

**CAVS yields Turtles : revisiting Environmental Form and Monumentality in Contemporary Ecology : a Future Archive entry**

by Luis Berríos-Negrón, NBK Berlin, Tuesday, June 19, 2012

*"The world that modern man has constructed by and large lacks sincerity and scale. It is twisted in space, without light and cowardly in color. It combines mechanically consistent patterns of details within formless wholes. It is oppressive in its fake monumentality; degrading in its petty, fawning manner of facelifting."*

Introduction to *Education of Vision* by György Kepes

In the word-play of past and future, I believe that the Center for Advanced Visual Studies still continues to embolden the signature of art. Whether it was by challenging the endless relation between technology and production, or how those affect the object of knowledge and its environment, it is clear that CAVS still generates pulses of anxious vitality that still keeps many awake at night.

Most poignantly, my view is that CAVS, while operative, relentlessly aimed to deliver a mediation between art and science. Not about the metaphorical, razzle-dazzle use, *control*, and misappropriation of servos, microscopes, lasers, and even cybernetics, but as a pedagogy of rigorous observation, of experimentation, challenging the material and visual production of art itself, as self-inquiry, of *self-regulation*, through the fundamental interrogatives - *how to see* and *how to experience* – both without compromising artistic origin, whether *transcendental*, *continuous*, or *recursive\**.

It is a differentiation between these two interrogatives I would like to briefly discuss here, and how they stem into an array of continuous relationships I see in regards to how CAVS operated and how the Future Archive helps me correlate my recent experiences in redefining environmental form and the evolution of my Turtle Series.

Therefore, in regards to seeing, there is the matter of *making-visible* as defined by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger: *the interstitial, mental action that arguably underlies all the manifestations of cultural production, regardless of which sense one is aiming to address*. It is particularly elusive when considering the current amassing of effort that is going into the political and labor economy of artistic intent. This current effort, which undoubtedly stems from the conceptual work of the 20th century, often takes both pedagogical and sculptural dimensions. This form is often manifested as resistance: in the past as a contrast to industrialization, today, as a contrast to free-market globalization.

In between that past industrial deployment and today's free-market battleground, we endured the fastest technological acceleration, 200 or so years, of the most radical,

concentrated technological development in recorded western history. Whether it all equates to innovation or progress, it is still to be determined. But, what we can surely surmise is that we still today struggle to keep pace with the impact those technologies, on how they mediate these worlds around us.

In Book One of the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche tells us that "*the task of incorporating knowledge and making it instinctive is only beginning to dawn on the human eye and it is not yet clearly discernible; it is a task that is seen only by those who have comprehended that so far we have incorporated only our errors and that all our consciousness relates to errors*" (pg. 85, Kaufmann translation). Perhaps these are the entrails of CAVS... that this "*task*" motivated an extension of the role of arts education to voraciously follow alongside science and its technological advancements, in order to, through *trial and error*, see beyond industrial production and critique, into a deeper sense of environmental observation and self-inquiry.

From its earliest days, its faculty and fellows immediately began to tackle and reconfigure the "Education of Vision" - to take a step back and rethink the seen and unseen. This time, not with some modern line we yearn to follow, or a perfumed air we desire to corral, but through a careful survey and implementation of emerging visual precision and material instrumentation that at once began to rationally bombard the minds of a society coming to terms with televisual mass-media and the cold war space-age barrage. This conscious reconfiguration, Tomás Maldonado would argue in the same publication, began to immediately challenge *intellectual thinking*, by favoring the nascent focus on *visual thinking*. That as societies began to dive into the numeric mechanics of result-driven, intellectual experimentation, CAVS also saw that societies could not set aside its correlation to the aesthetics of continuous, visual experimentation.

In that correlation we find a compelling chapter about epistemic notion, where CAVS contributes to this kind of experimentation, not for the sake of effect through novel media, but to instinctively produce previously un-projected artistic resolution. While the visual and technical education of the student was vital to create such projections, it also became evident that the same would then be required from the audiences and their environment – in short, that this intermediate field required a broader array of curatorial objects that made visible a scientific observation and engagement, a field of *preparations*.

In regards to experiencing, there is the matter of *abstract machines* as defined by Gerald Raunig: *virtually real machines of possibility enabling bodies and signs to flow together*. This notion, that is neither an ideal nor a universal, seems to me to have been the operative mode in CAVS whom were intent in producing newly, technologically mediated art, with a parallel, deeply rooted concern over how it would be engaged by the audience.

