comforting a family member over the phone, conveying a small part of his or her being in the timber and inflection of his or her voice.  Furthermore, instead of bringing images from the conflict zone into the private sphere of a person's home (there is nothing for the message bearer to see in Forest's project), it takes that person on journey to by sending his or her voice across borders to resonate – in many cases in real time – in the place where the events are unfolding, hypothetically in the ears of some of the people caught up in them as victims, perpetrators, enablers, or innocent bystanders.  The participant is forced to make a greater effort to picture in his or her mind's eye the place where his or her voice has traveled— and perhaps even picture him or herself there in person—because he or she is deprived of the familiar exotic imagery of the foreign place that the news typically provides.  Knowing that his

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or her own words and voice are being heard *there* might initially give the participant a feeling of power—as if one has been given the opportunity to play the part of an international envoy— but it also has the potential to make him or her feel vulnerable, something which the news generally tends to avoid, or at least mitigate.  The message bearer might be overtaken by the unsettling premonition of the utter foreignness of his or her voice—not to mention his or her language—at its destination and struggles to find the right words and tone.  Unlike the news, it is not the other's foreignness that is emphasized, but the participant's.  This problematizing of the participant's position and voice is as important to a meaningful expression of his or her conscience as his or her capacity to empathize with others.

From the standpoint of those directly affected by the conflict so much more is needed— material assistance in different forms, political courage on the part of world governments, and more opportunities to have *their* voices heard; however, one can at least conjecture that the messages of peace that they might happen to hear are construed as a demonstration of true human solidarity and that this might help in some small measure, just like hearing a friend's voice on the phone in a time of trouble often helps more than anything specific that the friend might have to say (or anything he or she might actually do).  Forest is aware of his project's limitation.  This awareness is demonstrated symbolically in the choice of the watchtower as its emblem.  A watchtower is an example of military architecture; however, there is the conspicuous substitution/opposition in the title:  Forest's towers are *Watchtowers of Peace,* not *War.*  Still, a watchtower is part of a vulnerable place's fortifications.  It's meant to protect from danger by detecting it before it is too late—or at least early enough to prepare an appropriate defensive response; to keep the threat outside the walls.  Watchtowers are a common site

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along borders, particularly when the neighboring countries are not on the friendliest terms. It is impossible to escape the implications of these connotations in Forest's project. Here, the watchtowers allow voices and words to cross borders with apparent ease, but they do not erase these borders. In fact, crossing them electronically actually highlights their very real existence. It is also not possible to escape the fact that Forest's watchtowers are rather fragile-looking makeshift structures of steel scaffolding (works in progress, temporary structures); or the fact that they were erected at safe location, along the Austrian border with Slovenia, a more prosperous, peaceful, and outward-looking nation that had made the transition to independence and democracy with considerably less violence and destructions than its less fortunate neighbors (Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo) in the former Yugoslavian federation (the Ten Day War with Serbo-Yugoslavian forces excepted). These ambiguities and limitations are meant to raise questions. Perhaps Forest wanted his public to ponder an ultimate Zen-like riddle that strikes to core of his project. If a voice calls out in a desert where there is no one to hear it, or in a foreign land where there is no one who understands it, what does it matter?

**Pioneer Generation**

Forest's place among the leading figures from what Robert Adrian has called the "pioneer years" [27] of telecommunication art is unique. Whereas many of his peers focused their attention on satellites (e.g. Nam June Paik, Douglas Davis, Willoughby Sharp, Liza Bear, Carl Loeffler, Bill Bartlett, Eric Gidney, Mobile Image/Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz) and telematics (e.g., Bill Bartlett, Robert Adrian and the ARTBOX-ARTEX group, Roy Ascott, Tom Klinkowstein, Norman White, Don Foresta, Tom Sherman, Eduardo Kac), the telephone

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remained a central feature of Forest's work. It would nonetheless be inaccurate consider his works "low-tech" since his multimedia platforms were often both technically sophisticated and logistically complicated in spite of their deceptively simple appearance and intentional user-friendliness (Forest definitely preferred systems that anyone could use without special preparation). Moreover, Forest was relatively quick to incorporate new technologies like the personal computer (1983), the French internet precursor *Télétel/Minitel* (1983), and LED message boards (1985) in his projects. Nonetheless, well into the 1990s, Forest maintained a special interest in two of the more commonplace and overlooked media, telephone and radio, which he valued for both their pervasiveness in everyday life and their intimacy—a familiar voice in one's ear through a small object one holds in one's hand; music or chatter filling the room one occupies or the car one is driving while leaving the gaze (and perhaps the mind, too) ostensibly free for other things. He liked to use them in tandem, in many instances as a counterpoint to more impersonal mass media like television. Writing in *Leonardo* in 1991, Derrick de Kerckhove stresses that the compulsive use of the telephone was a hallmark of the Aesthetics of Communication insofar as it was a product of 1980s "speed culture," obsessed with the pervasiveness, ease, and distance-crushing rapidity of telecommunications around the globe (which the telephone, in all its banality, embodied better than any other medium); which he contrasts with artists' earlier fixation on "mass culture" (i.e., TV) in the 1960s and 70s and their then burgeoning interest in "depth culture" (digital media, computers, and VR) in the 1990s.[28] Another person who understood Forest's passion for the telephone was Marshall McLuhan, who was familiar with Forest's work (beginning with *Space Media*) and wrote a brief text about Forest's use of the telephone, in which one reads the following:

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I am enchanted by Fred Forest's attempts to unlock the mysteries of the telephone.... The telephone is the most ignored of all media. Teenagers are the only ones who really get it, letting themselves get tangled up in the chords while chatting for hours with their feet propped up against the wall. This is exactly what this most demanding instrument calls on you to do.... It is the most all-embracing instrument as well as the most embraceable one. It has the power to send your entire being wherever you are calling: the caller is called forth.[29]

McLuhan also joked that Forest's work gave new meaning to the old phrase that some American children used when a stranger had called: "Uncle Fred is on the phone."

After years of toiling in relative obscurity on the margins of the art world (perhaps because so little of what that did could be put on display), the telecommunication artists of the 1970s and 1980s are now getting renewed attention for the way they anticipated the possibilities and problems of both the internet-based digital art that came after it and online culture in general.[30] Some of the live projects produced using satellites, computer messaging, and telematics have rightfully achieved iconic status and are now considered masterpieces. This is true of Mobile Image's (Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz) telecollaborative dance project, *A Space with No Geographical Boundaries*, part of the *Satellite Arts Project* (1977); and their later *Hole in Space* (1980), which allowed people in Los Angeles and New York to visually interact with one another in real time via a two-way satellite TV transmission projected onto large screens in high-pedestrian traffic urban locations, literally as if they had run into another on the same street corner. It also pertains to some of the major multi-location real-time events that gave new meaning to the cliché of the global village: for example, Robert Adrian's *Die Welt In 24 Stunden* (*The World in 24 Hours,* 1982), which brought together artists

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in 16 cities on three continents for 24 hours through coordinated use of multiple technologies (slow-scan TV, computer messaging, fax, telephone); and Roy Ascott's *La plissure du texte* (*The Pleating of the Text,* 1983), which involved artists in 9 different locations collaborating on a "planetary fairytale." While the work of Forest and the other mostly French artists working under the Aesthetics of Communication banner are not unrecognized within the small community of telecommunications art pioneers, several of whom have worked with Forest and his colleagues,[31] they are not widely acknowledged outside of it and have been largely left out of recent histories of the communication and network art movement.[32] Eric Gidney has suggested that one reason for this lack of broader recognition could be that access to the most advanced technologies, such as satellites, was not as good (or as early) in Europe, which made the work done there with less spectacular technologies, like telephones, seem provincial. Gidney also acknowledges that artists not based in the Anglophone world or unable to work well in English might have been at a distinct disadvantage in terms of opportunities for collaboration and publicity.[33] However, the language gap does not explain away the disappointing fact that Forest and the Aesthetics of Communication Group, the leaders of the telecommunications art movement in France, we're ignored by the most emblematic new media event to take place in France in the 1980s, Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput's legendary co-curated exhibition *Les Immatériaux,* held at the Pompidou in 1985.[34]

**From Aesthetics to Ethics**

The basic principles of the Aesthetics of Communication became a permanent foundation for Forest's theory and practice of art just like those developed earlier in the

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framework of Sociological Art. According to Forest, art should be a socially relevant research endeavor. It should help people make sense of their increasingly technologically augmented environment. It should offer a critical reflection on the interfaces through which we communicate and access information that are the most responsible for shaping that environment. Furthermore, an art world that relies too heavily on objects, images, theoretical discourses, personality, or the marketplace to convey meaning and confer value has lost relevance and ought to be bypassed. The type of art most appropriate to a society organized on the basis information circulating in automated systems, interactive feedback, long-distance communication, dematerialization, and digital globalization ought to be essentially invisible, made out of public interaction with remote-accessed telematic networks. In this kind of art, the artist is designer of an interface used by the public, not the producer of a tangible work of art viewed by the public. Indeed, the users themselves are responsible for making the art, which arises from their interaction with and through the interface and disappears into thin air the instant the temporary system shuts down. The systems should be designed to make users more aware of the time and space they inhabit, and of the "microphysics" of power that structures the hybrid environment they live in as much as the laws of science or the effects of technology. They are also designed so that a little of the pirate/poacher/prankster ethos rubs off on the users. Finally, art has a choice to make: it can either be utopian or decorative. Forest is a firm believer in the former.

Nonetheless, within this relatively stable framework one discovers some new inflections and greater stylistic variety in Forest's work in the late 1980s and early 1990s. On the one hand, he returns to his earlier practice of staging more theatrical multiple-user simulations.

The best example of this from the period in question is *In Search of Julia Margaret Cameron* (*Avis de recherché: Julia Margaret Cameron,* 1988). This action mobilizes a large number of people in the French Mediterranean port city of Toulon to look for a fictitious missing person by using a broad range of media: daily missing person notices published in the local daily newspaper **[Figure 24]**, 5,000 tracts distributed in the streets, posters, graffiti **[Figure 25]**, and a series of local radio and television broadcasts. The citizens are invited to develop an imaginary relationship to the missing woman by reporting their sightings of the enigmatic Julia, sending her snapshots of themselves **[Figure 26]** or voice messages, or claiming to be her **[Figure 27]**. Simultaneously a social sculpture, an attempt to reverse of the depersonalizing effects of modern media, a reflection on the mystery of personal identity, and a farce performed jointly in urban space and media space, *Julia Margaret Cameron* ends similarly to his campaign for the presidency of Bulgarian television a few years later—with an ironic motorcade through the streets of the city, in this case with an actress playing the part of the once missing woman in the starring role **[Figure 28]**.[35]

In the second place, Forest begins creating multimedia installations and performances that more closely resemble the standard fare one would expect to find in museums and art galleries; however he still uses new media in these works to disrupt and question normal modes of perception. *The Age of Electronic Writing* (*Le temps de l'écriture électronique,* 1986) features an LED message board that streams the artist's reflections on writing through ages, deriving additional meaning from its context: a Letterist-themed exhibition of art organized by the painter, writer, and filmmaker Roland Sabatier, a prominent member of the movement.[36] *Italian Perspective* (*Perspective à l'italienne,* 1987) is a performance/installation piece that takes

its inspiration from both Renaissance painting and the works of Magritte. Spectators take their seats directly in front of a glass door offering the orderly and harmonious perspective of a garden path that leads straight off to a vanishing point on the horizon; however, a screen blocks their view of the scene. What they see instead, projected on the screen, is live video of Forest walking along the same path towards the vanishing point. The here-and-now reality of the of the video is reinforced by the camera, which is left in plain sight of the spectators and physically connected to the artist by a string that he pulls along behind him as he walks off into the distance. By tugging on the string the artist is also able to shut off the camera at the precise moment he is about to vanish in perspective. *Jogging in the Park* (*Le jogging dans le parc,* 1989) is a multimedia installation centering on the video of a man doing just what the title implies; however, in this case, his jumbled thoughts are reconstituted in stream-of-consciousness form on six LED message boards mounted on the walls of the viewing area **[Figure 29]**. The scrolling text alternately slows down, speeds up, halts, and flashes erratically simulating the varied rhythm of his running, breathing, heartbeat, and train of thought.[37] LED message boards were later again used to stunning effect in *The Electronic Bible and the Gulf War* (*La Bible électronique et la guerre du Golfe,* 1991), in which Forest buries boards in a pit filled with six tons of Kuwaiti sand, flown in by cargo plane. The streaming messages on the boards juxtapose passages from the Bible with news dispatches from the war **[Figure 30]** – an evocative technological rendition of the ancient trope of the prophet crying out in the desert, lamenting the folly of war disguised as God's will – while off to the side one finds a video monitor, surrounded by cameras like at a news conference, playing a succession of news clips from the conflict at dizzying speed.

Finally, Forest creates a number of works that demonstrate how the mass media and telecommunications could make even the most traditional form of art—figure painting—more interactive. For instance, in *Nude on Cable* (*Le nu sur le cable,* 1987), he enlists the help of Prix de Rome laureate Joël Moulin to conduct a series of art lessons carried live on cable television using a nude model in a pose replicating that of the human figure in Eugène Delacroix's *Woman with a Parrot* (1827). *Zenaide and Charlotte Take the Media by Storm* (*Zenaide et Charlotte à l'assaut des médias,* 1988-89) uses a wide variety of media platforms—radio, television, newspaper ads and articles, telephone answering machines, and costumed performers interacting with the public—to encourage the citizens of Toulon to imagine the conversation taking place between the young women portrayed in Jacques-Louis David's *Portrait of Zenaide and Charlotte Bonaparte* (1822), which is in the collection of the local museum. The results are displayed alongside the original on sheets featuring photocopied reproductions of the painting with filled-in comic book-style dialog balloons **[Figure 31]** (another example of the enduring legacy of the *Space Media* project of 1972).

The most poetic work of this type is no doubt *Electronic Homage to Mondrian* (*Hommage électronique à Mondrian,* 1989), which consists of a wall of video monitors displaying non-stop electronically generated geometrical forms like those found in Mondrian's works **[Figure 32]**. Only the space in the center of the video sculpture breaks the pattern: here one finds a television tuned in to a particular local channel. However, the work is not complete in this form, as a sign informs the visitors: it is waiting for the last piece of the video puzzle to be added, a final electronically generated monochrome square to be displayed for 60 seconds only during a special live broadcast on the channel playing on the centerpiece monitor. Though

simple in its underlying concept, this project raises many questions about the nature of the artwork(s) created. What specifically makes this a work of art? Are we dealing with a single coherent work of art, one that goes through different phases, or multiple works? Is the wall of monitors really not a (finished) work before the crucial broadcast? If it is in fact already a work of art, to what extent does different from the one that comes into being when the missing video appears on the center screen? Does yet another different work come into being and live on after the missing piece of video had come and gone? Is it a diminished or deteriorated work or a mere vestige, like an empty stage after a play? Is one dealing with an installation, a sculpture, architecture, video, a telecom piece, a performance, a happening, or an electronic painting? Who can be considered its author? Is it Forest, the engineers, the museum staff, or the television show hosts? Isn't the complicity of the spectators needed to make the work? Would it even exist if there were no one in the gallery to see the final 60-second segment on the center monitor? What do the people who only witness the special television show at home see? Is it, too, a work of art, the fragment of a work of art, or just another TV program (albeit an odd one)? If they tune in at the exact moment that the Mondrian-inspired pattern fills the screen might they not think that they were experiencing some technical difficulty? What if there were real technical difficulties and the broadcast of the final square were prevented? Would this make the entire project a failure? How would it change the perception of the intended work? Would there still even be a work or is the failure of any specific component of the project perhaps immaterial? Could it be that this ambiguity, precariousness, and insidious immateriality are the main points of the entire exercise? How is this work a fitting tribute to Mondrian? What does it have in common with iconic Mondrian works like *Broadway Boogie*

*Woogie* (1943)? Should it be considered a posthumous collaboration? Is it a modern experiment or a postmodern pastiche?

In addition to the more varied artistic offerings, there is also something of a new sensibility in some of Forest's work in the late 1980s and early 90s, which he likes to characterize in terms of a paradigm shift from aesthetics to ethics. While his work already demonstrated a strong ethical tenor and social conscience dating back to his pre-Sociological Art days, what one sees at this stage involves a stronger assertion of the artist public role as interpreter of major societal trends and projects that that express more explicit civic, moral, and political messages—albeit not without Forest's trademark sense of humor and insistence on the idea that it is up to the users of his systems to come to their own conclusions about what it all means. This more explicit ethical outlook might have something to do with age and maturity. Forest turned 60 in 1993, two years after *The Electronic Bible* and the year of *Watchtowers,* two of the the morally powerful works in his entire career. A more plausible explanation, however, is that the new emphasis was a response to the changing world around him. Three developments in particular stand out: the intensification of the process of globalization and geopolitical transformation, the fractious public controversy that took place in France in the 1990s over the inherent value of contemporary art, and the rapid proliferation of the internet. The latter two will be examined in detail in the following chapter.

Aside from the effect of telecommunications and technology in general had on human relations and the perception of time and space—the political scientist Zaki Laidi defines globalization in terms of the advent of "world time"[38] (Forest would agree)—three things in

particular seem to have struck Forest in the late 1980s relative to globalization and accompanying adjustments to the geopolitical status quo: the greater urgency with which questions of ecology were being raised locally and internationally; the collapse of Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, helping to bring about a new world (dis)order in which a certain idea of liberal democracy was becoming the "universal" frame of reference; and finally the fact that "globalization" and "the global" had themselves become mythological categories of the collective consciousness, applied to all manner of phenomena. The global was a cultural construct that people were learning to inhabit as if it were something natural, just as they had learned to inhabit the "imagined community" of the nation, and just as they were also beginning to learn how to inhabit a realm that everyone would soon be calling "cyberspace."[39]

The ecological awareness is there in a work like *The Mixing of the Waters* (*Les eaux mêlées,* 1988), an interactive video installation **[Figure 33]** simulating the mixing of the polluted waters of the Seine and Rhine rivers, which then Forest feigns to drink from a teacup – a project that involves a well-publicized debate between the artist and the West German Federal Minister of the Environment Klaus Töpfer.[40] Keen awareness of both the promise and the danger of inherent in the demise of Communism and the political reordering of Central and Eastern Europe and the entire post-Cold War world is clear in such major projects as *Fred Forest for President of Bulgarian Television* and *Watchtowers of Peace.* It is also lesser known works like *Ballad for Regime Change* (*Ballade pour changements de régime,* 1989) and *Perestroika-Art* (1990). The former involves the live performance in Moscow, by bassoonist and composer Alexandr Alexandrov, of a specially commissioned work of the same name—a concert carried live on France-Inter Radio and via conference call in the Paris gallery cohosting the event,

where Forest displays defaced and upside down portraits of former Soviet leaders **[Figure 34]**. The latter represents an evocative variation on the theme of Forest's iconic *150 cm2 of Newspaper* (1972) in the form of an ornately framed blank space for free reader expression appearing in the Russian newsmagazine *Echo of the Planet* **[Figure 35]**.

In August of 1989, Forest carried out an ambitious project that touched on the cultural construction of the global, the environment, and the liberalization of the Soviet Union at the same time: *Telematic Rituals for White Nights* (*Rituels télématiques pour nuits blanches*). At the heart of this multifaceted project is a mock scientific expedition from Arkhangelsk on the White Sea in the Soviet Far North to the edge of the Arctic Circle on a research vessel **[Figure 36]** during the final white nights of the polar summer. On board, Forest performs all the "rituals" of scientific research—he makes measurements using various instruments, conducts mysterious experiments, and keeps a journal of his observations—collecting "data" which he shares with institutions on five continents, including the prestigious Moscow Academy of Sciences. His great "discovery" is that the North Pole is actually located (surprise!) ... inside the perimeter of an artistic square meter at the top of the world! At the conclusion of the first leg of his voyage, he trades science for religion and mysticism and descends the Northern Dvina river to the city of Veliky Ustyug, where he visits the Russian Orthodox monks of the Troitse-Gledensky Monastery and performs a special ritual to bring about the synthesis of time and space. The final leg of his journey, the political one, takes him to Red Square in Moscow, where he stages an unauthorized performance (yet another ritual) near the gates of the Kremlin. The first of several works to come over the next 20 years that would take on a distinctly ritual quality, *Telematic Rituals* was at its most basic level a pilgrimage to three highly symbolic sites.

Throughout the project, Forest plays the part of an artist-as-shaman, who leads his followers through a rite of initiation that will allow them to have a new vision of their world unlike anything to be found in science, religion, or politics: a utopian vision through the mind's eye of an emancipated imagination of a world in which art was an invisible force field as powerful and pervasive as electromagnetic energy or gravity.

## Chapter Two: Illustrations



**Figure 1:** Forest's individual manifesto in *Le Monde* proclaiming a new direction in Sociological Art (1980).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 2:** Main building (President's residence) of the *Territory of the Square Meter,* Anserville, France (c. 1980).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 3:** Hall of Enigmas in the seat of government of the *Territory of the Square Meter* (c. 1980).
The abstract painting on the wall is an untitled work by Fred Forest (1969)
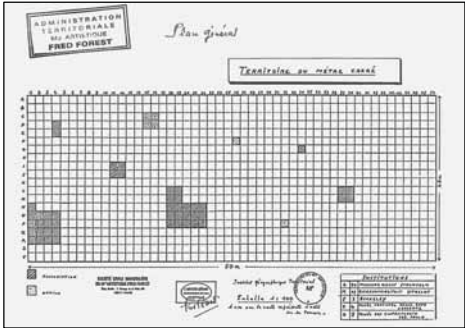[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 4:** Map of the artistic square meter plots on the grounds of the *Territory of the Square Meter* (c. 1980).
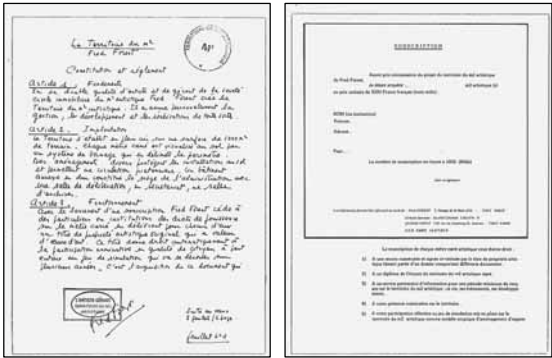[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 5 (Left):** Excerpt of the Constitution of the *Territory of the Square Meter* (1980).
**Figure 6 (Right)** Subscription form, *Territory of the Square Meter* (1980).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 7:** Sample of title given to citizen-subscribers of the *Territory of the Square Meter* (c. 1980).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 8:** Gathering at the *Territory of the Square Meter* (c. 1980).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

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**Figure 9:** Trading board at the *Stock Market of the Imaginary,* Centre Pompidou (1982).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 10:** Stills from a television documentary about the *Stock Market of the Imaginary* (1982).
[Source: INA video archives]

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**Figure 11:** *Here and Now,* multimedia event, San Severino, Italy (1983).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 12:** *Electronic Blue: Homage to Yves Klein,* multimedia event, Benevento, Italy (1984).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

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**Figure 13:** *Celebration of the Present,* multimedia event, Salerno, Italy (1985).
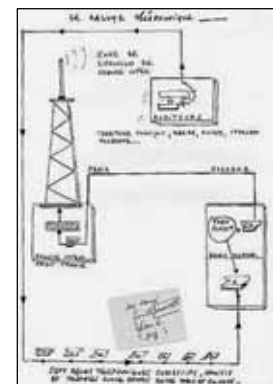[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 14:** *Telephonic Rally,* public participation event using radio-telephone interface (1986).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

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**Figure 15:** Installation for *Planetary Faucets* project, Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, Paris (1992).
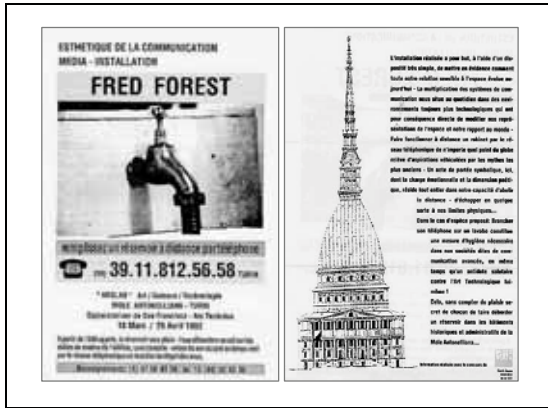[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 16:** Front and back side of poster for *Telephonic Faucet*, exercise in telematic agency, Turin, Italy (1992).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

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**Figure 17:** French culture minister Jean-Philippe Lecat interviewed for *Babel Press Conference* (1983).
[Source: INA video archives]



**Figure 18:** Abraham Moles offering commentary on the set of *Babel Press Conference* (1983).
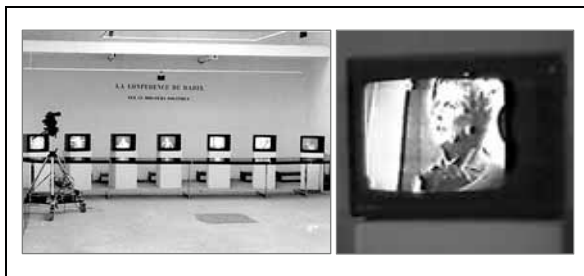[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

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**Figure 19:** *Babel Press Conference* installation, video conference, detail of Margaret Thatcher speaking (1983).
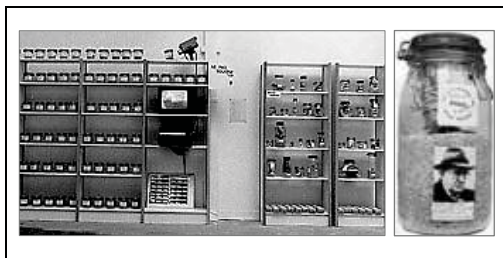[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest (right) and INA video archives (left)]



**Figure 20:** *Babel Press Conference* installation, conservation of speeches in jars, detail of Yuri Andropov jar (1983).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

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**Figure 21:** Poster for *Learn How to Watch TV with Your Radio* (1984).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 22:** Stills from a television documentary on *Learn How to Watch TV with Your Radio*, live event (1984).
[Source: INA video archives]

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**Figure 23:** Stills from a television news segment on *Watchtowers of Peace*, border of Austria and Slovenia (1993).
[Source: INA video archives]

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**Figure 24:** Missing person notices published in *Var matin* (Toulon) for *In Search of Julia Margaret Cameron* (1988).
[Source: *Recherche de Julia Margaret Cameron*, project catalog]



**Figure 25:** Graffiti produced for *In Search of Julia Margaret Cameron*, Toulon, France (1988).
[Source: *Recherche de Julia Margaret Cameron*, project catalog]

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**Figure 24 (left):** Photos submitted by public for *In Search of Julia Margaret Cameron* (1988).
**Figure 25 (right):** Letter submitted by a member of the public for *In Search of Julia Margaret Cameron* (1988).
[Source: *Recherche de Julia Margaret Cameron*, project catalog]



**Figure 28:** Actress depicting Julia Margaret Cameron in final motorcade through streets of Toulon, France (1988).
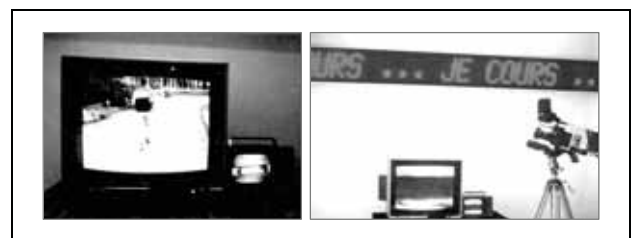[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

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**Figure 29:** *Jogging in the Park*, multimedia installation featuring video and LED message boards (1989).
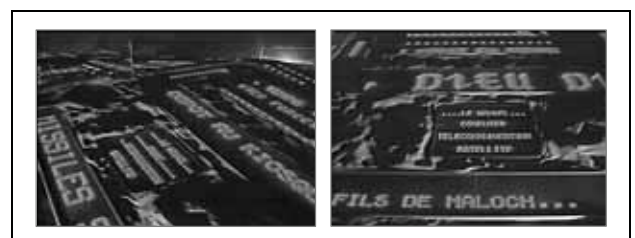[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 30:** Close-ups of the installation for *The Electronic Bible and the Golf War* (1991).
[Source: INA video archives]

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**Figure 31:** *Zeanaide and Charlotte Take the Media by Storm*, public participation event using various media (1989).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 32:** Forest (left) and Mario Costa (right, speaking) on the occasion of Forest's *Tribute to Mondrian* (1989).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 33:** Installation for *The Mixing of the Waters,* Cologne, Germany (1988).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 34:** Forest at the teleperformance of *Ballad for Regime Change,* Paris and Moscow (1989).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

**Figure 35:** *Perestroika-Art,* Forest's blank space in the Russian periodical *Echo of the Planet* (1990).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 33:** Forest on a ship heading for the Arctic Circle, *Telematic Rituals for White Nights* (1989).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

# Chapter Three

## *Experiments in Cyber-Liminality*

Beginning rather inconspicuously in 1991 with the first of what was to become several series of articles published in the journal *Esprit*[1] and culminating in a raucous colloquium held at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSBA) in 1997 (where catcalls of "Nazis!" and "Fascists!" could be heard), contemporary art was the object of an unusually acrimonious public debate in France that garnered the attention of the mainstream media and was still occasionally making the news and generating a steady stream of pamphlets well into the second decade of the twenty-first century.[2] While the French contemporary art controversy of the 1990s did little to alter Forest's view of contemporary art (he had always been an unrelenting critic of the status quo), nor did it have a direct impact on his own artistic production (it was as ephemeral and unmarketable as ever), it deepened his conviction that contemporary art had lost its "anthropological" relevance and needed to be replaced by an "art of the present" in step with the latest technologies of communication and information; and it helped turn a marginal prankster into a recognized public crusader against the contemporary art establishment.

