

“A STEP BACKWARDS FOR A LEAP FORWARD”

The OFF LABEL Festival / Digital Art Weeks 2011

Victoria BC, Canada, November 2011

THE OFF LABEL

The OFF Label Festival is the brainchild of the Digital Arts International Network group headed by the American/Swiss Artist and Curator Arthur Clay working in collaboration with host institutes around the world. Wary of the present New Media movement in the arts and the academic environment upon which many „New Media Art Festivals“ and „Science and Art“ fusion events depend, the DAW moved this year’s Off Label festival into more diverse and eclectic waters and targeted a more general audience by focusing on analogue arts, mixed-media art forms, and by introducing the element of spirituality into the context of DAW’s already well practiced „Art and Technology in Cultural context“ approach.

The 2011 festival took place at the end of October in Victoria BC on Vancouver Island, which possesses a wealth of diversity in terms of the multicultural in its most contemporary form. On the one hand, the island has an active community of First Nations peoples and on the other it boasts having Canada’s oldest China Town. These two cultural axis along with the artistic community of the festival’s host Open Space Art Society combined with the wide range of „off label“ and „off beat“ venues such as the fusion-styled I Kyu Restaurant, The Ministry of Casual Living, a Duncan based Sweat Lodge and others, aided greatly in re-defining how multi-culturality can function and fuse synergistically, and at the same time increase the diversity of a participants at such types of „arts events“.



Fig. 1. Performance with Ted Hiebert and Jackson Two Bears (Photo credit© DAW 2011)

As a result of this synergy, the Off Label Festival can be deemed as culturally and socially innovative. For example, with the invitation to the Wayward school an emphasis was placed on self reliance and inter-disciplinary exploration within the context of overlapping communities. And, moreover, the festival embraced not only innovative New Media art forms but the re-emergence of non-digital arts. This combination led to new, hybrid arts never experienced before.

Internationally renowned artists and researchers travelled from diverse countries to gather together, discuss issues, connect (or disconnect), and to celebrate being off beat, or as the festival defines it, to celebrate “acting out off label”. The various festival venues included the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society and the Visual Arts Department of the University of Victoria, G++ Media Gallery, and, as the festival founding guest, the Computer Science Department of the ETH Zurich, From the fine arts side, venues included such professionally run spaces as the Open Space Art Society and the Audian Gallery of the University of Victoria. Multi-cultural interests included The Ministry of Casual Living, the I Kyu Restaurant located in downtown China Town and a Furst Nations sweat lodge situated up the coast from Victoria in Duncan BC run by Fred Roland.

Scrolling down the extensive Off Label web site at www.digitalartweeks.ethz.ch one can decipher DAW’s version of the meaning of taking an “off label” approach as a festival, in the arts, in the sciences, and even culturally as the festival makes the effort to link the apparent disparity between the arts and sciences with the spiritual:

“The OFF LABEL festival is an exploration of experimental thinking, seen through the triple lenses of art, technology and spirituality. The term off label is derived from the practice (or malpractice) in which pharmaceuticals are prescribed for illicit use, breaking with approved standards of medication in order to engage new -if sometimes contested- possibilities for treatment. The festival takes up the term “off label” and its variations, both literal and allegorical, to examine the possibilities, politics and meanings in the technologically enabled, artistically motivated and ideologically-invested world, we know live in.”



Fig. 2. Keynote speakers Arthur and Marilouise Kroeker (Photo credit© DAW 2011)

UNCONFERENCES

The Off Label Festival featured two “Un-Conferences”, both of which were implemented to embrace the academic community and the culture of discussion and debate , and at the same time “decouple” the academic from the institutional and expand its embrace into the realm of the quotidian by holding talks, demonstrations and workshops in such diverse spaces as a Chinese restaurant, an exhibition hall, and a sweat lodge, etc.

The group of keynote speakers, all established experts and innovators in the fields of technology, culture, and spirituality were invited to share their insights regarding “off label” in theory and practice in the context of the festival. A new type of “book end” conference structure was implemented to begin and to conclude the festival. These talks, selected for the creative ways the speakers re-imagine the past, the present and the future, challenged the boundaries of critical thinking and provided insights determining alternative methods for engaging the technological present and more. Content presented during the opening bookend edition of the un-conference was taken in by participants, developed further in discussion, experienced a new during workshops, and seen from diverse perspective in application at the exhibitions and performances.

At the closing book-end edition of the un-conference, keynote speakers along with festival guests and participants summed up the festival’s approach in an intense „before and after“ manner by metaphorically stacking the triple lenses of art, technology and spirituality to refocus on all three through cultural connectivity.