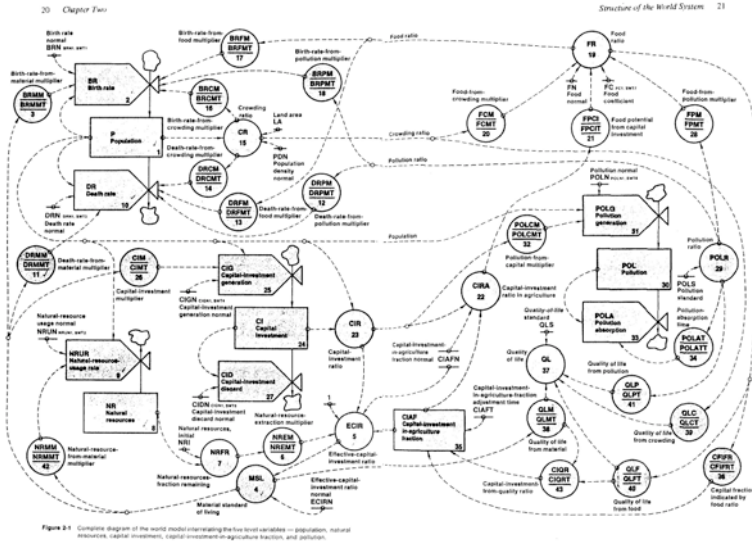
Since the Big Bang of site-specificity, when Degas "removed" the dancer's pedestal, the spatial envelop of art has been expanding. Consciously or viscerally acknowledging this new intermediate field, and compounded by the new instruments of visualization and the growing intricacies about the action of seeing, the faculty and fellows wholly understood that their teachings and interventions had to directly confront the manifold of *environmental form*. While inspired by the new tools that allowed us to see deeper into space and closer into organisms, that augmented personal communication and intensified mass media, they were also keenly aware of the broadening disconnect between man and nature, of the abuse of *monumentality* for the sake of power and the onslaught of resource destruction already brought upon by the industrial project.

Through the access to these new scientific resources found at M.I.T., and thus contextualizing their application of knowledge and visualization in their teaching and their work, one notable dimension of environmental form became readily apparent in the initial years of the Center. Aside from the rich collection of published works and events, that resulting, compelling dimension was Sky Art.

Led by Otto Piene, several registers materialize when Sky Art was produced. These aerial interventions not only explored the defying of gravity, scale, and singularity in their form, but most obvious was the shifting of the horizontal experience of art into a vertical one. And, as the public hinged their heads upwards or laid down on the ground, two things happened: the public saw the sky, and felt the ground, beyond the work of art, a monumental environment, a "*Denkmal*" or place to re-member, to *re-think*. It is very difficult to illustrate the grave circumstances of air and water pollution in the 1970's and 80's, and how broad the activism, and, to a significant extent, how successful the confrontation between the state and the people was. And, it was there that Sky Art became, not much as a sculptural object, but a curatorial device, a preparation that made-visible the environment. It was a significant contribution to that new and much broader notion of environment, a notion that fundamentally excited the still pertinent fluctuation between an *anthropological* and a *mechanical*, or even an instinctive rather than intuitive, notion of environment and therefore of Reality. This is not unlike American philosopher Charles Peirce's datum of continuity where he would call in his article of 1892 titled "Law of Mind" an *infinite community of inquiry*, where the notion of Reality emerges from hypothesis as the consistent semiotic stream of trial and error that proposes an infinite increase in knowledge and thus cognition of environment.

One example is CAVS fellow Aldo Tambellini, who among his many other collectives, was also part of the Raindance (and its publication Radical Software) along video artists such as Paul Ryan and its founders Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider. I briefly interject this relationship with Raindance for it was at the core of

a unique understanding of cybernetics strictly rooted in Gregory Bateson. That same notion of cybernetics was further informed by Peirce, mainly through Paul Ryan's work on formalizing, not the accepted dyadic condition of feedback, but further developing a much more sophisticated circuit-based triadic mediation, where a third component, following Peirce's categorizations of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, would remediate the observable, recurrent impasse in human and natural relations, giving way to what Bateson described as schizmogensis, the "growth of a split". This reading of cybernetics by Ryan and Raindance was definitely concerned with the growing split between man and nature (whether spliced by the Enlightenment and/or by Industrialization), but Raindance somehow did not succumb neither to the extreme views of either the hippie nor to the technocratic movements by drawing from both technology (mainly through video art) and communal and ecological aspirations.



img.1

Through this mediation of novel social and technological aspirations, Tambellini makes evident that his notion of environmental form, arguably as a notion of Batesonian cybernetics, was one of natural circuitry that explored systems of social *self-regulation* that accepted and even thrived upon the irrational ramification of nature as an *unstable balance*. This notion often encompassed a collaborative and participatory field, deploying itself in many instances through hypothetical thinking

that did not ignore providing his work and audiences access to a measure of these notions of environment, suggesting broad interactions of Mind and all its surroundings, of a mental ecology.