That such a controversy surrounding contemporary art could occur in France should not come as a surprise. After all, grand intellectual "quarrels" are a French tradition. Indeed, many commentators have noted that the *Querelle de l'art contemporain,* as the contemporary art

controversy was called in the French press, was reminiscent in more than name only of the legendary 17th century *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes,* which pitted traditionalist literati in the Académie Française and at court – the Ancients, led by Boileau – who believed that art and literature could do no better than to imitate the august model provided by classical antiquity, against more progressive humanists – the Moderns, led by Perrault – who believed that France in the new golden age of the Louis XIV could surpass Athens and Rome and create a new standard for future generations emulate.[3] Furthermore, contemporary art's "tradition of transgression," as Nathalie Heinich calls it, has touched off controversy on many occasions since its emergence in the 1960s. Consider the highly politicized debates that took place in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s (and ever since) over allegedly offensive or obscene works exhibited by major American museums receiving public funding: e.g., the Whitney Museum's 1989 exhibition of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987), which placed Congressional funding for the National Endowment for the Arts in jeopardy; and the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center's 1990 Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition (held one year after a similar exhibition organized at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. was cancelled), which led to obscenity charges being brought against the museum and its director.

Nonetheless, the American and French controversies were different in at least two respects. In the first place, the American disputes were more about morality and politics than aesthetics. They were flash points in the long-running "culture wars" over "family values," free speech, and the proper role of government in arts funding. The cultural relevance and aesthetic merits of contemporary art *per se* were not a significant part of the public debate even if such issues were raised among insiders and specialists. Moreover, given their emphasis

on the wedge issues of morality and censorship, the American controversies did little to alter the equation between cultural conservatives and progressives. The latter for the most part reliably defended the artistic freedom of expression and the right of institutions to expose controversial work even if they did not personally embrace the work in question.[4]

### The Absolute "Nullity" of Contemporary Art

By contrast, the French Contemporary Art Quarrel of the 1990s did focus on cultural relevance and aesthetic merits (or lack thereof) of contemporary art *per se*. In spite of its elite status as a quasi-official style rather like the history painting of old—a point even its defenders were generally willing to concede—contemporary art found itself deemed "null" (*nul*) and "bullshit" (*n'importe quoi*) in its entirety; and its supposed hegemonic status was explained as the result of a "conspiracy" perpetrated by insiders with the complicity of state officials. Significantly, these were the exact terms used by none other than Jean Baudrillard in an infamous article on "The Conspiracy of Art" that appeared in the left-leaning daily *Libération* in 1996. In this essay, Baudrillard distinguishes between two kinds of nullity, a good kind and a bad kind, rather like good cholesterol and bad cholesterol. The good kind (found in abstraction, Yves Klein, and perhaps Warhol) is a sort of radical insignificance found at the outer reaches, or just below the threshold, of meaning itself. The bad kind is the vapid insignificance of pure bullshit (Duchamp and most of contemporary art), aggravated by ostentatious display:

> Art's duplicity is to aspire to nullity and insignificance when it's already null and
> void. [...] In reality, nullity is a hidden virtue to which not just anyone may aspire.
> True insignificance, the glorious defiance of meaning, the stripping bare of
> meaning, an art of the disappearance of meaning, is an exceptional quality

> belonging to a rare number of works, and never those that proclaim it. There
> are rites of initiation into Nothingness.... And then there's insider trading in
> Nothingness, counterfeiters of nullity, the snobbery of nullity that prostitutes
> Nothingness for private gain...[5]

Baudrillard was not the only leftist intellectual to take this position. Hence, the sides in the French controversy did not break along predictable left-right or liberal-conservative lines. However, Baudrillard himself was responsible for muddying the waters somewhat when he followed up his *Libération* article with a likeminded essay that appeared in a special issue the journal *Krisis* (no. 19, November 1996, along with texts by Jean Clair, Jean-Philippe Domenecq, and Ben Vautier), an organ of the French New Right sympathetic to the Front National with a policy of reaching out to thinkers on the Left). The *Krisis* special issue on contemporary art and Baudrillard's contribution to it, which some on the Left considered a serious lapse of good judgment if not a deliberate act of apostasy, touched off such an intense firestorm of personal attacks and partisan recriminations that aesthetic considerations were nearly lost among the ideological ones that suddenly took center stage.

Baudrillard's dismissive position on contemporary art is really not that surprising if we the body of his work, especially on the shallow simulacra that define postmodern culture, or the broader crisis of identity and values that the French intellectual Left has endured dating back to the late 1970s. Some were initially inclined to follow the lead of the so-called *Nouveaux philosophes* (Bernard-Henri Lévy, André Glucksmann, Pascal Bruckner, and Alain Finkielkraut, among others), who abandoned the Marxism of their youth in reaction to what Communism had become where it had come to power and denounced the insidious totalitarian logic of

other leftist ideologies and positions.[6] Others were inclined to concede that Luc Ferry and Alain Renault had a point about what they saw as the underlying anti-humanism of the May 68 mindset, as critiqued in their influencial 1985 essay *La pensée 68,* translated in English as *French Philosophy of the Sixties.*[7] Quite a few were rather lukewarm in their support for President François Mitterrand (1981-1995), whom they considered somewhat of a phony socialist, an ethically-challenged opportunist, and too accommodating of the prevailing liberal faith in the free marketplace for the sake of European integration. They had especially mixed feelings about Socialist cultural policy, embodied by the flamboyant minister Jack Lang. Criticism of the Mitterrand-Lang approach to culture centered on four main points: [1] the profligate and gargantuan Paris building program personally initiated by Mitterrand, for which the French president was likened to both the Sun King and the Egyptian pharaohs; [2] an allegedly undiscerning and possibly unpatriotic preference for the styles in vogue on the international scene, expressed via subsidies and new programs such as Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain (FRAC); [3] an anti-elitist and supposedly demagogic form of cultural pluralism that tended to put pop culture on the same level as high culture (this was called *le tout culturel* or "everything is cultural" approach); [4] and a program of public festivals intended to enhance fraternity and break down cultural barriers among the people life (e.g., the annual Fête de la Musique) that many considered a waste of energy and money, if not outright publicity stunts.[8] More than a few prominent public intellectuals (e.g. Finkielkraut and Régis Debray, a former Mitterrand adviser) found themselves in substantial agreement with the conservative scholar and Académie Française member Marc Fumaroli, who accused the Socialist "Culture State" of promoting a falsely democratic and aesthetically impoverished idea of culture as a cynical

attempt to "manipulate public opinion."[9] Finally, beginning with the first incident (1989) of the protracted "Headscarf Affair," which centered on the question of whether authorities should ban the wearing of *hidjabs* by Muslim girls in the public schools, many rallied to the defense of the French "republican ideal" of a nation based on the Enlightenment-era principles of reason, universalism, indivisibility, secularism (*laïcité*), and civic instruction—a set of values said to be endangered by the French State's craven willingness to accommodate the demands of religious fundamentalists (in the name of multiculturalism and tolerance) and other special interests.[10]

Were all the old lefties turning into "new reactionaries"?[11] While this label might indeed fit some of the intellectual celebrities to whom it has been applied, a sudden generational propensity for knee-jerk conservatism alone does not adequately explain the trend. One common thread that one finds running through many of the political and cultural critiques made by the so-called new reactionaries, including, for many of them, the denunciation of contemporary art's nullity, is a certain unapologetic faithfulness to an older heroic idea of modernity and the modern against the postmodern as characterized by multiculturalism, the marketplace, globalization, the "ecstasy of communication," and neo-Dadaism in its most derivative forms. Those most dismissive of contemporary art weren't advocating a return to Tradition with a capital "T." Indeed, most accepted the basic premises that contemporary art seemed to share with modernism: e.g., avant-garde iconoclasm as a creative force, the complete freedom of the individual creator, and art's critical engagement with the issues of the present. However, they lamented modernism's supposed emphasis on craft over careerism, its unabashed pretention to universal significance, and its persistent belief in painting as the crucial medium for the expression of singular artistic visions. As such, the

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French contemporary art controversy of the 1990s was not so much a new Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns as a Quarrel of the Moderns and the Contemporaries.

Musée Picasso director Jean Clair was a leader of the anti-contemporary camp. Though he was by no means a stranger to high-level government support for the arts (and perhaps because of this fact), Clair held the State responsible for the "impasse" in which French art found itself, in his view. He claimed that government policy had elevated to the status of "arbiters of public taste" what he termed "a small clique of 'commissars' all too often mixed up with the market, in thrall to an official avant-garde, and indifferent to anything that doesn't conform to its dogma." This not only led to the inevitable problems of corruption, preferential treatment, and bureaucratic obtuseness; it also allegedly contributed to a general decline in technical mastery, leaving many French artists "colorblind," amateurish, and incapable of careful contemplation of simple realities. Most damning of all in Clair's view was that the French State's interventionism was responsible for hastening France's national decline on the international art scene insomuch as it had made French artists "dependent on state subsidies" and "ill prepared to compete in a global marketplace;" and had foresaken "the national genius" for "internationalism on the cheap," whereas Italy, Germany, and Britain had remained competitive because they supposedly had not erased all of the inherited traits of their respective national schools.[12] Clair's ultimate aim was to reestablish the great Western humanist tradition in the arts; and his most audacious claim, expressed in his 1997 essay, *La responsabilité de l'artiste: les avant-gardes entre terreur et raison*, was that the avant-garde had served as "a test case for the spiritual intolerance and violence" that had so characterized the twentieth century and threatened to remain the norm in the twenty-first as well.[13]

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This kind of political critique of the State-dominated French contemporary art system was wrapped up in a broader aesthetic critique, which, as mentioned, often involved the use of derogatory terms like "bullshit" and "nullity." It would be easy, but also misleading, to put together a hit parade of snide remarks and blanket condemnations of this type. For example, there is the character Marc in Yasmina Reza's popular play «*Art*», which was first performed in France in 1994 (at the height of the *querelle*). Marc, an engineer with a rather conventional taste in art who represents both reason and the position of a new breed of contrarian that makes it a point of pride to reject the present, keeps trying to pressure his friend Serge, an upwardly mobile dentist who fancies himself an lover of cutting-edge art, that the white monochrome by the painter Antrios that the latter has purchased for a scandalous amount of money is really "a piece of shit."[14] Then there is the *Esprit* essayist Jean-Philippe Domecq, who assessed contemporary art as being "95% null," accused it of having "nothing to say about anything except contemporary art itself," and singled out Daniel Buren, whose art amounted to little more than acts of "pure self-promotion." Nonetheless, there were some elements of serious argument behind the invective. Domecq, for instance, suggests that critics are to blame for the pervasive nullity of contemporary art because they have failed to develop a framework of aesthetic criteria that can be used to distinguish between good and bad works. The only aesthetic question they are apparently willing to entertain is whether or not a given work minimally qualifies as art—a question to which they invariably respond "yes."[15]

Put on the defensive by such categorical critiques, the response of the French pro-contemporary art camp was somewhat lackluster. This was perhaps because it agreed with parts of the critique of the "system" and also surely because it felt that many of the more

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sweeping and vindictive condemnations of were not worthy of serious point-by-point refutation. When the pro-contemporary art camp did respond, they tended to focus on the reactionary politics and aesthetics of the anti-contemporary art camp.[16] While this line of argument was sometimes quite partisan (e.g. the special dossier in the journal *Art press*, no. 223, April 1997, with a title that translates into English as "The Far Right Attacks Contemporary Art"), it was developed more thoughtfully in other instances. One such example, also from 1997, is *La crise de l'art contemporain* by the former ENSBA director, the philosopher Yves Michaud.[17] Michaud asserts that it is the nostalgic ideal of "a grand aesthetic for a grand art" that is the real "sham and terroristic threat" insofar as it denies the pluralistic nature of both art and the groups that make up today's democratic society. Aesthetic relativism is the only viable option in today's world, he advises, and any attempt to apply old categories to contemporary art in order to give the latter some semblance of common purpose (e.g. the city-wide celebration of *La Beauté* held in Avignon in 2000, organized by Jean de Loisy[18]) is bound to fall short. The most common type of response of contemporary art's detractors emphasized the existential relevance of contemporary art. For instance, in *L'art contemporain: histoire et géographie*, *Art press* editor-in-chief Catherine Millet writes that while not all contemporary art is good—but neither was all modern or classical art (one tends to forget the nullity of other eras)—the best of contemporary art fulfills one of the fundamental missions of modernism: "to bring to light and ... move to higher ground that essential part of our humanity that religion no longer addresses and science cannot even imagine."[19] It does so by confronting—more frankly than modernism ever did—the eternal grey zones of the human experience such as the body, sex, death, meaninglessness, alterity, fetishism, violence, power, and money.

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There were a number of paradoxes and incongruities in the French Contemporary Art Quarrel that ought to be mentioned. One of the most striking was the relative absence of actual contemporary artists (and their work) in the whole affair. Not only did they generally abstain from the debate (Ben contributed a text to *Krisis,* others attended the Beaux-Arts colloquium), but specific examples of their work were rarely cited, let alone analyzed in detail. Contemporary art was treated more like a stereotype and the names of only a handful of artists who fit that stereotype—invariably Duchamp, Warhol, Jeff Koons, and Damien Hirst; and to a lesser extent Buren and Jean-Pierre Raynaud—were repeatedly cited. Another paradox concerns the evolution of Jean Clair's position since the 1970s. As Rebecca DeRoo points out in *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art,* Clair had played an important role in the French institutional response to May 68's demand that art be reconciled with the everyday life of the people as a member of the curatorial team that organized the exhibition *Douze ans d'art contemporain en France* and laid the foundation for what was to become the Centre Pompidou. He had also written enthusiastically of artists like Christian Boltanski, Annette Messager, Jean Le Gac, and Gérard Gasiorowski, whom he saw as representing a new, "clandestine avant-garde" with a typically French interest in memory and the archive—proof that Clair once believed that contemporary art could in fact carry forward the "national genius." Not everyone had Clair's record of experience, however, and Clair is certainly entitled to reject the art of the 1990s and like some of art the 1970s; however, many other self-styled dissenters to the contemporary art status quo seemed stuck in the past (albeit a quite recent one), rejecting contemporary artists and work that they once at least tolerated with little evident aesthetic or moral discomfort ... 20, 30, or 40 years after the fact. Another paradox is what little attention in

the debate was paid to critics of contemporary art coming from a more radically progressive position—leaving the impression that the Contemporary (the status quo) and the Modern (nostalgic aestheticism) were the only two options. This is where Fred Forest comes in.

**Beyond Contemporary Art**

One can hardly be blamed for thinking that the French Contemporary Art Quarrel of the 1990s was Forest's dream come true since many people were finally saying the kind of things that he had been saying for years. For an artist as attuned to social context and media buzz as Forest, it was a perfect occasion to seize. However, Forest's position was more subtle, and radical, than that of contemporary art's most strident critics. Although he agreed with their critique of the "system" essentially point-for-point, he never claimed that contemporary art as a category had no aesthetically redeeming quality or that there were hardly more than a handful of contemporary artists who had something meaningful to say. Furthermore, he was never against the idea that successful artists should be well compensated for the fruits of their labor as long as the gains were honest and the process transparent. The major difference, though, was that he did not want to send art back to the bygone golden age of modernism (even though he was an unapologetic humanist); instead, he wanted to move more boldly forward by advocating an "art of the present" that was fully engaged with the technologies that had so radically transformed human experience and as immaterial as the information environment in which people lived. Forest's position in the art controversy is spelled out in a caustic article from 1993 entitled "Pour qui sonne le glas: les impostures de l'art contemporain" ("For Whom the Bell Tools: The Travesties of Contemporary Art"):

The time has come to wipe the slate clean. To reinvent ... forms of expression ... capable of making sense after this period of sterility. Forms in synch with the spirit of the times, its sensibility, and the air that we breathe. [...]

I have nothing at stake in this academic dispute between the "ancients" and the "moderns." I put all of the actors in this tawdry spectacle in the same bag. In one corner, the acolytes of an underappreciated contemporary art, and in the other, the supercilious and intolerant guardians of an obsolete orthodoxy. The latter at least have the merit of having kicked the hornet's nest. Of having loudly denounced a travesty and brought the debate out into the open. [...]

If we succumb to the temptation of debating with them, we would be falling into a trap. In order to raise ourselves up to their level of erudition, the very least we would have to do would be to exhume the body of Herr Kant himself! ... as if the gentleman could have the same idea of the "Beautiful" and the "Sublime" today that he had one hundred and fifty years ago, writing by the light of his oil lamp in Königburg. [...]

Why not try to assess with a modicum of intellectual honesty what the so-called "faculties of representation" have become for individuals like us ... [living] in a highly technological environment? For a society in which all sorts of prostheses, diverse interfaces, and even forms of artificial intelligence are developing rapidly... These are unprecedented conditions that fundamentally change our relationship to the world, the forms we use to represent it, our way of grasping it, sensing it, understanding it, living in it. [...]

Contemporary aesthetics cannot be construed without taking into consideration certain conditions contingent upon and inherent to our age and the radical changes that are affecting it. There is a great temptation to reject them in favor of nostalgia for a paradise lost or an investment in something more "primitive," or better still, the rock solid and thoroughly vetted values of a bygone past. Or

the merchandise manufactured and marketed to us in a commercial context that is manipulated by the smooth operators of the art market. [...]

From my point of view, "avant-garde" artistic practice coincides closely with discovering the specificity of new media and the potential for intermedia hybrids in a variety of new contexts. By contrast, art that utilizes techniques acquired long ago wears itself out in the repetition of the "already done" and the "already seen," even if it sometimes happens that such art leads to works that are not without relevance. [...]

Beyond the vicissitudes of the art market and the ideological trends it breeds; beyond the byzantine quarrels these trends are subject to, it is our responsibility to come up with other ways of reading our world and other operational concepts that will allow us to lay the foundations of a true art of the present in synch with our time. [...]

Research artists – in other words, avant-garde artists who are truly representative our age – tell us that "new technologies" are transforming the contours of artistic creativity. These artists have worked towards the elaboration of new models of epistemological and existential meaning ... [and] new instruments of speculative anthropology. Their role today, like [that of the avant-garde] in times past, is to make sure that our modes of creativity correspond to a new anthropological moment, brought about by these technologies. [...]

For this reason, the task with which we are now confronted perhaps no longer consists solely in redefining the contemporary meaning of aesthetics, but also the contemporary meaning of ontology.[20]

Forest's works over the next twenty years would put these ideas into practice. However, in the more immediate context of the French contemporary art quarrel, they would

first lead him to a public campaign against the French contemporary art establishment that most famously included his highly publicized lawsuit against the Pompidou Centre. Over the next several years he would also develop both his critique of contemporary art and his own idea of an "art of the present" in a series of three books in about art's role in society: *Pour un art actuel: l'art à l'heure d'Internet, Fonctionnement et dysfonctionnements de l'art contemporain,* and *Repenser l'art et son enseignement.*

Building on his 1993 article "For Whom the Bell Tolls," *Pour un art actuel* (1998) opens by reiterating Forest's critique of the irrelevance of a contemporary art that is still "in thrall to the materiality of the object," which is little more than a "fetish" (67) in a world characterized by speed, change, interrelation, and interaction, which static images cannot hope to express. It also repeats the idea developed in the theoretical texts of the Aesthetics of Communication movement that the project of aesthetics is to explore sensorial reality such as it exists for "a particular society at a specific moment in history" (75), which today encompasses what we can see, hear, and feel in the "hyper-technological environment" (75). Having largely ignored the major technological mutations of our day, contemporary art is no longer relevant except to a small group of initiates, people who stand to make money from the lucrative trade in art objects (merely a subsector of the market for luxury goods), and people who have empty walls to decorate. On the other hand, the more anthropologically relevant technological aesthetic Forest supports necessitates "transmedia events without a specific location" (87). Such works are not based on a traditional logic of *representation* and contemplation, whereby the artist produces plastic metaphors of the real to be pondered by the viewing public. Instead, they operate according to a different logic of *presentation* and interaction, whereby the real is

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captured as it happens, emerging directly from public interaction with and through the open system devised by the artist. Put succinctly, "exchange constitutes the work" (82). Those who still expect aesthetics to have something to do with pleasure will not be disappointed, Forest writes, but they should not expect this pleasure to be predominantly "retinal" since the type of pleasure inherent to the intersubjective transmedia events in information space prescribed by Forest is derived from "shared subjectivity coupled with an awareness of this sharing" (113). The internet is not the only context in which works conforming to these principles can be carried out, but it is the most relevant one given the prominent place it presently occupies in everyday "sensorial reality," its potential for taking art out of the "white box" to a larger audience, and the culture of decentralized collaboration out of which it emerged.

Forest then goes beyond the premises of both the Aesthetics of Communication and Sociological Art, as he spells out the necessary anthropological function of his "art of the present" in the "age of the internet." A true avant-garde art of the present must have an "exploratory" function as a form of "speculative anthropology" (86). Given their unique capacity for envisioning new realities, it is up to artists – not engineers, politicians, academics, pundits, or businessmen in Silicon Valley – to devise "instruments of creative adaptation" that can help people make sense of the "unprecedented situations with which humanity finds itself confronted" (177) in today's hyper-technological environment. This anthropological charge requires not only imagination but also the rebellious attitude of the insurgent. Anyone who wishes to help his or her contemporaries "broaden the horizons of our perception and sensibility as well as our critical, ethical, and spiritual consciousness" (88) by making art on/out of the internet, must first disrupt the its normal mode of operation, which has been shaped

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according to the vested interests and ideologies of multinational corporations and other powerful social forces. Artists must be in the forefront of the struggle against the effects of "disconnection from reality" (165) and "disinformation" (211) that are so rampant on the internet and refuse to allow the network to become just another venue for commerce based on the principle of passive consumption.

Writing in more positive terms, Forest argues that the artist of the technetronic present must "cast himself as the founder of new utopias" that are "sources for the renewal of existential meaning" (254). Although he leaves the interpretation of the word "utopia" open, he offers four hints centering on different existential fundamentals, all of which characterize his own work online. In the first place, artists can offer creative "reconfigurations" of time (152) and new ways to take one's time in opposition to technology's general tendency to push us to do more, faster. In the second place, they can invent new kinds of "voyage" that help to restore some of the "poetry of space" (253) that has been lost in long-distance communication. In the third place, they can devise "fun" pretexts for "renewed sociability" as an antidote to the "mechanistic solitude" (257) to which so many of us fall prey as we spend more time online and less in face-to-face encounters. Finally, they can lay new foundations for spiritual awareness:

> Computerized procedures, networked exchanges, and the sharing of both real and differed time on the Internet all lend themselves to "rites" of "communion" which, profane though they might be, are nonetheless subconscious attempts to establish the foundations of a new "religiosity." "Navigations" leading to revealing encounters with the other are tantamount to digital pathways of initiation across space and time. They serve the individual's fundamental

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existential and transcendental quest, his "cyclical" "craving" to return to "core" of meaning (265).

*Fonctionnement et dysfonctionnements de l'art contemporain* (2000) combines a detailed account of Forest's legal proceedings against the Centre Pompidou including relevant archival material (correspondence, texts of official rulings, etc.) with a scathing critique of the contemporary art world both in France and worldwide:

> One must not allow oneself be taken in by the inane, pseudo-intellectual, aestheticizing jargon with which obliging critics fill the pages of art journals and exhibition catalogs, and which is nothing more than a promotional tool used to "idealize" the art trade. (63) [...]

