

# Social Capital

Forms of Interaction

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum of American Art  
Independent Study Program Exhibition  
at The Art Gallery of The Graduate Center  
The City University of New York  
365 Fifth Avenue at 34th Street  
New York, NY 10016  
(212) 817-7386

**Gallery Hours**  
Tuesday-Saturday 12–6 pm  
Free Admission

**Gallery Talks**  
Saturdays, 2 pm  
Tours by appointment

حبة قمح.  
أصيب جحا في عقله  
وكان كلما رأى دجاج  
فأدخلته زوجته مست  
وعندما تأكد الأطباء  
وقبل أن يصل إلى منزله  
في الشارع فعاد إلى

حبة قمح.  
أصيب جحا في عقله واعتقد أنه حبة قمح.  
وكان كلما رأى دجاجة، أسرع خوفاً من أن تأكله،  
فأدخلته زوجته مستشفى الأمراض العقلية لعلاج،  
وعندما تأكد الأطباء من شفائه، سمحوا له بالخروج.  
وقبل أن يصل إلى منزله، رأى مجموعة من الدجاج

تأكله،  
لعلاجه،  
بالخروج.  
الدجاج



## Instrumental Spaces

The spaces we engage and occupy everyday shift fluidly between the physical and the virtual, as technology increasingly transforms discrete physical locations into nodes on virtual networks. This notion of flow and transformation has come to describe a kind of post-structural environment of mobile signification where cognition is affected and multiple subject formations are constructed.<sup>1</sup> While often associated with 1990s internet rhetoric, the idea of a network as a continuous form of interconnected and intersubjective biotechnical space actually dates back to the 1960s. With the first appearance of electronic media such as computers, mass broadcast radio, and television, an emergent discourse about networks and their contingent subjectivities (originally inspired by physiological and biological systems) became inextricably associated with these forms of mediation and the ways in which they alter connectivity between people and their environments. Media analyst Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s articulated his vision of a global technological utopia in which mass media would create an electronic space to facilitate simultaneous information reception and participatory inclusion.<sup>2</sup> Global networks were subsequently attempted within architecture, urban planning, and creative practice.<sup>3</sup> A gradual displacement of the physical in favor of an abstract system of interpenetrating subjectivities and spaces resulted from this reconception of space within a network.<sup>4</sup> Today, with the added presence of the internet, these spaces are much contested, forcing us to reexamine previous optimism about technology and its

rhetoric of proximity, participation, democracy, and free exchange.

Many contemporary artistic practices are best situated within this context of emergent technology and its contingent network subjectivity, as they construct and explore mediated spaces as territories for new social and subjective formation. Participatory software and web-based work (Mongrel, Andy Deck) and post-studio strategies and relational installations (Renée Green, Rirkrit Tiravanija) are prominent examples of this trend. Many new media practices have been difficult to interpret in traditional terms of medium specificity, creating the need for other frames of reference. Conscious of the opportunity presented by the lack of clear boundaries, the artists included here mine the notion of ambiguity to various ends and thus respond, if implicitly, to Walter Benjamin's ideas of the possibilities that arise as new technologies emerge. For Benjamin, the birth of a new technology, in his case film, was categorically dialectical; importantly, it offered an opportunity for anticipatory critical practice.<sup>5</sup> Within this context, the following works demonstrate how participatory spaces of information are constituted across many spaces—physical, collective, technologically mediated, and virtual—and how social relationships can be produced within them. This cross-sectional look at Rirkrit Tiravanija, 16 Beaver Group, Renée Green, and Mongrel proposes that technologically mediated creative practices, such as electronic laptop music, and social interfaces, such as social software and interactive



**RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA**

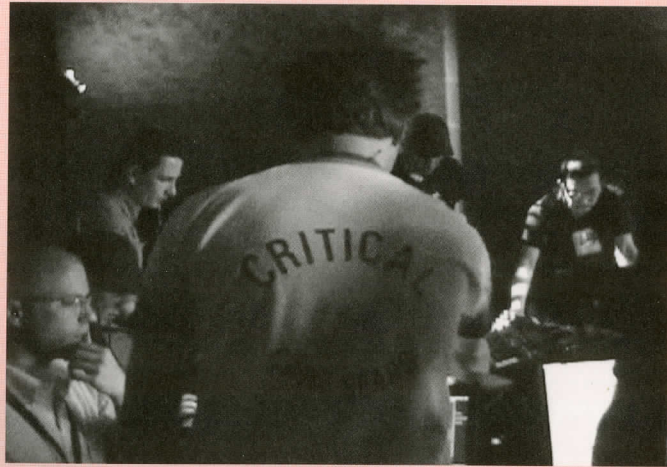
*Untitled 1996 (rehearsal Studio No.6), 2004*  
[previous installation view at Le Consortium - Centre d'art Contemporain, Dijon, 1998]



internet-based work, can be used to interpret the facility of structure and content within participatory and relational art work. This recontextualization also may point out useful identifications and similarities among seemingly disparate creative practices, including ideas of the artist as computer programmer, installation as infrastructure, or the art object as social interface.