Fig. 3. Work presentation from Ubermorgen.com (Photo credit© DAW 2011)

Invited Key Note Speakers included:

Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, The Pacific Centre for Technology and Culture, University of Victoria

Art Clay, Artist, Curator, & DAW Director

Dr. Richard King, Professor for Chinese Studies, University of Victoria

Doug Jarvis, Artist and Co-Curator Off Label Festival

Marie-France Bojanowski, Artist & Research Resident at the Computer Science Dept, ETH Zurich

Ubermorgen.com, renowned artist group based Zurich Switzerland

ART & TECHNOLOGY

Art

Two exhibitions were offered during the festival. The “Art of a Placebo” exhibition was presented in Open Space Art Society and showed a wide range of artworks -mostly technology based- from Canada, the USA, Germany, Switzerland, Poland, and Austria, The second exhibition, entitled “Emotional

Landscaping”, was presented at the Audian Gallery at the University of Victoria BC and included works from the USA, Switzerland, Canada, Italy, and Germany.



Fig. 4. “This is Something For Me” by Curious Minds (Photo credit© DAW 2011)

Several of the projects shown in the Emotional Landscaping exhibition fell into the category of non-digital arts and several others into the category of digital arts. Here however, works were selected with regard to the artist’s relationship to nature and how this relationship is manifested in the artworks. So rather than having a festival that completely focus on technology, its innovations, and the so called “marriage” of science and art, or how society is being affected by technology. Emerson’s concept of the “Transparent Eyeball” was applied and reiterated for the sake of contemporary cultural orientation. In Emmerson’s essay Nature (1836), he writes:

"[In nature] [w]e return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, -- no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, -- my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite spaces, -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."

The following is a quotation of the curatorial statement behind the intelligence of the exhibition:

"Through poetic license, the peaks and troughs of an earthquake or a volcanic eruption might be considered as emotional states of the earth. In "Emotional Landscaping" -an exhibition conceived for diverse "landscapes" projects- a metaphor is drawn between the emotional states of humans and those of the habitat they inhabit. This exhibition proposes to inspire a transcendental experience in the vein of Emerson when the boundaries of what the artists experienced while making the artwork and what the viewer experiences while viewing it resolve into a kind of mutual transparency. Emerson believed that to truly appreciate art -- as to truly appreciate nature -- one must not only look at it and admire it, but one must also be able to feel it taking over the senses."

The works involving digital technologies presented in the Emotional Landscaping exhibition were the “Hidden Rooms” project by Marie-France Bojanowski (CHE), and “The Fire” by Kilo (POL). The analogue works presented were two works by the international artists group Curious Minds and by the photographer Monika Rut. The first work by Curious Minds was a performative book entitled “This is

Something for Me” and the second a pocket game titled “Where’s the F’n Road?”. The works by Rut consisted of two large-scale photographic works of volcanic landscape portraits.



Fig. 5. Selected Photography of Monika Rut (Photo credit © DAW 2011)

The work “This is Something for Me” is demanding for it is a performative work which is read in the same manner which a piece of music is played. The reader is a „performer“ and the method in which the book is to be read is the performer’s „interpretation“ of it. For those who perform the work, it becomes self-evident that we are the landscapes we live in and that there is an emotional tie between both, which, as stated by the authors of the book, “[the emotional tie] is at every moment there, when we are asleep or when we are awake, when the weather changes or when it does not, when earthquakes shake us, or when volcanoes find eruption.”

It was the early photographers such as Walker Evans who were inspired by Emerson and applied his concept of transparency to the art of making photography. On this account, it was appropriate to include some photographic work in the exhibition. Selected were several photographic works of Monika Rut, which were presented both in the Emotional Landscaping and the Art of a Placebo exhibitions, In these an emotional connection between the foreground objects and their background provide the essential subject of each work.

It is this intra-subjectivity that stimulates what is intrinsically shared between both and made apparent to the viewer as they begin to interpret each work. A type of dialectic takes place in the observation process of the viewer, which not only takes place between foreground and background content, but also between humanity and nature. This is because the photographic works in question here are portrait photos taken in the setting of a natural landscape, where thesis and antithesis, or human kind and nature synthesis together into a higher truth or transcendent connectivity. In this manner, apparent dichotomies dissolve and transform into a synergistic experience or harmonic state like the one Emerson hoped to define and describe.

