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### **An Archaeology of Networked Art:**

*A Symptomatic Reading of The Messenger by Paul DeMarinis*<sup>1</sup>

An artwork can function as a site for re-enacting and unraveling discursive constellations of media-cultural relevance. Situated at the present, it may become an observation post and conceptual laboratory to access the cultural landscape that it, in one way or another, is part of. Unlike other forms of utterance, including scientific and historical discourses, art has certain advantages, including its freedom to travel freely back and forth in time, drawing together seemingly discrepant elements from various discourses. Art also has the “licence” (or perhaps the “duty”?) to avoid collapsing its elements into “conclusive” formulas. The interpretation is left open, without being channeled into any “statement of purpose” or -- worst of all -- a doctrine. *The Messenger* (1998), a seminal media art installation by the San Francisco -based artist Paul DeMarinis, is such a work. While raising crucial issues underlying the role(s) of telematics in society, culture and politics, it avoids proposing any soothing resolution. It activates various discourses, but refuses to harmonize them, to fill in the cracks. Because of this artworks like *The Messenger* can provide us clues about the invisible cracks, seams, patterns and tensions underlying media cultural processes. In this article a symptomatic reading of *The Messenger* is attempted, treating the work as a pointer to wider cultural formations it partakes/reveals.

*The Messenger* presents us three unusual, yet functional telegraphic receivers. A series of chamber-pots mounted sideways in a curved row can be heard every now and then to utter letters of the alphabet -- with barely audible voices, in Spanish. The second system consists of a row of 26 glass jars, each containing an electrolyte and a pair of metal electrodes, one of them in the shape of a letter. From time to time one of the letters begins to produce a stream of hydrogen bubbles. The third and final system consists of 26 little skeletons hanging from a wooden scaffolding, each wearing a poncho with a letter. Every now and then one of the skeletons jumps up, obviously triggered by some invisible force. This “force”, one discovers, is the Internet. As it turns out, the uncanny activities taking place in the installation space are a continuous enunciation of the e-mail messages appearing in the artist’s inbox. The messages are “read out”, letter by letter, by the three telegraphic systems.

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*The Messenger* is a media-archaeological exploration in the guise of an art installation, delving deep into the formative stages of the wired world. DeMarinis found his inspiration from the almost totally forgotten projects and experiments by the Catalan scientist Don Francisco Salvá i Campillo (1751-1828). Don Francisco was one of those pioneering scientists whom the newly discovered possibilities of electricity, a topic of lively discussion in the 18th century, inspired to envision systems for communication at a distance. As DeMarinis has explained in an informative essay, Salvá's made various proposals for the telegraph.<sup>2</sup> He had the prophetic insight about using an underwater telegraphic cable to connect Spain to its American colonies (anticipating the first sea cable from 1858 by half a century). Another scheme, supposedly demonstrated in 1804, utilized the electrolytic decomposition of water to transmit messages. As in DeMarinis's interpretation, the "interface" consisted of metallic letters immersed in glass jars to produce hydrogen bubbles. The most "shocking" of Salvá's projects was undoubtedly the idea of connecting 26 people to as many electric wires, each corresponding to a letter of the alphabet. A Leyden Jar was used to send sparks across the wires, and each "wired" person had to shout out his/her letter after feeling an electric shock. A 27th person was obviously employed to write the message down. DeMarinis has interpreted this idea by means of the chamber-pot receivers, inspired by the forgotten inventions of telephone pioneer Elisha Gray, already applied by the artist in his earlier installation *The Gray Matter*.

For DeMarinis, Salvá's projects evoke visions about the social and political space within which they were conceived. Salvá was anything but a spokesperson for the "democratization of media" or even for "two-way communication". His schemes were strictly one-directional, reflecting the hierarchical power-structures of an authoritarian colonial empire. The collective human telegraphic receiver in one of his systems could be interpreted as the ultimate manifestation of a society based on slavery. The identity of a slave/servant has been reduced to his/her voice uttering a letter, a mere phoneme, physically solicited by electricity. Reduced to enouncing a single letter, the human individual has been denied the right to meanings. Meanings emerge only as the result of the collective action of the de-humanized human telegraphic "relays" (and ultimately, only become evident when traced on paper). Interestingly, this scheme not only harks back to the past. It also evokes the future, the debates around industrial mechanization in the 19th century. The reduction of the human worker into a machine part, forced to perform repetitive actions by the assembly line became an important topic for both social debate and scientific investigation. Interestingly, as Ellen Lupton has shown, this issue eventually turns back to the field of telecommunications: to the working conditions of the female telephone operators very literally connected to the switchboard for hours on end.<sup>3</sup> Like Salvá's human telegraphs, these women were excluded from the meanings they transmitted; they were merely transmitters.

