

The Artist in the 21st Century, Tate Gallery London 1997

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After nearly 20 years of working in Docklands with tenants and action groups, we've learned a lot about the impact of the global upon the local and the process of those changes - hence our name The Art of Change.

These days Agenda 21 is a central focus for our work - not just the big green issues of greenhouse gases, global warming etc. but *sustainability* in all its ramifications. It's about cultural diversity as well as biological diversity.

Before I show slides of the work of The Art of Change to show what I mean by that, I'd like to begin by reflecting on some of the ideas of Manuel Castells, in his book 'The Rise of the Network Society', especially in his discussion of the role of culture in such a society. Because this is, I believe, central to our debate today.

First I'm going to go back to about 700 BC when - it is believed - somewhere in Greece, the alphabet was invented. Whether or not this is true, the time and place, may be debatable. What is undeniable is that the creation of an alphabet system, and its spread through other languages and cultures, transformed those cultures radically and forever.

The shift from spoken tongue to written language, separating the speaker from the 'spoken', was crucial in the development of conceptual discourse and 'objectified' knowledge - creating the mental and material infrastructure for *cumulative, knowledge based communication*. This radically transformed social relations, creating a potent triad of *knowledge, power and organisation* in the desire to dominate nature and other humans by a literate elite. It also meant that one could communicate and organise over distance, to larger numbers of people.

There was a major problem of access - dependent upon who you were, where you were, and economically - all books for example were hand written and copied; massively expensive to acquire. And it took centuries, and the invention of the printing press, for literacy to become widespread.

Since then we have seen an increasing shift in communication from the gestalt experience (of face to face contact) to a received system dominated by the typographic mind and phonetic alphabet order. (described as the Gutenberg Galaxy)

While invaluable for rational discourse, this form of communication also created a social hierarchy between literate culture and the audio-visual system of symbols and perceptions, and - it is claimed - a rift between left brain and right brain functions.

To quote Castells:

"The price paid was to relegate the world of sounds and images to the backstage of the arts, dealing with the private domain of emotions and with the public world of liturgy.....Of course audio-visual culture took an historical revenge in the twentieth century, first with film and radio, then with television.....A technological transformation of similar historic dimensions (to that of the invention of the alphabet) is taking place... the formation of a network that..for the first time in history, integrates into the same system the written, oral, and audio-visual modalities of human communication. The human spirit unites its dimensions in a new interaction between the two sides of the brain, machines, and social contexts. For all the science fiction ideology and commercial hype surrounding the emergence of the so-called Information Superhighway, we can hardly underestimate its significance. The potential integration of text, images, and sounds in the same system, interacting from multiple points, in chosen time (real or delayed) along a global network, in conditions of open and affordable access, does fundamentally change the character of communication. And communication decisively shapes culture....as Postman writes¹, 'our metaphors create the content of our culture. Because culture is mediated and enacted through communication, cultures themselves, that is our historically produced systems of beliefs and codes, become fundamentally transformed, and will do more so over time, by the new technological system'...Its global reach, its integration of all communication media, and its potential interactivity is changing and will change forever our culture."

Now the kinds of systems described above are not yet fully in place, they are still in many respects crude, and their development will be uneven both geographically and in pace. (Let's get real, the majority of the worlds population do not even have telephones!)

There *is* a problem of access, as there was originally with literacy, but the equivalent of the printing press has already been invented, and networking literacy is rapidly increasing.

We're not living in McLuhan's 'Global Village', and it's unlikely that we will. It's more likely that we'll inhabit 'virtual customised cottages', globally produced but locally distributed. But even if Castells 'predictions' are only half true, then our culture will be transformed radically.

Anyone who knows anything about our work at The Art of Change, or our previous incarnation as the Docklands Poster Project, will know that I don't have a rosy view of a future dominated by the increasing globalisation of capital. Not to mention the numerous ecological time bombs ticking away, the unremitting toll of unnecessary deaths daily in what are euphemistically called "the developing nations" (which are the direct result of the economic actions of the G7 countries). Let's be clear our technologies are used as a means of domination and oppression in what has become ironically termed 'the post-colonial period'.

¹ Postman (1985: 15) as quoted by Castells.

But I'm not here to discuss that today - that negativity. I'm here to discuss how we as people, as artists and those concerned with the future of our culture and society, can act in our own small way - to use our skills, our imagination and technologies - to help construct alternative pathways to the future. When I talk about alternative, however, I'm not talking about the marginal - I mean engaging and helping transform the mainstream. Setting new agendas.