For the last decade, Rirkrit Tiravanija's artistic practice has exemplified open-ended participatory work that facilitates relationships between the work and its audience. Examples of Tiravanija's past projects and installations include cooking and hosting Thai curry dinners at gallery and museum spaces, and reconstructing his New York apartment at a gallery for continuous public use. Though Tiravanija's installations are site-specific, they usually involve a series of locational displacements and substitutions that act on the given space's configuration and function to highlight the potential for creating social relationships therein.

Originally modeled on a recording studio similar to the one Tiravanija rented with friends in New York, the *Untitled 1996 (rehearsal Studio No. 6)* installation is an embedded space within the art gallery where people are invited to play, practice, and record music with available instruments and equipment. Completed recordings from the various installation sites have been retained as an ongoing archive. Here, as in his other works, Tiravanija remaps space and reimagines its function. Primarily a performance piece, it is consequently dependent on the presence, number, dynamics, willingness, and even skill of the participants in each setting. The work thus operates from the premise of reterritorialization and challenges the possibilities for different subject articulations within these same spaces. Apart from ideas of institutional critique, much less the ability of an art work to produce social relationships as espoused in Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics, Tiravanija's work also relates to issues of intersubjective social spaces and emergent technologies.<sup>6</sup> For here, the gallery visi-



**RENÉE GREEN**

Still from *Into the Machine: Laptops*  
from *Wavelinks Series*, 2002  
Courtesy of Free Agent Media

tor becomes aware of institutional space and experiences participation and exclusion as a function of mediated performance. This does not immediately implicate the work as an ethico-political model of "good" democracy but rather situates the strategy within a crucial moment of reception and awareness of spatial and subjective transformations.<sup>7</sup>

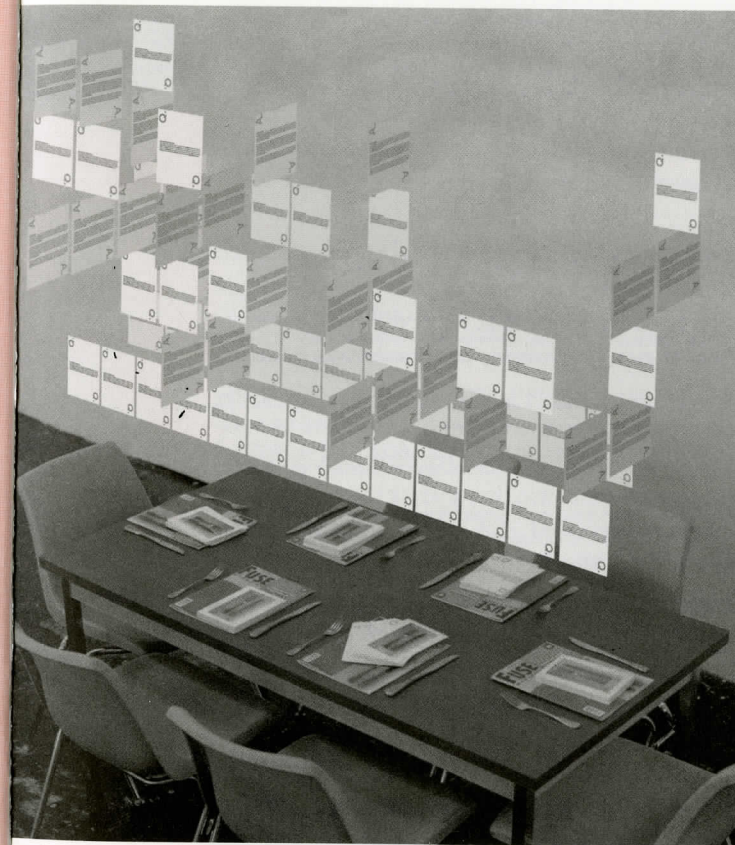
Emerging spaces of information can also be perceived as collective spaces or networks of discrete sites and groups. 16 Beaver Group, a New York-based, artist-run collective with multiple international affiliates, experiments with "open social formats" that both highlight and facilitate links between often geographically diverse social networks of artists, academics, activists, and interested participants. Though the projects have physical, site-specific manifestations, they are treated as entry points for activity that is organized through communication networks. In an effort to represent multiple positions and maintain difference within a cohesive network, programs in the past have included regular discussions, readings, presentations, actions, correspondence, email lists, meals, collaborative projects, and interviews, sometimes occurring simultaneously at different locations.

