

"New Media Public Sphere and Experience"

by Frazer Ward
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The following is an excerpt from "New Media Public Sphere and Experience"

[...]

Perhaps it is just this tension between individuality and the attenuation of experience in mass mediated contexts that gives rise to that anxiety over the absent social bond that I mentioned before, and the desire for collaborative or participatory art (and other) practices to fill that hole. Of course, the risk then is the weak and compensatory form of participation that Nicolas Bourriaud inadvertently seems to champion in Relational Aesthetics when he writes: "Through little services rendered, the artists fill in the cracks in the social bond."

Barbara Lattanzi addresses this anxiety and desire with deadpan irony in the (free) downloadable experimental software programs that comprise C-SPAN x 4 (2004). The Interrupting Annotator is a software tool, Lattanzi tells us, "for collaborative annotation of C-SPAN videos." C-SPAN Alphaville is "software that applies 1960's movie subtitles to public policy video viewing." "For movies in unfamiliar languages," writes Lattanzi, "you need subtitles. So too with C-SPAN, where projections of state power can often use the clarity of subtitles." Lattanzi's software allows the user to add subtitles from Alphaville, Godard's 1965 dystopian science fiction about a centrally-controlled society. C-SPAN Karaoke is software for "collaborative and convivial public policy video viewing." And In Lieu of Standing on Yer Head is software "for deflecting spin while watching C-SPAN videos" (basically, it turns the image upside down).

Collaboration, clarification, conviviality, deflection: Lattanzi's ludic turn in C-SPAN Karaoke suggests "public policy video viewing" as an opportunity for communal reinterpretation (even if it's on the order of yelling at the television—or anyway the computer screen), and perhaps Lattanzi suggests an opportunity for self-expression not altogether unlike the performances in Breitz's Queen, though lacking the fan love. Where Breitz's karaoke subjects perform themselves in and through the mass-mediated image, Lattanzi's imagined band of rogue C-SPAN watchers would largely obscure the video stream. I think it might be possible to see this work in some relation to the branch of conceptual performance that includes Tom Marioni drinking beer, but here conviviality follows upon the play with the media image, and may stand in for the counter- public sphere of those whose interests are excluded from representations of politics—something like Negt and Kluge's realm of recognition bound to experience without purchase on the public sphere. Still, if Lattanzi's software might worm its way into the web, the image of watching C-SPAN with your friends is both comical and pathetic, suggesting a sense of engagement adapted—or, curtailed—for a political arena more relentlessly mass-mediated than it was in the 1970s.

Intervening in software, at one end of a specifically contemporary experience, and in political imagery, at the other, Lattanzi's work might indicate that what you can do on the web is play with imagery, and also perhaps that you can't change anything but the image, as pleasurable as that is: but the play that Lattanzi makes available might serve as a prompt to critical interpretation, and/or even as a prompt to get off the computer.

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