> The existing art system has two main objectives: 1) to produce, endorse, validate, and promote specific types of "merchandise" ... that has commercial value in the context of the established market for contemporary art; 2) to "unload" this merchandise ... on the first sap that happens to come along, preferably a representative of public institutions in charge of acquisitions. As everyone knows, the art system generates huge profits in the process, the exact amount and beneficiaries of which it would be most edifying to learn. (66)

> This rather "artificial" means of "fabricating" aesthetic models which are then forced on us by the marketplace does not mean that all artists working in the field of contemporary art are "null," as certain reckless and unfair critics have claimed. However, it does mean that the artists themselves and the members of the public are victims of the same vast system of manipulation ... with the obvious complicity of the cultural apparatus of the State. The systematic nature and ethos of this manipulation have more to do with economics than aesthetics or debates about ideas—a fact that ... acutely illustrates our society's broader problem with value and meaning. (66)

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Forest recognizes that art is just as much a business as in literature, music, or film; however, he maintains that the active role that the French State plays in aiding and abetting the art business through acquisitions by public institutions and generous subsidies makes it more than just a question of business as usual. One should expect more from government agencies and public institutions that are supposed to be guided by democratic principles of fairness, transparency, and public service. Public institutions have an abiding interest to mitigating the supposedly "natural" play of marketplace forces with a corrective emphasis on work that is meaningful but underrepresented or less marketable. According to Forest, the last thing the State should be doing is use its resources and authority to reinforce the market-driven hegemony of the "artistically correct" (64). This only compromises the integrity of talented artists who have had the good fortune of having received the triple consecration market, media, and public institutions; and it further marginalizes the work of creators less willing to conform to prevailing tastes. Forest took the Pompidou to court because it is the French public institution in the field of modern and contemporary that possess the greatest symbolic capital and because it is, in his view, a major player in the morally and aesthetically compromised market-driven system:

> While the Pompidou Center does not currently play the pedagogical role that one has the legitimate right to expect it to play, ... it does play a non-negligible role in the "creation" of value by imposing certain artists or consolidating their position in the marketplace. In this respect, it finds itself both an interested party and referee in the "speculative" game being played on the contemporary art scene. It is directly implicated in the area of price. Prices are driven higher by the exhibitions it bestows on certain artists, who are the happy beneficiaries of this effect, as are the galleries that represent them... The only thing that

remains completely in the dark is the "how" and the "why" of the choices made of certain artists and not others who might nonetheless be equally talented. (65)

*Repenser l'art et son enseignement* (2002) describes how the problems outlined in the first two books have effected art education in France. His conclusion, not surprisingly, is that French art schools form a "closed and elitist milieu that reproduces the closed system of institutional art" (171). He particularly notes their purported slowness to accept art created with new technologies, which he claims has placed young French artists at a competitive disadvantage in the global art system and deprived the "art of the present" of some of new tech-savvy talent it needs to overthrow the old regime.

**The Man Who Pokes Holes in the Media Goes Online**

By far the biggest new development of the 1990s was Forest's own first experiments in art on the internet. With its built-in multimedia capabilities, the opportunities it provides to bypass traditional art venues and take interactive projects directly to a broader public, its immediate and far-reaching impact on contemporary culture, and its contribution to the mythology of information space, the Internet was naturally appealing to an artist of Forest's inclinations. One of the first Net Artists in France, Forest's place in the history of the genre deserves greater recognition.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, his experiments in Sociological Art and the Aesthetics of Communication anticipated many of the themes and tactics of the first generation of Net Art pioneers. [21] By hijacking, disrupting, or repurposing media interfaces in projects like *Space Media (150 cm2 of Newspaper, 60 Seconds of Blank Screen, etc.), TV Shock/TV Exchange, Babel*

*Press Conference, Learn How to Watch TV, Electronic Homage to Mondrian,* and *Planetary Faucet,* Forest set an example for the interface-conscious work of artists like Jodi.org, Alexi Shulgin, Olia Lialina, Mark Napier, I/O/D, Maciej Wisniewski, and others. Projects like *Biennial of the Year 2000, Electronic Investigation of Rue Guénégaud, Restany Dines at La Coupole, Madame Soleil in the Flesh, The Video Family,* and *Force Field of 14,000 Hertz* anticipate online pranks and parodies designed to expose and undermine the workings of the art world: e.g. Vuk Cosik's *Documenta Done* (1997), Cornelia Sollfrank's *Female Extension* (1997), Rachel Baker's *Mr. Net Art* competition (1998), 0100101110101101.ORG's *Darko Maver* hoax (1998-99), and Heath Bunting and Natalie Bookchin's *Criticism Curator Commodity Collector Disinformation* (1999). Forest's transactional artworks—e.g., *Video Portrait of the Collector in Real Time, The Artistic Square Meter, Stock Exchange of the Imaginary,* and *Telepathic System*—have much in common with later online works based on the e-commerce paradigm: e.g. the AKSHUN group's *73,440 Minutes of Fame Available Now on eBay* (1999), Keith Obadike's *Blackness for Sale* (2001), Cary Peppermint's *Use Cary Peppermint as a Medium: Exposure #8818* (2000). At his most provocative in works such as *The City Invaded by Blank Space, Fred Forest for President of Bulgarian Television,* and *The Lost Work,* and *Watchtowers of Peace,* he is close in spirit to web-based activism of Electronic Disturbance Theater, ®TMark, JoshOn/Futurefarmers, etc. Finally, Forest projects like *Immediate Intervention, Here and Now, Communicating Space, Electronic Blue, Celebration of the Present, Italian Perspective,* and *Telephonic Rally* anticipate interactive digital works and Net Art projects that explore the intersection of information space and physical space and its effect on human relations and consciousness: e.g., projects by Heath Bunting, Eduardo Kac's groundbreaking work on telepresence, Ken Goldberg and company's

iconic *Telegarden* (1995), Natalie Jeremijenko's *Live Wire* (1995), Stelarc's startling web-interfaced cyborg performances, Jeffrey Shaw's brilliant *The Legible City* (1989) and its later networked adaptation in *The Distributed Legible City* (1998), Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Vectorial Elevation* (1999/2002), Knowbotic Research's *10_DENCIES* project (1997-99), fellow Frenchman Grégory Chatonsky's *Sous terre, the Subnetwork* (2000), tsunami.net's *alpha 3.4* (2002), and Paris-based Karen O'Rourke's *A Map Larger Than the Territory* (2002-04).

Forest is a Net Art pioneer in his own right, too, albeit one who fits the nickname given to him by Pierre Restany, "the grand primitive of the Net," for the unapologetic humanism, childlike whimsy, and non-techie approach he brought to his online work.[22] Forest's first project utilizing the Internet, *From Casablanca to Locarno,* dates from September 1995. It is a multimedia public participation event with a live telecast involving the redubbing of certain famous scenes from the Humphrey Bogart-Ingrid Bergman classic with new dialog proposed members of the audience both in the studio and at home, who use email as one means to communicate with Forest and his team during the telecast **[Figure 1]**. In 1996, his web-based digital work *Network-Parcel* (*Parcelle-Réseau*) is sold at a public auction **[Figure 2]** carried live on the Internet—the first event of its kind.[23] *Network-Parcel* demonstrates how compatible Forest's career-long interests are with the internet platform. Like *Self-Portrait of the Collector in Real Time* in 1974 and *The Artistic Square Meter* in 1977, the auction is an integral part of the work, which is part performance, part social sculpture, part communication experiment, part concept piece, and part web-based digital image. Moreover, in spite of its visual manifestation in the form of a digital image, its location on the Web as designated by a URL, and the exclusive proprietary nature of the access code that is sold (features designed to give it a certain

definiteiteness), the work is arguably as much a parcel of the void as to be found in any of Forest's other blank space projects. In the end, *Parcel-Réseau* is a sort of riddle, left unanswered, about what it could possibly mean to buy, sell, collect, and possess digital art on the internet. Thanks to these and other early actions, Forest became one of the earliest public faces of Net Art in France, where internet use was somewhat slow to develop.[24]

Forest has created a number of noteworthy online works including *Time Out* (*J'arrête le temps,* 1998), *Machine for Manipulating Time* (*La machine à travailler le temps,* 1998), *The Techno-Wedding* (*Le techno-mariage,* 1999), *The Center of the World* (*Le centre du monde,* 1999), *Networked Color* (*Couleur-Réseau,* 2000), *Territorial Outings* (*Sorties de territoire,* 2001), *Meat: The Territory of the Body and the Networked Body* (*Viande: territoire du corps et corps-réseau,* 2002), *Memory Pictures* (*Images-mémoire,* 2005), *The Digital Street Corner* (2005), *Biennale 3000* (2006), and *The Lighthouse at World's End* (*La sentinelle du bout du monde,* 2007).[25] True to the fundamental principles of the Aesthetics of Communication, many of these works deal with the sensorial, cognitive, psychological, and anthropological effects wrought by the proliferation of the internet, which in addition to its own unique properties and ramifications [26] also epitomizes phenomena already associated with other forms of telecommunication and telematics: dematerialization, deterritorialization, globalization, telepresence, the ascendancy of real time over real space, hybrids of the virtual and the physical, interface ecologies, distributed community, and so on.

Some of the projects are quite similar in (metacommunicational) spirit to the absurd interfaces created ten to fifteen years earlier in the prime of the Aesthetics of Communication

(1983-87). In *Machine for Manipulating Time,* people visiting the work's website at the same time compete with one another to either speed up or slow down time by clicking the accelerator or brake buttons of the interface **[Figure 3]**. The resulting speed of time at any moment is hence a function of the overall positive (accelerating) or negative (breaking) sum of user input. The work clearly evokes how the Internet has been used to spur people to be ever more productive, putting every second to good use, wherever one might find oneself, in order to stay ahead in a hypercompetitive global economic environment; however, it is just as suggestive of the time-stands-still idleness and intense concentration of internet addiction (especially online gaming) and the utopian fantasy of harnessing the power of the technology to shape time in accordance with our desires.

By comparison, the web interface **[Figure 4]** featured in *Memory Pictures* (co-produced by Gilbert Dutertre of France's INA) is not so much absurd as it is ingenious insofar as it repurposes the image search function of Google unusual way by allowing its users to create a collage of images culled from the web via Google based on a word, name, or simple expression; for which they propose their own definition, description, or comment. Taken together, the archived "memory pictures" constitute a sort of online folk encyclopedia of people, places, things, and ideas. Individual collages could be printed out and sent to the artist, who would sign them as an attestation of their official status as collaborative works of art before returning them to the senders.[27] In keeping with Forest's past practice, this proposition raises questions about the artistic quality and authorship of the individual works produced in this manner. Indeed, a lot of different people could make a reasonable claim to being authors in this case: the users of the interface, Forest, his technical team, Google, and the people who posted the

images on the web in the first place. The latter are unwitting collaborators in a creative process, but not entirely unwittingly, since their "original" material—perhaps itself copied from somewhere else on the web—was not recovered from the trash or taken from them, but posted on a searchable public platform (as parts of individually or corporately authored web pages), ostensibly to be seen and used by others. There is a Surrealistic component in the project's attempt to cultivate a sense of the everyday marvelous in "automatic" associations of ideas and pictures culled from the "collective memory" of humankind that the web has become. The project also invites creative and devious users to attempt to outwit the system: i.e., Google's business practices and search algorithms, which make certain items the top responses to a given search while other items are relegated to the obscure nether reaches of the web and are used by advertisers and parties with a vested interest in the Google search stature of their sites; the culturally inculcated categorical and associative paradigms of the human mind; and Forest's intentions as the project's creator-in-chief. Consequently, while there were many predictable collages generated for terms like "Love," "Truth" **[Figure 5]**, and "Art" (coupled with philosophical or poetic musings on the subject) and tributes to favorite poets ("Rimbaud") or places ("Paris"); people almost immediately begin to use the system in counter-intuitive or alternative ways. For example, they generate collages based on the vaguest of signifiers like "Here" or "And," use the system as an instant messaging system for back-and-forth conversations or flame wars (in some cases, such messages have nothing to do with the images used), or they turn the system against Forest—for instance, by criticizing him or his work, or comparing this particular project unfavorably to work by other artists.[28]

One of the most interesting alternative uses of the *Memory Pictures* interface comes from Forest himself. For his *Stations of the Cross* (*Chemin de croix,* 2005) at Galérie Depardieu in Nice **[Figure 6]**, Forest invites the public to use the *Memory Pictures* interface to comment on the state of city of Nice—the city of Yves Klein, Nikki de Saint-Phalle, and Ben Vautier; a focal point of the Supports/Surface group of painters; and onetime home to Forest himself—under the controversial leadership of Mayor Jacques Peyrat, a former member of the right-wing Front National. Fourteen "stations" on themes like "Construction Projects," "Tram," "Military Music," and "Crime" are set up in the gallery. The mayor did not appreciate the criticism and allegedly retaliated by having the gallery excluded from the city's celebration of the "Nuit Blanche" (White Night), an annual (since 2002) nationwide event during which art galleries, museums, and other cultural hot spots are open all night in a festive attempt to bring cutting-edge art to the people.

Quite a few of Forest's web works reflect his preoccupation with the notion of territory dating back to his Sociological Art period, when it was expressed chiefly through the concept of the square meter. One of his earliest online art projects, *Networked Territory,* undertaken in 1996, involves the creation of a web version of his *Territory of the Square Meter,* Forest's home and make-believe independent state in the small town Paris region town of Anserville. On the project website, the narrative history of the Territory provides the ironic premise for a series of interwoven texts and images including private snapshots of Forest and his family and friends as well as archival material from Forest's earlier works **[Figure 7]**. Visitors to the site could take a self-guided tour of Forest's (e)state/life/career by either clicking on the "forward" and "back" buttons, or by wandering about the labyrinthine website in haphazard fashion, creating their own personal versions of his (e)state/life/career by clicking on the hypertext links in the texts at will. In the end, the second option was perhaps more faithful to the way Forest's own memory

probably functions, not to mention how anybody inhabits the virtual space that is his or her life by weaving an invisible web that ties together various places, events, words, images, people, and possessions. The work also underscores the fact our ordered sense of space is based in large part on political, cultural, and mental constructs like territorial borders. While the internet does have the potential to reshape, undermine and otherwise transcend many of these artificial constructs – effects that one understandably perceives collectively as a process of deterritorialization or virtualization – it does not necessarily entail an apocalyptic waning "real" in the face of the rising tide of the "virtual" because the real (i.e., physical space and actual places defined specific natural and manmade material attributes) is still there – underlying, poking through, and intimately intertwined with whatever conceptual constructs we impose on it in order to make sense of it.

In 2001, Forest once again uses his signature square meter concept in *Territorial Outings,* a work created during his term as artist in residence in the working class Paris suburb of Fresnes (best known as the location of the second largest penitentiary in France). This project combines a discrete on-site installation, schemes for public participation, and a web component **[Figure 8]**. On site, he places the outline of an "artistic" square meter on the floor of a big-box-type supermarket, just outside the checkout area. A webcam is installed so that the feet of the shoppers who walk across the square would appear live on the project's website **[Figure 9]**. This work lends itself to a number of different interpretations. Its stated objective is to lay claim to the internet for ordinary people the way Neil Armstrong had claimed the moon for "mankind," by leaving a symbolic footprint on its surface (visitors to the project website take part in the operation by sending the scanned outlines of their own feet to a special email

address). Furthermore, by combining the physical manifestation of a square meter of cyberspace on the floor of a bricks-and-mortar store with digital video of shoppers' feet on the web, the work symbolizes the intermingling of the "real" and the "virtual" as a fact of everyday life of which people might not be fully conscious (e.g. the digital footprint that they leave every time they use their credit card at checkout or their computer to view online content). Ultimately, the work suggests that there are similarities between cyberspace, the marketplace, and France's drab and disadvantaged suburbs, which *la racaille* (or "riff-raff," dixit Nicolas Sarkozy) lay claim to in their own deviant outings and the media portray as quasi-foreign territories that have been "lost" to the Republic. Forest's project hints that each needs art and other forms of creative trespassing if it is to be more than a postindustrial "no man's land."

The territorial concept applies in a different way in *Meat*. On the surface just the latest in a long line of ironic projects involving the commercialization of artistic non-commodities, it consists entirely of a website where, for a limited time only, one can purchase (perhaps "lease" would be a better term) the rights to different parts of Forest's body, displayed in a full-figure nude image of the artist looking both vulnerable and resigned **[Figure 10]**—carved up into sections like the carcass of an animal in a butcher shop (or parcels of land on a developer's map). Each parcel of flesh leased is in reality a small section of a larger interactive image onto which the new titular occupant planted a small flag and could leave a message, a sort of digital tattoo **[Figure 11]**. The work is a droll overstatement of the idea that the internet is little more than a vast electronic marketplace, where one can just as easily go shopping for pornography, a hook-up, or black market organs as for clothes to cover one's own naked body or real estate. It is also an acknowledgement of the loss of a holistic sense of the embodied self in the age of

information as we all tend to become primarily disembodied digital avatars while entrusting our incarnate beings to medical science, territories subjected to high-tech probes and various forms of medical imaging with the test results archived in computer data bases accessible online. Finally, the work touches on the subject of death insofar as it also represents an aging artist's fantasy of immortality (or anxiety over his legacy) and cheekily resembles both an autopsy and a human sacrifice. Given all of these weighty connotations, what makes the work bearable is its unconcealed tone of self-deprecating irony. How can one it too seriously when one is practically looking at oneself naked in the mirror?

**Rites of Passage in Cyberspace**

Other web-based works by Forest can be seen as rites of passage for a society entering the information age. As such, they attempt to do what all "liminal" public performance does according to Victor Turner: produce fleeting, flowing moments of "communitas" and explore alternative anthropological models in contexts of collective play. Turner borrowed the concept of liminality, derived from the Latin word for "threshold," from Arnold Van Gennep's studies of rites of passage in traditional, small-scale societies. As used by Van Gennep, the term refers to ritualized forms of play performed by persons on the threshold of acquiring a new social status. As applied to modern, large-scale societies by Turner, it designates a heightened state of collective consciousness, or "public reflexivity," that is attained in certain instances of collective public performance, particularly in times when a community finds itself on the threshold of profound changes in the existing social order. In this context, liminality represents a margin for subversive or innovative play with the normative structures, symbols and values of the

community, which public performance has loosened from the hold of everyday reality. For Turner, liminality represents the "subjunctive mood" of socio-cultural process just as more "mundane socio-structural activities" resemble its "indicative mood."[29]

Turner's theory of liminality in public performance also makes use of the concepts of "flow" and "communitas." Borrowed from the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, flow designates the experience of "merging action and awareness" whereby individuals engaged in a creative activity become absorbed in what they are doing. It implies an extreme "centering of attention" and a "loss of ego" that help the participants attain an unusual mastery of their actions in relation to the performance environment. Communitas is a special feeling of community that develops in the thick of public performance on the basis of the alternative social and cultural norms acted out by the participants, who are in a sense "flowing" together in a different direction than what prevailing social norms dictate. For Turner, communitas constitutes "an alternative and more 'liberated' way of being socially human."[30] Although it is an ephemeral phenomenon, it can have the lingering effect of inspiring and energizing those who might try to make an alternative social or cultural model a more sustainable and concrete reality. Liminality and the related concepts of flow and communitas correspond quite well to three of the stated objectives of Forest's practice of communication art: the staging of intersubjective events in which a heightened state of awareness of the technological environment is attained (flow), creative forms of "anthropological speculation" take place (liminality), and utopian models of community become virtual realities (communitas). However, the works in question are unique on account of their explicitly ceremonial or ritual

format and the official association that many of them have with an actual nationwide celebration in France, the "Fête de l'Internet."[31]

True to its title, *Time-Out* is a festive around-the-world time-out taken on the threshold of the new millennium, on the day of the spring equinox, during which people living in the world's different time zones could collectively pause to reflect on issues of time and technology as they impacted their lives. For this purpose, they are virtually gathered together via the project website [Figure 12] as the same hour of the day (12:00-12:59 P.M.) is "repeated" throughout the 24-hour duration of the day. It achieves this feat by using a network of synchronized webcams in different locations around the world: each webcam [Figure 13] begins transmitting to the event's official website at precisely 12:00 P.M. in the specified time zone with the uninterrupted webcast automatically switching over to the video feed of webcam in the next time zone to the west just as the clock is about to strike 1:00 P.M. Thus, it is as if visitors to the event's website are repeatedly teleported to a place in the world where local time coincides with the noon hour regardless of what "time" it is wherever they happen to be physically located while visiting the project's website.

Forest's event does what all true festivity does. It opens a parenthesis of time outside of time (uchronia[32]); it sets aside time for collective liminal flow on a global scale, albeit in a decentralized mode. As a rite of passage, it constitutes a virtual procession through the world's time zones and consecrates (i.e., it made sacred, or set apart from the profane) phenomena that had too quickly and uncritically become mundane facts of life: e.g., trans-global real time, telematic ubiquity, the virtual topography of cyberspace, and navigation through data. Yet as

carnival (the tone is definitely playful and irreverent), it invites participants to subvert the same concepts: to interpret them, or act them out, against the grain.[33] Subversion and consecration go hand-in-hand here because subversion has little savor unless its object is something in some way sacred. It makes its participants into an ad hoc community defined not by their shared worldview but by the shared intensity of playing/flowing together. However, Forest's festive *Time-Out* is unprecedented insofar as the web alone made it work.

In smaller scale communities, ritual and festivity normally imply people doing the same thing in the same place at the same time. In the age of large-scale imagined communities like the nation-state, where the sense of common location is an abstraction, it shifts to the idea of people doing the same thing (observing a moment of silence, singing the national hymn, etc.) in different places at the same time; later, with the development of the electronic mass media, the idea is diluted further still to people listening to or watching the same thing (a royal wedding, the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, etc.) in different places at the same time.[34] In the case of Forest's event, none of these scenarios really apply. It posits no common gathering place other than the World Wide Web and highlighted the great physical distances that separate its scattered participants through the remote webcams in cities in different time zones around the world (Paris, Montreal, Denver, Los Angeles, Honolulu, Hong Kong, Cairo, Moscow, etc.). Furthermore, the notion that the people participating in *Time-Out* via the project website somehow act in unison (i.e., doing the same thing at the same time) is every bit as contrived as the idea that they are gathered together in the same place (a sort of virtual public square); for while the pseudo-synchronicity was doubly reinforced by the event's broader common timeframe of the 24-hour period of a specific day (March 20, 1998) and its

experiential basis in the real time flux of the uninterrupted live webcam feed, construed as a constantly recycling noon hour, there is no mechanism for making sure that any of the website's visitors do anything together at the same time throughout the day-long operation! Indeed, to participate, one needs only to log on at some point; and one can just as easily log off after a minute or two, do something else for a while, and check back in later ... and repeat/continue the noon hour in some other part of the world hypothetically together with both the people physically present in that location and the other cyber-nomads who happen to be visiting the site at the same moment. In other words, it was the through the technical and conceptual artifice of the web interface – and the wishful thinking of the participants – that the idea of a shared time and place become a reality in Forest's project.

Given such intricacies, the expressly ritual and festive nature of the operation might be lost on most of its remote participants if not the fact that it takes place within the larger context of a real national celebration in France, the first nationwide edition of the annual Fête de l'Internet [Figure 14], which Forest helped to launch and in which his projects were for many years signature events.[35] The Fête de l'Internet, or Internet Fest, which still takes place annually around the date of the spring equinox [Figure 15], was conceived as a fun way to promote the internet in France and to exemplify the Jospin government's objective fostering *une société de l'information solidaire,* or more "solidarity-minded" form of information society, was itself connected to two broader traditions of public festivity in France. The first one was the relatively recent tradition of seasonal celebrations of different cultural sectors—e.g., Art (La Nuit Blanche, in October), Architecture (Les Journées du Patrimoine, September 20-21), Cinema (La Fête du Cinéma, late June), Reading (under different names, end of May), and Bread (La

Fête du Pain, the week of May 16)—dating back to the original model for Music, La Fête de la Musique (every June 21 on the evening of the summer solstice), launched in 1981 by President François Mitterrand's young minister of culture Jack Lang.[36] The older source was the national tradition civic festivity launched in the days of the French Revolution as a means to instill patriotism and unity among the newly emancipated citizenry and later more fully developed by early republican regimes (in particular, under the image-conscious and pedagogically inclined Third Republic, 1870 – 1940).[37] The paradigm for this republican tradition is the Fête de la Fédération of July 14, 1790. This gathering of national guardsmen, representatives from each of the social orders, and thousands of Parisian spectators on the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille symbolizes national communion and a commitment to democratic principles that transcend traditional divisions of geography, class, and creed; and serves as the ideal foil to the insurrectional event—the beginning of a divisive and violent decade-long revolution—that it commemorates.

The *Time-Out* project website offers visitors them a number of amusing and thought-provoking ways to make use of their time out of time. For example, they could give their opinions on time and technology in an online poll sponsored by the venerable SOFRES agency or peruse the ironic "Chroniques terriennes" ("Earthly Chronicles"): short texts in which Forest muses about the issues his project raised, with hypertext links to humorous illustrations. The more intellectually minded could follow discussions between Forest and special guest commentators like the philosopher Pierre Lévy. If they could not afford a vacation, they could send their feet, in the form of a digitally scanned outline, to an email address hosted on a server in Guadeloupe, where they would be kept "warm and comfortable" during the stoppage

of time. More frenzied people were given the opportunity to buy time in increments of thirty seconds, one minute, or one hour (with the proceeds donated to charity). Forest tried to attract customers to this unusual e-commerce venture by explaining that the time they purchased could be used whenever and however they desired (a sort of spontaneous private micro-festival): "Fight the fearsome pace of modern life: buy time and consume it without moderation!"

