

### Meeting the Other ...

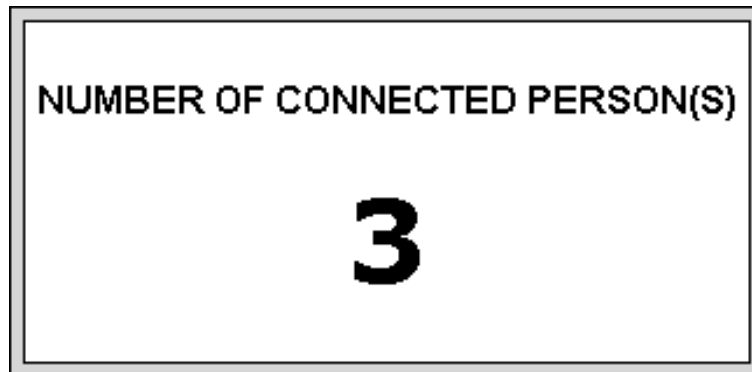
By **Évelyne ROGUE**<sup>i</sup>

"I is an Other"<sup>ii</sup>. But who is the Other in question? Is it about the Other *in* me or about the Other *for* me? Is it to say that I am a stranger to myself, that when I say "I", this "I" is anyhow an Other, other than the one I am referring to, or is it to insist on the fact that "I is an Other" in the sense that there is an Other *in* me, because above all, there is the Other in oneself and for oneself and *for* me?

Doubtless indeed, not only *RICARDO MBARAK's CONNECTED*<sup>iii</sup> but also his *VISITORS*<sup>iv</sup>, invite us to think about this last question. Far from the turmoil and from the anxiety of the contemporary world, far from the giddiness, the excitement, even the overexcitement which have led Pascal to know that "all the misfortune of man comes from one single thing which is not being able to rest in one room"<sup>v</sup>, R. Mbarak with these creations presented in the "Mediterranean Days of Sousse's Plastic Arts"<sup>vi</sup>, invites us to take time, but not any time.

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He invites us to take some time to think; a time which suspends its flight so that the soul may have a dialogue with itself. And the artist calls out to the surfer, in *VISITORS*, with these words: "How can a posted numerical value reflect to values of universal order?"



Knowing for a long time that the piece of art is a symbol or a rigorous symbolic system, in so far as it is *sensible*, its first vocation, residing in the fact of being a peculiar proposition of singular meaning; there is nothing as amazing as the artist calling out to the surfer in this way.

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Being also aware of the fact that the aesthetic experience does not rely anymore on our aptitude to appreciate the Beautiful, as it became a forgotten concept - at least with what regards the art in the digital era, and more specifically the Net Art - but to reveal the sense - or hidden meanings - of the considered work, R. Mbarak appeals to all the intellectual faculties of the *homo significans*: the man counterfeiter of signs who, doubtless, will not miss to give meaning to the work that belongs to him, more or less to give rise to it before his eyes.

Actually the artist postulates the participation of the audience, although it is not a question of intensive manipulation of the mouse, the mouse click, the continuous use of the trackball, as this is required for some other creations of the Net Art. The Interactivity requested in the above-mentioned creations is actually minimal, taking the double shape: connection / updating, even when it is a deep reflection in the meaning of the existence, the relation to time, to space, to the Other called out by the artist.

The question of time which appears in *CONNECTED* is more specifically in terms of simultaneity. If we do not have to forget that Marinetti was the first to use the word simultaneity from the literary point of view, if we neither have to forget to what extent "she implies a big sensitiveness for the progress of

events in time"<sup>vii</sup>, it is necessary for us to insist on the fact that she "seeks [also and particularly] to transform the auditory problem into a visual problem"<sup>viii</sup>. Maybe, by thinking of *CONNECTED* in terms of simultaneity, it has exactly to do with hearing the voice of the Other. By displaying the connection of others, I foresee the presence of the Other as another me, in whom I see myself, without really recognizing myself.

As far as, on one hand, we can and even have to say that the "I" confirms itself, from the point of view of the Other, and as far as, on the other hand, it is necessary for us to agree with E. Lévinas that the Other is at first a face from which the ethical imperative can be inscribed: "You will not commit murder" it is necessary for us to admit that the link with the other would not be reduced to its representation, but would be updated in the invocation of the other. Well, it is indeed the other who is called upon rather than summoned in *CONNECTED*, called upon in so far as his presence is guessed rather than really seized.