DeMarinis envisions his installation space as an imaginary colonial telegraph office, where commands are constantly received from afar but never answered. This would

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<sup>2</sup> Paul DeMarinis: "The Messenger", [www.well.com/~demarini/messenger.html](http://www.well.com/~demarini/messenger.html) (1998, last checked August 11, 2003.)

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Lupton: *Mechanical Brides. Women and Machines from Home to Office*. Cooper-Hewitt National Museum of Design/Smithsonian Institution and Princeton Architectural Press, 1993.

not even be possible -- the messages are “pushed” into the space, a feedback channel does not exist. The situation metaphorically links the imaginary colonial telegraph office with the communication strategies of later totalitarian regimes, such as Stalinist Soviet Union. This association may not be arbitrary, for DeMarinis has investigated the nature of the soundscapes of totalitarianism in other works as well, including *The Lecture of Comrade Stalin...* (2002) and *Firebirds* (2003). To counterbalance the totalitarian declamation DeMarinis always introduced the element of noise in the communication channel (in the cybernetic sense) that seems to compete for bandwidth with the voice of Stalin or that of other dictators. What other connotations such noise may have is open to interpretation. In *The Messenger*, the noise is the product of the system itself in its deliberate inefficiency. It may also have something to do with resistance to “the power of the center”. The messages, gradually spelled out by the telegraphic receivers, get an ephemeral, almost absurd quality. As DeMarinis imagines them, they are “received from inaccessible capitals, commands that have lost their meaning”.<sup>4</sup> The meaninglessness is metaphorically manifested in the “dance of the death” of the little skeletons, in the bubbles in the jars, and in the almost undecipherable utterances emitted by the chamber-pot-loudspeakers. Unless observed and written down letter by letter -- and who would have patience or motivation to do so? -- they will disappear forever. While the messages themselves fade into obscurity, what is highlighted is the anomalous presence of the (dis)communication channel, the telegraphic medium itself.

Naturally, *The Messenger* is a fiction, an artist’s interpretation of some interlocking discourses with historical referents. In a retrospective-hypothetical form it evokes an era, when proposed technical solutions and the social, political and cultural needs for communicating at a distance were still looking for a meaningful union. Although various signalling systems had been used since the antiquity, the need for establishing permanent communication networks was not generally agreed upon in the 17th and 18th centuries.<sup>5</sup> Many of the proposals made by scientists and writers in these centuries concerned intimate inter-personal communication between lovers, rather than the exchange of official orders and minutiae, not to say anything about dispatching financial and commercial data. For Father Strada, writing in 1616, the synchronized movements of two magnetic needles provided a possibility for telepathic communication “for lovers separated by the discipline of their families”. Even Robert Hooke, the famous English astronomer, was obviously thinking about private communication in 1684 when he characterized his experiments with signalling semaphors as a way of “making one’s thoughts known at a long distance”. Hooke’s other invention, the simple no-tech wire telephone still played with by children (two tin cans connected by a string), came to be known as “the telephone of the lovers”.<sup>6</sup> In 1802, Jean Alexandre, a reputed natural son of Jean Jacques Rousseau, became known for a device, probably electric, known as “Telegraphe

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<sup>4</sup> DeMarinis: “The Messenger”, op.cit.

<sup>5</sup> About the early formation of communication networks, see Armand Mattelart’s seminal *The Invention of Communication*, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> All these examples come from Patrice Flichy’s excellent *Une histoire de la communication moderne. Espace public et view privée*, Paris: La Découverte, 1991, pp.16-17.

intime”, the secret telegraph.<sup>7</sup> Telecommunication was seen as secretive, ephemeral and emotional, rather than as official, permanent and regulated. Whether this reflected just the fashion for “galant” literary metaphors or for real cultural desires, the official need for telegraphy was not a given. It had to be discovered and the equipment invented.

The earliest telecommunications network, the optical telegraph, which first began operating in France in the 1790s, served exclusively the interests of the state and the military. The French Revolution and the subsequent revolutionary wars provided the context that brought it into existence. The optical telegraph, invented by Claude Chappe, used lines of observation towers, each with an adjustable semaphore on top. Its movements were observed from the next tower by a telescope and interpreted by means of a codebook. The messages were then passed on in similar fashion along the line. Culturally the optical telegraph had both practical and symbolic meanings. It greatly facilitated the official communication between Paris and the periphery, including newly occupied territories and battlefields. Thus it effectively served the interests of homogenization and centralization, an effect Napoleon understood very well. Although messages could be sent in two directions along the line, all lines had their starting point in a single location -- Paris. Symbolically the optical telegraph created a new kind of space that Patrice Flichy has called “espace national”; the large territorial state was unified by the star-line net of the telegraph lines.<sup>8</sup> In a sense the telegraph virtually shrunk the country to more manageable dimensions, like those reigning in small city states like Geneva.

