

A Nourishing Network

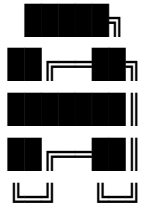
Defining Our Current Network Scenario

by Yoshinari Nishiki

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From "Telephone/Fax", through "Early Internet", to "Virtual Touring Software",
towards "a Slow-Speed Virtual-Physical Residency"



s soon as the COVID-19 pandemic started to severely kick off Europe in March 2020, many of the local cultural events switched to online. Like many others, it took me some time to get accustomed to proprietary online meeting environments such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet (all of which I only use on the Windows side of my dual-boot Linux-base ThinkPad [Jitsi is an exception]). While I enjoyed the vibe of “anyone could attend anything from anywhere in the world”, I felt the novelty of “at home” or “remoteness” had quickly disappeared. These days, I still do book interesting-looking online events, but can barely motivate myself to actually show up in front of the screen. Once “online” has been rendered almost completely flat by the surge of repetitive Zoom conferences and streaming events, perhaps it is time to look back some of the first virtualization efforts of art in history. In fact, “available from home” was nothing new.

In 1991, the Project InterCommunication Center (ICC), founded by the Japanese telecom giant NTT, hosted an event titled “The Museum Inside The Telephone Network” and invited almost 100 artists¹. It was an experiment to set up an invisible museum using telephone/Fax which were the most common back then and the fastest ways to transmit audiovisual data. In the early 90s, telephones were mostly available from home and the level of mobility only stretched as far as a cordless landline phone. However, they managed to offer five different “channels”: a Voice & Sound channel where prerecorded audio-based pieces could be listened to, a Live channel through which you could attend live performances and talks, an Interactive channel which involved interactions by physical telephone buttons, a Fax channel where you could print image-based pieces in black and white, and a Personal Computer channel that allowed you to view computer graphics-based pieces on the computer screen. Some of the artists found optimal uses of the media: e.g. for the Fax channel, the Japanese painter Tadanori Yokoo selected 1080 images from his extensive waterfall postcard picture collection and made them available to print at home². As a result, a cascade of images incessantly came out of the fax machine as though transforming into a waterfall itself.

Following this, there was another virtualization attempt by ICC called “on the Web - The Museum Inside The Network-” in 1995³. By this time, the Internet had become

partially available in some homes and pieces of artwork were accessible through websites from personal computers. Some of the art projects foresaw the age of social media: Kazuhiko Hachiya presented “Mega-Diary” where the links to diaries written by 100 people were gathered and updated on a daily basis⁴, Kouichirou Eto made the “Real Panopticon”, a web platform that worked on top of the exhibition website and allowed the viewers to observe what other visitors were currently looking at online⁵. I have always been thrilled by ambitious remarks made while speculating on the future of the Internet from 90s. One of the committee members of the project, theorist Toshiharu Itoh left us a quote that lets us reflect on where we are today⁶:

The technology of information communications is a “technology of consciousness” that belongs to the realm of the spirit and the senses more than to the realm of practicality and function. Bearing this in mind, I hope to immerse myself within the fabric of the network.

My question now is: What is our current state of consciousness and how should it be expressed through the networks available? As an example of a pandemic-ready practice, Norwegian visual artist/musician Lars Holdhus a.k.a TCF comes into my mind.

I met TCF physically for the first time in 2016 at TodaysArt, an audiovisual electronic art festival hosted in The Hague, the Netherlands. I got to know him through a mutual friend when we went to see him perform compositions based on algorithms used for cryptocurrency mining⁷. At that time, TCF was already well-established both in the fields of contemporary art and music, often touring around Europe and beyond. Then the talented musician, stopped making music a couple of years ago for some reason and relocated himself back to Norway where he is originally from. Not having heard anything of him for quite some time, TCF, after the COVID-19 pandemic, suddenly appeared on the Internet radio run by Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art. He said he had just picked 50kg of mushrooms last month (at the time of the interview)⁸.