By specifying explicitly that *CONNECTED* asks questions about the importance of being connected in mass, (or not), through a device of communication such as Internet", the artist puts in evidence the fact that communication can take a surprising shape, sometimes a very surprising shape in the cyberspace as far as the Other is not anymore the One that looks at me, but the One I can, with a little bit of attention, notice the trail of, for want of really finding it.

If the Other is never totally the One with whom we communicate, as points it out J. Baudrillard<sup>ix</sup>, for, it is the One who is followed and who follows. Indeed, in the net of networks, more than anywhere else maybe, the presence of the Other does never stop accompanying me like my shadow, my double, my image, so that to marry it, while never stopping erasing its tracks. Consequently, the presence of the Other is seized in the shape of a substantial evanescence in a chronic time and a utopian space.

We need indeed to notice and to emphasize that R. Mbarak invites the "spectator" of his works to think, not only about the notion of time, in the shape of simultaneity, but also in that of space. The evanescent space, which is created, lasts for a moment, extends a little while, before disappearing, reappears and disappears again. Fluctuating space in anyway,

more or less populated with souls, of which one can ask if it really represents a space of thought in the sense that P. Lévy understands it, a space for a *collective intelligence*<sup>x</sup> to come, either a *thinking envelop*<sup>vi</sup> such as already defined by Teilhard de Chardin. It is, anyway, a type of relation on the completely particular network that invites us to think about the works of R. Mbarak.

Indeed, by inviting us to experience the presence of the Other from a distance, the artist asks implicitly the question of knowing what the other means to me. Indeed in *CONNECTED I* know that there is the Other, but who is this Other? we could even suppose to extremes that machines connected among them by networks, or any other Intranet system, programmed in due form, connected at a specified hour, making then the surfer, who is physically present before his machine, "believe" that 35 other consciences are present at the same time as he is *hic et nunc* in this spatiotemporally determined point of network, while there would be only 35 machines deceiving a conscience!

The current intelligent, but not thinking machine, could, if it was of course endowed with word, *mutatis mutandis*, take the responsibility of the most famous joke seen in *The New Yorker* about the hidden identity of the surfer who said to a "communicating" dog on the network of networks "On the Internet, nobody knows that you are a dog"<sup>xii</sup>. And the machine telling another machine "On the Internet, nobody knows that you are a machine!" It is obviously about an extreme fact, but not less possible, which asks in a very serious way about how "I" consider this "Other" of whom I can only suppose, and imagine, the presence. Is Other recognizable? If each one is different, it seems difficult to say that the Other is another me. We have to say then that this Other is simply, but it is already a lot, like me a being endowed with reason and able to reach the universal.

While P. Virilio predicted that the "techno sciences" will be, and are already in a way, responsible for the lack of restraint of the human being and of the general solitude<sup>xiii</sup>; and that "the 21<sup>st</sup> (...) congeals the being and the society in some isolated insular behavior"<sup>xiv</sup>, R. Mbarak in a "silent call", but never less booming, prefers to invite the spectator of these creations, in a Nietzsche perspective, "to love the other distant sound". By creating TAZ with the Web site connected as well as *VISITORS*, the artist wishes effectively to arouse the

reflection of the individual as a surfer who connects, shifts, transfers sometimes, disconnects and also connects again.

Moreover, sometimes after a long run the surfer who, in search of aesthetic experiences, if not new, at least always renewed, doubtlessly arrives on the web site of *CONNECTED* or *VISITORS*. Because it is indeed about a web site which, at first sight, and at first sight only, seems common, regular, and simple in any case. Contrary to many other web sites, which one can find on the Net, the design is very abstemious; the clear making up of the page; the whole filtered out of any useless content. The surfer is not possessed by the urge to click on everything, to simultaneously discover everything, to open windows in all directions until they cover his entire screen.

On the contrary, in the sites of R. Mbarak, one has the impression that nothing diverts the attention of the surfer off the main thing. The latter is by no means attacked with colors, images, not even a continuous flow of information; he has no choice to make, so no dilemma arises to him, unless if it is to wonder about what he has to do. Consequently He has nothing to do but be attentive to the work, read the indications of the artist as in *VISITORS*'s page which points out: "The number above stretches out towards infinity as far as you push it".



