

Direct! From the stars! Art in yourrrrr TV.....

BY BILL BARTLETT/GELI JOHNSTON

The first thing everyone asks is, "Where's Port Washington?" The next question is probably, "How can you run a satellite project from a place like that?" DIRECT MEDIA ASSOCIATION, a newly formed network for the creative development of telecommunications, finds North Pender Island eminently suitable for its purpose. It is "strategically" located between Victoria and Vancouver, B.C., with only a few miles more to Seattle, Washington. A small car ferry will get you there in less than an hour or you can communicate by mail, phone and, before too long, by direct satellite video. In fact, operating in slight isolation, Direct is all the more motivated to develop telecommunications.

Much of the telecommunications technology of the past twenty years was developed precisely to alleviate the remoteness of far-flung communities. Over

long distances, we rely on telecommunications systems. Telephone is relatively inexpensive. Most of the telephone systems in North America utilize micro-wave, communications satellites and transoceanic cables for all but local calls.

When I chose to move to a small, rural island, I had a strong desire to keep in touch with the rest of the world. Back-to-the-land simplicity Pender is not; but there is a distinct lack of intellectual stimulus in the local politics and retirement mentality. Big cities have a lot to offer. I've lived in Los Angeles, New York and Tokyo and I can appreciate their creative vitality all the more from this smaller community. Through effectively used telecommunications and occasional visits, I can maintain a practical balance between the two environments.

"Creative Telecommunications" - what does that mean? To me it means doing

something about the present intolerable situation in which the government and the telecommunications industry have the final say in what we see, hear, plug into and have access to in all media and advanced technology. We can develop a network, a collaboration of interested, creative persons, working together within the controlling and developing organizations. We can take part in designing for the future. Creative development of telecommunications involves access to technology, to hard- and software, communications systems and TV. It involves us in our own written, visual and oral history as well as future.

I've been involved with the art support systems in Canada for the past seven years - in art galleries, museums, alternative spaces and with performing arts organizations and touring exhibitions. I'm a sculptor, designer and performance artist. Speaking as both