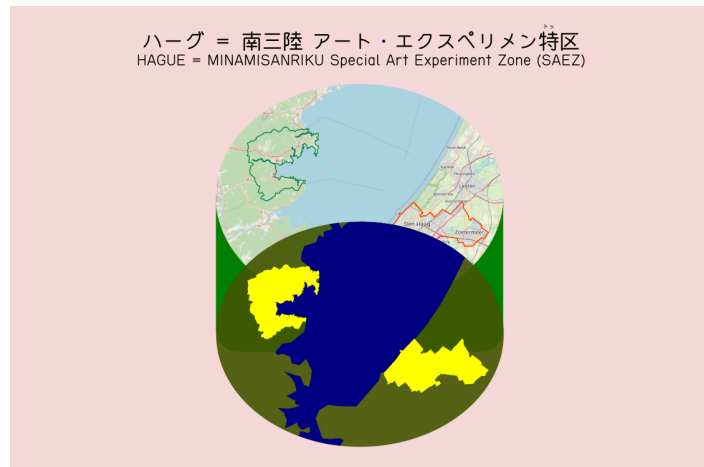
TCF said he is trying to localize his practice as much as possible, be self-sufficient, and lower his impact on the environment, while simultaneously keeping himself as an active agent in the field of contemporary art. TCF apparently does not tour any more and instead distributes a piece of software in which his 3D avatar learns how to walk/run through machine learning and the AI composes music on the fly.

TCF presented “Awne” at Unsound Festival hosted from Kraków, Poland in October 2020⁹:

Awne is a system where natural farming, permaculture and biomimicry meets music and art. In recent years TCF has worked on setting up a way to compose art and music that draws inspiration from biological processes, natural farming techniques, the twelve design principles of permaculture, our understanding of nature, microclimates and how to lower your impact on the environment... It will be built around the software (Unity + Machine Learning) that TCF is currently using in parts of his live performances.

It was live streamed from YouTube and was embedded in the festival website. Someone commented on the video: “I don’t exactly know exactly how my awareness of agricultural processes is increased if I watch plasticky looking 3D models of mushrooms bounce on other objects 😊. Nevertheless some of the animations and sounds were fun to look at / listen to.”¹⁰

I see our present network scenario to be somewhere between the following: reduced travel, an ever more powerful set of online tools, and environmental emergency (and urgency). Although Awne was a streaming event, I could still feel the presence of TCF, even in comparison to his live performance back in the day.



Based upon the above mentioned network components, I am currently in the process of setting up a “slow-speed” virtual-physical residency program between The Hague and Minamisanriku, a small municipality in Japan known to be one of the areas most affected by the 2011 Tsunami. It is an ethereal attempt to connect the two coastal regions beyond two vast oceans and one continent while setting “water management” as the common theme. “Virtual does not need to be fast” is the tag line and we are aiming to leave a “physical” trail in Minamisanriku through which the local residents can gradually shed the abominable image of a disaster-stricken area.

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1. <https://www.ntticc.or.jp/en/exhibitions/1991/intercommunication-91-the-museum-inside-the-telephone-network/>
 2. https://monoskop.org/File:InterCommunication_91_The_Museum_Inside_the_Telephone_Network_1991_hires.pdf
 3. https://www.ntticc.or.jp/en/feature/1995/The_Museum_Inside_The_Network/index-e.html
 4. <https://www.youtube.com/embed/DIWK2hbr3VQ?start=1144>
 5. <https://www.youtube.com/embed/DIWK2hbr3VQ?start=1481>
 6. https://www.ntticc.or.jp/en/feature/1995/The_Museum_Inside_The_Network/message/itoh-e.html

7. <https://soundcloud.com/liberationstechnologies/tcf-54-c6-05-1c-13-cc-72-e9-cc-dc-84-f2-a3-ff-cc-38-1e-94-0d-c0-50-5c-3e-e8>
8. <https://rum.macba.cat/en/sonia/sonia-312-lars-holdhustcf>
9. <https://www.unsound.pl/en/intermission/events/tcf-presents-awne>
10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQucsMHYVnI>

Yoshinari Nishiki

Born in an unacknowledged commuter town to Osaka, Nishiki had to invent his own ways to have fun and that ultimately shaped the foundation of his art practice. After irreversibly failing in the Japanese education system, Nishiki left the country for the UK and started to run art projects. Through a judgmental discount card scheme that actually worked on a main street of Liverpool, he met Graham Harwood who was to invite him to a masters program at Goldsmiths. Despite the lack of qualifications, Nishiki successfully made a legal train fare dodging system using racing pigeons and graduated with a merit. Nishiki relocated himself to Japan and began to be based in an international Augmented Reality laboratory in the middle of a mountain. He made Augmented Tree Climbing for the boy scouts and the research got published in a gaming conference. Since 2017, Nishiki has been based in Rotterdam and collaborated with researchers from TU Delft on artistic interventions into logistics systems. Projects pursued have included, among others, free transport by crowd, moving a mountain of agricultural produce with food couriers, and single-handedly flipping a 20-foot container. He is also known as Inari Nishiki.