Held in conjunction with the 1999 edition of the Fête de l'Internet, *The Techno-Wedding* is a rite of passage in the literal sense. A collaborative project of Forest and fellow digital artist Sophie Lavaud **[Figures 16 – 17]**, this multimedia performance is also the couple's real-life wedding, webcast live along with a simultaneous virtual reality version of the ceremony featuring avatars of the bride, groom, and celebrant, whose movements are choreographed in real time based on input received from sensors worn by the physical participants **[Figure 18]**. The project not only blurs the distinction between art and life, public and private, virtual and real (the VR creation is not a representation in the conventional since it is an integral part of the actual event rather than just a mere image of it); it also places different modes of presence and absence in poetic juxtaposition: namely, attendance at the official civil ceremony held in the town hall of the Paris suburb of Issy-les-Moulineaux (presence in real space and time, though not necessarily the most "authentic" experience of the event); long-distance access to the event via the project website **[Figure 19]**, which offers one the choice between being a passive spectator (watching the webcast) or participating more actively by using the links on the site to send flowers, gifts, and congratulatory messages to the couple electronically (hence, different degrees of presence in real time mitigating physical absence); and an intermediate iteration in

which people gather in specially designated locations (including cybercafés in Chicago and Tokyo) to celebrate while watching the live webcast and VR version on a large screen (i.e., real wedding celebrations in substitute/remote locations with the bride and groom physically in absentia but telepresent via the internet). The sacred union of two people in the bonds of matrimony as well as a symbolic union of the real and the virtual (the essence of any sacred ritual), Forest and Lavaud's *Techno-Wedding* also qualifies as an optimistic example of how technology can be used to compliment gatherings in real space and actually enhance the ties that bind people together, instead of dissolving them.[38]

Six months after "The Techno-Marriage," Forest creates another highly ritualistic work called *The Center of the World* (*Le centre du monde*). As presented on the project website, it is his idea of a response to an urgent existential crisis: the irreversible "disintegration" of the "center of the world that each one of us carries inside him." Unable to withstand the "onslaught" of the dense "magma of fragmented information" in which the modern individual is submerged, this formerly unique and irreplaceable focal point, which was "simultaneously geographical, spatial, ideological, and philosophical" in nature and constituted "a vital axis of equilibrium," has been replaced by "the dilated surface of indeterminate dimensions" that knowledgeable people call "the global." With the notion of a stable center of the world waning more each day, if not already lost forever, and people still unsure about how to find or create new individual and communal reference points in a radically decentralized and seemingly wide open world transfigured by free-flowing information, Forest decides to pay it a fitting "final homage" by giving it the most explicit representation it has ever had in a shrine-like installation at the Espace Pierre Cardin in Paris **[Figure 20]**.

Pilgrimage is the operative paradigm in this project. Visitors able to make the trip to the Espace Pierre Cardin could contemplate the "actual" center of the world in the form of an abstract image appearing on a computer screen embedded in an altar-like structure (which Forest himself likens to a well): a morphing digital artifact programed to change with the ebb and flow of internet traffic **[Figure 21]**. Cyber-pilgrims near and far could visit the temple online thanks to the three different Web cameras providing continuous live coverage of the installation site throughout the duration of the operation (September 16 – 18, 1999); and they could compose an email message that would be displayed on the large LED message board that covered the curved rear wall of the installation space, rather like a modern-day, digital version of the *ex voto* plaques that cover the walls of pilgrimage chapels.

The project thrives on ambiguity starting with the center of the world concept itself. What the "center" means, and therefore what its loss ultimately entails, are not altogether clear. It makes little figurative sense except as a hubristic metaphor for the importance of given country, city, or other place that claims to be the "center" of economic, political, intellectual, or cultural activity (and so on) in the world – for example, the mythical idea of Paris as a center of the art world. If this is what was on Forest's mind (and it was, to at least some extent), then the site's visitors – especially those who go to the trouble to go to the Paris installation in person – are paying their respects to an idea whose loss of significance is almost comically obvious. In our thoroughly multipolar, globalized world, what country or city can claim such centrality, let alone *Paris* in the field of art? Of course, in alluding to a world devoid of a center, Forest is also thinking (perhaps more so) about the fact that greater access to information online and the relative ease with which one can communicate across long distances via the internet (not to

mention other forms of telecommunication) not only potentially weakens all forms of centralized authority (with the notable exception of centralized control and surveillance of the internet itself), but also makes one's physical location increasingly irrelevant since anything can now, theoretically, be done from anywhere (provided that one can log on). One of the biggest ironies in this project is that anyone who goes online to visit *The Center of the World*, via any node in the network, actually finds him or herself at the closest thing our world now has to a center: the individual computer screen (and today, more emphatically, one's smart phone screen). In light of this suggestion, it is doubly ironic that the central feature of the (irrelevant) site-specific physical embodiment of the center of the world idea should be a morphing digital icon in synch with internet traffic appearing on a computer screen! However, the project also plays with the idea that the modern individual typically believes that the center is wherever he or she happens to be – a notion that centuries older than the internet – by suggesting that its participants see themselves as neither here nor there and as inhabiting multiple spaces at the same time: the particular place in the city or town where they happen to be sitting in front of a computer terminal; Forest's physical installation, the Espace Pierre Cardin, and the city of Paris; the project website, the World Wide Web, and cyberspace; and wherever their imagination happens to take them as they muse about the meaning of the center of the world concept (important places in their lives, the imagined locations of the other cyber-pilgrims, the great hereafter or the void of nothingness, etc.). Forest has set yet another trap for his public. As tantalizing as it might be consider the personal computer the new center of the world, it is just a just another mirage. Forest is still telling people that they have to find their own center now, inside themselves or outside, but the task won't be easy.

There is also ambiguity in the tone of *The Center of the World*. The overall tone of the project was not all that nostalgic, and certainly wasn't mournful or desolate. It was more contemplative (the focused mind constituting perhaps the truest of all would-be centers of the word), and imbued with a certain poetic sense of wonder, disguised as religious transcendence, in relation to the potential for adventurous journeys through the interface where cyberspace to meets the real world (a cyber-pilgrimage to a real place/ersatz center of the world being an example of just one such journey). On the other hand, *The Centre of the World* is clearly a parody—built around a device as obviously fake as the great machine hidden behind the curtain in the palace of the Wizard of Oz. However, the parody is not cynical in spirit even if it is meant to temper the pseudo-religious sentiment the project otherwise stirs. After all, Forest has created an ingenious new type of sanctuary, a place that is simultaneously virtual and real, where people can temporarily escape from their mundane and profane everyday lives (including all of the mundane and profane tasks they perform online on a daily basis) and reflect on globalization, technology, the individual's place in cyberspace, and other important issues.

Finally, it is worth considering some of the multiple connotations of the pilgrimage paradigm that is operative in this project. One of the fundamental paradoxes of pilgrimage is that while personal transformation is one of its ultimate goals (the pilgrim is a different person at the end of his or her sacred journey than the one who started it), one never undertakes a pilgrimage alone but as part of a community of pilgrims. The implicit sense of fellowship in Forest's Center of the World project is subtle – certainly more so than in either *Time-Out* or the *Techno-Wedding* – though essential. For those physically present at the final destination there

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is an opportunity for face-to-face communion and perhaps the kind of open sharing of thoughts only possible among fellow travelers; however, the disembodied presence of those having converged on the site via the internet, made manifest in the scrolling messages on the board along the walls, must be eerily palpable to them. In the case of those making the pilgrimage online, the feeling of fellowship is decidedly more virtual, but it is nonetheless anchored by an implicit sense of a common destination (a pilgrimage destination is always the temporary center of the world for those making the trek) and sense of purpose, shared with the other pilgrims, whether they are on line or on site. Still, the online visitors must find it thrilling to catch a glimpse on the webcams of the pilgrims physically on site, and to think that the latter might actually read their personal message as it streams brightly across the board in real time. The point is that the feeling of fellowship inherent to both modes of pilgrimage is enhanced by the other and is perhaps not complete without the other. Separately, life in terrestrial space and life in cyberspace can be limiting; however, when *artfully* combined they transcend those limitations.

This leads to another paradox of pilgrimage implicit in Forest's *Center of the World* project: while pilgrimages ultimately contrive to get us to loosen the onerous bonds of our earth-bound existences for something transcendent and heavenly, they nonetheless require an actual destination – one does cannot make a pilgrimage to utopia, which, by definition, is not actual place – and the physical and spiritual challenges one encounters in the real world along the way are as essential to purpose of pilgrimage as one's arrival at the nominal "final" destination. In other words, in pilgrimage might seem to the heavenly transcending the earthly but it really posits itself as a special interface between the two. This resembles how Forest

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construes the purpose of not just this particular project but all of his online work. It follows from this that Forest is not really suggesting that life will be better in a digital utopia that is ungrounded, devoid of centers, and borderless. It is preposterous to think that physical space and its various contingencies, both natural and cultural, no longer matter. What we might think of as world without a center, is really a world in which physical space and information space will interface in new and unusual ways. Interfaces are the new centers, Forest suggests in this work, and it is up to us to make of them what we desire.

*The Digital Street Corner*, a project created the 2005 edition of Art Basel Miami Beach, is festive work of a simpler nature. It involves the use of a peer-to-peer system for multiuser conversations—Solipsis, developed France Télécom engineer Joaquin Keller Gonzalez—for the staging of a virtual "party" that projected onto the façade of the Bass Museum of Art **[Figures 22 – 23]** while a larger official party is being thrown for an exhibition opening, giving the avatars of the Solipsis users an opportunity to hang out on a real street corner and virtually "crash" the swank opening; and the opening's invited guests, some of whom access Forest's project website via laptops and smartphones, a chance to party in three different locations at once: inside the gallery, online, and out in street.

In 2011, Forest creates a work reminiscent of both *Memory Pictures* in the way that it allows people to use digital media to generate some of the work's visual content and *Center of the World* in the way that combines networked participation/telepresence and an installation site with strong ritual and metaphysical connotations.[39] In its original form, *Ebb and Flow: The Internet Cave* (*Flux et reflux: la caverne de l'internet*), is presented in the ancient stone cellar of

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Les Moulins, a renovated medieval structure used as exhibition space by the Centre d'Art Le LAIT (Laboratoire Artistique International du Tarn) in the southern French town of Albi.[40] As its name suggests, it draws its inspiration from the allegory of the cave in Book VI of Plato's *Republic*, which describes people held captive in a cave who mistake the shadows cast on the wall for the things of the real world. Known even to people who haven't had a philosophy class, Plato's allegory is a fitting illustration of the predicament of a wired society in which online access to billions of images of all types, misleading information of all shades, and virtual worlds crafted to feel realer than real has become easier that one could ever have imagined. However, while Forest agrees with the basic Platonic premise that appearances are deceiving, there are three key differences between his cave and Plato's. In the first place, Forest uses no coercion, his situation is no cruel joke played on powerless captives, and his audience does not need an enlightened philosopher to show them the way out to the truth, if necessary by force. The members of his audience are active participants in both the production of the images they have to contend with in the cave and in the process of critical reflection on those images, and they do so in a collaborative way that includes people online from remote locations in different parts of the world. In the second place, among the images they must contend with are their own digital shadows on the wall, perhaps reminding them that their presence in this world is not as cohesive intellects, detached observers of their surroundings, and free agents with the power to shape both their environment and their own destinies; but as shadowy, evanescent, and unstable avatars resulting from a constantly changing ebb and flow of conflicting sensations, thoughts, memories, urges, and data. Finally, unlike Plato, who maintains that the universal Forms, or Ideas, are more real than either the actual things that are their mutable material

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manifestations in the everyday environment or our deceptive sensory perceptions of these material manifestations, Forest leaves his audience with no higher authority than their own perceptions, misleading or otherwise. It is up to them alone, as it always is with Forest, to do the hard work of making sense of it all, deciding what is credible and what is not, what has value and what does not, etc.

The visit of the site takes the form of a multistep ritual of transfiguration and self-discovery. The first stop is a room where the visitors' "shadows" are digitally captured **[Figure 24]**. In reality, these are more like digitally enhanced silhouettes that first appear on computer screens (offering the visitors a choice between submitting or erasing the images); and they resemble the negatives of Yves Klein's Anthropometries prancing in the void—in this case, milky white on electronic blue. The next two stops on the itinerary give the visitors/initiates a sense of the project's parameters: a video, viewed through a peephole, in which the artist offers his reflection on its themes; and a map **[Figure 25]** showing the different locations around the world (New York, Brasilia, São Paulo, Sarajevo, Beirut, Abidjan, etc.) where special stations have been set up to allow people to participate via internet. They then enter another image lab where they will select and annotate videos from a special database to be projected in the cave along with their shadows and material provided by the people in the remote locations. They next enter the cave-like cellar space itself. Even without the reference to Plato, the metaphor of a cave to represent cyberspace is marvelously counterintuitive given that most people tend to think of it along the same lines as the protagonist from William Gibson's *Neuromancer,* who describes the Matrix in terms of "bright lattices of logic enfolding across that colorless void."[41] However, in order to prevent the over-romanticizing of his cave metaphor, Forest places the

cave-like space in stark juxtaposition to both the modern equipment one finds throughout and the clinical plainness of some of the first areas through which the visitors pass. Once in the cave/cellar, though, they first walk through a crypt-like area where their bright specter-like silhouettes, or shadows, are projected onto the walls, where they seem to dance **[Figures 26 - 27]**. From there, they move on to a more cavernous space where they will see live video of themselves projected high up on a wall at a station the artist calls "the pulpit of vain gestures" **[Figure 28]**. These larger-than-life image of each visitor might call to mind any number of archetypes: a religious icon, a political leader's cult of personality, a pompous television news anchor's posturing in front of the cameras, a Times Square advertisement, the omniscient factory boss in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times,* Orwell's Big Brother, or the Great and Powerful Oz before Dorothy pulled back the curtain. Taken together, the shadows and this grandiose effigy could be meant to suggest the dual nature of our selfhood in the mediasphere: as both living ghosts haunting the nether reaches of cyberspace and as stars of a grandiose "reality show." The final stop involves an "altarpiece" comprised of large video screens where a jumble of images selected by the participants flashes by **[Figure 29]**. Throughout their passage through the cave, the visitors hear the loud electronically synthesized sound of water slowly dripping. Water is a favorite motif of Forest's. In this case, it enhances the cave-like ambience, signifies the passage of time, adds texture to the auditory landscape of contemplative silence, interrupts the concentration in the immersive environment before it can become too rapturous and uncritical, and allows for a hint of nature to insinuate into a space as cold and lifeless as cyberspace. While Forest's experiment is meant to be more meditative than manipulative, as was Plato's original version of the cave allegory, it was nonetheless similarly designed to create

a powerful final sensation when the visitors leave the closed space and suddenly find themselves, like Plato's liberated captives, in the bright light of the outside world once again.[42]

**Sociological SLart**

Beginning in 2008, Forest launches a new series of actions and simulations in the hugely popular "massively multiplayer online world" (MMOW) of Second Life.[43] When he first starts working in the SL metaverse, it already has a thriving art scene with its own art market, galleries (all-new ventures as well as SL outposts of established real-world galleries), museums, special art districts, artist in residence programs, competitions, festivals, and legions of eccentric avatars whose look itself is a form of artistic expression; prevalent genres include performance, installation, video (machinima), painting, sculpture, photography, architecture, land art, body art, and fashion.[44] For Forest, the environment is ideal. Tellingly, his first action in Second Life is to set up *The Experimental Research Center of the Territory* (*Le centre expérimental du Territoire,* 2008[45]) as a VR extension of his *Territory of the Square Meter* (1980), which had already been featured online as *The Networked Territory* (1996). The actual Center is an ultramodern glass-walled structure on a campus including a courtyard paved with interactive artistic square meters linking to other material when touched **[Figure 30]**. Reflecting the diversity of the real world, the Territory's landscape and architecture in Second Life is adapted to the geographical location where each SL project is presented by the artist in person: Nice, Naples, Nîmes, Sao Paulo, New York, Beirut, and so on **[Figure 31]**. Each of these location-specific projects focuses on a specific social and ethical issue. A symposium on "Sustainable Development" is held in conjunction with the inauguration of the Center in 2008. *Dump Your*

*Trash in Second Life* (*Stockez vos ordures sur Second Life,* 2008[46]), calls attention to the international traffic in garbage by allowing avatars to get rid of their own digital trash in the Territory's "Mystical Trash Disintegrator," just like people take out their trash in real life and expect it to magically disappear. *Second Life Corrida* (*Corrida sur Second Life,* 2008) is a satirical bullfighting contest that allows amateur matadors to do battle with the sacred cows of the art world. *The Traders' Ball* (2010), in collaboration with Ferdinand Corte, lampoons the cavalier attitude of Wall Street in the wake of the global financial meltdown of 2008.

This last project combines an actual live ball for avatars **[Figure 32]**, which takes place in a special Wall Street décor in the Second Life extension of the Territory, and an eye-catching installation in Midtown Manhattan at the Lab Gallery's storefront exhibition space on the corner of Lexington Avenue and 47th Street: mannequins dressed up like traders dancing in a downpour of dollar bills in Midtown Manhattan **[Figures 33 – 34]**.[47] The online dance party for SL avatars is meant to remind us of how traders from Wall Street – extravagant movers and shakers in the high-tech world of electronic capitalism but as (morally) hollow to the core as human beings as Forest's creepy mannequins – "partied" until they brought the financial house of cards down in the great crash of 2008. One cannot really be sure whether Forest's ball is the occasion to forget the world's economic woes and have some fun or a reinterpretation of the medieval meme of the *danse macabre,* the self-indulgent revelers oblivious to the fact that they are about to be carried off into the dark abyss of economic and social ruin. Street corner installation is tantalizingly ambiguous from the standpoint of the pedestrian, who probably doesn't know what to make of the strange scene at first **[Figure 35]**. Is it art? A publicity stunt? A retail store's window display for a new line of clothing? Even the soundtrack, blasted into the

street via loudspeaker in an attempt to get some of the passersby to join in the dance, is rather incongruous. The specially commissioned track by Devon Clarke, featuring MC Jamalski on vocals, called "World Wide Crisis," references the economic meltdown and other alarming world events, but features a very danceable ragga rap beat. In the street, people pause for a few seconds to snap a picture of the unusual window display with their phones (often posing in front of it), which they likely send to a few friends on the spot. These snapshots shared by smart phone represent a new way of experiencing art that surely delighted Forest (ironically, they might have generated more network traffic than his planned event in SL), but also offer powerful proof of the street's continued relevance and high impact as a node of communication.

Other Second Life projects by Forest center on the philosophical musings of Forest's digital alter ego, an avatar named Ego Cyberstar **[Figure 36]**, who claims to have fled the complex entanglements and disenchanting situations of the real world by seeking refuge in Second Life. However, digital escape from the real world does not mean that we can escape from conflicted selves or our existential dilemmas, as Ego himself confesses in *Ego Cyberstar and the Problem of Identity* (2010):

It's always a strange sensation for me. It feels like taking a timeout on the sidelines of the world's commotion just to dwell on myself. To ask myself the questions I never get to ask, because there's never the time. I have the feeling that it's different here in Second Life. [...] Here, at least, nobody bothers me. They claim that millions of people share the virtual space of Second Life. But you almost never see a soul cross your field of vision. [...] Here in Second Life, at least I can take the time to think ... [and] try to understand what's happening

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inside my head. [...] There are so many things all around us that make demands on our time, things that can't wait any longer; but I have the sneaking suspicion that they can wait a lot longer than we think! They'll wait until they simply stop waiting ... I stand before you as an innocent man. As innocent as the day I was born. Kind of like when a person stares at the sea, leaving no time to fall prey to the kind of parasitical thoughts and insidious doubts that can stop you dead in your tracks and destroy your mental resolve once and for all.[48]

As is so often the case in Forest's work, new media interfaces are empowering, but they are simultaneously disarming; and the utopian spaces into which they seem to lead us have an uncanny capacity to force us to get real.

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## Chapter Three: Illustrations



**Figure 1:** Stills from the television broadcast of *From Casablanca to Locarno* (1995).
[Source: INA video archives]

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**Figure 2:** Jean-Claude Binoche conducting the webcast auction for *Network Parcel* (1996).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 3:** Web interface, *Machine for Modulating Time* (1998).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]

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**Figure 4:** Screen shot, home page, *Memory Pictures* (1998).
[Source: Project website, <http://www.fredforest.org/Ina>]



**Figure 5:** Participant-produced collage, *Memory Pictures* (2005).
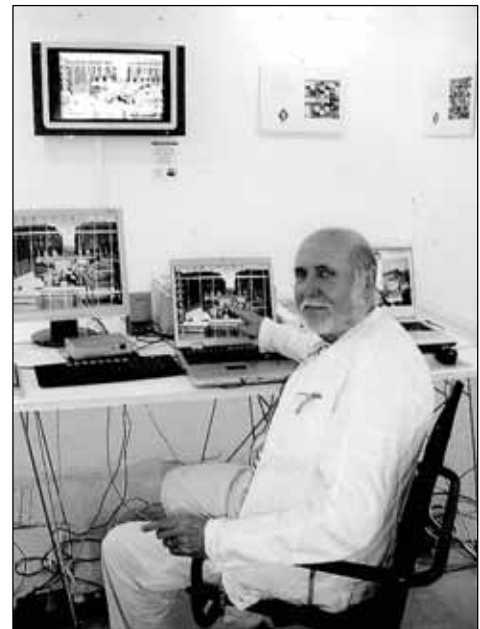[Source: Project website, <http://www.fredforest.org/Ina>]

**Figure 6:** Forest at the interactive installation for *The Way of the Cross,* Nice (2005).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]

**Figure 7:** Screen shots, "History of the Territory," *Networked Territory* (1996).
[Source: Project website, <http://www.fredforest.org/territories/fr>]

**Figure 8:** Screen shot, home page, project website, *Territorial Outings* (2001).
[Source: Project website, <http://www.fredforest.org/pied>]



**Figure 9:** Webcam image of customers setting foot on square meter of virtual territory, *Territorial Outings* (2001).
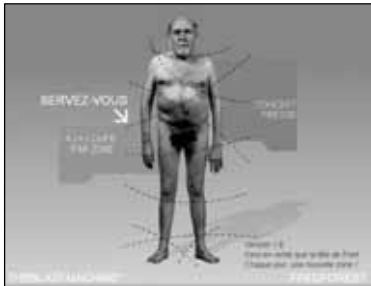[Source: Project website, <http://www.fredforest.org/pied>]

**Figure 10:** Home page of project website, *Meat* (2001).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]



**Figure 11:** Screen shot, interactive interface, project website, *Meat* (2001).
[Source: Project website, <http://fredforest.net/viande>]

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**Figure 12:** Screen shot, home page, project website, *Time Out* (1998).
[Source: Project website, <http://www.fredforest.org/time>]



**Figure 13:** Webcam image of Honolulu, *Time Out* (1998).
[Source: Project website, <http://www.fredforest.org/time>]

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**Figure 14:** Postcard publicizing the inaugural nationwide edition of the French Internet Festival (1998).
[Source: Personal archives of the author]



**Figure 15:** Poster publicizing the French Internet Festival in the city of Béthune (203).
[Source: < http://www.ville-bethune.fr/Fete-de-l-internet.html >]

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**Figure 16:** Sophie Lavaud, *Centre-Lumière-Bleu / Blue-Light-Center* (1994).
[Source: *Sophie Lavaud: du pigment au pixel*, <http://www.sophielavaud.org>]
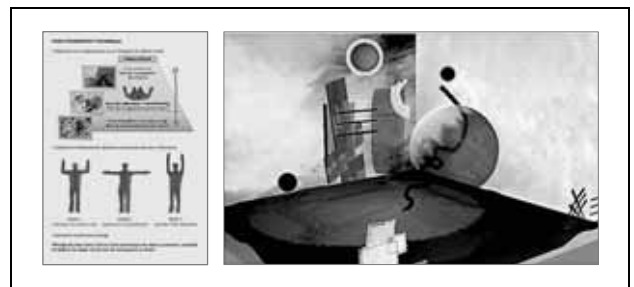


**Figure 17:** Sophie Lavaud, *Matrice active / Active Matrix* (2003).
This work is based on the painting *Yellow-Red-Blue* (1925) by Wassily Kandinsky.
[Source: *Sophie Lavaud: du pigment au pixel*, <http://www.sophielavaud.org>]

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**Figure 18:** Virtual reality version of the ceremony, *The Techno-Wedding* (1999).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]



**Figure 19:** Screen shot of project website, *The Techno-Wedding* (1999).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]

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**Figure 20:** Webcam image of the installation space, Espace Pierre Cardin, Paris, *The Center of the World* (1999).
[Source: Project website, <http://www.fredforest.org/centre>]



**Figure 21:** Webcam image of the digital relic of the center of the world, *The Center of the World* (1999).
[Source: Project website, <http://www.fredforest.org/centre>]

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**Figure 22:** Projection on the façade of the Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, *The Digital Street Corner* (2005).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]



**Figure 23:** Forest at the live performance of *The Digital Street Corner* (2005).
[Source: Personal archives of Fred Forest]

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**Figure 24:** Image laboratory for the production of visitor shadows, *The Internet Cave* (2011), Albi, France.
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]



**Figure 25:** Screen shot of project website, map of participating remote locations, *The Internet Cave* (2011).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]

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**Figure 26:** Visitor shadows (silhouettes) projected on the walls of the project site, *The Internet Cave* (2011).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]

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**Figure 27:** Alternate view of visitor shadows on the walls of the project site, *The Internet Cave* (2011).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]



**Figure 28:** The Pulpit of Vain Gestures, *The Internet Cave* (2011).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]



**Figure 29:** Final media display of the cave, *The Internet Cave* (2011).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]

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**Figure 30:** Fred Forest's ongoing project in Second Life, *The Experimental Research Center of the Territory* (2008).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]



**Figure 31:** Different "local" versions of Forest's Territory in Second Life (2008-10).
Clockwise from top left: Naples (*The Mystical Trash Disintegrator*), Sao Paulo, Beirut, New York (Wall Street)
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]

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**Figure 32:** Screen shot of the dance party in Second Life, *The Traders' Ball* (2010).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]



**Figure 33:** Installation at the Lab Gallery, Roger Smith Hotel, New York, *The Traders' Ball* (2010).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]

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**Figure 34:** Passersby contemplate Forest's installation, *The Traders' Ball* (2010).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]



**Figure 35:** Nighttime view of Forest's installation, *The Traders' Ball* (2010).
The live event in Second Life can be seen in process on the computer screens in the foreground.
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]

**Figure 37:** Screen shot featuring Forest's Second Life alter ego, *Ego Cyberstar and the Problem of Identity* (2010).
[Source: Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org>]

# Conclusion

## *Interface as Utopia*

Famously summing up both the spirit of an age and his own personal philosophy of artistic practice, Andy Warhol once declared: "I want to be a machine." If Fred Forest were to respond to Warhol he would likely do so by proclaiming: "I want to be an interface" **[Figure 1]**. Indeed, nothing characterizes Forest's career better than the astonishing array of experimental mass media, audiovisual, and telecom interfaces that he has created over the course of nearly a half century on the fringes of the art world. His interactive interfaces can be found everywhere: sometimes in art galleries and other types of cultural institutions; but just as often in one's daily newspaper, on TV, radio, the Web, or in the street. Like his independent *Territory of the Square Meter,* they offer access to a "temporary autonomous zone" in information space.[1] It's an abstract space with a real enough topography that can alternately be unsettling, stunning, or simply droll. Among its more prominent landmarks one finds blank spaces in the news, artistic square meters in the French countryside (also at the North Pole, on the floor of a suburban megastore, etc.), waves of "electronic blue" over Italy, digital pilgrimage routes to the center of the world, an internet cave, and an eerily calm sea at shore's edge somewhere in Second Life. This is Forest's version of utopia. However, since he sees himself primarily as service provider rather than content provider, what this utopian space actually looks and feels like, what it signifies, how it might be occupied, and where it might lead are all ultimately left up to users of

each particular interface, which necessarily remains operational for only a short while. For Forest, the interface is a threshold to utopia that the users are invited to cross while abandoning their preconceptions and to opening wide the mind's eye of their imagination as they make their way to the other side.

