Paris Réseau, Paris Network

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**Abstract:** Since 1994 the experimental art project, Paris-Réseau, has been a "(net)work in progress". Texts, images and sounds gathered in various ways before, during and after a performance by the group Art-Réseaux at the Paris Video Library form different layers in the Paris-Réseau Archives, a hypermedia database. Paris-Réseau assembles photographs, sound samples, videos and texts to form a composite image of the city, combining digitised traces of physical places and people with information garnered from individual and collective memory.

Paris-Réseau comprises at least five projects. It began very simply, gradually expanding to encompass different time frames and a very large number of paths throughout the city. Then in an effort to compose all this disparate information into a coherent whole, I began zooming in on selected itineraries. Here I will just sketch out the first phases of this project which have already been described at greater length in an article published in Leonardo. (O’Rourke 1996)

**Keywords:** Archives; Art; Interactive art; Itineraries; Memory maps; Palimpsest

1. Paris-Réseau at the Paris Video Library

1.1 A Virtual Map of Paris

It was originally planned as a five-day event at the Video Library in Paris, a virtual map of the city drawn by moving bodies in real time. It was to show the itineraries of Art-Réseaux group members as they left the Video Library in the centre of Paris (where the event was taking place) to go home toward the periphery. Each “reporter” would take a video or still camera to chart his or her trip; when he/she arrived home he/she would digitise and send the pictures by modem to the “ground crew” at the Video Library who would then integrate them into an interactive animation.
1.2 Paris as a Network: Memory Maps

Before the event even took place this original idea was expanded. Elaborating on the network theme, I asked each member of Art-Réseaux (="Art Networks") to describe the places in Paris where he or she used to live as well as his/her most frequent destinations at the time. If that person had any old snapshots of these places, these would serve as a departure point. The itineraries would then be photographed – interpreted – by someone else. The soundtrack would consist of interviews with the protagonists, as they pored over the “photographer’s” pictures.

The approach was somewhat anthropological. How do we remember these everyday itineraries from the past? How does someone else go about photographing them? The resulting map also reflects our social histories. It was Flaubert who suggested this approach to me: in the “Sentimental Education” he represented his characters’ social mobility, their ascensions or declines, by having them move from one neighbourhood in Paris to another.

2. Paris Réseau goes On-Line

Organising the archives after the Video Library experience, I saw ways of enlarging the project’s scope.

In order to transcend the physical boundaries of Paris and the limits of documentary, I used the all-text format offered on Arts Wire in late 1994 to post descriptions of our itineraries, asking members of the American network if they had seen one of us in Paris. They were invited to search their memories (if they had been to Paris) or to imagine fictive encounters. On the whole there was very little feedback. However network artist Judy Malloy, always a pioneer, did happen to sight Isabelle in a car sporting a dashboard web server on the German autobahn some time in the twenty-first century.

At the same time, several itineraries culled from literary sources were photographed and added to the archives: descriptions by Restif de la Bretonne, Nerval, Breton, Aragon, Duchamp, Hemingway, Queneau, Perec and others allowed us to imagine meetings in the same space between Parisian pedestrians living several centuries apart.

At this point I had accumulated an enormous mass of data: about 150 itineraries, most of which I had photographed myself. The presentation of this information however was too simplistic, too predictable. When you clicked on an itinerary, you invariably viewed a slide show evoking the atmosphere of each place as it looks today. The comments each person made were often rather disappointing, due partly to technical constraints. Since I was digitising the sound directly using the computer microphone (a Macintosh LC), the statements had to be very short. People tended to repeat what they had already written. When I realised they needed time to elaborate

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3The members at that time were Christophe Le François, Marie-Dominique Wicker, Isabelle Millet, Gilbertho Frado, Michel Suret-Canale and myself.