But making-visible this unstable balance of Reality, these interconnections between mental, spatial, physical, and atmospheric worlds, especially in the technological and militarized landscape of M.I.T., began to be misread. The ecological consciousness was soon being dogmatically deformed into the paralyzing, reductive notions of *universal balance* led by Jay Forrester of the Servomechanism Lab (Systems and World Dynamics, see img. 1), or what would be the beginnings of neoliberal ideologies of electronic mass control by Nicholas Negroponte and his Machine Group. Kepes, Piene, Tambellini, et al, clearly stepped aside from these factions, rejecting to misappropriate and then formulate that unwitting apparatus for control, and / or turning the singular interactions of ecological systems into reductive interdependencies, all which undoubtedly resonate in the pervasion of technocratic free-market capitalism. Soon, what was seen as an exciting and broad technological awareness that could reignite Kepes' efforts for social and biological *bridging* of fractures between the built and natural environments, became an instrumentalization of technology for the sake of social manipulation and the simultaneous severing of individual rights and communal consciousness we so struggle with today.

This heavily contested ground began to shape an oppositional, arguably democratic discourse that attracted, and produced, artists and other scientists and practitioners with an ever-expanding predisposition to question production through artistic experimentation, and the elusive socio-cultural dimensions of new technologies. While the discussions in this new contested ground began to evolve, naturally, some, if not many, procured to engage active partnerships with the corporations that manufactured these technological products, some in the sincere spirit of scientific experimentation, others with strictly commercial aspirations.

Not unlike the Bauhaus, the New Bauhaus, or Black Mountain College, CAVS did not follow the latter, still contested, yet more recognized and undoubtedly influential line of Negroponte's research & development model that we know today as the M.I.T. Media Lab. But, by the late 1970's and early 80's, and up to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Center continued, somewhat quietly, but steadily forth with a rigorous program for social outreach and public participation in artistic practices, still fundamentally experimenting with, and manifesting through bulging, new electronic media, including motion picture and mass communication techniques and devices.

Already then, the premonition of wireless communications and the internet began to create a paradoxical condition of both great promise and deep concern for the potency of what these tools and media could inflict on the *environmental, social, and mental ecologies*, to use Guattari's categorizations. CAVS foresaw how these tools could

become strict mechanisms to anesthetize the collective mind to the already palpable impacts of ecological destabilization, most evidently through defamiliarization and displacement. The later years of CAVS were then, for the most part, focused on confronting these two aspects of globalized, free-market transgression, mainly through two tactical mechanisms: the re-minding of space and free speech, both in regards to institutional control and the abuse of power. And, as such, the unfinished redefinition of *Monumentality* continued to be central to the CAVS modus operandi. Two parallel methods stand out in the recent, later years of CAVS: one was “*perception requires engagement*” pioneered by Antoni Muntadas, the other was “*critical vehicles*” pioneered by Krzysztof Wodiczko.

As I arrived at M.I.T., already influenced by the 1970’s notions of urban ecology, conceptual art, its ramifications, and after witnessing 9.11, I had considerable despondence towards what architecture had become, its practice and its production, diminished in its social role and exacerbated as a symbol of power. Once enrolled, I gravitated to the Visual Arts Program and CAVS for I quickly began to see a small fraction of the enormity of what was to be learned, primarily from these two aforementioned, parallel methods. And, although time was just not enough, I did my very best to produce work, ultimately in this case, a thesis, that reflected the gravity of CAVS in my intent as I left the Institute to practice what I still feel the dialogue between art and architecture ought to be.

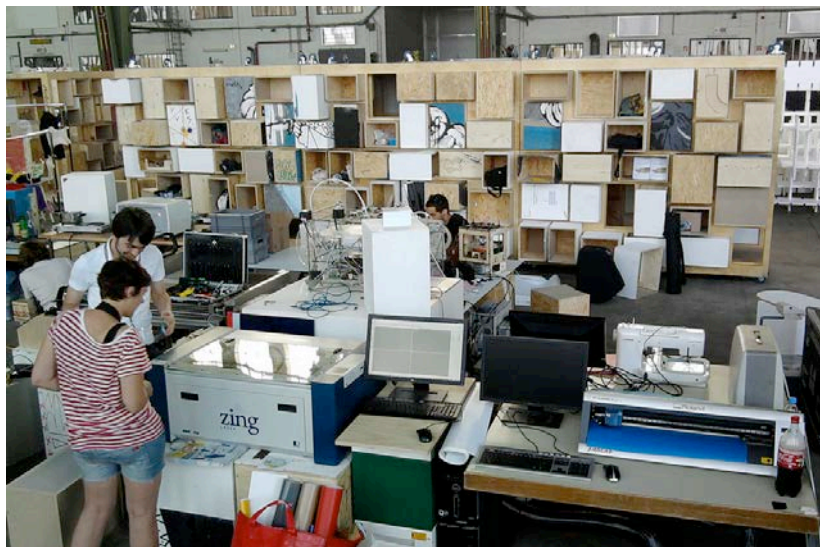
Once again, it is CAVS’ definition of *Monument* that still to this day is at the core of this dialogue, perhaps the Center’s most active abstract machine. This CAVS definition is not the crystallization of a symbol for historicist power, but the formulation of a dynamic reminder, of a cause, of an ongoing struggle, a place we can plug in and out of to think and to generate knowledge, to acknowledge. And, within that definition, implicit is the critical role of the Archive as visualization and technology, in its modes of production. The Turtle series stems from these notions.

