

COUNTING ON THE ODDS

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THE 1979 ELECTRO WORKS EXHIBITION AND SYMPOSIUM: everyone involved has been invited to dinner at the George Eastman House prior to the opening. Mary Dougherty and I have flown in from Chicago to speak at the symposium and now here we are, at the steps of the Eastman House, being politely barred from entering by the doorman. —You're to join the other artists in that little house down that path, he says.

The woman entering the little house after us is on the Eastman House staff. She carries paperback copies of the *Electroworks* exhibition catalog and gives one to each of us, for which we sign our names in receipt. I open the catalog to the preface. It is by Mr. C. Peter McColough, Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of the Xerox Corporation—Xerox, the corporation which has sponsored the *Electroworks* exhibition; Xerox, the corporation which grosses over 8 billion dollars annually; Xerox, the corporation with over 100,000 employees; Xerox, the second largest company in the second largest industry in the United States—communications. And this is Mr. C. Peter McColough's introductory sentence: "Technology and art need not be strangers, nor at odds with one another."

Dinner is served shortly after. I can give no better description of it than to quote from the Society section of the *Rochester Times-Union*. I do so because the dinner is symbolic of our *position* as students and practitioners of the communications arts within our society:

Before Friday night's members' reception for the opening of the ELECTROWORKS show at George Eastman House on East Avenue, the 110 black-tie guests dined in the East Room on elaborate dishes orchestrated by Michael Campbell-Tinney, manager of the University Club. They began with mixed canapes, featuring whole grapes covered with whipped Roquefort cheese mixed with that very expensive sauterne (rich golden wine) Chateau d'Yquem, and homemade pates and stuffed pullet eggs. The first course was large prawns (shrimp) from Lorenzo Marques on the east coast of Africa. The prawns were steamed and split, and topped with tiny shrimp, diced fresh mushrooms and poached artichoke hearts. Then came the classical filet mignon steak, small roast potatoes and an elaborate eggplant dish prepared to resemble the bird of paradise flowers decorating the house (and the show poster by artist Dima Dar). Pieces of the top of the eggplant were cut and fanned out to resemble the bird's tail feathers, with

pieces of tomato inserted for color. The salad followed the main course, made of arugula, a leafy lettuce with a purple edge and, flown from Kentucky, cave limestone lettuce (grown in caves) at \$4 a head, and fresh asparagus. Dessert was strawberries from New Zealand, prepared as Escoffier did them for Queen Wilhelmina of The Netherlands—marinated in orange juice and Kirschwasser (a cherry liqueur base); they were flanked with fresh Kiwi fruit. The wines were a 1976 Cabernet and a 1976 Chenin Blanc. The waiters, of course, wore white tie and white gloves. NOTE: due to incorrect information given, the TIMES-UNION yesterday gave the name of the person who catered *the separate Eastman House dinner for the ELECTRO WORKS artists. She is NORRINE E. WALLER: the meal included crabmeat with artichokes, roast beef and spinach salad: PLO CLOWLY made the cream puffs for dessert.* (Emphasis mine.)

Mary and I return for seconds on the puffs.

—Our compliments to the chef, we say to a kitchen hand who has brought fresh coffee.

—Oh, she says, they'd be happy to know, and they're right in here. And the entire kitchen crew issues forth from the kitchen of the little house down the little path. The gist of their feelings is voiced by one: —It was an honor, she says, to cook for all of you. I think this separate dinner was shameful. I never go to see pictures, but I'm going into the museum to see your pictures tomorrow.

So, dinner being over, we are summoned to the Museum for the official opening of the *Electro works* exhibition. Inside, circulating under the rotunda, the Xerox executives and their wives in formals await the Entrance of the Artists, and we pass through the front door like a side show—suits and sweaters and boots and knee socks and Guatemalan wedding shirts and Afghani sheepskin vests and embroidery and mothmarked scarves and shoes from the People's Republic of China. The sexual energy between the executives and the female artists, and between the male artists and the executive wives is immediately thick. There is an immediate preemptive strike by artists on the Xerox Color Copier situated at the entrance to the exhibition. The prints are free, and we artists can't let such an opportunity to do our own work go unused. So this is the scene: the Xerox Color Copier is defended by a soldiery of artists against the bands of timid- but-inquiring executives and wives who approach the fort, circle it once or twice, and retreat. That scene is the one interaction within a larger scenario of mutual invisibility. There is no dialogue between the two factions, except for the signature bee held by two executive wives (a signature bee is when you walk up to anyone in nonformal dress—that's how you can tell an artist—with your *hardback* exhibition catalog with its original Color

Xerox print held out, and you ask —Which one are you? and then periodically compare totals). And the evening wears on. The executives and wives are polite but distant, and the artists are understandably miffed because of the separate-but-unequal dinner. It is all very *human*.

