At A Distance is an invaluable collection of such powerful expressions of collective identity. It explores networked art and activist projects mainly from the 1970s and 1980s, arguing that this was a period in which communications technologies and media forms became deeply implicated in both activism and art. What unites the various case studies, suggest the editors, is their shared concerns with “communication, activism, art, collaboration, performativity, and, of course, distance” (p. 3). At A Distance presents an archive of Net prehistory, tracing genealogies and strategies of contemporary activist and artistic practices — an approach which has also usefully been applied by Tofts et al (2003) and, in different ways, by Wardrop-Fruin and Montfort (2003). This collection seeks to open up connections between current and emerging practices in networked art and activism, and their precursors, antecedents, ancestors. In the study of Internet activism, as in the study of Net art, the continuities are as important and as interesting as the discontinuities; the uses and applications of
existing traditions, strategies and tactics are as significant as their transformations in the Net environment.

Chandler and Neumark have assembled twenty essays divided into three sections. In the first part, five authors approach the book’s themes from theoretical and/or historical perspectives. Owen Smith, for example, traces forty years of Fluxus, identifying amidst the dizzying proliferation of artists and projects involved, a “general Fluxus attitude [which] seeks to open up the possibilities of life and art as a consequence of direct participation, a partnership process that emphasizes the power of play, the affirmation of engagement, and the value of creation without predetermined, definitive characteristics or goals” (127). This could stand equally as a fine description of much of the most notable Net activist work (such as the various activities of the Yes Men), where it can be suggested that the real goal is to encourage audiences to participate, to produce their own media.

These first five essays both complement and set the scene for the second and largest section, which offers ten chapters by and about specific projects and practitioners. This archival section features a broad range of texts — memoirs, interviews, email exchanges — and is the richest and most rewarding section of the book, juxtaposing accounts of mail art, community TV, mini-FM local radio and experimental music from around the globe. This material is a genuinely useful and important contribution, counterpointing contemporary currents in Net study, where an emerging emphasis is on what Henry Jenkins (2003) has labelled “participatory culture”. In the work of scholars such as Chris Atton (2004) and Axel Bruns (2005), the exploration of networks of audiences reconfiguring themselves as networks of producers is emphasised. At A Distance offers resources to both strengthen and test some of the central ideas in this area (such as the contemporary specificity of networked practice).

Jesse Drew, for example, offers an account of alternative TV and video networks, tracing connections from Paper Tiger TV and the Deep Dish network to the Indymedia network. Drew stresses the importance of recognising the social and cultural dimensions to the success of these earlier networks. On the one hand, Deep Dish depended on the proliferation of camcorders to enable community groups to contribute reports on ongoing projects or campaigns or issues. In this, there’s a technological analogue to the role of the Net in making possible Indymedia. On the other hand, Drew emphasises the need to interrogate structures and organisations in networks, to go beyond the usual easy assumption that networks are necessarily positive. “Networks”, writes Drew, “must be scrutinized for their social impact, and not just their technical achievement” (p. 222).

In another noteworthy contribution, Don Joyce, a long-term member of Negativland, describes the development of the group’s collage aesthetic, mixing live and recorded music and found sound with the voices of live phone-in callers, in ways that chime with the work of a range of more recent artists, from Scanner’s live mixing of found conversations in real time to the craze for mash-ups (as done so well in 2 Many DJs’ collision of Nirvana with Destiny’s Child, or Wax Audio’s creation of George W. Bush ‘performing’ John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’). Joyce proposes Negativland as an early indicator of the now increasingly visible participatory culture, of which the Net is but the most celebrated vehicle. He writes: “We hope we are an amusing example, encouraging listeners to make out of their world what they would like it to be, to break it down and put it back together to their own taste, to participate in a shared culture...” (188).

The final section presents five chapters focussing on the metaphors and physical practices of networks and networking. An especially nice feature is the inclusion of a timeline at the end of the book, which maps chronological descriptions of important projects and participants against the various chapters in which they appear. At A Distance is a book which aims to open things up rather than nail them down, and in this it’s largely successful. I did find the terms “art” and “activism” became untenably synonymous at times, but at the same time the relentless linkage of activism and art was also a welcome counterpoint to the primarily sober social science approach to networked activism that comprises much of the published work in this field at present. It is a timely and important contribution.

References


**Graham Meikle is the author of** *Future Active: Media Activism and the Internet* (Routledge, 2002).

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