### Creator of Realistic Utopias

Although he never offers a systematic explanation of his understanding of the concept, utopia is clearly at the core of both Forest's own work as an artist and his theory of art in general. On several occasions, he asserts that the artist's role in society is to create "realistic utopias" in which one might gain a sense of the latent potential of the media for more liberated forms of communication and envision different ways of living in today's "hyper-technological" environment. A certain undeniable optimism permeates his work—optimism founded not on the technology itself but on a belief in the human capacity to come together, to resist, to innovate, and to rise above the limitations of one's circumstances. One could easily dismiss this utopian optimism as typical of the romantic hubris of the so-called "first generation" of (male) video art pioneers, to which Forest belongs, whose self-perpetuating heroic myth of origins fellow video artist Martha Rosler unsparingly deconstructs in her essay "Shedding the Utopian Moment."[2] However, one ought to take Forest at his word when he qualifies his brand of utopianism as "realistic."

What is a *realistic* utopia? For Forest, realism entails immersion in the real world of sensation; lucidity about social, political, and economic conditions; accessibility to "real" people and not just the intellectual and cultured elite; temporariness, functionality, and the tactical

advantages of a small-scale do-it-yourself operation; and an aversion for ideological systems. His utopia is a brief moment of truth one discovers on one's own, but usually with others forming a special community of users, through hands-on interactive practice; not a grand design revealed by the artist for the mere pleasure of contemplation. Forest's notion of utopia is quite like that to be found in Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope,* which recognized that utopian dreams of a better life pervade our culture in diverse cultural forms both mainstream and marginal, ranging from fairytales and fashion to architecture and political discourse.[3] However, these cultural forms must be read critically—i.e., against the grain of the dominant ideologies which they are intended to serve. Once this critical perspective has been attained, the utopian subtext of the cultural forms emerges—not as a functional blueprint for a brighter future but as an insidious challenge to the status quo rather like the upside down world of carnival according to Mikhail Bakhtin or the poacher's / trespasser's logic on display in popular appropriations of official culture as described by Michel de Certeau. Thus, a realistic utopia is a critical utopia. Forest applies this notion consistently when he makes defamilarization and critical insight into the real workings of the mediascape the necessary preconditions to any utopian praxis there.

Yet Forest's desire to make a distinction between his idea of utopia and the usual ways in which we tend to think of the concept by labeling his version "realistic" is suggestive of a more fundamental reworking of the utopian paradigm that ought to be considered one of his major achievements as an artist. This paradigm relies on normative conceptualizations of space and time that have been thrown into crisis like so many other western cultural norms in the postmodern era. Forest's work can be seen as an effort to salvage utopia from this crisis by

means of a re-conceptualization – or reconfiguration – of its spatial, temporal, and functional parameters. Since Forest considers that we experience reality through the filter of the myriad interfaces that we use on a daily basis, he identifies utopia with the in-between (i.e., liminal) space of the interface itself. This is the crux of his reconfiguration of utopia: *utopia = interface.*

### The Utopian Perspective in Crisis

Before considering some of the specific ramifications of this equation, it might be helpful to first review the genesis of the traditional utopian paradigm and the contours of its current state of crisis. The western paradigm of utopia can be thought of as involving three separate but closely related concepts. In the first place, it is a literary and philosophical trope that reflects the dual Greek etymology (*ou/eu + tropos*) of the term coined by Thomas More in 1516.[4] Utopia is both a *non* place and a supremely *good* place: the imaginary setting for a particular vision of the ideal society. The ideal is by nature unrealistic given that there is literally nowhere in the real world that such a perfectly well-ordered, harmonious, productive, enlightened, and/or happy society could actually find its place. Through the popularization and broadening of this trope, the word "utopia" eventually came to mean any lofty social ideal or scheme that one suspected of being too good to be true. In the second place, there is the more concrete meaning utopia acquired in the 18th and 19th centuries: the precursor of the ideal society in the form of *an experimental prototype,* such as a utopian community or work of architecture or town planning, that put one's social ideal to the test.[5] Such prototypes define themselves on the basis of their alterity: they are not set in an imaginary place or time that exists nowhere in the real world but do radically set themselves apart from surrounding reality.

Finally, utopia can also be considered an extreme example of a specific long-dominant regime of "visuality" (i.e., a social construct of vision, as defined by Norman Bryson) in the West that originated with perspective and the practice of projecting oneself from a fixed point in space into a virtual realm where the imperfections of the real world are corrected by the eye of reason.[6] Piero della Francesca's *Ideal Town* (1470) is the quintessential expression of this perspectival utopianism. Perspective is an artifice, a technique, but one that has become so pervasive in the culture at large that it has been largely internalized and therefore seems both natural and invisible. One ramification of the power and cultural pervasiveness of perspective is that it has been applied not only to space, but to time as well. According to the political theorist Zaki Laïdi, the "perspectival turn" of civilization makes the modern idea of progress possible through the "temporalization" of perspective.[7] The notion of progress involves both the *projection* of a better life for humanity in the future and the long-term *project* of its actual improvement. Utopia hence becomes the *superlative form of perspectival progress:* the perfected society which is a mental projection for the time being but which one expects to see realized in a not-too-distant future, representing the culmination, or end, of history.

True utopian thinking no longer comes naturally in today's postmodern societies; however, the crisis of utopia has not affected all dimensions of the paradigm equally. The ironic use of the term to designate a social ideal that is too good to be true is as prevalent as ever; whereas functional utopian prototypes in architecture, urbanism, technology, and social planning have not disappeared but are viewed with increasing skepticism. On the other hand, figures of the ideal society are still relatively common in literature, art, and philosophy; but they tend to represent isolated examples rather than expressions of a broader current of optimistic

and idealistic speculative thinking in the culture (if they are not simply ironic to begin with).[8] Moreover, one is now as likely to encounter dystopian models as utopian ones in today's works of the speculative imagination. The concept of cyberspace is a good case in point. Coined by William Gibson to characterize the dystopian world of his groundbreaking cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984), the term has come to represent social transcendence for some, and social disintegration for others.[9] For adherents to the so-called "Californian Ideology" of cyber-liberalism that emanated from Silicon Valley in the heady early days of the World Wide Web and the accompanying dot.com boom, it has been synonymous with a new world without borders, where individual freedom is empowered by easy access to information online.[10] Some have even considered it the harbinger of a new phase of human evolution, in which the collective mind would take shape—the embodiment of the French Jesuit paleontologist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's concept of the "noosphere."[11] In stark contrast, for techno-pessimists, including quite a few prominent French intellectuals, it is has been likened to everything from a virtual "seventh continent" already colonized by American capitalists (Jacques Attali)[12] to an invisible, global "metacity" as dehumanizing as any sprawling concrete-and-glass megalopolis or the likely ground zero of an insidious "information bomb" destined destroy civilization (Paul Virilio).[13]

Where the utopian paradigm has been most thoroughly undermined, however, is as a function of the perspectival ordering of space and time in terms of projection, project, and progress. There are multiple factors involved. Following Jean-François Lyotard, one this is that the great narratives of modernity upon which utopia once depended (Enlightenment, Progress, Revolution) have lost their aura of moral legitimacy: we are now ambivalent about the benefits

of technological civilization; we have been disappointed too often by revolutions that promised a radiant future; and we are all too eager to disavow any ideas that have served as alibis of western imperialism.[14] Eager, too, to disavow the hegemony of the so-called "scopic regimes of modernity" (Martin Jay) for the way that they have suppressed or marginalized other forms of engagement with the world, not to mention the powerful tools of social control to which they have given rise (Foucaldian surveillance, Debordian spectacle, etc.).[15] For thinkers like Laidi, Virilio, Pierre-André Taguieff, and Michel Maffesoli, another factor in the demise of utopia as project and temporal projection is that we now live in the confines of a hegemonic and tyrannically urgent present, often narrowly reduced to concept of real time.[16] Our temporal horizon is increasingly limited to short-term risks and benefits and to the rapid turnover of information, and seems to preclude long-range projects driven by grand moral imperatives. Put succinctly, we lack both the faith and the time traditional utopian thinking requires. Jean Baudrillard further attributes our present incapacity for utopian thinking to the fact that the "perspectival space" of the public arena, in which our collective utopian projects were once collectively envisioned has imploded and been replaced by a "space of simulation" reflecting a non-convergent model of society based on the principle of anonymous connection. What remains of utopia in this context, according to Baudrillard, is this simulacrum of public space itself, a space that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, where the transmission of information is massive in volume, instantaneous, and global but meaning is dissolved in the deluge of signs.[17] This "cybernetic utopia" (Lyotard's term) has nothing to do with any collective project because it is a *fait accompli*: the fully realized utopia of the "ecstasy of communication" (Baudrillard) that is now a familiar feature of everyday life. While Forest

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clearly does not espouse such epic pessimism regarding modern forms of communication and the effects of technology on public life and the collective imagination, one insight that he does share with the likes of Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Virilio is the notion that thinking about utopia today must start with the pseudo-utopian non-places and virtual spaces of the media and information environment, which are not idealized projections, but fundamental components of everyday reality.[18]

### Utopia in Reverse

With this starting point as one of its most basic premises, the implications of Forest's equation utopia with interface are three-fold. In the first place, an interface normally implies two-way interactive communication between different systems, environments, or agents that have been placed in contact. By contrast, western utopias have traditionally been one-way affairs: projections from a fixed starting point in contingent reality towards the vanishing point of an ideal, virtual reality that lies outside the frame of everyday space and time. However, in Forest's utopian experiments, the interface, through artfully orchestrated feedback loops, also works *in the opposite direction:* it brings salient elements of the "virtual" space of information back into to the realm of the "real." Forest's "realistic" utopia is essentially *utopia in reverse,* retroactively incorporated into the real. Before one can begin to imagine alternative realities, the initial objective is simply to *get real:* to see how the virtual space of information and communication *really* works; to discover how it intersects with the everyday *real world* of space, time, and sensation; to establish its own more fully *realized* sense of place; and, ideally, to lay the foundations for a new sense of *reality* in which the so-called "real" and the so-called

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"virtual" are merged. The reconfiguration of the real takes precedence over projection of the ideal. Subsequently, one can take the next step, which is not just to envision, but to *act on* the latent anthropological potential of the newly reconfigured real.

The second major implication of Forest's basing utopia on the interface paradigm is that it is not inherently differed to another place and time outside our here-and-now reality, a vision that one can only contemplate for the time being. In the majority of his projects, utopia is a fully operational (albeit temporary) interface available for immediate use by large numbers of people. It nonetheless exhibits a strong "uchronic" quality, or temporal out-of-ordinariness, in so far as each intervention represents a time-out from the normal routine and rhythm of life and offers the interface's users a particular experience of "flow," the heightened state of consciousness fusing quick real-time reactivity, as in a game, and the paradoxical impression of time seeming to slow down that is characteristic of immersion experiences.

The final implication of Forest's interface-as-utopia paradigm is that content—whether it is artist or user-generated, poetic or prosaic, visual or cognitive—is always secondary to the interactive process and the network environment in which it takes place. Utopia is linked to what Forest calls the "invisible system work" (*L'œuvre-système invisible,* 2006):

> In reality, this type of artistic "object" can be construed as information "architecture," an instance of space-time in flux, an electro-magnetic process, a concentration of waves of physical or animal origin, a cognitive work, or a manipulation of mental images with no material substratum. (16) [...]
>
> In an *invisible system-work,* the various images, sounds, movements, signs, and even the technical and material elements that ... ultimately "structure" the work are mere surfaces effects which one must never confuse with the work itself. They satisfy a structural necessity essential to the work's internal coherence and

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> functionality but are never more than a tiny part of it, the visible tip of the iceberg. The physical "platform" set up by the artist-designer of an *invisible system-work,* whether visible or not, is never more than the work's material infrastructure or operational configuration. It's not its embodiment. We are talking about a work that is *fundamentally* invisible and impalpable. (34) [...]
>
> The imaginary entity of the *invisible system-work* derives from successive permutations of real entities in an imperceptible operational field which is defined solely by mental constructs and defies all geometric and volumetric representation. (171)

### Interfaces as Utopian Thresholds

Virtually all of Forest's major works since the late 1960s involve a utopian interface of one type or another. They typically fall into one of four categories that transcend the chronological phases of his career, although quite a few projects demonstrate characteristics of more than one type (indeed, some combine all four). The first is the *recursive interface,* in which the multimedia configuration is designed to generate unusual points of view on the social situation of the users. As Forest's onetime collaborator and philosophical mentor, Vilém Flusser, explained in his insightful essay treating Forest's sociological video art as the prototype of a new post-objective epistemology, these insights are obtained through complex mirror effects and feedback loops that deflect, refract, cross, contradict, layer, magnify, reduce, or deconstruct established points of view. Here, the utopian element resides in the liberating potential of the unconventional vantage points that are momentarily opened up in an ongoing process of critical displacement and *mise-en-abîme* in the field of observation. Examples of this type of interface come primarily from Forest's early work in video: e.g., *Senior Citizen Video* (1973), *Electronic Investigation of Rue Guénégaud* (1973), *Video Portrait of a Collector in Real*

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*Time* (1974), *Restany Dines at La Coupole* (1974), and *The Biennial of the Year 2000* (1975); however such later works like *Italian Perspective* (1987) and *Territorial Outings* (2001) function similarly.

The second type is the *subversive interface,* in which the normal operation of an interface is disrupted, compromised, jammed, or deviated in some way; or one type of interface is used to undermine another, or to provide an alternative means of tapping into the same network or field of operation. The utopian element here is obvious: the subversive interface momentarily threatens the established order (of the media, politics, art, etc.), reveals the truth behind its spectacular façade and creates brief openings for free expression where it is normally inhibited. Examples abound throughout Forest's career: *150 cm² of Newspaper* (1972), *The City Invaded by Blank Space* (1973), *The Artistic Square Meter* (1977), *The Stock Exchange of the Imaginary* (1982), *Babel Press Conference* (1983), *Learn How to Watch TV with Your Radio* (1985), *Fred Forest for President of Bulgarian Television* (1991), *The Watchtowers of Peace* (1993), *From Casablanca to Locarno* (1995), *Memory Pictures* (2005), *and Biennial 3000* (2006).

The third type is the *metacommunicational interface,* which, as we have seen, is designed to reveal the immanent realities of media and information space. In this case, the utopian element still relies on a certain leap of the imagination; however, this is not for the purpose of imagining an alternative reality outside the here-and-now, but rather for re-envisioning our here-and-now reality so as to fully incorporate the utopian spaces of information and communication already in its midst. As one becomes more fully immersed in

actions of this type, one eventually stops worrying about the apparent *irreality* of the type of space in which the action is taking place and one is left free to simply inhabit it with one's senses, mind, and conscience fully engaged. In some works exemplifying this type of interface, one experiences what Forest collaborator, Mario Costa, has called "the technological sublime." In others, there is greater emphasis on the social potential of the new kind of space tthat has opened up. Works like *Here and Now* (1982), *Intermediate Intervention* (1983), *Electronic Blue: Tribute to Yves Klein* (1983), *The Past-Present Network* (1984), *Celebration of the Present* (1985), *Telephonic Rally* (1986), *Telephonic Faucet* (1992), and *Machine for Manipulating Time* (1999) are examples of this type of utopian interface.

Lastly, there is the explicitly *liminal interface,* in which the interface is turned into a threshold to be crossed in explicitly ritual or festive events in which old anthropological norms are temporarily suspended and new ones are to be improvised. The best examples of this type are to be found among Forest's later web-based projects like *Time-Out* (1998), *The Center of the World* (1999), *The Cyber-Wedding* (1999), *Meat* (2002), *The Digital Street Corner* (2005) *The Traders' Ball* (2010), and *Ebb and Flow: The Internet Cave* (2011). Through projects such as these, Forest would seem to fulfill one of the key conditions for the emergence of collective intelligence as described by his friend, Pierre Lévy. Although Lévy considers the emergence of collective intelligence an inevitable result of the dynamic pooling of knowledge that he sees taking place in cyberspace, he also stresses that both art and ritual are needed if it is to become a *self-conscious* reality: "The collective imaginary is born from taking the time to invent the ceremony that is its own inauguration."[19]

*   *   *

The modes of utopia that one encounters in Forest's interface art differ in several respects from the traditional model; however, one thing remains constant: utopia still conveys social ideals and ethical imperatives that are meant to bring out the best in humanity. Forest's utopianism is an example of the refreshing yet lucid humanism that Pierre Restany identified as his greatest quality as an artist. Time will tell if Fred Forest, France's most famous unknown artist, finds his rightful place in any of the major museums of the world or the historical surveys of contemporary art; nevertheless, it is already safe to say that this unusual man—a self-taught artist, an inveterate troublemaker, a devious media hijacker, a prominent video and telecom art pioneer, an art world gadfly, a realistic utopian, an aesthetic sociologist of the information society, and choreographer of rituals in cyberspace—succeeded in achieving exactly what he said a socially relevant "art of the present" should do:

> The artist of today has considerable means of action at his disposal. He can contribute to the "co-evolution" of the people, systems, and networks of his time by "injecting" new values into society and—if we are to believe chaos theory and the sciences of complexity—by playing the role of catalyst so that his action, infinitely small though it might be, can create a ripple effect that destabilizes established systems and sets up "microsystems" with a real measure of autonomy. [...] With his personal computer and an internet connection, the artist can bypass the traditional museum structure and commercial channels of art and become an autonomous "transmitter of the symbolic," speaking to the entire planet.[20]

## Conclusion: Illustrations



**Figure 1:** Forest with Andy Warhol's *Gold Marilyn* (1962) at New York's Museum of Modern Art during his unauthorized performance *Sociological Walk with Google Glass, or the Augmented Visit at MoMA* (2014) [Source: Documentary film by Yvana Samandova and Borjan Zarevski, < http://youtu.be/Cqxu2rs6kZo >]

# Notes

*Introduction: Fred Forest, Troublemaker*

[1] According to Robert C. Morgan, this is how Forest introduced himself at a New York function in honor of the late Pierre Restany. See Robert C. Morgan, "Deep Irony and the Traders' Ball" in *The Traders' Ball,* catalog for the exhibition at The Lab Gallery, New York, June 11 – July 2, 2010 (New York, 2010): n. p.

[2] The exhibition, which ran 25 January – 31 March 2013, was curated by Dominique Roland with scenography by Manuela Manzini. See Dominique Roland, ed., *Fred Forest, home-média no. 1,* bilingual (French-English) exhibition catalog (Enghien-les-Bains, France: Centre des Arts & Strasbourg: r-diffusion, 2013).

[3] "Vidéo Vintage 1963 – 1983," exhibition, Centre Georges Pompidou, 8 February – 7 May 2012, curated by Christine Van Assche. See Christine Van Assche, ed., *Vidéo vintage 1963 – 1983: une sélection de vidéos fondatrices des collections Nouveaux médias du Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou,* exhibition catalog (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 2012).

[4] See Frank Popper, *Art of the Electronic Age* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993) and *From Technological to Virtual Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007); and Stephen Wilson, *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science, and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2002). See also Catherine Millet, *Contemporary Art in France,* trans. Charles Penwarden (Paris: Flammarion, 2006). Both Popper and Millet have been regular defenders of Forest's work.

[5] For Flusser's analysis of Forest's blank space in *Le Monde,* see Vilém Flusser, "L'espace communicant: l'expérience de Fred Forest," *Communication et langages* 18 (1973): 81-92.

[6] Forest's intervention during the Biennial also included a Brazilian version of his *Space-Media* project, with blank spaces and interruptions in a number of periodicals and broadcasts. One version of a blank space in a newspaper was printed up and distributed in the city streets to be filled out on the spot and later exhibited. While not an official part of his participation in

the Biennial, Forest mounted another successful project while still in Brazil, *Sociological Promenade in Brooklin* (*Promenade sociologique à Brooklin,* 1973). On the surface, this was typical fare in the genre of socially conscious relational art: Forest led a group of volunteers on a walking tour of the São Paulo district of Brooklin, then still a largely working class and lower middle class district (now aggressively gentrified and full of corporate office towers)—in an attempt to get to know more about the lives and social mores of the shopkeepers and residents they met along the way. However, it also included an interesting reflection on spectatorship and the artistic "transfiguration of the commonplace" (Danto). In order to participate in the walk, interested persons first had to claim one of the thirty numbered stools left waiting in the contemporary art museum—a gesture that revealed the competitive undercurrent in art and placed the privileged status of spectator itself on display rather than bringing the commonplace into the transfigurational space of the museum. The walkers then had to carry their prized stools with them throughout the walk, which made them as much objects of curiosity as the humble residents of the district were to them, reminded them constantly of their own status (as bourgeois, spectators, amateur sociologists, educated art lovers, etc.), and made it more difficult to blend in to the surroundings and freely mingle with the locals. See Arthur Coleman Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981). Published in French translation in 1989 as *La transfiguration du banal,* Danto's work has greatly influenced Forest's thinking.

[7] Forest's *Artistic Square Meter* is an important example of what has been called "transactional art," which uses the mechanisms of business transactions to question the complicated relationship between art's commercial value as a commodity, as determined by marketplace forces and the established practices of the "trade;" and its social, political, moral, aesthetic, and spiritual value(s). Through his ritualistic sales of *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* (1959-1962), Yves Klein was one of the subgenre's initiators. Other noteworthy practitioners include fellow Frenchman Philippe Thomas, whose *readymades belong to everyone®* agency (*Les ready-made appartiennent à tout le monde,* launched in 1987) produced and marketed works signed by the purchaser in place of the author; and J. S. C. Boggs, who

created his own series of artisanal, pseudo-counterfeit bank notes, which he put into circulation by persuading others to accept them in exchange for goods and services. Forest's innovation in the field consists in his critical understanding of the role information plays in creating value and his innovative and subversive use of modern means of mass communications to promote his projects. For this reason, Forest's true kindred spirits in the field are the members of a younger generation of artists who create transactional works online like Keith Obadike, who offered his blackness for sale on eBay (*Blackness for Sale,* 2001); and the ®TMark group, which solicited support for projects by affiliated groups (e.g. The Barbie Liberation Front, The Yes Men, etoy) through an online clearing house structured like a mutual fund. See Daniela Alina Plewe, "Transactional Art as a Form of Interactive Art" in *Re:live: Media Art History 2009,* published proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology, Melbourne, 26 – 29 November 2009, eds. Sean Cubitt & Paul Thomas (Melbourne: University of Melbourne & Victorian College for the Arts, 2009): 119-125; <http://mediaarthistory.org/relive/ReLive09Proceedings.pdf>.

[8] Forest was interviewed by Inspector Freddy Clapier of the Paris Police Prefecture's commerce and fraud division. The transcript of the interview is part of file no. 6188E, submitted on March 15, 1977. The author obtained a copy of this report from Fred Forest. The following passages are excerpted from the report:

> QUESTION: Based on what criteria has the [artistic] status [of the square meters] been determined?
>
> ANSWER: I am fully competent to determine the artistic status of the parcels because I am recognized internationally as an artist of the first order and can provide you with proof of this. [...] It is evident that the artistic status of the parcels is a designation made by me alone insofar as I came up with the idea based on personal criteria, which, given their artistic nature, need not be materialized or explained.
>
> QUESTION: What do you mean [in your advertisement] by "a double investment with a high rate of return" and in what way does the phrase "invest your capital a stone's throw from the Swiss border" make the land worth more?

> ANSWER: It's well known that Switzerland is a haven for secure and lucrative investments. This is made abundantly clear by the migration of so much capital to this country. [...] But the notion of the high return is rooted in art, as well as in the asset's quality as real estate. To understand this, all you need to do is look at the recent evolution of the art and real estate markets. My system offers you an opportunity to speculate in both at the same time. [...]
>
> QUESTION: In essence, this is just a first test case and what comes next will be determined on the basis of the reactions that may be observed on the part of any eventual buyers.
>
> ANSWER: As has always been the case anytime a new form of art has attempted to establish itself. [...]
>
> QUESTION: Are you anticipating making a large profit from the sale of the plot?
>
> ANSWER: A large profit is indeed a possibility since the original purchase price [of the land] was quite low; however, in this case, I would like to point out that the value added [through art] is considerable. As I've already told you repeatedly, for me, this is an artistic operation as much as a financial one.

[9] A number of documents related to the artistic square meter cycle (including Restany's attestation and several press clippings) are to found in a catalog Forest published for the creation of the Territory: Fred Forest, *Le Territoire du m²* (Anserville: Éditions du Territoire, 1980).

[10] See Fred Forest, *Correspondances: l'œuvre perdue,* into. Harald Szeemann (Lausanne: Galerie Rivolta, 1990).

[11] Forest's Bulgarian campaign is described in detail and analyzed in Nedeltcho Milev, "Fred Forest et la télévision bulgare: entre Eisenstein, Buñuel et Fellini," *Communication et langages* 91 (1992): 47-54.

[12] Forest's own only slightly fanciful account of his cat-and-mouse game with Saparev is painfully funny:

The artistic parody of political behavior can itself become an act of political communication, inscribed in information space. By the very nature of things, this space has become the primary battleground for competing ideas, strategies, and political confrontations. In this experiment we deliberately sought to turn the information milieu into a place for art! [...]

In retrospect, what seems astonishing is the fact the media powers that be, in the person of Saparev himself at the very top, did not smell the trap, but instead plunged headfirst into the net that we had spread out for them… Right upon my arrival in Sofia, which had been preceded by selected information leaked in the press by a few of my journalist friends, I challenged him to a duel on live television. This challenge was issued at my very first press conference, held at the International Press Center, while I was presenting the details of my platform for a new "utopian and nervous" Bulgarian television. By 8:00 P.M., footage from this press conference was being rebroadcast on the BTV1 evening news, presented and commented by the star anchorwoman Nery Tervieva. At 10:00 P.M., it was BTV2's turn to report on it. Seeing these images, the impulsive reaction of Ognan Saparev was to pick up the phone to put through a call to the editorial offices [of the broadcasting authority]. At the end of the broadcast, Nery Terzieva read an communiqué through which Ognan Saparev let it be known that "he was accepting the Frenchman's challenge." [...]