Their *Open Interview and Lunch* project creates a virtual and physical space for dialogue among individuals and email lists affiliated with *FUSE* magazine, a Canadian contemporary art publication. During a three-day period, the group sent personalized questions via email to recipients who were then invited to answer and pose another question. Discussion centered around collaborative frameworks, social engagement, collective political action, and participatory agency. On the third day, a simultaneous lunch took place in Toronto and New York to discuss the results. The subsequent proliferation of questions and answers documented the nonlinear relationships forged between multiple individuals. For 16 Beaver Group, the interview format is a template or mode for organ-

izing and generating new territories of participation through email and actual group meetings.

Media interfaces that enable reterritorialization and facilitate network interaction are important elements within this context. In the documentary-based work *Into the Machine: Laptops*, Renée Green explores how electronic laptop computer musicians engage audience participation in technologically mediated physical spaces. As part of her continuing inquiry into mediated social and creative sonic practices, Green investigates what it means to participate in public laptop music events, both as a performer and an audience member. Specifically, Green's interest lies in the laptop as an interface; likewise, she explores how the computer, often perceived as an object of solitary engagement, can become a medium of multi-participant, social activity. Through footage of actual events and interviews, the video attempts to delineate where collaborative practice and collective experience are perceived phenomenologically, either within the physical space of the performer and audience or within the technical operations that combine participants' inputs. The video documents performances in which laptop musicians huddle over their computers as they perform in front of a seemingly passive, disconnected audience. Although the interaction is not immediately apparent, the artists interviewed regard electronic laptop music performances as inherently participatory. The ambiguities of space and the role of mediating technology are similar to Tiravanija's *Rehearsal Studio*, in that instruments (laptops) are interfaces that allow participants to negotiate social space through performative interaction and synesthetic aural and visual experience. As demonstrated by laptop performances such as those hosted by New No York, the interaction between participants occurs in physical space but is also represented virtually in network and software operations that mirror the relations of the performers.

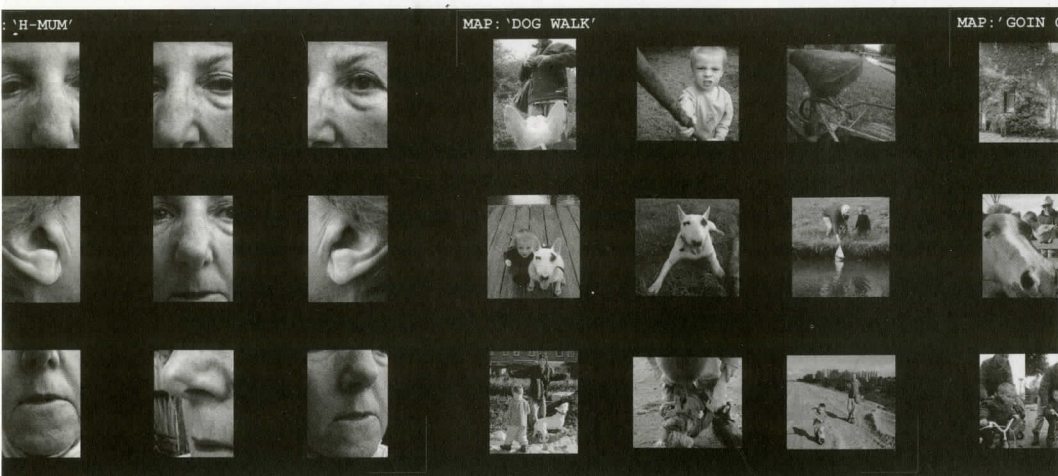
Moving to virtual social spaces, we can draw parallels between the role of the artist and programmer



**16 BEAVER GROUP**  
(IN COLLABORATION WITH FUSE MAGAZINE)

*Open Interview and Lunch*, 2003  
[digital rendering of installation view]