The early history of the optical telegraph is characterized by the tension between democratic claims (the technology in the service of the new citizen state) and autocratic and centralized uses. The individual citizens only had a chance to appreciate the telegraph in its symbolic dimension. After some initial acts of active resistance inspired by revolutionary fervor (the burning down of Chappe’s experimental line by the mob), the citizens were reduced to the passive role of observing the semaphores in operation (the codebooks were secret). For them, the “medium became the message”, associating the government with new technology and implying that things were taken care of. This was, naturally, far from the ideals of the revolution. As Patrice Flichy has explained, from this moment on, the development of telecommunications can be seen as a long struggle for access between governmental, military, commercial and private interests.<sup>9</sup> The introduction of the electric telegraph, the telephone and the wireless during the 19th century each witnessed a growing demand for wider access, sparking off intense debates.<sup>10</sup> Against this background the current battles about the rights to use and to control the Internet are nothing new. The right for personal and unrestricted access to the tools of communication at a distance has never been a

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<sup>7</sup> The device was probably electric. See J. Munro: “Heroes of the Telegraph”, Chapter One: The Origins of the Telegraph, available online at <http://www.worldwideschool.org/library/books/tech/engineering/HeroesoftheTelegraph/chap1.html>

<sup>8</sup> Flichy, op.cit, p.22.

<sup>9</sup> Flichy, op.cit.

<sup>10</sup> See Carolyn Marvin: *When Old Technologies Were New. Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

given. It has always been the result of a struggle, connected in complex ways with the wider social struggles ignited by the emergence of commercial capitalism and the formation of the technological society.

As always in his media-archaeological works, DeMarinis moves freely within and between multiple cultural spaces. The exploration of the imaginary colonial telematic space is linked with motives that bridge it with the present, the struggles and tensions related with the Internet. The intriguing idea of making the fanciful telegraph receivers transmit private e-mail messages and to display them in a public gallery space is full of implications. How should we read the role of the e-mail in *The Messenger*? Do these messages function just as placeholders for the absent -- non-existent -- messages from the past? Or do they somehow represent a silent struggle of suppressed voices to be heard -- voices doomed to nearly simultaneous demise by the system, silenced by the nonchalance or the power of the authorities? Or could the work in its own subtle way be speaking about the obscenity of media (in Baudrillard's sense), their perverse tendency to expose and exploit the private and the intimate, turning these into spectacles and targets for marketing efforts and surveillance? Is it totally inappropriate to see DeMarinis's imaginary colonial telegraph office, in spite of its ghostly ineffectiveness, as a metaphoric echo of the high-tech wire tapping centers being built by intelligence services and the military alike in the era of Total Information Awareness?

Whether intentionally or not, *The Messenger* reflects the current debates on privacy and surveillance on the Internet. While the right to the privacy of telecommunications has never been a given, its validity has never been more seriously jeopardized than in the post 9-11 world. Governments, businesses, criminals and terrorists are all looking for ways to intercept private communications. While there are those who are trying to achieve this through legislation, in the name of public security, others prefer to work in total secrecy, like the Bush government in the United States. The sense of being observed is becoming a widely shared state of mind. The world of telecommunications is in danger of turning into an all-embracing Panopticon: you cannot escape the feeling that anything you do with your computer or your cellphone may, or may not, be monitored and recorded by someone else at any moment. Simultaneously the massive tidal waves of SPAM that fill your inbox lead to a growing feeling of unreality. This stream of data no longer arrives from "inaccessible capitals", but from unknown peripheric locations, routed via untraceable paths. Searching for a few personal messages from a sea of anonymous unsolicited and often undecipherable e-mail may evoke a sense of an absurd void-in-excess reminiscent of the ghostly transmissions of DeMarinis's telegraphs.