Following the advice of his chief of staff, Saparev attempted to stall by offering different excuses: an official trip to the provinces, the diplomatic flu, a meeting the head of state. Hot on his heels, opposition journalists hounded relentlessly, demanding to know the date and time of the confrontation on the small screen. In the press, the headlines read: "Saparev is afraid of the artist," "Saparev is hiding," and "Saparev is worried about the Frenchman." I can just imagine the polite embarrassment this caused in the ranks of the French Embassy in Sofia. Having gotten wind of the project beforehand, the Quai d'Orsay [French Ministry of Foreign Affairs], had already tried to talk me out of it. The pressure was hardly subtle. It came from a diplomat stationed in Sofia even before my departure from Paris. France was in the process of negotiating an important television agreement with Bulgaria. My "inopportune" action ran the risk of

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jeopardizing it. One feared a diplomatic incident that would bring it all down: a French citizen's interference in the domestic affairs of a foreign country. Still unreachable, Saparev's attempt to get out [of his debate commitment] provided my campaign with the ideal launching pad. The affair had become national in scope. It was now impossible for me to move about in the streets of Sofia without giving an impromtu press conference on the sidewalk. Thanks to his repeated appearances on television, the "Frenchman" had become the "TV icon in rose-colored glasses" in the eyes of the Bulgarian people. [...]

My movements and meetings, which I kept up at a frantic pace, served the purpose of keeping up the pressure in the media. The invisible Saparev resurfaced to make a surprising overture that struck me as rather strange: on the October 8, he broke his silence by letting me know that he was inviting me to lunch in one of the best restaurants in Sofia. Since I had happily accepted a similar invitation from Mikhail Petkov, the head of the opposition Social Democratic Party, just the evening before, it was inconceivable that would not dine with Saparev. This maneuver struck me as very crude. I could already see our picture in the next day's papers with Saparev's hand on my shoulder! With his napkin around his neck, Saparev was waiting for me inside the restaurant in the company of his chief of staff. I asked the journalist Katia Vladimiova to serve as my emissary. She would go inside and let Saparev know that I had come to Sofia to take his job, that it was nothing personal, and that I would not sit down at his table unless he gave a firm date and time for our televised debate which I could make public. From outside through the steamed up window, I could see his chief of staff waving his arms like a semaphore. His face bright red with anger, he couldn't control himself…. To have dared to impose conditions before sitting down at Saparev's table was an unspeakable insult [for someone of his stature]. Frozen in his three-piece "Soviet gray" suit, Saparev apparently had no right to speak for himself.

From this moment on, everything happened very fast. I caught a ride on an ambulance with sirens blaring to deliver an open letter in which I announce Saparev's backing out [of our debate]. The members of the video crew that had been following me since the first day put on white nurse's uniforms for the occasion. The letter mentioned that "the power of the imagination will prevail

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over political power, the party line, and bureaucracy." I then made my way through the streets of Sofia on a route that led me to the Parliament building. It was a sort of campaign motorcade. Perched atop the roof of a car, I waved to the crowd. [...]

Being neither a technocrat, a manager, a politician, nor a media mogul, I sought the position [of president of Bulgarian television] solely in my capacity as an artist of communication. For this reason, I broke with tradition and promised to permanently establish the utopian, creative, interactive, and nervous television of tomorrow immediately upon taking office. [...]

My campaign for this position, including my rose-colored glasses, was designed to stir up ideas, to open debate about the role of the media and television in particular in a society of communication on the threshold of the 21st century. In spite of appearances, my candidacy couldn't have been more serious. Monsieur Saparev and the bureaucracy that spawned him were incapable of grasping this. An attitude like mine is situated outside the parameters of politics that structures his way of thinking. Symbols, too, are weapons. My candidacy was a symbolic act that wanted to become meaningful in the eyes of the world.

Author translation of excerpts from "Fred Forest president de la TV bulgare," <http://www. webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/expo-retr-fredforest/textes_critiques/textes_divers/ff_president_ tv_bulg_fr.htm#text>. The paragraph structure of the original was altered for readability.

[13] See Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, "A User's Guide to Détournement" in Ken Knabb, ed. & trans., *The Situationist International Anthology,* rev. ed. (1981; Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006): 14-20; and Situationist International, "Détournement as Negation and Prelude" in Knabb 67-68. See also Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) and Simon Ford, *The Situationist International: A User's Guide* (London: Black Dog, 2005).

[14] Forest explains his tactical use of the media in an interview with Michael F. Leruth, "Dépasser l'art contemporain," part one of "Interview avec Fred Forest, braconnier des espaces

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virtuels de l'information," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 10.3 (September 2006): 276-289 (esp. 282-283).

[15] For an overview of media subversion in contemporary art, see Inke Arns, "Social Technologies: Deconstruction, Subversion, and the Utopia of Democratic Communication," trans. Michael Robinson, *Media Art Net 1: An Overview of Media Art,* eds. Dieter Daniels & Rudolf Freiling, <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art/society/>. For Situationist-inspired tactics in early online art and activism, see Stephen Best & Douglas Kellner, "Debord, Cybersituations, and the Interactive Spectacle, *SubStance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism* 28.3.90 (1999): 129-156. For the underlying principles of culture jamming, see Mark Dery, *Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs,* (Westfield, NJ: Open Media, 1993); Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America* (New York: Eagle Brook, 1999); and Christine Harold, *Our Space: Resisting the Corporate Control of Culture* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2007). See especially Harold 76-78 for an illuminating analysis based on the etymological derivation of the word "prank." For underlying principles of tactical media and hacktivism, see Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1994) and *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia: 1996); David Garcia & Geert Lovnik, "The ABC of Tactical Media," Nettime posting, 16 May 1997, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-I-9705/msg00096. html>; and Garcia & Lovnik, "The DEF of Tactical Media," Nettime Posting, 22 February 1999, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-I-9902/msg00104.html>; Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (London: Tate, 2003); and Rita Raley, *Tactical Media* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2009). For an early overview of the radical counterculture of the internet, see Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century* (New York: Grove, 1996).

[16] Derrick de Kerckhove, "Fred Forest: l'envers du terrorisme," *Art press* Mai [May] 2004: 22-24.

[17] In English, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steven Rendall (Brekeley: U California P, 1984); *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other,* trans. Brian Massumi

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(Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1986); and *Culture in the Plural,* trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1997).

[18] To gauge Forest's reputation in France, see Harry Bellet, "Fred Forest, empêcheur de créer en rond," *Le Monde* 22 Février [February] 2003: 30. To gain a sense of his critical view of contemporary art, see Fred Forest "L'art contemporain est-il contemporain?" *Le Monde* 30 Octobre [October] 2004: 21.

[19] It is more than ironic that *Shapolsky 1971* was the original object of Forest's case against the Pompidou given that the legendary work's investigation of the shady real estate dealings of a New York slumlord was so controversial that it resulted in both the cancellation of the solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, where it was to be featured and the firing of the exhibition's curator. For a discussion of *Shapolsky 1971,* see Rosalyn Deutsch, "Property Values: Hans Haacke, Real Estate, and the Museum" in Deutsch, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Chicago: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts; Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1996): 159-194. For general information on Haacke's career, see Brian Wallis, ed., *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business,* exhibition catalog (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art & Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1987); Benjamin Buchloh, "Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason" in Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2003): 203-241; Walter Grasskamp, *Hans Haacke* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2004); Luke Skrebowski, "All Systems Go: Recovering Hans Haacke's Systems Art," *Grey Room* 30 (Winter 2008): 54-83; and Kristen Hileman, "Romantic Realist: A Conversation with Hans Haacke," *American Art* 24.2 (Summer 2010): 74-93.

[20] It should be noted that Forest's focus on Haacke has a complex back story that predates the case against MNAM. Haacke is often considered a representative of "sociological art" although Forest takes issue with this idea. Nevertheless, works by Haacke were featured in two of the exhibitions organized by the Collectif d'Art Sociologique in association with Bernard Teyssèdre in 1975; and Forest relates that the Collective made overtures to Haacke about joining the group and possible collaborations, but that Haacke was not interested, allegedly

because the Collective was too radical and affiliation with it might have jeopardized his teaching position in the United States. Haacke first became a target for public criticism by Forest in 1987 because of one of the artist's anti-Apartheid paintings, which was prominently featured at Documenta 8 in Kassel in 1987 and was promptly sold by the gallery representing Haacke (John Weber Gallery, New York). Forest found it ironic that this lucrative business deal took place against the backdrop of a major international exhibition of avant-garde art that had chosen "the social responsibility of art" as its theme. In a commentary published in a Cologne newspaper, Forest alleged that art's purported social responsibility in general and the Haacke work's political stance in particular were merely being used by the art market to increase the value of its merchandise, which wasn't to say the artist was complicit or that his political convictions were not sincere. Several years later, on January 18, 1994, Forest disrupted a joint appearance by Haacke and Pierre Bourdieu at the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris that was organized in conjunction with the publication the artist and the sociologist's co-authored book, *Libre échange,* which treated, among other issues, how museums exchanged their symbolic capital (artistic freedom of expression, aesthetic transcendence, etc.) for the financial capital of corporate sponsors. See Pierre Bourdieu & Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange,* trans. Randal Johnson and Hans Haacke (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995). Forest distributed a tract ("Scandals on every floor!") outside the museum and essentially forced his way upon the stage to question the two about the commercial implications of their collaborations and the broader relationship between art, politics, public institutions, and the marketplace. On the same day, he sent a registered letter to Germain Viatte, director of MNAM, requesting purchase price of *Shapolsky et al.*—the official beginning of his legal battle with the museum.

[21] The quotation is from the unpublished manuscript of Forest's introduction to a proposed collection of Pierre Restany's writings about his work. The texts themselves (minus the introduction) are available online at <http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/reflexion/pierre-restany/23textes_intro.htm#text>.

[22] See Fred Forest, "Die soziale Aufgabe der Kunst," *Kölner Stadt Anzeiger* 20 August 1987: n.p. This was the opinion piece that criticized the sale of Hans Haacke's anti-apartheid painting.

[23] Forest's video and paper archives (Fonds Fred Forest) can be consulted at INA's Inathèque, located on the Tolbiac campus (Bibliothèque François Mitterrand) of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Forest says that he was planning on staging on a spectacular public performance during which he would burn it when he was introduced to Dutertre (the head of INA's Fonds de création audiovisuelle contemporaine), who persuaded him to donate his archives to INA instead.

[24] See Priscila Arantes, ed. *Circuitos paralelos: restrospectiva Fred Forest,* catalog of the exhibition held at Paço das Artes, São Paulo, curated by Priscila Arantes (São Paulo: Paço das Artes & Imprensa Official, 2006). See also the online content for the Slought Foundation retrospective, curated by Osvaldo Romberg, at <http://www.slought.org/content/11348/>.

[25] In English, see Vilém Flusser, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design,* trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion, 1999); *Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion, 2000); *Writings,* ed. Andreas Strohl, trans. Erik Eisel (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2002); *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism,* ed. Anke K. Finger, trans. Kenneth Kronenberg; *Into the Technical Universe of Things,* trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2011); *Does Writing Have a Future?,* trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2011). See also Anke Finger, Rainer Guldin & Gustavo Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2011).

[26] For Forest's reflections on Flusser's contributions to his practice of media art, see Annick Bureau, "Interview avec Fred Forest," *Flusser Studies* 8 (May 2009), <http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/08/bureaud-interview-avec-forest.pdf>.

[27] In the strictest sense, the term "Pied-Noir" applies only to the community of French-speaking Europeans of Algeria prior to Independence; however, in common usage, it is sometimes extended to include French citizens of the entire Maghreb prior to decolonization.

[28] Pierre Restany, *Le Nouveau Réalisme* (10/18-Union Générale d'Editions, 1978): 282 (quote from the first manifesto of the NR movement, 1960); 45 (quote from text originally published in *Les Nouveaux Réalistes,* 1968). For more on Pierre Restany's life and legacy in the art world,

see Henry Périer, *Pierre Restany: l'alchimiste de l'art* (Paris: Cercle d'Art, 1998); and Richard Leeman, *Le demi-siècle de Pierre Restany,* proceedings of the conference of the same name held at the Institut National d'Histoire d'Art, Paris, 30 November – 1 December 2006 (Paris: Cendres & INHA, 2009).

[29] Pierre Restany, "De l'art sociologique à l'esthétique de la communication, un humanisme de masse" in Fred Forest, ed., *100 actions* (Nice : Z'éditions, 1995): 57-58. For the sake of readabilty I have altered the paragraph structure of the original text. For Restany's interpretation of Klein, see Pierre Restany, *Yves Klein: Fire at the Heart of the Void,* trans. Andrea Loselle (New York: Journal of Contemporary Art, 1992).

[30] From Forest's introduction to the unpublished compilation of Restany texts, manuscript courtesy of Fred Forest.

[31] From the unpublished compilation of Restany texts, manuscript courtesy of Fred Forest.

[32] At the 1977 edition of the Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain (FIAC) in Paris, Forest and Orlan had side-by-side stands: Forest to present his *Artistic Square Meter,* and (Saint) Orlan her legendary performance, *The Artist's Kiss* (*Le baiser de l'artiste*). Forest is fond of telling the story of how Orlan once jokingly asked him to marry her!

[33] A full account of Forest's thesis can be found in Blaise Galland, *Art sociologique: méthode pour une sociologie esthétique* (Geneva: Georg, 1987): 43-58. Galland's book, a key source on Sociological Art, was itself originally a doctoral thesis in sociology at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

[34] Fred Forest, *Une vie en 100 portraits* (Nice: Incognito, 2010). In this compendium of sketches, we find everyone from Michel Foucault to Mick Jagger, Alain Robbe-Grillet to Roman Polanski, and Marshall McLuhan to Pelé. Forest also profiles many of his collaborators and intellectual allies from the world of art and ideas (e.g. Vilém Flusser, Pierre Restany, Luc Ferrari, Harald Szeeman, Paul Virilio, Philippe Sollers, an Catherine Millet) as well as dozens of fellow contemporary artists (e.g., François Morellet, César, Ben Vautier, Robert Filliou, Arman, Michel

Journiac, Orlan, Joseph Beuys, Christian Boltanski, Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik, Claude Viallat, and Maurice Benayoun).

[35] Fred Forest, *Un pionnier de l'art vidéo à l'art sur internet: art sociologique, esthétique de la communication et art de la commutation* (Paris: Harmattan, 2004). In addition to brief descriptions and illustrations of Forest's principle works starting in 1967, this work contains a number of valuable critical essays, some reprints of work published elsewhere, by a wide range of authors including Marshall McLuhan, Edgar Morin, Vilém Flusser, Derrick de Kerckhove, Mario Costa, François Rabaté (on Forest's network aesthetic), Harald Szeemann, Jean Devèze (on Forest's sense of space), Pierre Moeglin (on what makes communication aesthetic in Forest's approach), Frank Popper, Isabelle Rieusset-Lemarié (on the paradox of the immediate on Forest's work), Pierre Restany, Pierre Lévy (on the art of implication in Forest's work), Louis-José Lestocart (on Forest's epistemological stance), and Evelyne Rogue (on Forest's aesthetics of commutation). For additional information about each of Forest's major works, see also *Fred Forest Rétrospective: Art sociologique, Esthétique de communication,* Web Net Museum (a website maintained by Fred Forest), <http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/expo-retr-fredforest/actions/actions_fr.htm>.

[36] Isabelle Lassignardie, *Fred Forest: catalogue raisonné (1963-2008),* doctoral dissertation in art history under the direction of Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, Université de Picardie-Jules Verne, Amiens, France, defended March 26, 2010, 4 vol. + Commentary: vol. 1: 1963-1976; vol. 2: 1977-1987; vol. 3: 1988-2008; vol. 4: appendices (incl. bibliography).

*Chapter One: Sociological Art*

[1] Leruth, "Dépasser l'art contemporain": 276.

[2] Leruth, "Dépasser l'art contemporain": 277.

[3] For general information on the French colonization of Algeria and the Algerian War (1954-1962), see Martin Stone, *The Agony of Algeria* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997); and Benjamin Stora, *Algeria, 1830-2000: A Short History,* trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2004). Detailed discussion of the Pied-Noir community both before and after Algerian

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independence can be found in Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France,* 2nd ed. (2006; Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2008). For the broader cultural context of French decolonization, see Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1995). The Pied-Noir experience is the subject of a number of works in French including Joëlle Hureau, *La mémoire des Pieds-Noirs de 1830 à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 2001); Raphaël Delpard, *L'histoire des pieds-noirs d'Algérie* (1830-1962) (Neuilly-sur-Seine, France: Lafon, 2002); and Michèle Baussant, *Pieds-noirs, mémoires d'exils* (Paris: Stock, 2002).

[4] Forest returned to Mascara for the first time since 1962 in 2009.

[5] See Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* 3 vol., trans. John Moore (London & New York: Verso, 1991-92); and Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle,* rev. ed., trans. Fredy Perlman and John Supak (1970; Detroit: Red and Black, 1977). There has been a resurgence of interest in Lefèbvre in recent years. For example, see Kanishka Goonewardena et al., eds., *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefèbvre* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Luksz Stanck, *Henri Lefèbvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2011). There is a lot of literature in French on the *la banlieue* and its famous public housing complexes (HLM). In English, see Norma Evenson, *Paris: A Century of Change, 1878-1978* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale UP, 1979): 232-254; and Melissa Ellis Plouin, "Chicken Coops and Machines of Interminable Errors: A History of the *Grands Ensembles* in Parisian Suburbs," *Berkeley Planning Journal* 20.1 (2007): 43-59, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8ms3q57m.> The idealistic intentions of French architects, urban planners, and intellectuals in this period are detailed in Larry Busbea, *Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France, 1960-1970* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007).

[6] The story of Forest's acquisition of first Portapak his personal account.

[7] The very first video installation in France was created two years earlier, in 1967, by Martial Raysse—a closed-circuit video sculpture called *Identité, maintenant vous êtes un Martial Raysse* (*Identity: Now, You Are Martial Raysse Original*), in which live footage of gallery visitors was displayed in a "monitor-painting." In contrast to Raysse's simple design, which was a

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philosophical reflection on portraiture, Forest created a true multimedia environment with multiple social connotations. Forest again teamed up with Ferrari to create an audiovisual environment at the 1970 World's Fair in Osaka, Japan. The Osaka Fair is perhaps best remembered in artistic circles for the domed Pepsi Pavillion, which the EAT group (Experiments in Art and Technology, made up of Billy Klüver, Fred Waldhauer, Robert Rauchenberg, and Robert Whitman) transformed into a spectacular, immersive multimedia performance space.

[8] Fred Forest, *Art sociologique:* 69.

[9] Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

[10] See Frank Popper, *Art, Action, and Participation* (New York: New York UP, 1975). For recent appraisals, see Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U California P, 2004); Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

[11] The central themes and methodologies of these untraditional forms of artistic practice are marvelously documented in the series "Documents of Contemporary Art," jointly published by Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press. The volumes most relevant to Forest's practice are *Participation* (ed. Claire Bishop, 2006), *The Artist's Joke* (ed. Jennifer Higgie, 2007), *The Everyday* (ed. Stephen Johnstone), *Appropriation* (ed. David Evans), *Utopias* (ed. Richard Noble, 2009), *Chance* (ed. Margaret Everson, 2010), *Education* (ed. Felicity Allen, 2011), and *Situation* (ed. Jens Hoffmann, 2012).

[12] On the origins and early history of video art, see John G. Hanhardt, "Dé-collage/Collage: Notes Toward a Reexamination of the Origins of Video Art" (emphasis on Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell); Marita Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History" in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture & Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990): 71-79 and 101-121;

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and Yvonne Spielmann, *Video: The Reflexive Medium,* trans. Anja Welle and Stan Jones (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2008): 71-129.

[13] An important contributor to scholarship on the subject is Edward Shanken, editor of Roy Ascott, *Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology,* and Consciousness (Berkeley & Los Angeles: U California P, 2003), which includes an extensive introduction by Shanken. Shanken also offers a useful discussion of the role played by Burnham and his systems-based notion of art as software in "Art in the Age of Information," *Leonardo* 35.4 (August 2002): 433-438. See also Shanken's *Art and Electronic Media* (London: Phaidon, 2009), a comprehensive survey of the field (unfortunately, though, with no mention of Forest). For a broader view of the influence of cybernetics and systems theory on art, see Claudia Gianetti, *Aesthetics of the Digital,* trans. Tom Morrison, <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/aesthetics_of_the_digital> (which does contain a reference to Forest).

[14] See Donna De Salvo, ed., *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970* (London: Tate, 2005).

[15] Nathalie Heinich, *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain* (Paris: Minuit). See pp. 52-72 on the interplay between artistic transgression, public reaction, and institutional consecration that characterizes contemporary art in comparison to modern art; and pp. 338-350 on the "permissive paradox" inherent to the nearly instantaneous institutionalization of transgression.

[16] Serge Guibaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War,* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1985). For brief background on French art in the 1960s, see Sarah Wilson, "Paris in the 1960s: Towards the Barricades of the Latin Quarter" in Sarah Wilson, ed., *Paris: Capital of the Arts, 1900-1968,* exhibition catalog (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2002): 330-343. For a more in-depth study, see Jill Carrick, *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-avant-*garde (Farnham, England & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010). Paul Ardenne offers an excellent overview of a wide range of artists from France and elsewhere (including several mentions of Forest) whose non-plastic work in the 1960s and 70s relied on social contexts outside the traditional spaces of the

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art world in *Un art contextual: creation artistique en mileu urbain, en situation, d'intervention, de participation* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002).

[17] See Cécile Debray, ed., *Nouveau réalisme,* catalog of the retrospective exhibition held at the Grand Palais in Paris, 28 March – 2 July 2007 (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2007).

[18] Information on the origins and early history of video art in France is available in English in Chris Meigh-Andrews, *A History of Video Art: The Development of Form and Function* (Oxford: Berg, 2006): 27-28 & 89-91; and online in *New Media Encyclopedia,* <http://www.newmedia-arts.be/english/histoire.htm>. The authoritative French work on early video art is Anne-Marie Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing* (Paris: Hachette, 1981). Forest is mentioned several times in Duguet's book.

[19] See Gilles Aupetitallot, *GRAV, Groupe de recherché d'art visual, 1960 – 1968: stratégies de participation,* catalog of the retrospective held at Le Magasin/Centre d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble, 7 June – 6 September 1998 (Grenoble: Le Magasin, 1998); and Elverio Maurizi and Anna Caterina Toni, *Il GRAV: storia et utopia* (Rome: Mulitgrafica, 1991).

[20] See Jean-Paul Ameline and Bénédicte Ajac, eds., *La figuration narrative: Paris, 1960 – 1972,* catalog of the retrospective exhibition held at the Grand Palais in Paris, 16 April – 13 July 2008 (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2008).

[21] See Bernard Ceysson, Loïc Bénétière & François-Marie Ceysson, eds., *Le mouvement Supports/Surfaces* (Saint-Étienne, France : Ceysson-Éditions d'Art, 2010) ; and Daniel Dezeuze, *Dictionnaire Supports/Surfaces* (Paris : Ceysson-Éditions d'Art, 2011).

[22] For May 68's impact on the French art world, see Rebecca J. DeRoo, *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: The Politics of Artistic Display in France after 1968* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006). DeRoo offers an illuminating analysis of efforts on the part of French cultural authorities to come to terms with radical demands to break down the barriers between the rarified bourgeois domain of high art and the everyday life of the masses—efforts that eventually led to the creation of the Centre Georges Pompidou—and of artists' reactions to these overtures. Noting that many artists were faced with a dilemma—either work within

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the newly liberalized system at the risk of compromising one's principles or work outside it at the risk of being relegated to obscurity—DeRoo focuses on artists (Christian Boltanski and Annette Messager) whom she portrays as engaging in subtle and thought-provoking contestation of museological practices and the broader cultural tropes they reflect from inside the new post-1968 system. Seen in this context, Fred Forest represents a somewhat different position: that of an artist who is not exactly obscure but who has remained on the fringes of the system throughout most of his career both as a matter of choice (because he refuses to accept as settled the important question of how art "interfaces" with society) and as a consequence of the unorthodox ways in which he has chosen to express himself (i.e. his calculated acts of provocation aimed at the contemporary art establishment as well as the immaterial nature of many of his works). An excellent source in English on the evolving perception of May 68 is Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2004).

[23] See the title essay (on May 68) in Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings* (English translation of *La prise de parole et d'autres écrits politiques,* 1994), trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1997).

[24] The classic theorization of this concept is *Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World,* trans. Hélène Iswolsky (1941; Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1984); on the carnivalesque dimension of May 68, see Sherry Roxanne Turkle, "Symbol and Festival in the French Student Uprising (May-June 1968)" in Sally Falk Moore & Barbara G. Meyerhoff, eds., *Symbol and Politics in Communal Ideology: Cases and Questions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975): 68-100. A leading French theorist of the liberating ethos of public festivity is Jean Duvignaud, whose magnum opus was *Fêtes et civilisations* (Geneva & Paris: Weber, 1973; new. ed. Arles: Actes Sud, 1991). Duviganud was on Forest's doctoral dissertation thesis jury.

