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LAB 1  
COMMUNICATION

## Artificial Nature

**The web is gradually re-building itself into a multi-dimensional environment. Cyberspace marries subjective human experience to the vast data of global information.**

**The Web is Indiana Jones and Armageddon, an action movie brimming with adventure high impact, and sensory bombardment. Like contemporary action films, the computer network enjoys a huge success because of its explosive dynamism. Users identify with non-linear action where a surprise awaits around every corner. Pictures, video, and animation whirl in a kaleidoscopic hypermedia circus. Click, bang, click bang: one screen after another explodes. But while action films reach back to linear narratives akin to Homeric story-telling, today's information tools have the look and feel of something very different. The earlier linear mode of perception is broken by random-access actions that deliver layers upon layers of information. The viewer becomes participant in the action and instantaneous telecommunication accelerates the mind's inherent speed. Soon enough, however, even the veteran net surfer grows weary of speed thrills and choppy surfaces. Serenity also has value, and a value difficult to sustain in high-energy environments. Information space eventually requires balance through greater depth, a sense of place, and the quiet dignity of painting and literature. Technological thrills will cloy until we can inject into the Internet some of the meditative profundity of Mahler's symphonic Adagios or the landscapes of Corot.**

**The arts bear witness to the power of nature to bring profound calm and solace amidst the terrors of life. Here nature is not only the material circumstances of life, nor simply a setting for biological evolution. Nature is a soughtafter refuge that soothes the soul through rich sensory**

**immersion, through pathways in the woods, and through a renewed awareness of the interconnectedness of all things. Modern people need to embed nature as psychic correlate within the human microcosm.**

**Until recently, the Net has been dominated by the left brain craving for quick information bits. Text and two-dimensional images provide a mosaic of wafer-thin media streams. The solitary ego sifts through networks, searches out relevant tidbits, and communicates across time zones, but all this transpires in a reduced, print-based environment. We have been receiving information as if we were alive only from the chin up. We need the bread of spatial visualization to fully digest information. The shape of information hardly acknowledges the fact that our primal understanding of things arrives with the baby's explorations of three-dimensional toys where the lessons of spilled milk and sandbox castles bring visceral insight.**

**Signs now point to the resurrection of this second artificial nature. The first signals were the efforts of VRML (Virtual Reality Modeling Language) in the mid 1990s. Then at the end of the 20th century, role-playing adventure games began appearing on the Net, including the 3D chat of ActiveWorlds and Blaxxun's Cybertown. Now the world's fourth-largest software company, Adobe has introduced its Atmosphere software where avatars (graphic representations of real-time participants) inhabit richly textured virtual worlds on the Net. Product display technologies, like Viewpoint and Eon Reality, poke new holes into flat web pages. The web is gradually rebuilding itself into a multi-dimensional environment. The spatial intuition of the right brain switches on as the user changes from a tiny cursor moving across an isolated desktop into a self-manifesting avatar available in real time for other users on the network. Being on the same web page**

**becomes a social event. (For many samples, see [cyberforum.artcenter.edu](http://cyberforum.artcenter.edu)) Cyberspace marries subjective human experience to the vast data of global information. The spatial imaging of data is, as Kant might put it, the a priori condition of the human perceptual apparatus. The way data appears – its aesthetic design and its conceptual architecture – is the job of the current generation.**

**Tools for teleconferencing in three dimensions are no longer the province of science-fiction writers who imagine cyberspace as multi dimensional. The emerging virtual space does not conform to photorealistic images of human shapes or Euclidean geometry. The new space embraces fantasy and surreal structures just as Frank Gehry's architecture puts novel computer-aided extrusions onto the streets of Los Angeles or Barcelona.**

The human interiors we project into cyberspace become reciprocal catalysts for seeing and feeling. Virtual space is more a dwelling than a handy tool. Our communication tools transform us, or rather we transform ourselves through the tools. The next phase of cyberspace might take into account the way traditional arts evoke nature and incorporate its values, especially the more holistic arts that combine several of the senses. Art forms like the Japanese tea ceremony have a special power to awaken the healing power of nature.

The tea ceremony is a technology designed to refurbish a tarnished nature. Artificial and formalized in every movement and gesture, the tea ceremony removes every excess in order to exalt the simple clarity of a rich here-and-now. Its highly stylized cultivation suggests a certain quality of experiential completion. Only through the artificial does one regain an open harmony with the nature that has been lost through daily drudgery. The daily struggle for survival pulls us away from experiencing pure, spontaneous nature. The tea ceremony is not just drinking tea but involves all the activities leading to it, all the utensils used in it, the entire surrounding atmosphere, the procedure, and, last of all and most important, the frame of mind or spirit which mysteriously grows out of the combination of all these factors.

The ritual drinking of tea uses spatial dimensions (you crawl into the hut through a tiny door) to invoke a psychic atmosphere. A distinct mood is created by sitting in a small semi-dark room with a low ceiling, irregularly constructed, by handling the tea bowl, which is crudely formed but eloquent with the personality of the maker, by sharing the silent admiration for flowers and seasonal objects, and by listening to the sound of boiling water in the iron kettle over a charcoal fire.

In the tea ceremony, you go indoors in order to regain your fresh perception for outdoors. You gather the usually goal-directed, sequential mind and allow it to absorb the simple harmony of a total environment. The spatial organization of things becomes crucial, intrinsic to the information as perceived. The pace of action aligns with the harmonious movements that synchronize everything and everyone into a rich presence. Artificiality creates the circumstances where perceptions are re-invigorated. After the tea ceremony, the guests emerge with their "doors of perception" open and clear.

**In summer 2001, a new virtual environment appeared on the Net as one of the first experiments in the beta version of Adobe Atmosphere. The environment was named "Michael's Zen Garden" and its purpose was to bring serenity and refreshment. The environment's creators, Australian members of the Digital Space Team, Dave and Merryn Rasmussen created their Zen garden, with a distinct purpose.**

**As they wrote in a personal message, "the lead developer of Adobe Atmosphere was really having a bad time of it with some bugs at the time we were creating the garden, so we dedicated it to him, for a place to relax after programming all day." And a visitor to the 3D world ([www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com)) will find at the entrance a description that is germane to all invocations of artificial nature: "This serene space in cyberspace is a way station to calm nerves and share a spiritual experience with friends. Sounds of bamboo windchimes and a long journey-path give the Zen garden guest a chance to reflect on one's life in cyberspace and realspace."**