

Artists trade imagery via video network

By Catherine Fox

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Something is in the air. It's not a bird, not a plane, not even pollen. It's art.

Until recently business has been the main beneficiary of telecommunications. Its images and information have dominated the airwaves. But now artists have begun to get involved, transmitting video images to kindred souls around the world.

Robert Adrian, a Canadian artist, is interested in the broader potential of this fledgling medium. He sees air space as a potential public space, and telecommunications as a new public art. Adrian has helped coordinate a telecommunications network for a major public exhibition.

Beginning Thursday and running through Sunday, telecommunications artist from all over the world will be transmitting images to the Venice, Italy, Biennale, one of the world's most renowned fine art expositions. Ben Davis -director of the electronics imagery department at the Atlanta College of Art, whom Adrian tapped to man the Atlanta "node" - and local artists Robert Edgar, Dutch Knotts, John Mabey and Daryl Vance are among more than 25 participants in the Biennale's first display of electronic imagery.

The I.P. Sharp Computer Text Network loaned time on its electronic mailbox so that artists in such far-flung locations as Australia, Japan, Wales and the United States could communicate with ease and speed. Messages were typed into computers and sent simultaneously all around the world, enabling the artists to work out the logistics of the Venice exhibition, and exchange ideas.

Here's the plan: Working out of an Art papers office equipped to the hilt courtesy of ACA, Still Current Design and Carnegie-Mellon, the Atlanta artists are sending out still images at several prearranged times. They transfer their images to videotape and send them to Venice via a show-scan television transceiver, a machine that changes the video image into audio impulses.

These impulses, which sound like crickets, travel over the telephone line to a transceiver in Venice

that translates it back into a video image that appears on four 6-by-8 monitors set up in a pavilion.

The system was put to the test early Wednesday morning when Davis and Edgar staged an improvisatory telecommunications performance. It started with a trans-Atlantic phone call from Jean Rene, a French artist working in Venice. The connection made, Davis trained the video camera on a construction site across Peachtree street from the Art papers office, and Edgar used his computer to overlay graphics on the video image that appeared on the monitor.



RICH ADDICKS/Staff
Ben Davis (right) and Robert Edgar send images to Venice from Art Papers office.

The first exchange revealed the limits of language in global communication. Edgar typed "Is the phone on the blink?"

The puzzled Frenchman asked Davis on the phone "Blink? Is that an international word?"

But the images got across. About halfway through the 45-minute transmission, Adrian got on the phone for a trans-Atlantic interview. In between blips and beeps, he reported that the images were appearing on the huge monitors. He described the pavilion as an old rope factory about a half-mile long. Computer films were playing on two monitors. A Macintosh computer and a Facsimile, used to make print-outs of the video images, were also set up in their section of the old factory.

When the artists transmit again, their work will deal with the daily news, the subject chosen as the general theme of the telecommunications exhibit. Edgar's work will focus on the Southern Baptist Convention. His is the only interactive piece: He expects the recipients to alter his image and send it back. Davis' collages will deal with the way the

news media collapses time, juxtaposing events that occur at different time periods as if they were simultaneous.

News is a typical theme among telecommunications artists, according to Davis. "Because this is a live medium, current events is primarily the information used. Subject matter also tends to be about the medium and its ramifications. When you are working globally, your images extend over political borders. Artists get involved with politics and economics of technology."

Access and control are key issues. Adrian wants the individual to have the same access to telecommunications as business. "The trouble is that when individuals do get access, they don't know what to say. We are trained to be consumers, not producers. If artists can learn to make art with it, maybe we can do other things."

For Davis, who first began experimenting in 1980, setting up this global network is more important than the actual presentation in Venice. Ever since he began working in telecommunications six years ago, he has especially enjoyed his experience as a means of having a dialogue, a visual conversation with other artists.

"It's a way to create your own art world. The exciting part is live interaction. It's like a visual phone call as if someone called up and said, "What's on your mind?" It makes artists into collaborators and conversants. It breaks down artistic ego."

Adrian is also more interested at this point in the artists' ability to conquer time and space than the images they produce. "This isn't really gallery art. It doesn't look like gallery art, and I don't think it should. It is still in a primitive state. We don't even have the language to define its aesthetics."

For both artists, the medium's message is cultural revolution. "The world is a verb now rather than a noun," Davis said. "What is the artist's place in a fast-moving world? Does it mean that you are famous for 15 minutes, like [artist Andy] Warhol said?" Artists, like the rest of society, are becoming part of "the moving [information] and storage business."

Adrian is equally bemused. "I have a feeling something astonishing is happening," Adrian said. "I don't know whether it's good or bad. But whether we like it or not, we've got it."