[25] On the history, theory, and practice of the Collective, see Rainer Wick, "Nicht Kunst, nicht Soziologie: Das Collectif d'art sociolgique," *Kunstforum International,* special issue on "Art as Social Process," 27 (1978): 143-183; and Galland, *Sociologie esthétique.*

[26] The origins and development of Sociological Art were and still are a matter of some controversy. Bory and Rabascall, as well as (Sacha) Sosno can be considered the conscientious

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objectors of Sociological Art on account of their refusal to go along with Forest, Fischer, and Thenot after the latter launched the Collective on their own and then presented it to their fellow artists as a *fait accompli;* and because of their subsequent criticism of the Collective's methods. There is also disagreement over who first came up with the term itself: Fischer, Forest, Pluchart, and Flusser each claimed that they had been the first to use it. However, one thing is clear: while the founding members of the Collective made themselves the public face of Sociological Art, the contours of the movement were somewhat broader and fuzzier. Even the first three exhibitions of Sociological Art, which were ostensibly organized by the Collective with the help of Bernard Teyssèdre, featured the work of a diverse group of international artists that included the New York section of Art & Language, Hans Haacke, Les Levine, Lea Lublin, Antonio Muntadas, Adrian Piper, Wolf Vostell; as well as Bory, Rabascall, and Sosno. Several of these artists (in particular those based in France) have either identified themselves or have been identified by others as associated with the concept/movement. The members of the Collective broke with Teyssèdre at the end of this first exhibition cycle. Their second manifesto (May 1975) and subsequent group exhibition at the Musée Galliéra in Paris (June – August 1975) signaled their desire to take exclusive ownership of the concept of Sociological Art. Not surprisingly, tensions within the group remained, particularly between the more austere and theoretically-inclined Fischer (the group's "André Breton") and the more charismatic and practice-oriented Forest (its "Salvador Dali"). Active collaboration had already slowed within a few years of the creation of the Collective as each of the members devoted more time to their individual projects, and had effectively ceased by 1979. The Collective's official dissolution, which Forest and Thenot have blamed on Fischer's alleged attempt to control the jointly created École Sociologique Interrogative (School of Interrogative Sociology, 1976) and his more pronounced intellectualist approach, occurred in January 1981.

[27] The epistemological orientation of Sociological Art is firmly established in "Manifeste II de l'Art sociologique" (May 1975), which was originally published in the catalog of the Collective's self-curated group exhibition at Musée Galliéra in Paris, June – August 1975, *Collectif [d']art sociologique: théorie, pratique, critique:* 6.

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[28] Forest, *Art sociologique:* 33 (italics in the original).

[29] In addition to the four manifestos published by the Collective, the most important primary sources for the theory behind Sociological Art are the two books written by Fischer and Forest: Hervé Fischer, *Théorie de l'art sociologique* (Tournai, Belgium: Casterman, 1977); and Forest's *Art sociologique: dossier Fred Forest* (1977). Fischer's book is denser and can perhaps be considered the most authoritative theoretical text on Sociological Art. However, Forest's book is a more interesting historical document. It is actually a compendium of texts by critics and intellectuals (e.g. Jean Duvignaud, Vilém Flusser, Edgar Morin, and Pierre Restany), catalog-like entries on Forest's early works, a variety of theoretical texts by the Collective's members (including all of its previously published manifestos), and the illuminating and often irreverent results of an inquiry about the concept of Sociological Art conducted by Forest among his fellows artists (respondents include Art & Language, Jeanne-Claude Christo, Robert Filliou, Gérard Fromanger, Jochen Gerz, Dan Graham, Guerilla Art Action Group, Les Levine, Jacques Monory, Antoni Muntadas, Joan Rabascall, Claude Rancillac, Ben Vautier, and Wolf Vostell). The results of the inquiry are analyzed by Galland. Forest's main theoretical texts in the volume are "Réflexions sur l'art sociologique" (29-68) and "Ni art, ni science: autre chose" (183-203). Fischer's contribution to the volume, "De l'hygiène de l'art à la pratique sociologique utopiste" (169-183) was submitted as a complement to his own book. Earlier versions of Fischer and Forest's reflections are found in the Musée Galliéra exhibition catalog: Hervé Fischer, "Théorie de l'art sociologique" (15-23) and "Pour une pratique artistique socio-pédagogique" (39-42); and Fred Forest, "Stratégie de la rupture: animation, activation, communication" (23-26). See also Jean-Paul Thenot, "Esquisse méthodologique" in the same catalog (26-29). The Collective's definition of Sociological Art in terms of "subversive short circuits" and "platforms for deviance" is set forth in "Manifeste III de l'Art sociologique: méthodologie et stratégie," originally published in the international catalog of the 37th Venice Biennial and later reprinted in Forest, *Art sociologique:* 158.

[30] See Craig J. Saper, *Networked Art* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2001). Examples of intimate bureaucracy abound in Sociological Art, including both group efforts like the Collective

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itself and its subsidiary, the École de Sociologie Interrogative; and the individual projects of the Collective's members, such as Fischer's Pharmacy, Thenot's opinion surveys, and Forest's real estate venture. Hervé Fischer even wrote a book about artists' use of rubber stamps, among the most iconic symbols of bureaucratic authority. See Hervé Fischer, *Art et communication marginale: tampons d'artistes* (Paris: Balland, 1974).

[31] Vilém Flusser, "L'art sociologique et la video à travers la demarche de Fred Forest" in Forest, *Art sociologiquie:* 387-388. This dense critical text by Flusser included in Forest's volume is 74 pages long (pp. 357-531).

[32] See <http://www.hervefischer.net>.

[33] See <http://www.jeanpaulthenot.fr>.

[34] For an overview of Forest's seminal early work in the press, see Jules Gritti, "Fred Forest: artiste de la communication, inventeur de l'expérience de presse," *Presse actualité: la revue de l'information écrite, parlée, télévisée* 151 (Janvier [January] 1981): 32-39.

[35] Heinz-Peter Schwerfel, "Forest, artiste-vidéo," *+ – 0 [Plus moins zéro]* 13.43 (Octobre [October] 1985): 66-68; English trans., pp. 68-70. The translations of some of Schwerfel's terms used here differ from those in the original publication.

[36] Ann-Sargent Wooster, "Reach Out and Touch Someone: The Romance of Interactivity" in Hall and Fifer, *Illuminating Video:* 275-303.

[37] For example, the tape of Flusser was shown at a round table discussion in which both Flusser and Forest participated at a photography fair in Arles in 1974.

[38] See Fred Forest, "Art sociologique: la famille Vidéo," *Communication et langages* 33 (1977): 85-102.

[39] A detailed synopsis of the *Senior Citizen Video* project can be found in *La télévision en partage: la télévision par câble et la vidéo,* dossier no. 3 (1974) in a series published by the Institut d'Etude et de Recherche en Information Visuelle (Lausanne): 20-30. Butaud and a colleague later made the experiment the subject of an in-depth book-length study. See Jean-

Philippe Butaud & Geneviève Voirin, *Libérer l'imaginaire? Enquête audio-visuelle en milieu institutionnel pour retraités ouvriers* (n. p.: D.R.S., 1976).

[40] See Kathy Rae Huffman, "Video Art: What's TV Got to Do with It?" in Hall and Fifer, *Illuminating Video:* 81-90; and Dieter Daniels, "Television-Art or Anti-Art: The Conflict between the Avant-Garde and the Mass Media in the 1960s and 1970s," trans. Michael Robinson, in *Media Art Net 1,* <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art/massmedia>.

[41] In the original text, Flusser uses the French word *leurre,* which can also be translated as "trick," "ruse," "illusion," "pretense," or "mirage."

[42] See *La télévision en partage:* 31-41.

[43] Although Nicolas Bourriaud is normally given credit for having invented "relational aesthetics," Fred Forest vehemently disputes this assertion; as does Jacques Van Lennep, the Belgian cofounder of the Cercle d'Art Prospectif in 1972. Both point to their own earlier use of the concept. For instance, the relational basis of Sociological Art affirmed in the quotation is also explicitly mentioned in the 3rd manifesto published by the Collective (1976). See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* trans. Simon Pleasance & Franza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002). See also Renaud Gahide & Benoît Goffin, eds., *CAP, art relationnel: un aspect de l'art contemporain en Belgique,* catalog of the exhibition held at the Maison de la Culture de Namur, 7 September – 20 October 2002 (Brussels: Dexia Bank & Tournai, Belgium: Renaissance du Livre, 2002). For a critique of Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics, see Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79.

[44] Fred Forest, *Art sociologique:* 186 (italics in original).

[45] For instance, Flusser, in "L'espace communicant de Fred Forest," writes that Forest must "struggle" against his "raw material," the mass media, which resist his attempts to transform them, just as more traditional artists struggle against the resistance of their raw materials: marble or wood in the case of the sculptor, paint in the case of the painter, sound in the case of the composer of music, and words in the case of the writer (85). For his part, Moles admits to being awed by the sheer amount of work (phone calls, letters, meetings, logistics, etc.) required

of Forest in order to "agitate" institutional systems—the true "essence" of his work as a sociological artist. See Abraham Moles & Fred Forest, "Réflexion en commun sur l'art sociologique," *Opus international* 55 (Avril [April] 1975): 47. In "L'envers du terrorisme," De Kerckhove, compares Forest to Atlas, hoisting upon his shoulders the vast networks in which our everyday life are enmeshed (23). It is worth noting, for example, that Forest did not pay to have *Le Monde* publish his blank space or his advertisement for the sale of artistic square meters, but used persuasion, personal relations, and the allure of collaboration with an avant-garde art rebel to obtain the space for free.

[46] Henri Lefèbvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford & Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991).

**Chapter Two: The Aesthetics of Communication**

[1] This was the gist of a new manifesto that Forest published on his own, "Art sociologique (Acte II)," *Le Monde* 7 Février [February] 1980: n. p.

[2] In English, see See Abraham Moles, Information Theory and Aesthetic Perception, trans. Joel F. Cohen (Urbanna: U Illinois P, 1968); and "Design and Immateriality: What of It in a Post-Industrial Society?" in Marco Diani, ed., *The Immaterial Society: Design, Culture, and Technology in the Postmodern World* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992): 27-34. In French, see Abraham Moles & Marie-Luce André, *Art et ordinateur* (Tournai, Belgium: Casterman, 1971); and Moles, "Cybernétique et œuvre d'art," *Revue d'esthétique* 18 (1965): 163-182. Moles' work is discussed in the chapters on "Cybernetic Aesthetics and Communication" and "Aesthetics of Communicative Context" in Claudia Gianetti, *Aesthetics of the Digital* (online publication).

[3] Subscribers included the philosopher Paul Virilio and a group from the University of California, Berkeley.

[4] Télétel was an earlier version of the French telephone-based internet precursor, Minitel.

[5] See Fred Forest, *Bourse de l'imaginaire, bourse du fait-divers: expérience de presse conçue et présentée par Fred Forest,* pref. Pierre Restany, catalog for the multimedia project conducted

at Centre Georges-Pompidou, 9 – 28 June 1982 (Paris: Centre Georges-Pompidou & Anserville, France: Éditions du Territoire, 1982).

[6] For more on the results of this project, see Fred Forest, "La bourse de l'imaginaire," *Communication et langages,* 55 (1983): 86-89; and Jules Gritti, "Le fait divers: une communication imaginaire, " in the same publication (pp. 89-96).

[7] Costa's major writings on the Aesthetics of Communication and related subjects include *L'estetica dei media: tecnologie e produzione artistica* (Cavallino di Lecche, Italy: Capone, 1990; rev. ed., Rome: Castelvecchi, 1999); *Il sublime tecnologico: piccolo trattato di estetica della tecnologia* (Salerno: Edisud, 1990; rev. ed., Rome: Castelvecchi, 1998); *Nuovi media e sperimentazione d'artista* (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1994); *L'estetica della comunicazione, come il medium ha polverizzato il messaggio: sull'uso estetico della simultaneità a distanza* (Rome: Castelvecchi, 1999); *Internet e globalizzazione estetica* (Naples: Tempo lungo, 2002); and *Dimenticare l'arte: nuovi orientamenti nella teoria e nella sperimentazione estetica* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2005).

[8] De Kerckhove is the author of a number of important bookson technology, electronic media, and culture including *Brainframes: Technology, Mind, and Business* (Baarn, Netherlands: Bosch & Keuning, 1990); *The Skin of Culture: Investigating the New Electronic Reality* (Toronto: Sommerville, 1995); *Connected Intelligence: The Arrival of the Web Society* (Toronto: Sommerville, 1997); and The *Architecture of Intelligence* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2001).

[9] The term telematics, which refers to the integrated use of telecommunications and computers to process information and transmit over long distances, was coined by Pierre Nora and Alain Minc in a 1974 report to the French president on the implications of the computer revolution. It is an English translation of *télématique,* which combines *TÉLÉcommunication* and *inforMATIQUE,* the French word for computer science/technology. Their work was translated into English as Pierre Nora and Alain Minc, *The Computerization of Society: A Report to the President of France,* n. trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1980). Fax, internet, and a whole range of digital systems that rely on wireless or landline transmission can be considered examples of telematics, as can the French Videotex-based internet precursor Minitel (1978 – 2012). On the

development and cultural impact of Minitel, see Odile Challe, "Le Minitel: la télématique à la française," *The French Review,* 62.5 (April 1989): 843-856.

[10] Zorbala was a cosigner (with Forest and Costa) of the original declaration founding the Aesthetics of Communication Group on October 29, 1983 in Mercato San Severino, Italy. Rokeby and White participated in Derrick de Kerckhove's Strategic Arts Initiative in Canada, which maintained close ties to the Aesthetics of Communcation Group through de Kerckhove.

[11] Fred Forest, "Manifeste pour une esthétique de la communication," *+ – 0 [Plus moins zéro]* 13.43 (Octobre [October] 1985): 7-16 ; English trans. David Sugarman and Joanna Weston, pp. 17-24. Quotations from the Manifesto cite the page numbers of both the original French text and the English version; however the translations in quotes are my own and in some instances differ from those the official English version. Aside from the special issue of *+ – 0* that includes the Manifesto, a number of other art journals published issues containing extensive presentations of both the theory and practice of the Aesthetics of Communication. A 1984 issue (no. 94) of *Opus international* contains Forest's article "Une nouvelle esthétique: l'esthétique de la communication" (pp. 42-43). The February 1988 special issue (no. 122) of *Art press* contains important theoretical texts by Mario Costa and Derrick de Kerckhove, a short commentary on Forest's work *Le vase brisé* (*The Broken Vase*) by Pierre Moeglin, the transcript of a discussion between Forest and Paul Virilio, and interviews with a number of other artists working on issues related to communication and technology (Norman White, Kit Galloway, Sherrie Rabinowitz, and Gene Youngblood). While not devoted exclusively to the Aesthetics of Communication, the special issue of *Leonardo* (vol. 24, no. 2, 1991) on "Connectivity: Art and Interactive Telecommunications," guest edited by Roy Ascott and Carl Eugene Loeffler, features a note by Forest and a more extensive article by Costa, in English. See also Fred Forest, "Pratique interactive et esthétique de la communication," *Le bulletin de l'IDATE,* 20 (Juillet [July] 1985): 309-312; and *Pour un art actuel: l'art à l'heure d'Internet* (Paris: Harmattan, 1998): 77-186. An expanded version of the article published in *Le bulletin de l'IDATE* is available in English: Fred Forest, "Communication Esthetics, Interactive Participation, and Artistic Systems of Communication and Expression," *Design Issues* 4.1-2 (1988): 97-115—the only extensive

theoretical text on the Aesthetics of Communication by Forest available in English aside from the English translation of the Manifesto. The work of the Aesthetics of Communication Group is also discussed in Popper, *Art of the Electronic Age:* 122-139.

[12] For clarification, see Fred Forest, "Thématiser l'espace-temps comme pratique artistique," *Sciences de la société: Les cahiers du LERASS,* 26 (Mai [May] 1992): 41-46.

[13] Fred Forest and Paul Virilio, "La fin des certitudes," *Art press* 122 (Février [February] 1988): 14-16. Among Virilio's extensive body of work available in English translation, his publications dealing with art and aesthetics include (in chronological order of their original publication in France when applicable): *The Aesthetics of Disappearance,* trans. Philip Breitchman (first French ed. 1980; New York: Semiotext(e): 1991); *Lost Dimension,* trans. Daniel Moshenberg (first French ed. 1984; New York: Semiotext(e): 1991); *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception,* trans. Patrick Camiller (first French ed. 1984; London & New York: Verso, 1989); *The Vision Machine,* n. trans. (first French ed. 1998; Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1994); *The Art of the Motor,* trans. Julie Rose (first French ed. 1993; Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1995); *Art and Fear,* trans. Julie Rose (first French ed. 2000; London & New York: Verso, 2003); *Unknown Quantity,* English language version of the catalog for the exhibition *Ce qui arrive,* Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, 29 November – 30 March 2003 (London & New York: Thames & Hudson; Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 2003); *The Accident of Art,* co-authored with Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Michael Taurmine (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005); and *Art as Far as the Eye Can See,* trans. Julie Rose (first French ed. 2005; Oxford & New York: Berg, 2007).

[14] Term used by Mario Costa in "Technologie, production artistique et esthétique de la communication," *Art press* 122 (Février [February] 1988): 13.

[15] In his contribution to the special issue of *Leonardo,* Mario Costa summarizes the principles of the Aesthetics of Communication in ten points: 1) it is an aesthetic of immaterial events presenting themselves as pure spatial-temporal flux and as an interactive living process; 2) the event is created by means of a remote-control device capable of visually joining two distinct spaces; 3) the information exchanged in the event is less important than the functional

conditions of the exchange (i.e., the network activated); 4) the event always takes place in real time; 5) the event is a mobilization of energy and field tensions rather than concepts and does not rely on any particular material object; 6) the event results from the interaction of the present and simultaneity, which are short-circuited, producing a fluid, pre-systematic experience of time; 7) the event creates new sensorial equilibriums in space-time (i.e., the "new" space-time is a "universal ... non-site of the present"); 8) the event activates a new phenomenology of presence based on the planetary extension of the nervous system via technology; 9) the feeling created in the event is to be described in terms of the sublime (i.e., awe for the "absolutely great") rather than the beautiful; 10) the emphasis on the sublime is unique in the history of the arts insofar as it implies the overcoming of the traditional antagonism between humankind and technology, creating both "a serene symbiotic bond in which the two are interdependent and indistinguishable" and a "spiritualization of technology." See Mario Costa, "Technology, Artistic Production, and the 'Aesthetics of Communication,'" *Leonardo* 24.2 (1991): 123-125. Forest's practice of the Aesthetics of Communication generally adheres to these points; however, it retains much of the critical posture inherent Sociological Art and the sense of the technological sublime in his work is often tempered, and sometimes undermined, by irony.

[16] See Blaise Galland, "Zen et esthétique de la communication," *+ – 0 [Plus moins zéro]* 13.43 (Octobre [October] 1985): 59-60 (English translation, pp. 60-61).

[17] Forest is fond of saying that when he crosses two media, a third media—a hybrid—is created as a result. Similarly, in a work like *Immediate Intervention,* he crosses different spaces with the help of electronic media in order to create a whole new iteration of space—a hybrid of physical space and media space.

[18] See Isabelle Rieusset-Lemarié, "Fred Forest ou le paradoxe de l'immédiat dans 'L'Esthétique de la Communication'" in Fred Forest, *Un pionnier de l'art vidéo à l'art sur internet:* 47-54.

[19] Passing mention should also be made of *Telepathic System* (*Le système TELEPAT,* 1986), a wry parody of the utopian faith in the potential of telematics in the form a revolutionary new

service of telepathic communication and agency via telephone, billed directly to the user's credit card!

[20] Similar works include *Water Games* (*Jeux d'eau,* 1986), *Electronic Faucets* (*Les robinets électroniques,* 1986), *Running Water* (*L'eau qui coule,* 1986), and *Planetary Faucets* (*Les robinets planétaires,* 1992).

[21] In fact, there was a physical confrontation between Forest and some of the journalists. This account was related to the author by Fred Forest and is also found in the manuscript of Forest's introduction to the unpublished compilation of Restany texts. One of the young journalists from *TEL* involved in the project and the scuffle on the set was Olivier Poivre d'Arvor, the brother of the iconic French television anchorman Patrick Poivre d'Arvor and future director (1999-2010) of the Association Française d'Action Artisitque (AFAA), which became CulturesFrance following its 2006 merger with a sister organization and subsequently changed its name to L'Institut Français in 2010. An arm of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture, the organization is responsible for promoting French art and culture abroad. Forest is fond of joking than his sometimes contentious relations the organization during Poivre d'Arvor's tenure as director might have had something to do with hard feelings left over from this incident.

[22] Such independent stations, called *radios libres* in French, had their roots in the pirate radio movement and weren't legalized in France until 1981, one of the signature initiatives of the new Socialist administration of President François Mitterrand. There is not yet a lot of scholarship in English on the interesting history of these radio stations in France. For the basics, see the entry on "radio (pirate/free)" by Alan Pedley in Alex Hughes & Keith Reader, eds., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary French Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998): 451-452. More information can be found in Mark Poindexter, "Radio in Paris: Can Community Stations Survive?" *Journal of Radio Studies* 4.1 (1997): 258-273. For a general history of free radio in an international context, see Lawrence Soley, *Free Radio: Electronic Civil Disobedience* (Boulder, CO: Westview P, 1998). In French, see Matthieu Dalle, "Les radios libres, utopie 'deleuzo-guattarienne,'" *French Cultural Studies* 17.1 (February 2006): 55-72.

[23] See Fred Forest "Regarder la TV avec votre radio," *Communication et langages* 64 (1985): 100-105 (p. 103 for the quote); and Pierre Moeglin, "L'art et les medias," pp. 105-122 in the same issue.

[24] If anything, Forest's public gathering resembled watch parties held in cafés and public squares, where large numbers of people gather to watch the telecast of a big game or an important event together in party atmosphere; however, in the case of Forest's gathering the people assembled outside the Grand Palais were not really spectators given that they were also participants in the event and were not there to see anything in particular on TV.

[25] See David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1988).

[26] A retrospective of the *Watchtowers* operation, *The Watchtowers of Peace, 15 Years Later,* was held in June 2007 at Galerija 10 m² in Sarajevo.

[27] Robert Adrian, "Art and Telecommunication, 1979-1986: The Pioneer Years," an essay contributed to the Walker Art Center-hosted website of the exhibition *Telematic Connections: The Virtual Embrace,* February 2001 – October 2002, curated by Steve Dietz for Independent Curators International, <http://telematic.walkerart.org/overview/ overview_ adrian.html>.

[28] Derrick de Kerckhove, "Communications Art for a New Spatial Sensibility," *Leonardo* 24.2 (1991): 131-135.

[29] Marshall McLuhan, "Fred Forest et le téléphone" (1972), reprinted in *Art sociologique:* 126-127. The English text used here is the author's retranslation of the published French translation of the original text.

[30] See also Annemarie Chandler & Norie Neumark, *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2006); and Inke Arns, "Interaction, Participation, Networking: Art and Telecommunications," trans. Tom Morrison, in *Media Art Net 1,* <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art/communication>.

[31] For example, *Tempo Real* (1989), a project coordinated by Giovanna Colacevich, which consisted of using fax transmissions to take a group snapshot of four artists physically situated

in different locations throughout the world: Colacevich in Rome; Forest in Amiens, France; Roy Ascott in Bristol, England; and Tom Klinkowstein in New York.

[32] Aside from the work of Frank Popper and Stephen Wilson, already mentioned, Forest's contributions are largely unmentioned in scholarship on the subject in English. Perhaps the foremost new media and technology artist of his generation, Eduardo Kac was influenced by the Aesthetics of Communication and considers Forest an important precursor. Kac was familiar with Forest's work in his native Brazil and later collaborated with Forest on a few occasions including Forest's *Techno-Wedding* (1999), for which Kac served as a long-distance witness. Kac refers to Forest's work multiple times in his book of collected essays *Telepresence and Bio Art: Networking Humans, Rabbits, and Robots* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2005).

[33] See Eric Gidney, "Art and Telecommunications: 10 Years On," *Leonardo* 24.2 (1991): 147-152 (p. 151 for referenced comment).

[34] One exception was Jean-Marc Philippe, affiliated with the Aesthetics of Communication Group, whose satellite-based work *La roue céleste* (*The Celestial Wheel*) was featured at the exhibition. *Les Immatériaux* did feature the work of a number of other French new media artists including Jean-Louis Boissier, Liliane Terrier, Michel Bret, Edmond Couchot (all colleagues of Lyotard at Université de Paris 8, Vincennes-Saint Denis); and included a Minitel-based Videotex variation of Roy Ascott's *La plissure du texte* project called *Organe et fonction d'Alice au pays des merveilles* (*Anatomy of Alice in Wonderland*). For historical and critical perspective on *Les Immatériaux,* see John Rajchman, "The Postmodern Museum," *Art in America* October 1985: 111-177, 171; Anthony Hudek, "From Over- to Sub-Exposure: The Anamnesis of Les Immatéraiux," *Tate Papers* 12 (Fall 2009), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/ tatepapers/09autumn/hudek.shtm>; and Todd Jerome Satter, "The Black Box in the White Cube: Lyotard's *Les Immatériaux* as Machanic Theater," blog posting, *Any-Space-Whatever,* 6 September 2011, <http://anyspacewhatever.com/the-black-box-in-the-white-cube-lyotards-les-immateriaux-as-machanic-theater/>. In contrast, *Electra: l'électricté et l'électronique dans l'art du XXe siècle,* which was curated by Frank Popper and held at the Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris one year before *Les Immatériaux* (10 December 1983 – 5 February 1984),

prominently featured the work of Aesthetics of Communication artists including Forest's *Communicating Space*. Another alternative to *Les Immatériaux* in terms of the exposure given to Aesthetics of Communication was the videoconference and media performance festival *Les Transinteractifs,* organized by Derrick de Kerckhove and Frank Popper and held jointly in Paris (Centre Culturel Canadien) and Toronto (Ontario Science Centre), 4 – 5 November 1988.

[35] See *Recherche de Julia Margaret Cameron: action médiatique de Fred Forest,* French-English bilingual catalog for the follow-up exhibition at the Musée de Toulon, 21 January – 13 May 1988 (Nice: Z'éditions & Toulon: Musée de Toulon, 1988).

[36] Lettrism, or Letterism, was founded as movement in France in the 1940s by Isidore Isou. Guy Debord and Gil Wolman joined the movement in the early 1950s before breaking with Isou to form a rival group, the Letterist International, later to become the Situationist International. Letterism experimented with poetry and poetic-graphic art hybrids (metagraphics, hypergraphics) using configurations of alphanumeric characters devoid of semantic content, and produced art books with blank pages to be filled in by readers—practices similar in spirit to Forest's metacommunication. For more information, see Greil Marcus' *Lipstick Traces.* See also Stephen Foster, ed. *Lettrisme: Into the Future,* exhibition catalog (Iowa City: University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1983); and Jean-Paul Curtay, ed. *Letterism and Hypergraphics: The Unknown Avant-Garde, 1945-1985,* exhibition catalog (New York: Franklin Furnace, 1985).

[37] See Lieselotte Papenburg, "Fred Forest nous fait courrir," *Colóquio-Artes,* 31.82 (Setembro [September] 1989): 22-31 (the article includes an interview with Forest).

[38] See Zaki Laidi, *Le temps mondial* (Brussels: Complexe, 1997).

[39] On the cultural and philosophical construction of the global, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization,* trans. François Raffoul & David Pettigrew (Albany, NY: SUNY P, 2007). On the concept of the nation as imagined community, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991).