Technology

Several of the projects that were presented in the “Art of Placebo” and the „Emotional Landscaping“ exhibitions focused on technology, particularly research technologies not yet available on the commercial market were: Several of these were discovered in “The T.R.I.P.” by Monica Studer and

Christoph van den Berg (CHE), „PrayStation“ by Justin Love (CAN), The “Hidden Rooms” project by Marie-France Bojanowski (CHE), “The Fire” by Kilu (POL/USA), “I Shall Please” by Manifest.AR (USA), a “Second Life Party Event” featuring Liz Solo (CAN) bridging the divides between virtual environments and participants in self-constructed costumes, and many other demonstrations that were part of the G++ Interactive Media Gallery (CAN) launch. Works by Steve Bates (CAN) „Radio Silents“ and Jake Moore (CAN) „Valentin“ were also exhibited as part of the Art of Placebo exhibition.



Fig 8. Liz Solo during the Second-Life Party (Photo Credit ©Rob Lovitt 2011)

The T.R.I.P.” deals with basic questions concerning drug-induced consciousness expansion experiences elicited in computers. Parameters of the program sequence speed up or slow down the normal frequencies, combining and rhythmically synchronizing certain RGB values (colour values: red, green, blue) with HSL values (hue, saturation, and lightness), which in turn have a hypnotic effect in terms of the graphic CPUs (central processing unit of the computer). However by using Pharmacograms™ programs, such programs generated “trances” not only in human users but also, and especially, in the computers themselves.

In „PrayStation“, the user puts on a medical grade brainwave (EEG) interface and selects one of the eight most popular religions to pray to using a “prayer dial”. The system will analyze a user’s brainwaves for activity and when a state of prayer or meditation is detected, software agents are born into a digital canvas and assigned an image as an aesthetic ideal based on the religion that is currently selected. Once born agents move throughout the canvas and transform pixels they occupy to be closer to the pixels in their aesthetic ideal. Over time a painterly collage will emerge based on the cumulative prayers of the systems users.

The “Hidden Rooms” project explores the concept of “cerebral scenography” in the context of an immersive panoramic visual experience involving neuro-feedback interaction. This involved the use of a wearable immersive system (designed at the ETH Zurich) EEG sensors and an electronic compass to observe and navigate within panorama images.

“The Fire” is a light-sculpture that reveals the alchemical product of a laser and a fog apparatus, which when combined makes it possible to dissect the fog’s turbulences, producing transient slices resembling the flames of a fire.

“I Shall Please” is a live museum project in which founding members of ManifestAR, Will Pappenheimer and John Craig Freeman filled prescriptions of the experimental augmented reality drug Virta- Flaneurazine AR. The “artists gone doctors” screened and admitted “patients” into the VF AR clinical trial program, who received instructions on what to expect and how to create screenshots using their mobile devices of their experience and relay those results back to the clinic for display.



Fig. Nr. 6. „The T.R.I.P“ by Studer & van der Berg (Photo Credit © DAW 2011)



Fig. 7. Screen shot from “I Shall Please” by ManifestAR (Photo Credit © Will Pappenheimer 2011)

New Media Art grew in connection with and in parallel to the emergence of multimedia and its manifestation in the Internet. Digital Poetry, for example, explored the possibilities of text in the Internet, and as the Internet grew into a full-fledged multimedia communication vehicle, new forms of



Fig. 8. Valentin by Jake Moore (Photo Credit © DAW 2011)