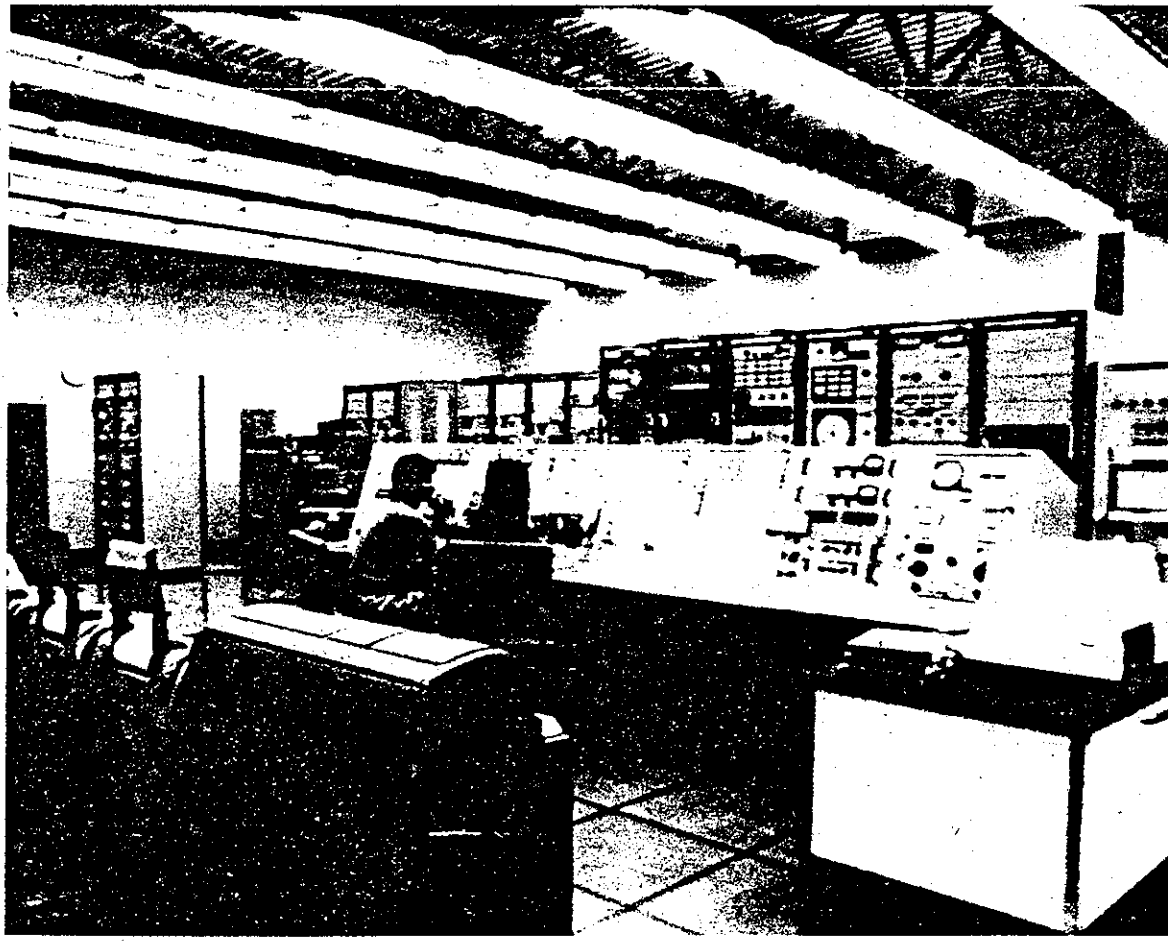


Photo: Telelobe.

AN ART STUDIO?

artist and arts administrator, art support systems, as I have encountered them, are too costly to maintain and alarmingly out of date.

In the future we're going to have to consolidate our resources, cut duplication of services and find effective alternatives. This will mean reducing the number of galleries, centralizing collections and totally rethinking the attitudes to supporting the creative process. By unloading much of the bulk and bureaucracy future art support systems should be able to give support where it is most needed - to the creative process.

Now is the time to collaborate with the outside world. Most other professions have at least two things in common with the arts: creativity and an elitist attitude which cuts off communication regarding their work. Whether it goes as far as a feeling of having

"Art support systems...too costly to maintain and alarmingly out of date"

a monopoly on the creative process, the attitude is counter-productive if not downright destructive. I hear artists saying, "You just don't understand." I wonder if they like to keep it that way? If not, why isn't there more effort at self-promotion among them? Is there more excitement, stimulation and enthusiasm at Pender Island's Farmers' Institute meetings than there is in our creative community of "artists"?

The collaboration I'm referring to is an attempt to break down the barriers, pool our creative expression and take a new look at what we in the arts call "the establishment" or "non-artistic world". Out in the general community there exist exciting people, most of whom could contribute a great deal of creativity and original thought, if only they didn't feel alienated. This group includes scientists, technicians, educators, consultants, communications people and so on and on. Through their professions, they have the access we speak of longingly. They have access to and understanding of technology, electronic gadgetry, and all the media and communications techniques which are available to those who make, develop and use them. One issue to keep in mind about all this technology; it was developed originally for one-of-a-kind purposes. To bring the manufacturing and implementation costs down, more uses must be developed. I'm convinced that anyone with a good idea can gain access to whatever they need. Just recently, I was told of a satellite for sale - very cheap - which could be placed by the purchaser anywhere around the earth. There are probably twenty others like it. For their part, most persons in the telecommunications field readily admit that the field is wide open for development and that they welcome the creative contributions of our community as a way of putting this technology to better use.

The potential for creative usage of telecommunications is limitless. Direct Media is conducting research into projects that have taken place using telecommunications technology and is developing programming and implementation. Anything is possible; the process includes brainstorming, reading and research, contact with others, collaboration and idea exchange and various experimental projects. For example, the recent Open Space Gallery slow-scan video experimentation using teleconferencing techniques assisted in the development of non-verbal, visual language communications.

One of the hardest phenomena to deal with in two-way direct satellite interactive broadcasting is the time factor or how best to

utilize the instantaneous quality to its fullest potential. Slowscan video provides an inexpensive medium for developing techniques to cope with reactions to a transmitted video image. Each technology has its unique potential. The object is to find the most appropriate applications for media such as two-way satellite, slowscan, video and film.

Now picture yourself in the not too distant future. You could be sitting at home, in your studio or in a local community centre viewing an exhibition via satellite. Should you want copies of the work, merely request them through the computerized interactive responding device and out of the facsimile transmission equipment you receive whatever copies you require. For three dimensional work, holographic images are created. If you want to know more about the exhibition, two-way video interactive transmissions have made possible a question period. To find out what's happening at the museum or our "centre" (in global terms) punch in a request to the computer and the printout gives you a complete listing. Reference material required for educational purposes can be obtained by the same method. Suppose you don't like what is being shown; talk back during the open session, this application of technology makes available to you any exhibition in the world on demand.