[40] Another work in this vein is *Thinking Water* (*L'eau pensante,* 1989).

***Chapter Three: Experiments in Cyber-Liminality***

[1] Translated into English, the themes of the issues of *Esprit* that launched the controversy were as follows: "Are There Still Criteria of Aesthetic Judgement? (no. 173, Juillet-Août [July-August] 1991); "The Crisis of Contemporary Art" (no. 179, Février [February] 1992); and "Contemporary Art versus Modern Art" (no. 185, Octobre [October] 1992).

[2] The following account of the *Querelle de l'art contemporain* is closely based on the excellent one provided by Marc Jimenez in *La querelle de l'art contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005). The literature produced during the controversy and in its wake is truly voluminous— proof that contemporary art is still a hot topic (or a convenient whipping boy, depending on one's point of view). Among the more recent negative entries in the genre, one finds Aude de Kerros, *L'art caché: les dissidents de l'art contemporain* (Paris: Eyrolles, 2007); Jean-Louis Harouel, *La grande falsification: l'art contemporain* (Paris: Godefroy, 2009); and François Chevalier, *La société du mépris de soi: de l'Urinoir de Duchamp aux suicidés de France Télécom* (Paris: NRF-Gallimard, 2010). For a more neutral perspective, see Nathalie Heinich, *Pour en finir avec la querelle de l'art contemporain* (Paris: L'Échoppe, 1999); and *L'art contemporain exposé aux rejets: études de cas* (Paris: Pluriel-Fayard, 2012). Another good source is Matthieu Béra, "La critique d'art dans la presse écrite: avantage ou handicap pour un positionnement intellectuel," *Quaderni* 60 (Spring 2006): 77-89.

[3] See Joan DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1997).

[4] Much has been written about the American art controversies of the 1990s. For a collection of primary source texts from the period, see Richard Bolton, ed., *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1992). More general accounts and varied opinions can be found in Steven C. Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992); Brian Wallis et al., eds., *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America* (New York: New York UP, 1999); and Dustin Kidd, *Legislating Creativity: The Intersections of Art and Politics* (London and New York, Routledge, 2009). For an in-depth account of the controversies at the local level, see Steven J. Tepper, *Not Here, Not*

*Now, Not That!: Protest over Art and Culture in America* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2011). For broader historical and institutional background, see Michael Kammen, *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in America* (New York: Knopf, 2006); and Michael Brenson, *Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress, and the Place of Visual Artists in America* (New York: New Press, 2001).

[5] Jean Baudrillard, "Le complot de l'art," *Libération* 20 Mai [May] 1996: 4. An English translation of this essay is included with other texts on the same subject in Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, trans. Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005).

[6] For intellectual background on the *Nouveaux Philosophes,* see Oskar Negt, "Reflections on France's *Nouveaux Philosophes* and the Crisis of Marxism," trans. Jamie O. Daniel, *SubStance,* 14.4-12.1 (1982-83): 56-67; Peter Dews, "The Nouvelle Philosophie and Foucault," *Economy and Society,* 8.2 (1979): 127-171; and Jonathan Judaken, "Alain Finkielkraut and the Nouveaux Philosophes: French-Jewish Intellectuals, the Afterlives of May '68, and the Rebirth of a National Icon," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques,* 32.1 (Spring 2006): 193-223. For a scathing critique of the *Nouveaux Philosophes* as a mass media phenomenon, see Gilles Deleuze & Bertrand Augst, "On the New Philosophers and a More General Problem," *Discourse,* 20.3 (Fall 1998): 37-43.

[7] Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism,* trans. Mary H.S. Cattani (Amherst, MA: U Massachusetts P, 1990).

[8] For general information about French cultural policy under Mitterrand and Lang, see David Wachtel, *Cultural Policy and Socialist France* (New York & London: Greenwood Press, 1987); Jill Forbes, "The Soul of Man: Cultural Policy under Socialism" in Sonia Mazey & Michael Newman, eds., *Mitterrand's France* (London: Croom Helm, 1987): 131-165; David L. Loosely, *The Politics of Fun: Cultural Policy and Debate in Contemporary France* (Oxford: Berg, 1995); and Philippe Poirrier, "French Cultural Policy in Question, 1981-2003" in Julian Bourg, ed., *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on Postwar French Intellectual and Cultural History* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004): 301-323. In French see Mark Hunter, *Les jours les plus Lang* (Paris: Jacob, 1990); Claude Mallard, *Le cinquième pouvoir: la culture et l'Etat de Malraux à Lang* (Paris: Armand Colin,

1999); Laurent Martin, *Jack Lang: une vie entre culture et politique* (Paris: Complexe, 2008); and Maryvonne de Saint Pulgent, ed., *Jack Lang, batailles pour la culture: dix ans de politiques culturelles* (Paris: Comité d'Histoire du Ministère de la Culture & Documentation française, 2013).

[9] Marc Fumaroli, *L'Etat culturel: essai sur une religion moderne* (Paris: Fallois, 1991). See also Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image: une histoire du regard en occident* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) and *L'État séducteur: les révolutions médiologiques du pouvoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993). The pros and cons of the French Socialists' approach to culture are debated in Alain Finkielkraut and Jack Lang, "Les fossoyeurs, font-ils la loi?" *Le Nouvel Observateur* 8 Mai [May] 1987: 46-49.

[10] On the resurgence of the republican ideal among French intellectuals, see Michael F. Leruth, "The Neorepublican Discourse on French National Identity," *French Politics and Society* 16.4 (Fall 1998): 46-61. On the Headscarf Affair, see John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2008); and Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010). Explanations of the French republican position can be found in Catherine Kintzler, *La République en questions* (Paris: Minerve, 1996); and Régis Debray, *Ce que nous voile le voile* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

[11] The term comes from Daniel Lindenberg, *Le rappel à l'ordre: enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires* (Paris: Seuil, 2002). See also Maurice Maschino, "Les nouveaux réactionnaires," *Le monde diplomatique* Octobre [October] 2000: 1, 28-29.

[12] See Jean Clair, "De l'art en France à *Made in France*," *Cahiers de médiologie* 3 (1997): 121-133.

[13] See Jean Clair, *La responsabilité de l'artiste: les avant-gardes entre terreur et raison* (Paris: Gallimarrd, 1997). Clair revisits his critique of contemporary art in *Malaise dans les musées* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009) and *L'hiver de la culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

[14] Yasmina Reza, *"Art",* trans. Christopher Hampton (New York: Faber & Faber, 1997).

[15] See Jean-Philippe Domecq, *Artistes sans art?* (Paris: Esprit, 1999); *Misère de l'art: essai le dernier demi-siècle de création* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1999); and the conclusion ("L'art du

contemporain est terminé") of the revised edition of *Une nouvelle histoire de l'art du XXe siècle* (Paris: Pocket, 2011).

[16] For example, see Philippe Dagen (art critic for *Le Monde*), *La haine de l'art* (Paris: Grasset, 1997).

[17] See Yves Michaud, *La crise de l'art contemporain: utopie, démocratie et comédie* (Paris: PUF, 1997). Michaud also tried to answer the critics' argument that there were no aesthetic criteria by which to judge contemporary art in *L'art à l'état gazeux: essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique* (Paris: Stock, 2003) and *Critères esthétique jugement de goût* (Paris: Chambon, 2003).

[18] See Jean de Loisy, ed., *La Beauté,* catalog for the series of exhibitions and events in Avignon throughout 2000 known as *La Beauté en Avignon* (Paris: Flammarion & Mission 2000 en France, 2000).

[19] Catherine Millet, *L'art contemporain: histoire et géographie,* rev. ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 2006): 168.

[20] Excerpts from Fred Forest, "Pour qui sonne le glas, ou les impostures de l'art contemporain," *Quaderni* 21 (Automne [Fall] 1993): 119-140. For background on the the the French art market in English, see Raymonde Moulin, *The French Art Market: A Sociological View,* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rurgers UP). In French, see the work of Pascaline Costa, *L'artiste, l'institution et le marché* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992); and *Le marché de l'art: mondialisation et nouvelles technologies* (Paris: Flammarion, 2003).

[21] There is a dearth of information online and in print on the origins and early history of Internet Art. Two of the most useful sources are Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (London & New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004); and Peter Weibel and Timothy Druckrey, eds., *Net_condition: Art and Global Media,* exhibition catalog (Graz: Steiricher Herbst; Karlruhe: ZKM/Center for Art and Media & Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2001). More thematic approaches can be found in Stallabrass, *Internet Art* and Joline Blais & Jon Ippolito, *At the Edge of Art* (London & New York: Thames & Hudson, 2006). Broader background on digital art can be found in Peter Lunenfeld,

*Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2001); and Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (London & New York: Thames & Hudson: 2003). For background on performance in cyberspace and using new media, see Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007).

[22] Pierre Restany, preface to Fred Forest, *Fonctionnement et dysfonctionnements de l'art contemporain:* 11.

[23] It's somewhat hard to say with certainty what represents the first work of online art to be bought since the definition of the term is subject to discussion. Peter Halley's digital print *Superdream Mutation* (1993) was sold by Wolfgang Staehle on the New York-based group THE THING's website 1993 and is therefore generally considered the first. Douglas Davis' *The World's First Collaborative Sentence* (1994 – present), which is considered by many to be the first true work of Net Art because of the collaborative/distributed Net aesthetic it reflects, was commissioned by Lehman College Art Gallery of the City University of New York in 1994 and shortly thereafter became the first online work to be purchased for the collection of a major museum (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995). What distinguishes Forest's work was the staging of a traditional art auction carried in real time and open for bids over the internet. Its historical claim is thus be based on it's being the first work to be auctioned off via the internet.

[24] There were a number of reasons for France's initial reluctance to "go online" including attachment to the nation's own rather extensive Minitel telematics network, the lower number of households with personal computers, the lower number of content providers, the relatively high cost of service, concerns about Anglophone dominance of the network, and the Net's rather unsavory reputation as a haven for right-wing fanatics and pornographers. The Socialist government of Lionel Jospin, in cohabitation with the conservative president Jacques Chirac, made promoting the internet a policy priority and formed a commission to make recommendations about how this could be done while remaining faithful to the French "cultural exception," preserving social solidarity, and fostering cooperation among francophone nations. See Patrick Bloche, *Le désir de France: la présence internationale de la France et de la*

*francophonie dans la société de l'information,* report to the Prime Minister of France (Paris: Documentation Française, 1999).

[25] Many of Forest's web-based works operated for a limited time and the websites themselves have either gone done or no longer function. The artist maintains two archival websites. See <http://www.webnetmuseum.org> (esp. <http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/expo-retr-fredforest/actions/actions_fr.htm> for a retrospective of his career with descriptions of projects dating back to 1967, and <http://www.webnetmuseum.org/php/image_catalogue/index_fr.php?d=Photos_Panorama> for a retrospective image gallery); and <http://www.fredforest.org> for links to many project websites (see <http://www.fredforest.org/book/index.htm> for news about his past and present projects). For a general overview of Forest's early web art, see Michael F. Leruth, "From Aesthetics to Liminality: The Web Art of Fred Forest," *Mosaic* 37.2 (2004): 79-106.

[26] Among the first works to examine the social and psychological impact of the internet is Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995). In France, one of the leading early writers on the topic is the philosopher Pierre Lévy, whose works exerted a profound influence of Forest and who both collaborated with and wrote about him. See Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace,* trans. Robert Bononno (1st French ed. 1994; Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 1997); *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age,* trans. Robert Bononno (1st French ed. 1995; New York: Plenum, 1998); Cyberculture, trans. Robert Bononno (1st French ed. 1997; Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2001).

[27] The work was based on the aesthetics of "navigation" and the "data base," the two most prevalent interface paradigms that have become part of how we see the world according to Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media.*

[28] For example, Grégory Chatonsky's *Sampling* (2002), <http://incident.net/works/sampling>.

[29] Victor Turner, "Frame, Flow, and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality" in Michel Benamou & Charles Carmello, eds., *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (Madison, WI: U Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Twentieth Century Studies & Coda P, 1977): 33-55.

[30] Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," *Rice University Studies* 60.82 (1974): 53-92.

[31] Forest's major Fête de l'Internet-associated works are *Time Out, The Techno-Wedding, Meat, Memory Images,* and *The Lighthouse at World's End.* There are several less significant projects not mentioned here.

[32] This concept is discussed by digital media art pioneer and theorist Edmond Couchot in *Des images, du temps et des machines dans les arts et la communication* (Paris: Chambon, 2007).

[33] For an insightful discussion of Bakhtin's ideas about carnival applied to networked communication art, see Claudia Giannetti, "Ars Telematica: The Aesthetics of Intercommunication" in Weibel & Druckrey, *Net_condition:* 162-167.

[34] See Elihu Katz & Daniel Dayan, "Media Events: On the Experience of Not Being There," *Religion* 15 (1985): 305-314; and Dayan & Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992). On meaning of the Olympics as (televised) spectacle, see John MacAloon, "Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Society" in MacAloon, ed., *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals toward a Theory of Cultural Performance* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984): 240-280

[35] See Michael F. Leruth, "The French Fête de l'Internet," *The French Review* 73.5 (2000): 921-942.

[36] For background on Jack Lang's idea of public festival, see David Looseley, "Jack Lang and the Politics of Festival," *French Cultural Studies* 1.1 (February 1990): 5-19. For background information about the Fête de la Musique and its founder, Maurice Fleuret, see Anne Veitl and Noémi Duchemin, *Maurice Fleuret: une politique démocratique de la musique, 1981-1986* (Paris: Comité d'histoire du ministère de la culture – La Documentation française, 2000). For detailed discussions of other specific examples, see Michael F. Leruth, "Themes of the French

Year 2000 Celebration," *Modern and Contemporary France* 9.4 (November 2001): 467-482; and Audra L. Merfield-Langston, "Celebrating Literature to Shape Citizenship: France's 2007 'Lire en fête,'" *Modern and Contemporary France* 18.3 (August 2010): 343-356. For an inside view from the producer of a number of big public celebrations of this type, see Gad Weil, "Fêtes grandioses dans les villes et les territoires," *Le journal de l'école de Paris du management* 5.55 (Septembre-Octobre [September-October] 2005): 29-35. For a study of the impact of these events at the local level, see Isabelle Garat, "La fête et le festival: elements de promotion des espaces et représentation d'une société idéale," *Annales de géographie* 114.643 (2005): 265-284.

[37] See Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution,* trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991); and Olivier Ihl, *La fête républicaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).

[38] Lavaud and Forest report that other couples contacted them after the ceremony to find out if they could use a version of the same setup for their own weddings.

[39] There are several other precedents for the somewhat mystical setting of *Internet Cave* in Forest's prior work dating all the way back to *Interrogation 69.*

[40] The work was curated by Jackie-Ruth Meyer of Le LAIT; Forest's artistic collaborators were Manuela Manzini (scenography), Christian Valezy (image and sound effects), Pascal Joube (information technology), Pierre-Jean Grattenois (graphic design), and Thomas Krober (director). A different version of the work was presented at Chuchifritos Gallery in New York in August 2011 under the title *Feedback.*

[41] William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984): 5. More in keeping with Plato Gibson also presents cyberspace as "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions…" (p. 51).

[42] The official project website is <http://www.flux-et-reflux.net/>. See Marie-Laure Desjardins, "Entrez dans la caverne!" *Arts Hebdo Médias,* online article, 22 August 2011, <http://www.artshebdomedias.com/article/210811-fred-forest-entrez-dans-la-caverne>. The

press kit for the project is available online at <http://www.centredartlelait.com/documents/dp-fred_forest.pdf>.

[43] There is already abundant literature dealing with the Second Life "metaverse." A starting point is Michael Rymaszewski et al., *Second Life: The Official Guide,* 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Wiley, 2008). For general background and information about the company that created and manages SL, see Thomas Malaby, *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2009); and Wagner James Au, *The Making of Second Life: Notes from the New World* (New York: Harper Business, 2008). For the cultural ramifications, see Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2008). A broader view of the implications of virtual worlds and multiplayer games can be found in Mark Steven Meadows, *I Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life* (Berkeley, CA: New Riders 2008); Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2005); Castronova, *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun Is Changing Reality* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007); T. L. Taylor, *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2006); Celia Pearce and Artmedia, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2009); and Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic, 2011). For analyses of diverse forms of computer simulation, see Turkle et al., *Simulation and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2009).

[44] The sheer amount and variety of art activities in Second Life are staggering and has yet to be inventoried, let alone analyzed, in systematic fashion. Some of the most basic resources are online. The creators of Second Life offer an official portal at <http://secondlife.com/destinations/art>. More information can be found on the website of the user group ".:SL Art:.," <http://world.secondlife.com/group/33277be0-c177-b267-c3b2-4648eac60dfe>. Information about galleries in SL can be found at <http://www.sasun.info/ArtGalleriesofSL.htm>. While there is no commonly accepted capitalization for the term, Second Life art is usually referred to as "Slart" (and its makers as "Slartists") or as "SLart" (the usage preferred by the creators).

Richard Minsky, the founder of the Center for Book Arts in New York, published an art journal called *SLART,* started in 2007, but had to cease using the term when he lost a trademark lawsuit to Linden Lab regarding the use of the term, which Minsky had tried to register as a trademark. Minsky subsequently transformed *SLART* into *The Art World Market Report* website, <http://minskyreport.com>. His overview, "The Art World Market of Second Life" (2007, revised and expanded in 2009) is available online at <http://minskyreport.com/ArtWorld_ Market.pdf>. There are already some critical texts (print and electronic) on Second Life Art, with more likely to follow. See Domenico Quaranta, "Remediations: Art in Second Life," *Hz* 11 (2007), <http://www.hz-journal.org/n11/quaranta.html>; Holly Willis, "The Unexamined Second Life Isn't Worth Living," *Afterimage,* 35.2 (September-October 2007): 13-16; Joelle Seligson, "My Raven-Haired Avatar Flies through the Museum," *Museum News* 88.5 (September-October 2007): 54-60; Rachel Wolff, "All the Web's a Stage," *ARTnews* 107.2 (February 2008): 98-101; Christine L. Liao, "Avatars, Second Life, and New Media: The Challenge for Contemporary Art Education," *Art Education* 61.2 (March 2008): 87-91; Eleanor Heartney, "Like Life," *Art in America* 96.5 (May 2008): 164-165, 208 (on Chinese artist Cao Fei); Patrick Lichty, "Why Art in Virtual Worlds? E-Happenings, Relational Milieux, and 'Second Sculpture,'" *Magazine électronique du CIAC* 31 (2008), <http://www.ciac.ca/magazine/archives/no_31/ dossier.htm>; Lichty, "Agoras and Conversations: Virtual Worlds, Public Art, and Second Life," *Public Art Review* 21.1 (Fall-Winter 2009): 42-45; Caroline McCaw, "Art and (Second) Life: Over the Hills and Far Away?" *The Fibreculture Journal* 11 (2008), <http://eleven.fibreculturejournal. org>; Christopher Bolton, "Virtual Creation, Simulated Destruction, and Manufactured Memory at the Art Mecho Museum in Second Life," *Mechademia* 4 (2009): 198-210; Elif Ayiter, "Embodied in a Metaverse: 'Anatomia' and 'Body Part,'" *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* 8.2 (2010): 181-188; Talete Flanagan, et al., "Arts, Mathematics, and Physics in Second Life," *Journal of Applied Mathematics* 3.1 (2010), <http://www.journal. aplimat.com/volume_3_2010/Number_1/Flanagan_Delphin_Fargis_Lexington.pdf>;      Leman Giresunlu, "Second Life: Performing the Real in Digital Arts," *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* 4.5 (2010): 251-272; and Amy J. Elias, "Psychogeography, *Détournement,*

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Cyberspace," *New Literary History* 41.4 (Autumn 2010): 821-845 (with an extensive section on SLart).

[45] The location in Second Life no longer exists.  See the video on the Daily Motion website, <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4cj6k_centre-experimental-du-territoire-e_creation>.  A clip of the opening convocation is also posted, <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4lukf_ territoire-du-m2-retransmission-du_creation >.

[46] See  <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5hse9_fred-forest-dump-your-trash-in-seco_ creation>.

[47] For an overview, see <http://coverage3d.com/the-lab-gallery-new-york-fred-forest>.

[48] Original script courtesy of Fred Forest; English translation and voice performance by Michael F. Leruth. See <http://www.scribd.com/doc/32618109/Science-Fair-Handout>.

***Conclusion:  Interface as Utopia***

[1] See Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1991).

[2] See Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment" in Hall and Fifer, *Illuminating Video:* 31-50.

[3] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope,* 3 vol., trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice & Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1986).  Part 3 of Vol. 1 ""Wishful Images in the Mirror" is of particular relevance for this discussion.

[4] There is a voluminous literature on the intellectual history of the idea of utopia.  As a start, see Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, eds., *The Utopia Reader* (New York: New York UP, 1999); Gregory Claeys, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010); Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea* (London & New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011); Ruth Eaton, *Ideal Cities: Utopianism and the (Un)Built Environment* (London & New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002); Krishnan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1991); Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse, NY:

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Syracuse UP, 1990); Frank Edward Manuel and Fritzie Prigohzy Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, MA:  Belknap-Harvard UP, 1979); Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys & Lyman Tower Sargent, eds., *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World,* catalog of the international exhibition organized by the New York Public Library and the Bibliothècque Nationale de France, curated by R. Schaer (New York: New York Public Library & Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000); Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010); Howard P. Segal, *Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities* (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); and Keith Taylor, *The Political Ideas of the Utopian Socialists* (London: Cass, 1982).

[5] For a historical overview of early American utopian communities, see Mark Holloway, *Utopian Communities in America,* 2nd rev. ed. (1951; 1966; New York: Dover, 2011); and Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991).

[6] See Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1983); and *Tadition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1984).

[7] See Zaki Laidi, *Le sacre du présent* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), esp. Chapter 1 ("Le tournant perspectif," pp. 43-66) and Chapter 2 ("La perspective rentre dans l'histoire," pp. 67-97); the expression cited comes from p. 70.

[8] Reconsiderations of the idea of utopia from a contemporary perspective can be found in Darko Suvin, *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction, and Political Epistemology* (Oxford, England & New York: Lang, 2010); Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London & New York: Verso, 2005); and Patricia Viera & Michael Marder, *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

[9] Consider the telling dualism in the title of an article by Luciano Floridi, "Internet: Frankenstein ou Pygmalien," *Horozons philosophique* 6.2 (1996): 1-18.

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[10] See Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," article available online on the website *Alamut: Bastion of Peace and Information,* <http://www.alamut.com/ subj/ideologies/pessimism/califldeo_I.html>.  Louis Rossetto (the founder of *Wired* magazine), Negroponte (the founder of the MIT Media Lab and a regular contributor to *Wired*); and Barlow, the founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation and another frequent contributor to *Wired*) can be considered among the leading examples of this libertarian, neoliberal, and techno-utopian frame of mind.  Rossetto offered a rebuttal of Barbrook and Cameron's critique on the same website, < http://www.alamut.com/subj/ideologies/pessimism/califldeo_II.html >.  See also Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Knopf, 1995).  There are several other good critical studies of "techno-romanticism," "techno-transcendentalism," and Teilhard's influence over this way of thinking:  Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity;* Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2004); Patrice Flichy, *The Internet Imaginaire,* trans. Liz Carey-Libbrecht (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007); and Philippe Breton, *The Culture of the Internet and the Internet as Cult,* trans. David Bade (Los Angeles, Litwin, 2011).  Dery and Breton are the most critical.

[11] Applications of Teilhard's philosophy to the internet include John Perry Barlow, "The Great Work," *Communications of the ACM,* 35.1 (January 1992): 25-28 (more secular in tone); and John R. Mabry, "Cyberspace and the Dream of Teilhard de Chardin," Creation Spirituality," 10.2 (Summer 1994): 22 (from a Catholic theological perspective).  Teilhard de Chardin's most important works are *The Phenomenon of Man,* trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper, 1959); and *The Future of Man,* trans. Norman Denny (New York: Harper, 1964).  The former is available in a new translation as *The Human Phenomenon,* trans. Sarah Appleton-Weber (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic P, 1999).  On Teilhard, see Ursula King, *Spirit of Fire: The Life and Vision of Teilhard de Chardin* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996); Arthur Fabel & Donald St. John, eds., *Teilhard in the 21st Century: The Emerging Spirit of Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003); and James Salmon, S.J. and Donald Farina, *The Legacy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: His Relevance for Today* (New York: Paulist P, 2011).  Unlike Roy Ascott, Fred Forest is not influenced by Teilhard's ideas and does not advance the notion of collective intelligence as a spiritual form of human

convergence in cyberspace; however, Forest is influenced by the work of Pierre Lévy and Marshall McLuhan, both of whom adopted the Teilhardian idea of the noosphere (McLuhan was a devout Catholic and admirer of Teilhard).  The spiritual dimension of Forest's work, though rather vague, is closer to the Eastern tradition (in its most popularized forms in the West) than the Christian tradition, and the references to religion and religiosity should be interpreted in more sociological and anthropological than theological terms.

[12] Jacques Attali, "Le septième continent," *Le Monde,* 7 Août [August] 1997: 10.

[13] See Paul Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst: An Interview with Philippe Petit,* trans. Michael Cavaliere (New York: Semiotext(e), 1999; and *The Information Bomb,* trans. Chris Turner (London & New York: Verso, 2000).  Forest and Virilio have remained on good terms although Forest claims to be disappointed by Virilio's pessimism on technological issues.

[14] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1984).

[15] Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" in Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay P, 1988): 3-23.

[16] Zaki Laïdi, *La tyrannie de l'urgence* (Montreal: Fides, 1999).  Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay in Dromology,* trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Columbia UP, 1986); *Open Sky,* trans. Julie Rose (London & New York: Verso, 1997).  Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'effacement de l'avenir* (Paris: Galilée, 2000).  Michel Maffesoli, *L'instant éternel: le retour du tragique dans les sociétés postmodernes* (Paris: Denoël, 2000).

[17] In an insightful study of Marshall McLuhan's influence on Baudrillard (esp. the concept of implosion) and postmodernism, Gary Genosko refers to the work of Fred Forest and the Collectif d'Art Sociologique.  See Genosko, *McLuhan and Baudrillard: Masters of Implosion* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999):  30, 74, and 86.

[18] See also Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity,* trans. John Howe (London & New York: Verso, 1995).

[19] Lévy, *Collective Intelligence:* 125.  In an effort to be more faithful to the syntax and tone of the original French, the author provides his own alternative translation of this passage.

[20] Fred Forest, *Pour un art actuel:* 261-262, 263-264.