# MONGREL

Screenshot from  
*Nine (9)*, 2003

nine texts, and nine sounds.) Users are invited to upload a set of nine elements to the database and connect their map to others already in the archive. The visual representation of the overall archive is a flat, sprawling matrix of maps interconnected by proximity, geography, topic, user preferences, and word use. According to Mongrel, *Nine(9)* represents a visual mapping of various social geographies that reveals otherwise invisible power structures. In its development as open source software, *Nine(9)* reflects sociability in code and implementation between user and programmer, which they describe as a “a sociotechnical pact” or an evolving and responsive relationship to social relations in the software.<sup>9</sup>

As Mongrel’s approach suggests, the space of emergent technology and its contingent network subjectivities is tied to factors of power and the material conditions through which it is manifested. In the proliferation of spaces of information and the subject articulations they create, there is the possibility to reframe existing social forms. Likewise, these anticipatory creative practices employ new forms of electronic information to augur oppositional political strategies. As these works demonstrate, the new spaces enabled by technology are to be occupied by active participants engaging in the possibilities of flow and transformation, all the while cognizant of the forces that continue to shape and divide us.

in providing open frameworks or spaces for participation and social interaction. As with electronic laptop music, the design of software operations can both construct and represent social relationships when mediating communication between individuals. Social software or software applications that facilitate the formation of social networks between individuals and groups can provide insight into relational art practices as work that in some form supports participatory interaction, feedback, and social relationships. The emergence of social software responds not only to the continuing effort to use technology to augment communication, but, more importantly, acts to place virtual space in the realm of the social. As opposed to groupware (software that imposes predetermined groupings of individuals), social software enables self-organized groups to coalesce around shared interests and connect with others. Popular forms of web-based social software systems include conversational web logs (blogs), chat groups, and social networking sites such as Friendster, Meetup, and match.com. These systems are predicated on a belief in the fluidity and openness of the internet. Artists such as Andy Deck and activist software collective Mongrel, however, create social software programs that critique this perception. While Deck’s imagemaking systems allow social and collabora-

tive interaction within established parameters, Mongrel’s projects reposition socially constructed software within the context of those excluded by technology and reactivate it as a tool for political agency and empowerment.

Approaching software as a social form, Mongrel, a London-based new media collective of activist programmers and artists from different international regions, addresses factors that facilitate or prohibit participation, such as access, ownership, and representations of power at the level of software code and overall creative direction. Mongrel critiques the rhetoric that asserts the openness of computer-mediated and internet-enabled communication even in the face of a growing digital divide and privatization of software. Instead they redefine openness as a function of how such an inherently discrete structure as software can also reflect open social engagement and provide a means for agency.<sup>8</sup>

*Nine(9)* is a noncommercial, community-based social software project that allows groups and individuals to contribute a text, image, or sound to an archive of 729 maps. (The software has nine groups, each of which has nine archives, each of which has nine maps. Each map has nine images,



## NOTES

1. Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, trans. Robert Bononno (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1997), 14.
2. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
3. Mark Wigley, “Network Fever”, *Grey Room* 4 (Summer 2001), 109.
4. Branden Joseph, “My Mind Split Open: Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable”, *Grey Room* 8 (Summer 2002), 94.
5. Ibid., 95. Joseph cites Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin; prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rold Tiedermann (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1999). Joseph also extends this idea to incorporate an analysis of Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable multimedia spectacle in which he refers to a creation of “emerging spaces of information” where the impulse to make connections is rendered into a form of participation and awareness of the spatial/subjective transformations effected by media technologies.
6. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).
7. Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” forthcoming publication in *October* 110 (Fall 2004). Bishop critiques the claims that Bourriaud makes for relational art, specifically its immediate implication as a political and emancipatory mode of artistic practice.
8. “Open for us means that we and the organizations need to change form and function to accommodate the cultural and social variety of the groups we encounter... After all, technology—whatever the media hype—is not inherently open.” Mongrel interviewed by Geert Lovink in “National Heritage and Body Politics,” in *Uncanny Networks: Dialogues with the Virtual Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003), 252.
9. “As a social software project, *Nine(9)* is directly born, changed, and developed as the result of an ongoing sociability between users and programmers in which demands are made on the practices of coding that exceed their easy fit into standardized social relations. *Nine(9)* can most usefully be understood to work in these terms. It is a socio-technical pact between users of certain forms of license, language, culture, and environment. The various forms of its freeness or openness are being developed as part of the various rhythms of the life of this software; its production and critical engagement with the process of permission. In addition to this, *Nine (9)* requires new social machines to spawn its codes, to diffuse and manage its development and implementation.” Dive Into the Kingdom of Piracy: *Nine (9)* at <http://residence.aec.at/kop/DIVE/cd/kop/nine9.html> Also see <http://9.waag.org>