You'll use the same technique for performance, independent video production and even first run movies. Performing arts production offer a multitude of possibilities. When we have a choice of 60-75 TV channels in our own community and thousands from all over the globe, the world is literally in our home...or studio, or community centre. Live performances will still be popular where they are practical, but they are very costly, specialized and exclusive form of production and distribution. Even today, with ticket prices over \$15 and \$20, not many can take advantage of what is currently available. In most cases, too, the potential for interaction is almost as limited in live performances as it is with TV. Two-way transmissions will permit post-performance audience discussion with the performer.

Telecommunications and religion go hand in glove nowadays. In April, 1979, the World Symposium on Humanity will hold its conference simultaneously in Toronto, Los Angeles and London, England. The conference will include inter-active video via satellite, computer network and a media cathedral. This conference is big business; broadcasting for 24 hours a day, eight days in a row, with big name attractions. Whether this is overkill remains to be seen, but it's going to happen and its producers confidently predict success.

Telecommunications has also been utilized in the field of education for some time. Major education projects include satellite experiments in Alaska, Hawaii, the Appalachian Region, India, Northern Canada, and B.C. and in the Stanford University, Brazil, Rocky Mountain Federation and Pacific Island Region Peaceat experiments. From all this experimentation, several interesting conclusions have been reached. It's not the technology itself that is causing the problem, it's the information transmitted. Also, the unique services provided by the technology must be made known much more widely. Furthermore, we need to evaluate our successes and failures if they are really going to aid future development. Ironically, these education projects have not been as instructive to their producers as one might have hoped. The audience in these developing regions are extremely passive and results are hard to calculate. There is much in these experiments which is relevant to the arts support system and the arts community could gain important insights by studying their examples.

Other direct, two-way interactive video broadcast projects could open up our field of vision. Multi-culturalism and cross-cultural exchanges are possible over long distances and vast areas. Program exchanges between countries avoid the high cost of transportation and at the same time reach a much broader audience. Teleconferencing techniques using holographic or image transmissions, again cut down the distance and isolation and introduce new stimulation and exposure.

Once more, the evaluation process will be very important. By offering opportunity for much needed comment and constructive criticism, interactive telecommunications can play an important role in improving our art forms. More true alternatives in the display and performance of the creative process and its product will broaden public awareness and appreciation of the art forms. A discerning audience is always more constructive than an uninformed one. A more supportive audience may take the state of the arts further, making value judgments more credible. This evaluation process also coincides with the development of the technology. The demystification of media and telecommunications, as in the case of children, will increase understanding and perpetuate development through broader acceptance. More use brings down costs; access is possible by still more people. The process is self-nourishing.

"...gaining access is only a matter of attitude, approach..."

The technology exists now. Gaining access is only a matter of attitude, approach, willingness to exchange ideas and presentation of the proposals. It won't be achieved with the attitude that the artist is entitled to access on a silver platter. It's that elitist attitude that breaks down communications by alienating potential allies. On the other hand, if you approach negotiations expecting a fight, you'll probably get one.

Fear and skepticism that telecommunications are creating a sterile and dehumanised society also play a part in holding back development. Technology is only a tool. It is only as evil as its masters and their applications of it. There are as many constructive users as destructive. In a competitive society, the use that gives the greatest return - good or bad - for the investment, determines future development. What is needed is a new set of rewards to offset any possible disadvantages, creative development and positive implementation.

Telecommunications and technology are relevant to artists and the art support system. But a word of caution; art support systems up to now have supported the squandering of precious natural, human and monetary resources. Technology and communications have shared in this practise, with mixed results. Someone has to take the responsibility for ensuring that expenditures for any given system will produce the desired development rather than creating short term jobs which will eventually mean unemployed artists, curators, and communications technicians as well as superfluous facilities, equipment and industries.

The offering and acceptance of technology should not take place in blind haste, but rather in an atmosphere of knowledge, understanding, responsibility and commitment. The creative people in our society become likely candidates for such a watchful role, using perception and intuition as a sounding board for the rest of society.

Bill Bartlett is coordinator for the Direct Media Association, RR#1, Port Washington, B.C. V0N 2T0. Direct Media is an association for communications and creative development of telecommunications. Membership in the Association is available. Membership includes receiving a periodic newsletter outlining past and future related projects, selected reading lists, contracts for equipment and service access and related writings. Bill Bartlett is coordinator of the Open Space Gallery Collaboratory project SAT-TEL-COMP (Satellite/Telephone-Computer) October 30 to December 10, 1978. Participation and enquiries are invited. In the Spring of 1979, several direct two-way interactive broadcasts via satellite are planned. Participation is invited.