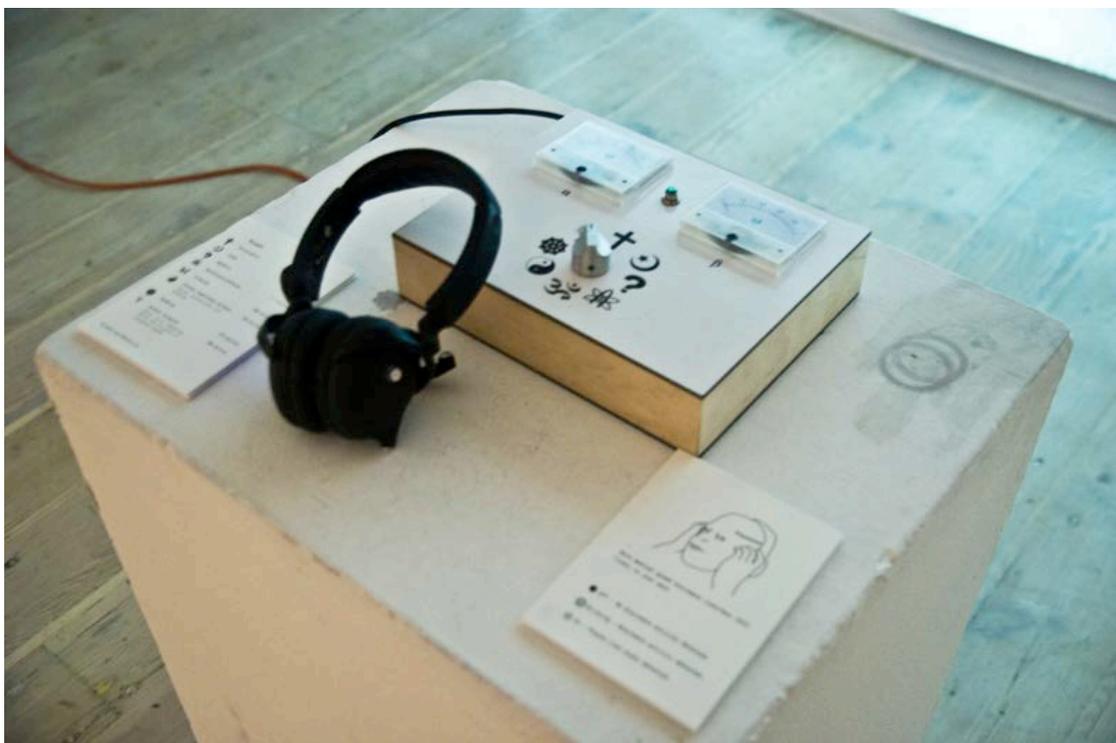


Fig. 9. PrayStation by Justin Love (Photo Credit © DAW 2011)

digital arts developed using all the possibilities provided. It is possible that for many who use modern social networking tools in combination with mobile devices, such people can transcend such connections into actually being where they are not in supra-natural form. Therefore, the concept of Emerson's "Transparent Eyeball" is applicable to digital art -- specifically to artworks using any form of network-based communication means-- as a metaphor for describing the phenomena of feeling "connected."

So by approaching certain aspects of the festival using the concept of creating transparency in the sense of Emerson's transparent eyeball and not limiting the concept of communication to the purely visual, but by expanding it to modern communication in general and how this creates a certain transparency, it was possible to unify the many different facets of the festival, whether it was analogue or digital art, scientific versus artistic research, or the diversity of cultures that were represented and which simultaneously inhabit the same space with a completely different cultural understanding of it.



Fig. 9. An Event during the K(no)w Picnic series (Photo Credit © DAW 2011)

SPIRITUALITY

It is clear to most that spirituality is an integral aspect of religious experience, and that spiritual practices are of interest to those who are seeking what might be termed "a more comprehensive self". Common spiritual practices include meditation, prayer and contemplation, and such practices are intended to develop a person's inner life. Through such practices one is able to experience connectedness with a larger reality, with other individuals, with nature, with the cosmos, and with the realm of the divine. What is perhaps less clear is that today a much broader view of spirituality has been made possible, partly on the account of the decline in participation in religious institutions and more largely by the growth of secularism.

This broadening has allowed the Off Label Festival to approach the topic of spirituality as an integral part of contemporary experience in general and of the festival in particular. However, the task of creating actual events involving spirituality and applicable to a festival audience remained difficult. Although a strong sense of community was created at the Un-Conference events and a culture of sharing knowledge and skills was established at the K(no)w Picnic workshop series, the question still remained as to whether the desired spiritual condition for a deeper comprehension of self was actually

achieved. But it was certain that a deeper feeling of spiritual and inter-personal connectedness was manifested simply through the amalgamation of eclectic venues.

Festival curators discovered that by taking an off label approach dichotomies are automatically generated: malpractice can only be defined in direct relationship to established practice. Such dichotomies abound in off label issues: Real-world versus virtual self, or the virtuality of digital drugs consumed and the reality of analogue detoxification led to a solution on how to “reintroduce” the value of the non-electronic by including the more traditional “unplugged” arts and even certain forms of therapies. Trying to give equal attention to both sides of the dichotomy “plugged in and unplugged” yielded to a wider purview available for programming choices.



Fig. 10. Fred Roland Lecture / Performance (Photo Credit © DAW 2011)

So, with the movement toward a “technologically enabled world” there is a naturally antithetical movement toward imagining a “technologically disabled world”. For example, on the one hand a large portion of the works in the Art of Placebo exhibition dealt with the idea of digital drugs or electronic placebos and their effects both on humans and on the other hand the event “A Ceremony ; An Excursion”, among others, concentrated on detoxification from electronic media use.