In recent years we have seen the appearance of a growing number of artworks utilizing, scrutinizing, measuring and criticizing communication networks, particularly the Internet. This is not just a sign of the artists' interest in extending their repertoires or the artworld's willingness to redefine its territory. It is also, and perhaps primarily, a reaction to the mounting pressures against individual expression and the freedom of action on the Internet (in this sense, hackers and artists share some goals). As a consequence, many Internet-related artworks have a strong "meta-medium" quality -- using the medium to deal with the medium. This is

evident in a wide range of works from “browser art” like Mark Napier’s *Riot and Feed* to ambitious mappings and transformations of the Internet’s data traffic such as the *Carnivore* by the Radical Software Group (RSG). By focusing on the iconography of the interface and the hypertextual structuring of the World Wide Web, browser art recycles and transforms features that are already part of the medium. Creating collages from the material available on the Net by means of a code written for the purpose may highlight certain aspects of the Internet, but its critical potential is limited. Such art has recently been characterized as an inheritor to the traditional art of painting -- “Web as a Canvas” -- shifting the attention from the critical questioning of the Internet to the tracing of continuities with existing artforms.<sup>11</sup>

*Carnivore* gets much further by replicating secret tools used by the authorities to monitor and record Internet use, making them available as freeware and re-defining them as tools for creativity.<sup>12</sup> Such projects seem to state that Internet-related art cannot be content with creating or recycling “surface events”. It has to tackle the infrastructure itself, the codes and protocols that condition the textual and graphic manifestations innocently called up on the screen by non-technical users.<sup>13</sup> The recent emergence of “software art” that emphasizes the primacy of codes and coding in the digital art practice is a reply to such challenges, although it should be remembered that not all the forms of software art are openly political in their goals; some of them emphasize a new critical formalism, celebrating the aesthetic beauty of the code for its own sake.<sup>14</sup> The appearance of software art and other artforms representing the “meta-medium” approach is certainly very welcome, although it is not without risks. Declaring the code and the coding principles as the main criteria for an artwork at the expense of other features may limit the potential audience to the small circles of cognoscenti. In the worst case it may also lead to a new dogmatism. All this may distract the attention from the goal of using art as a means of maintaining a critical dialogue and intervening with networked media, conceived not just as technical, but also as social, economic and cultural spaces.

In his well known book *The Victorian Internet* Tom Standage argued that many of the features and discourses now associated with the Internet and considered as absolute novelties were anticipated by the cultural formations developed around earlier telecommunication systems, such as the electric telegraph in the 19th century.<sup>15</sup> Support for this argument could easily be found from the works by cultural historians of technology like Susan J. Douglas and Carolyn Marvin.<sup>16</sup> From the Internet-related artworks created in recent years, however, such historical awareness seems to be nearly totally absent. No matter how critical the approach,

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<sup>11</sup> See “Web as Canvas/La red como lienzo”, *Art Futura 2002*, catalogue, edited by Montxo Algora and José Luis de Vicente, Madrid: Ediciones Anaya Multimedia, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> [www.rhizome.org/carnivore/](http://www.rhizome.org/carnivore/)

<sup>13</sup> These thoughts have been influenced by my discussions with Gloria Sutton, a post-graduate student at UCLA, Department of Art History.

<sup>14</sup> See my essay “WEB STALKER SEEK AARON; Reflections on Digital Arts, Codes and Coders”, in *Code - The Language of our Time*. Ars Electronica 2003, edited by Gerfried Stocker and Christiane Schöpf, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje-Cantz Verlag, 2003, pp. 110-128.

<sup>15</sup> Tom Standage: *The Victorian Internet*, New York: Walker and Company, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Susan J. Douglas: *Inventing American Broadcasting 1899-1922*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987; Carolyn Marvin, op.cit.

the Internet is treated as if nothing like it ever existed before. Underlying these works, there seems to be a hypothesis about a paradigmatic rupture separating the Internet from its predecessors both qualitatively and quantitatively. For them, the Internet emerges as an entirely new territory that poses unprecedented challenges to its users and its critics, including the artists. Culturally and theoretically informed artworks delving into the pre-history of today's telematic culture and pondering its continuous relevance for understanding the media culture in the era of the Internet have so far been exceptions.<sup>17</sup> *The Messenger* is one of these rare works. One of its achievements is its complete lack of didacticism and theoretico-political finger pointing. Its media-archaeological discourse never turns into declamation, which increases, rather than diminishes, the power of its delicately uncanny poetics.

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<sup>17</sup> Winke Winke, an interesting re-enactment of the optical telegraph, associated with other means of telecommunications, by Gerfried Stocker, Anton Fuchs, Anton Maierhofer, Wolfgang Reinisch and Jutta Schmiederer (Austria, 1993) is one of the few works that come to mind. See <http://gewi.kfunigraz.ac.at/~gerfried/winke/winke2.html> .