There *are* opportunities as society moves out of the fetters of industrialisation. It should no longer be necessary to occupy the narrow boxes of time and space organised and encultured around industrial production processes; to work from 9-5, to travel en-mass into large overcrowded conurbations on overloaded transport systems, where these tightly packed physical spaces leave enormous ecological footprints which are ultimately unsustainable.

Artists in the post-industrial culture can leave behind the constraints of Modernism - industrialisation's cultural child - dispense with the narrow boxes of style and hierarchies which squeezed out diversity, downgraded crafts and skills, pictorial narrative forms, anything non-western or related to popular culture (unless reprocessed and repackaged in a very particular way). We can of course retain what we perceive to be the useful things that emerged from Modernism.

To *some* extent this is already happening: our culture is being revitalised by not only by the forms, but the processes and concepts of other cultures. We are witnessing a beginning in the growth of diversity, new fusions of the craft based, hand made, and the post industrial technologies. Yet when we look at the cultures of the past, of the vision, craft and sheer achievement - in Italian Renaissance Churches, of ancient mosques for example - we so often feel like primitives. Why? Especially when we in the West have been raised on the illusion that we are on the pinnacle of an rapidly evolving civilisation. We've lost a lot along the way. We're primitives. But primitives in a new age. And rather than look back nostalgically, we can take the lessons that are still available to us and move into the future. *As Giotto was to the development of perspectival representation, so our generation (if we are fortunate) will be to representations of cyber-space and the network society.*

I also believe we'll see a huge rise in post-gallery art. I don't mean galleries as *spaces* will disappear, although what goes in them will I am sure diversify quite considerably, but the dominance of an institutionalised system with its focus on the market. These historically specific modes of transaction, meritocracy, and economy, will I believe become even more specialised and less significant to the mainstream of culture. Galleries like the Tate will of course remain important as a custodian of historically canonised material, but how it disseminates this material will change. *Its current reliance on the canonisation of artists by the art market will also*

have to change if it wishes to retain any relevance within in a rapidly changing contemporary field.

Post and extra-gallery work is already beginning to create new relationships between the local and the global, and - along with a new wave of cultural theorists like Castells - are beginning to recognise that new forms of communication will radically shape the development of our culture. And, for the first time (at least since industrialisation) , culture - as the symbolic processing of meaning and communication - is integral to a the creation of a new social and economic infrastructure.

To quote Castells again,

" There is a specially close linkage between culture and the productive forces in the informational mode of development... (and) modes of development shape the entire realm of social behaviour.. it follows that we should expect the emergence of historically new forms of social interaction, social control and social change"².

In short, culture will be the main arena where the forces which shape our culture will interact in conflict or collaboration. And we - as shapers of cultural forms - like it or not, will be implicated.

And now I will discuss the more modest ways in which *The Art of Change*, in practice, is attempting to address some of these issues....

(Begin slide show)

Finish on proposal for the International Institute of Art, Ecologies Cultures and Change

other issues that might be raised during slides or in following discussion:

Cyber-space

The 'page' metaphor used on many web sites is a transitional metaphor bridging the old (alphabetic order) and new network systems. What will be the new 'space' metaphor of cyberspace? Will it simply reproduce the post-Renaissance model of 'naturalistic' perspectival space. There will be some who go this route and this form of representation may well remain as one of the central visual metaphors. But cyber space has many other potentialities, some of which are only beginning to emerge, many of which are still unknown. For example, scale and time flows can be infinitely variable, there are possibilities for individual or group interactions, non-linear or 'open' narrative forms, combinations of media and many forms of customisation by the recipient.

² *ibid.* as note 1.

Consultation:

Digital processes can be used to engage people in developing proposals for public artwork. It can be an invaluable tool in the consultation process, allowing ideas to be presented 'virtually in situ' so that their impact upon the environment can be seen and considered holistically for discussion and debate. Especially important when working with those who have no experience of reading drawings and other forms of representation which require a certain knowledge of conventions, experience of how to interpret them as material form, and an imaginative leap of faith as to the possible impact the final work will have. It becomes even more crucial when, as we are increasingly, working on larger more holistic environmental schemes with other specialists, moving beyond the impact of a single discrete object. A digitally constructed model - as opposed to a physical construction - can be modified relatively quickly, and options can be presented almost simultaneously. One can also create 'walk through' presentations which have a distinct advantage over the 'birds eye view' which is inevitable in the standard scale model. All this makes the design process much more flexible and creates the possibility for much more synergy with the consultation process. It is also possible to use web-sites to create educational or other kinds of extensions to public artworks to develop wider audiences and new ways of relating to and thinking about public art. Research, ideas and meanings would be extended much further than the original artworks and be used to actively inspire and engender new work. These sites can in fact become public artworks in their own right.