The Turtle as my final work at M.I.T, as a thesis, had to be a contribution, not necessarily as a rhetorical and/or technical resource sitting in a bookshelf or in a digital catalogue, of whom very few actually read, but as a discursive, physical intervention. It of course was required to project my academic competence and aspiration, but much more importantly, it needed to project my desire to build a support structure, a prop for its eventual users in the production and representation of knowledge.

As an extension of the animal metaphors in the late 20<sup>th</sup> history of architecture, where Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi had the *duck*, Frank Gehry had the *fish*, and Mark Goulthorpe had the *rabbit*, I wanted to add the *turtle*. Reason being, not because I was interested in joining that prominent list, but because I felt there was one category missing... if in simplest of terms the *duck* projected building as billboard,

the *fish* reflected building as self-reference, and the *rabbit* scripted building as immaterial form, which animal would then *incorporate* building as cultural production?

The *turtle* became the obvious choice... on one hand, because it is very slow and patient, and it always wins; on the other, and much more importantly, it also reminded me of the *nomadic war machine* I wanted it to be, with no interior, all exterior. A micro architecture, a mobile *Monument* that served as a mobile space and diagram for relationships, allowing its users to not only organize and catalogue their knowledge networks, but also to deploy its infrastructure of curatorial tools, creating correlational spaces for social interface and representation. And that is what it became, the Turtle was to become at once object and subject of that thesis.



img.2

Today, the Turtle, as concept, has a series of offspring (The Turtle, The Turtle Two, The Turtle Three, The Turtle Kompakt, The Turtle Five) each of which has been, or is in current use at cultural and marginal institutions such as the Deutscher Architektur Zentrum, the Betahaus, ETSY, Open Design City Maker Lab (see img. 2), Program Berlin, Bauhaus in Dessau, Aedes Network Campus, in Mark Jarzombek's library, *Examples to Follow*. New methods, namely Parametric Determinism and digital fabrication, are always a critical dimension to Turtle building. But, it is always more so a desire to have an affirmative influence in labor and material economies that

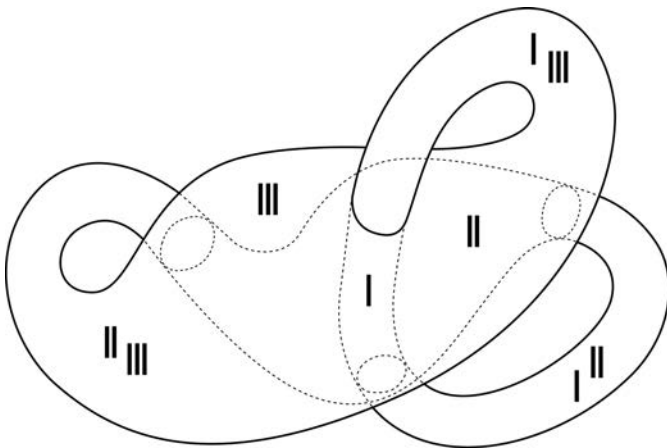
allows the Turtles to be purposefully useless emblems of the contemporary advents of mass customization and transdisciplinarity, all in order to serve the elusive interests of the *precariat*, of Raunig's sleepless monster.

Ultimately, the exhibition design and The Turtle's participation at the NBK, is not just to represent one aspect of the vast legacy of the artistic and scientific work influenced by CAVS, but that it supports the audience to project itself to build their own Future Archive, whether physical or mental. In my own case, I engage this landscape here to give form to the questions that have been emerging from working with Ute Meta Bauer and Paul Ryan this past year:

Can a mannerist context in regards to contemporary ecology help us redefine cybernetics in human relations?

Is there a connection, other than chronological, between the architectonics of Nietzsche's *eternal recursion* and Peirce *continuity*?

Is the archive, as an anachronistic, evolutionary dispositif that, not unlike objects like Paul Ryan's Relational Circuit (see img. 3), can operate as a prop favoring and developing the incorporation of instincts over and above the transcendental notion of intuition? \*



img. 3