The artist, then, seeks the reflection of the surfer about philosophic questions such as the conscience of others, the meaning of its existence, its situation in space and in time as well. As we are effectively accustomed to evolve in the digital era, living at the real time, at the Internet time, it is not effectively superfluous to take time to wonder which *alter ego* has followed the same road as I did, who has passed by here before I passed, on whose trail am I walking, when clicking I pass from link to link, even from site to site. Some would think that these experiences, proposed by *CONNECTED* and by *VISITORS*, add nothing than what life offers to us, the one that

we experience when we connect to a certain site, without even being conscious that we are alone, dozens, even hundreds or thousands to be connected at the same time to the same site, while being physically thousand of kilometers away from others, certainly settled in very different continents as well.

Certainly, the meter of the site connected indicates that "we" are "9" to be connected on this page, "9" to read the same text at the same time, maybe in a different language, "9" to ask the same question: "Who is the Other? Who are the others, who as I did, clicked on this page? How did they get here? What are they thinking about? Who are these *alter ego* whom I know nothing about and who nevertheless are, like me, human beings? It is necessary for us to answer then, the Other is the one who momentarily lives in the interconnected planetary village. Thus, the Number registered at the top of *VISITORS* page, indicates a trace of a "collective and common passage, graffiti of a past and present presence". If we go for this experience while being conscious of it in the MUD, we would not be conscious of it in other sites, or else we would not even think of it. Well, it is maybe in this way that the work of R. Mbarak is exemplary. By choosing the deterrent nature, he makes a difficult choice because each one knows to which extent "the biggest difficulty in art consists in the fact of reproducing what one has before his eyes. He can manage to live his own time without noticing it (...) to walk along with his time: nothing seems so simple and nevertheless nothing is more difficult"<sup>xv</sup>. Beyond the common character, almost ordinary one of the connection at a Web site as it appears to the 21st century individual, to the *homo communicans* registered in the digital era, R. Mbarak tries to remind that what is given, is the technical possibility, but effective as well by composing personal temporalities to create a collective subjectivity, "to feel" also a collective time, emerging beyond individual subjectivities. He reminds us that the Other is another "I", the one that confirms that the "I" exists; he is as an *alter ego* is with me, my double by whom I am found and lost. In the same way as Rotrou's Amphitryon "meets" in Jupiter, it is necessary for us to say: "Hardly do I know myself in this extreme disorder: / Meeting myself in him, I look for myself in myself"<sup>xvi</sup>. One will not be so amazed to notice that the important for the artist, is to less flick through the channels for..., to take part in..., to interact with..., to get lost in labyrinthine meanders of the *click* rather than to make the individual think in the meaning of his existence, not as an awareness of itself, in the solitude, in the

solipsism but in his relation with the Other. And to note R. Mbarak: "The conscience of being alone or many, takes part in the meaning and in the real life that I invite you to think and feel through *CONNECTED*. Indeed, not only *VISITORS* but also *CONNECTED*, could be interpreted as "I" thrown towards the Other such as an artificial equivalent of dream in a maybe desperate attempt to restore to conscience, to space, to time, their essence or lost substance.

Finally, it is necessary for us to show to what extent does today's Net Art, and more particularly the creations like *CONNECTED* and *VISITORS* which allow each of us to visualize, to guess, to feel, to also imagine the presence of the Other in this particular place, which is the cyberspace, invite to experiment new aesthetics, which does not raise, or not anymore, simply from *the aesthetics of commutation*<sup>xvii</sup>, not even from *the aesthetics of the unveiling interactivity*<sup>xviii</sup>, but of the *rhizomorphic aesthetics* specific in the rhizomatic art<sup>xix</sup>. Rhizomatic Art in the meaning that each one can be connected at any moment in anywhere, not only from any place of the planet, but also from any URL. Rhizomatic Art in the sense that we can say that connections are numerous, lateral. Rhizomatic Art in the sense that "any point of the Internet can and has to be connected with any other one"<sup>xx</sup>. Rhizomatic Art in the sense that one has merged in the multiple<sup>xxi</sup>. Rhizomatic Art in the sense that the connection can be broken, cut in a certain place and, start again according to such or such relays, following other trajectories. Rhizomatic Art finally in the sense that it is a "forgetfulness or anti-memory"<sup>xxii</sup>. Rhizomatic Art then in the sense in which G. Deleuze and F. Guattari define the rhizome<sup>xxiii</sup>.