Given the effects of digital drugs, addiction to gaming, loss of real self through electronic usurpation in Second Life and through social media platforms, processes and methods of analogue detoxification were found important interesting and ways to include them in the festival programme were sought out. Emerson, for example, believed that the best method to achieve spiritual enlightenment was to simply take a walk in the woods.

So called, “electronic detoxification” events would not only involve unplugging but involved a return spiritual encounters with greater nature. However, the festival curators knew -as Emerson did- that most people do not experience nature in the way he did. In fact, Emerson says, "few adult persons can see nature." The example he gives is that when a woodcutter goes into the forest, he just sees timber and not the unity of Universal Being. However, it seems that Emerson was less concerned with having others experiencing the unity of all things than with being able to live simply in harmony with that unity. So the Off Label Festival events that were programmed included moments during which participants were challenged to simply be themselves and to accept taking action that is based on trusting deeper impulses.

One of the main things that the Off Label festival pursued was the integration of First Nations culture into the general programme of the festival. Invitations to First Nations artists such as Fred Roland and Peter Morin came naturally and as an integral part of the festival's effort to spin the "off label" concept into perpetual variation and it seemed to be an most obvious way to get participants to open themselves to nature. Although each represent different cultural backgrounds, Fred Roland and Peter Morin share a vision of inclusion based on the traditional values of their cultures, which they both pursue in the work they do on the artistic and cultural levels. These values were extended to others during the sweat lodge event "A Ceremony; An Excursion".



Fig. 12. „This Blanket Represents the Land“, Peter Morin (Photo Credit © DAW2011)

The sweat lodge experience was ideal for demonstrating the need for resurrecting a technologically-disabled world through the process of "unplugging". It should be pointed out that not only accessories like watches, rings, et cetera, were removed, but a general tendency to "unplug" or to leave all electronic devices behind was initiated so the participants were able to experience more fully a natural communion in the context of the sweat lodge. In the words of the keeper of the sweat lodge, Fred Roland:

"The sweat lodge is a re-enactment of a return to our mother womb-like experience, which is the cleaning of the body, mind and spirit. People remove all accessories like watches, rings, and glasses, [and unplug electronic devices] to remember that we came into this world without material possessions. It is a time of sharing our problems with other people and praying for the needs of our innermost self. Then after the rounds we re-enter creation reborn with New Hope and a changed attitude. The sweat lodge has been amongst our people long before the churches were built on our Reserves. This is where our people went to pray and come in contact with a Higher Power or Creator."

Those who speak of spirituality outside of religion often define themselves as "spiritual but not religious" and they generally believe in the existence of different "spiritual paths," while emphasizing the importance of finding one's own individual path toward spiritual resolution and consolidation. It is exactly this multifarious approach that the Off Label Festival attempted to demonstrate while stressing the advantages provided by multiculturalism and transdisciplinarity. Participants may not have experienced the whole nature of a mystical vision such as Emerson describes, but the festival organisers hoped that participants were made more aware of what sort of experience it is wise for individuals to pursue.

CONCLUSION

All in all, the Off Label Festival was an invitation and a challenge for presenters and practitioners to pose answers to such questions as: What happens to inquiries concerning experiences involving art, technology and spirituality when we begin to peel off taxological labels or interpretations? What results when we begin to remix the variegated themes and codes of the remix itself? Who are we when living or attempting to live in parallel or synchronically the imaginary versions of the story as things might otherwise proceed?



Fig. 11. Sweat Lodge Fires, Duncan BC. (Photo Credit © DAW2011)

When one reviews the list of events itemized in the colour-coded brochure provided by the Curious Minds Art Multiple “Nine Levels between Heaven and Earth,” the festival seemed to be divided into separate unique events as framed within the parameters of a festival for art, science and culture. However, the events were inter-connected not only through the ideology of the Off Label approach, but were further unified by the curatorial concept of what the DAW Network came to refer to as the “performative surround,” that is the concept of participatory synergetic inclusion and, hence, transcendence.

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Art Clay
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Doug Jarvis
Peter Morin
Justin Love (G++ Interactive Media Gallery)
Yifan Wang
The Wayward school

Off Label Hosts:

Open Space Arts Society
Centre for Studies in Religion and Society
Visual Arts Department, University of Victoria
I Kyu Restaurant,
The Ministry of Casual Living,
Sweat Lodge, Duncan BC