I tell you this story, as I said, because it is symbolic of our position as students and practitioners of the communications arts within our society. It contains the seeds of issues important to us. The issues can be identified by asking basic questions like: what does the statement “Technology and art need not be strangers, nor at odds with one another” actually mean; why was there so little dialogue between the artists and the technologists; what are the technologists’ dreams for the future? What I have to offer are not so much answers as observations—small sprouts from the seeds which allow only the most obvious features of the plants to be delineated.

I’ll start with the last question, because our dreams for the future determine how we live in the present and what we value and therefore remember of the past. What might be Mr. McColough’s dream for the future—a utopia in which he could operate as he dreamed? There are three indications from the *Electroworks* dinner:

1. An element of his dream for the future would be an extension of his ability to use the world as a resource to be exploited at will (the prawns, you remember, came from the east coast of Africa, the \$4 lettuce came from caves in Kentucky, the wine came from France, the strawberries from New Zealand, etc.). This development of the world by multi-national corporations is an increasingly accomplished fact. (Xerox operates in 113 countries.)
2. An element of his dream for the future would be the closed community. A community is a group of persons who share a belief in a body of knowledge, who have opinions about it, and who take mutual responsibility for the care of that body of knowledge. At the opening there were two communities: that of Art and that of Technology. Each operated as a closed circle: inside each circle there was dialogue; between the circles there was none. Each community made itself *immune* to the other. McColough in no way means to imply by his statement that technologists and *artists* need not be strangers. Rather, he means that technology *makes* the new imaging and sound options which artists *use* —and that relationship is mediated by money. That relationship is also necessarily minimal, because as an artist I belong to a home industry with pocket money only; Mr. McColough makes his products for paying industries. I am of use to him only when entering the front door of a museum at the nod of his summons, in order to

serve as Bearer of Culture, as the final course following the Kiwi fruit. He does not need artists. He’s doing just fine. He grossed 8 billion last year. His system of thought—technology—is dominant. The fact that the cumulative effects of his system of thought imperil the world he can discount with the standard hope that more technology will solve the problems of technology itself.

3. An element of his dream for the future would be a society characterized by the exclusion of those not accountable and controllable through the specialization of their roles. Those who are accountable wear their properly specialized uniforms: those who are *of course* attired in white tie serve those who are attired in black tie; those who are attired in black tie serve the Xerox Corporation. Those who wear dresses serve as decorations. So, too, do the artists’ works. The artists themselves cannot be counted on because they are not accountable to this particular social contract—and they are therefore excluded.

In rereading the paragraph I just wrote, I realized how naturally the term “counted on” came to mind when describing the technologists’ reasons for excluding artists. What might “counted on” mean in relation to technology? I want to tell you a brief story to preface this question: Several years ago, Mary and I lived next door to a man who was working terribly hard to implement his dream of living his life on a space station. He lived in Chicago and wanted to find peace away from earth. When asked if there might not be social problems to contend with on the space station—problems which might not be solvable by means of technology—he replied that, given the state of technology, he could choose to go off and live by himself on a one-person asteroid. This man’s dream cannot be smiled away—he is the head of a large department at a major university —and the attainment of his goal is possible with already-developed or soon-reachable technology. For him, utopia *starts* the morning after the technical problems have been solved. Technology itself is the vehicle that permits him to project his beliefs into the future. We must ask ourselves if this man straps his beliefs onto the back of technology as if it were a passive recipient, or if the language of technology itself predetermines what this man can believe.

I mentioned the term “counted on” and how easily it came to mind when dealing with the attitudes of technologists. The language of technology is the language of calculative reason and, as we know, every language, verbal or visual, organizes the mind to view the world through its terms. The world view of calculative reason is simply that the world is *countable*. With such a view, the world

(including human beings) is no longer a living entity, but, rather shrinks to a pool of *resources* committed in advance to operations of *development* (in California I used to pick up unemployment checks at the Office of Human Resources Development). The thinking required by technology is objective thought, a thinking built upon an understanding of the world as a system of objects subject to counting. Objective thought de-personalizes and de-contextualizes, and the dinner at *Electro works* was served and eaten in its image. It is this mode of thought which is now dominant: it runs this city, this country, this world. It endangers the planet, not only in its most obvious danger—annihilation—but in the more pervasive and daily-lived form of purposeful self-assertion in everything, and in the danger that the mode of relationship to the world which is natural to technology—a relationship characterized by objectivity and calculable thought, a thinking that must *count on* things and people—will become the only way to think. The world as a living entity has been reduced to information the only value of which is that it can be categorized, proved, and manipulated. The domination of the language of technology represents the end of our ability to understand the world and our place in it; the language of technology destroys the *dialogue* between different species, between different languages, between different visions.

