

MATRIX: Women Networking

ANNA COUEY

Arts Wire

Matrix is an ancient word that has many meanings. The archaic meaning of matrix is womb. In *Neuromancer*, William Gibson's book about cyberspace, matrix is used synonymously with computer network. Combining the ancient and modern meanings matrix can be seen as a net and a vessel—malleable, capable of containing, yet at the same time flexible—with the ability to grow and change in shape. In other words a matrix can be seen as a nurturing, flexible, and creative environment where change and growth are possible within the web of the matrix itself.

The matrix of computer networks now spans seven continents. Though still in a raw form and even today accessible to a minority of the world's population, the matrix portends a potential revolution in the structuring of our societies. Unlike previous forms of mass communication, computer networks provide both a public and participatory forum for communication—a potential paradigm shift from a few to many, to a many-to-many communications structure. The impact of such a construct to our conceptions of identity, culture, education, and community is as yet largely unknown; it will depend on the vision of those who use it, as Roy Ascott aptly noted (*Art + Telecommunication*, 1983):

“The creative use of networks makes them organisms. The work is never in a state of completion, how could it be so? Telematique is a decentralizing medium; its metaphor is that of a web or net in which there is no center, or hierarchy, no top nor bottom. It breaks the boundaries not only of the insular individual but of institutions, territories and time zones. To engage in telematic communication is to

be at once everyone and nowhere. In this it is subversive. It subverts the idea of authorship of the works of imagination. It replaces the bricks and mortar of institutions of culture and learning with an invisible college and a floating museum the reach of which is always expanding to include new possibilities of mind and new intimations of reality.”

Whether the matrix develops as Ascott envisions or simply recreates the values and practices of global acculturation may still be up for grabs, but not for long. Civil rights have not yet been clearly defined in legal terms, but law enforcement representatives, computer professionals, and civil libertarians are tussling over turf. Varying levels of access to technology across the world, and even within post-industrial countries, are serving to limit participation in the matrix. Interface and economics further enforce the use of this decentralized communications medium to those with a high level of technical skills and western literacy. In the U.S., budding commercialization and pure survivability bode ill for the ethic that “information wants to be free” and raise serious issues about the future development of the “information age.”

The level of technology governing the matrix of worldwide computer networks is determined not so much by the technological capabilities of discrete systems, but by connectivity, the standards of interoperability among diverse systems, and the bandwidth to connect them. The capability to read text across platforms (ASCII) has been standard for quite a long time in network terms; likewise graphics transmission standards also exist (GIF, TIFF, JPG), though are not yet ideal. Current technological challenges are the ability to seamlessly exchange images, video, and audio across platforms—without requiring users to have specialty software to de-

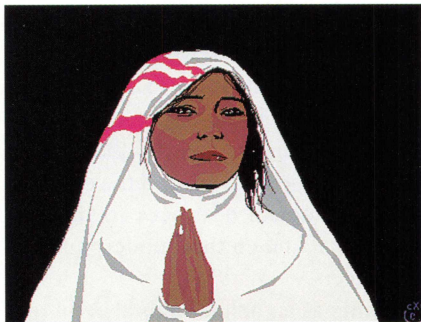
code transmissions. This work has taken two tracks—the high end requiring tremendous bandwidth and resources and the low end focusing on currently available bandwidth and working toward general availability. Matrix: Women Networking will demonstrate low-end developments, such as NAPLPS, a standard that allows for the online display of graphics files that take up very small amounts of disk space and are configurable downward to the end user's system. Similarly, in terms of connectivity, Matrix will highlight systems and projects that are readily available to anyone with a computer and modem—whether they be in rural or urban locations. In order to ensure the broadest access possible, most of the projects in Matrix are text-based, and employ interactivity as a means of directly engaging the public in the creative process. Our goal in focusing on the low end is to call attention to the technological disparities that exist in our society, and to raise questions about their impact. We hope to expand the concept of technological advances to include their social and cultural underpinnings and affects.

Matrix as an online cultural event utilizing computer networks will involve SIGGRAPH participants in interactive works of electronic literature, computer graphics, games using inscription and virtual performance. Matrix features works by women of differing cultures and artistic backgrounds who are working with computer networks as a means of creating collaborative works with artists and non-artists alike, to decentralize the creative process, to educate about and preserve their distinct cultures and communities, and to provide online access to population groups who would otherwise be the have-nots of the information age. The work of the participating artists is grounded in the inclusive art process and distribution. It involves community building, economic

development, and equitable and open participation in the evolution of the matrix. In these projects art is at once a mechanism of cultural exchange and a means of education and historication of cultural identities through technological communications media.