well, if "being rhizomorph, is to produce stalks and stems which look like roots, or, even better, interconnect among them by penetrating into the trunk even if this means to use them in new different foreign ways", force is to notice that *rhizomorphic aesthetics* produce topoï (places) of thought, of reflection, of experience which look like a base, even foundation, hiding its real essence which is not to be but ramifications. As pointed out by the poet J. P. Hebel: "whether it pleases us or not to admit that we are plants which, leaning on their roots, have to rise from the ground, to be able to prosper in the ether and carry their fruits". Then the artist cares to invite the surfer to invent a collective imaginative and creative

thought, which would know itself, rather than giving him satisfaction by "entertaining" him.

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More problematic than dogmatic the works of R. Mbarak invite the spectator to reconsider the stakes bound to the isolation, to the solitude, to the connectivity, to the perception of space and time, of oneself and the Other, the way we can experience it on the Internet. The artist seeks effectively the participation of the public. However, it is a question of revealing its meaning rather than creating the work, to take time to think also about the meaning of its existence *hic et nunc*, its place in the world, the other's in relation to ours, even ours in relation to the other's. Putting to a certain extent an end to what we could call the frenzy of click of the intertextuality eager surfer, the artist does not deal us out to click, to interact, to wear out the mouse, to misuse the trackball, but to read a text in which the message is nothing but an invitation to think, an invitation to voyage, an invitation to embark in the cybernetic ether of a rhizomatic art of which the unstable ramifications, the vague connections, just as thousands of diamond cutters keep shining in the firmament of the *rhizomorphic aesthetics*.

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<sup>ii</sup> A. Rimbaud, *Correspondance à Paul Memeny*, 15 mai 1871

<sup>iii</sup> refer to : <http://www.ricardombarak.com/connected/>

<sup>iv</sup> refer to : <http://www.ricardombarak.com/visitors/>

<sup>v</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, Seuil, Paris, Trad. Lafuma, 1962, VIII, "Divertissement", 136 (139), p. 77.

<sup>vi</sup> Forth Session, 2003.

<sup>vii</sup> Richard Heulsenbeck, *Idem*.

<sup>viii</sup> Richard Heulsenbeck, *Ibidem*.

<sup>ix</sup> J. Baudrillard, *La transparence du Mal : Essai sur les phénomènes extrêmes*, Galilée, Paris, 1990.

<sup>x</sup> P. Lévy, *L'intelligence collective*, Editions de la Découverte, Paris, 1994, p. 149.

<sup>xi</sup> "Noosphère ou enveloppe pensante de la Planète par opposition à la "Biosphère", enveloppe simplement vivante (et non pensante) de la terre", Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *L'activation de l'énergie*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1963, Vol. 7, note 1, p. 329.

<sup>xii</sup> On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog.

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<sup>xiii</sup> P. Virilio, in Entretiens réalisés par M. Stora, A propos du 21<sup>ème</sup> siècle, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1994, p. 85.

<sup>xiv</sup> P. Virilio, Idem., p. 86.

<sup>xv</sup> Comme l'écrivait Th. Gauthier

<sup>xvi</sup> Les Sosies, acte V, scène 4

<sup>xvii</sup> For more information about this subject, refer to E. Rogue, "De l'esthétique de l'implémentation à l'esthétique de la commutation et de l'interactivité dévoilante" (French), september 2003, in *Archee*, <http://archee.qc.ca/ar.php?page=imp&no=211>

<sup>xviii</sup> For more information about this issue refer to the thesis of E. Rogue, Wittgenstein et l'esthétique, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1995. refer to : <http://www.septentrion.com/theses/catalogue/SC154.html>

<sup>xix</sup> We can think about *La plissure du texte* of D. Ascott, but we also have to keep in mind that this art would have its filiations in the Kinetic Art, the Telematic Art and the Telecommunication Art in general. The reader can refer to the reading of the following article: E. Kac, "Aspects de l'esthétique communicationnelle", in A. Bureau, N. Magnan, Connexions : art, réseaux, média, Paris, ensba, Guide de l'étudiant en art, 2002.

<sup>xx</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, Milles plateaux, Paris, Edition de Minuit, 1980, p. 13.

<sup>xxi</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, Idem., p. 14.

<sup>xxii</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, Ibidem., p. 32.

<sup>xxiii</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, Ibidem., p. 31.