Dialogue, means, literally, “speaking across” —across the necessary gulf between You and Me, the gulf which always remains but can be bridged by a recognition and acceptance of the other by the other. But for technology, the other is depersonalized, an “it.” It is sent down a small path to a small house, to a separate and smaller dinner. Dialogue is based in a relationship between participants of equal importance; dialogue is based in a relationship of mutual hearing; dialogue is based in a relationship in which the differing contexts of the participants are seen and allowed; dialogue is based in a relationship where plain speaking is permissible; dialogue is based in a relationship in which there is a social contract of mutual obligation. In a sentence, dialogue is based on the integrity of the individual.

Which brings me to education—in that the education of the individual is a concern at the core of every Western social vision, from Plato to More to Rabelais to Castiglione to Rousseau to Marx to Skinner to Goodman to *Xerox* (Xerox is the second largest publisher of educational materials in the world). Let me now tell you one other eating story: this one takes place in the cafeteria at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton University. The Institute is comprised of thinkers who are brought there from around the world. A friend of ours, who was invited to be a resident at the Institute, observed that the Fellows eat only with those in their own disciplines—and not only with

members of their own disciplines, but with members of their own specialized interest within their specialized disciplines. Why? Chiefly because the language of each discipline has become so specialized that others outside the discipline have difficulty understanding its issues, and therefore dialogue is not attempted.

Art education cannot claim exemption—it, too, is a series of little tables in the cafeteria. At each table sit the filmmakers, or the video artists, or the artists, or the dancers or the writers or the photographers. And due to both tradition and the pressures of economics on the institutions of art education, the ideal definition of an artist as a person who can utilize any means of communication according to the needs of the ideas needing expression, is never realized. Instead, we define ourselves as specialists, the specialization of language and education and vision continues, dialogue stops, and the artist, who should be situated as the *bridge between the calculative and the meditative modes of thought*—who should be the person professionally concerned with that dialogue—falls headlong into his or her own specialized, fragmented, disconnected, irresponsible, and little world.

And therefore, given free use of a Xerox Color Copier at the opening of *Electro works*, we artists make more prints, and the possibilities of dialogue, of mutual education, are lost until the next time—and there seem to be increasingly fewer next times. We cannot afford to let such opportunities pass. We no longer have the luxury of speaking to ourselves only, of ignoring either the executives or the chefs. We are artists, and the task of an artist is dialogue with the world.

This means starting where we are and with what we have. It means making art out of our own lives—even, who knows, out of issues not currently of concern to the art world. That world has so compromised itself by allegiances to money and to fashion that it no longer is in a position to give us much guidance. Dialogue does not sell very well because it tends to change; a style *does* sell very well because it can be counted on.” Art, as opposed to style, is an ongoing activity faced with changing forms of experience and the need to discover meanings. This does not mean discovering a meaning once and then repeating the look of that meaning forever. It means waking up in the morning and questioning the conclusion reached the night before. To do this we must become questionable to ourselves. If we do not become questionable to ourselves, all the possible ways we can understand and change ourselves and the world are limited by whatever sex we happen to be, whatever skin color we happen to have, whatever religious or ethnic tradition we happen to have inherited, and whatever historical circumstances we happen to be living

in. We look to our *events* and turn them into *experiences* by thinking and translating and transforming that thinking into forms—and for some, that is a definition of art.

In this spirit, what could we as artists have done at the *Electroworks* opening? Perhaps a lot, but perhaps as little as to ask a single question of a Xerox wife —And what do you do? and in the answer's surprised, slight delay, to have offered the gifts of worth and expectation. That's all: nothing overt or splashy, no sour grapes, no placards, no demonstrations, no tirades against appropriation, segregation, control, countability, Kiwis versus creampuffs— just a single question and the willingness to engage in the ensuing dialogue into which, perhaps, the events of the evening could be introduced on a one-to-one basis. Not much to speak of, certainly, but perhaps all that could be effective. As it happened, nothing did happen, except remaining at odds with one another, yet again, and *that* could have been counted on.

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