Like the network itself, the Matrix events are generally loosely defined more as potential rather than clearly defined events. The artists assume that once these ideas are seeded on the network they take on a life of their own, guided by all those on the network who wish to participate.

Four of the artists will be exploring text-based interactive online projects. For example, Lisa Cooley, a poet and activist for women's rights, freedom of expression, and government-funded art will be organizing and experimenting with the concept of doing an online poetry slam. Anna Couey, a telecommunications artist who works with computer networks as a means to engendering new cultural and social constructs, will



Hardware

- 2 PCs, each equipped with 40 Mbytes hard drive minimum, a 3.5" floppy drive, with modem & printer cables, VGA output capability, mouse and DOS operating system.
- 2 Hayes compatible 9600 baud modems
- 1 color/b&w laser printer
- 1 MAC, 40 Mbytes hard drive minimum, with modem and printer cables, and operating system.
- 3 Phone Lines.

Software

- NAPLPS software for MAC and PC
- Qmodem software for PCs
- Microphone software for MAC

be facilitating a virtual panel. Judy Malloy is a pop-conceptual artist whose recent works employ computer programming and computer networking systems to explore information, memory, and collaborative production. Her project will involve the collaborative creation of an encryption art work. Aida Mancillas is a book artist, painter and writer. Her projects involve art, technology, and multicultural education and community work. Mancillas, as a Chicana artist living in the border city of San Diego, is using computer networks as a way of allowing immigrants to tell each other their own stories.

The two other artists will be exploring graphics on the network. Lucia Grossberger Morales is an interactive computer artist who addresses multicultural and multilingual issues. Morales will be creating simple chained animations that people on the matrix can collaboratively work on and add to. Because of the nature of the matrix, the piece will never be finished and will always be available for people to add to the piece. Lorri Ann Two Bulls, an Oglala Sioux artist, lives in an isolated city in South Dakota. The community doesn't have enough people to support an artist, so Lorri creates images of her artwork and puts them on the network, which broadens her potential buying audiences, and brings native art to communities that wouldn't otherwise be exposed to it.

Contact

- Anna Couey, Arts Wire

Contributors

Lisa Cooley
The Literary Network
Council of Literary Magazines & Presses
154 Christopher St.
New York, NY 10014
tel: 212.741.9110
email: coollit@tmn.com

■ Lisa Cooley is a poet and an activist for women's rights, freedom of expression, and government funded art.

Anna Couey
Arts Wire
1077 Treat Ave.
San Francisco, CA 94110
tel: 415.826.6743
email: couey@well.sf.ca.us

■ Anna Couey is a telecommunications artist who works with computer networks as a medium for engendering new cultural and social constructs.

Judy Malloy
Box 2340, 2140 Shattuck
Berkeley, CA 94704
email: jmalloy@well.sf.ca.us

■ Judy Malloy is a pop-conceptual artist whose recent works employ computer programming and computer networking systems to explore information, memory, and collaborative production. Malloy is Associate Editor of Leonardo and Leonardo Electronic News.

Aida Mancillas
3505 - 28th St.
San Diego, CA 92104
tel: 619.291.0054
email: mancilla@tmn.com

■ Aida Mancillas (Chicana) is a book artist, painter and writer. Her projects involve art, technology, and multi-cultural education and community work.

Lucia Grossberger Morales
3007 Gera Dr.
Santa Cruz, CA 96062
tel: 408.476.3536
fax: 408.475.7205

■ Lucia Grossberger Morales (Latina) is an interactive computer artist who addresses issues of multiculturalism.

Lorri Ann Two Bulls (Oglala Sioux)
702 East Oakland
Rapid City, SD 57701
tel: (h) 605.343.9435; (w) 605.343.7171

■ Lorri Ann Two Bulls (Oglala Sioux) uses computer networks as a way of distributing her work from rural South Dakota. She works in NAPLPS and in traditional media to represent her culture and experience. Her NAPLPS graphics are distributed online as "shareart" and also serve as a marketing mechanism for prints.