

Douglas Davis at Lehman College

Davis's assault on the depersonalized one-way nature of mass media moved into cyberspace with "Breaking Out (of the Virtual Closet)," an Internet performance using hypertext to achieve the global interactivity long predicted in his work by creating The World's First Collaborative Sentence. The series of events and texts began Nov. 10th at the Lehman College Art Gallery with "Discours Amoureux," in which Davis explored electronic chat line eroticism by exchanging seductive messages over the Internet with Russian artist Nathalie Novarina at Galerie St. Gervais, Geneva.

In the central performance of the "Breaking Out" meta-narrative on Dec. 8th, spectators watched a videotape of Davis running into the gallery as the artist himself ran in and logged on. Davis's work since the 1970s has tried to "break out" of conceptual categories separating art from life, virtual reality from "real" reality, media from experience. An exhibit curated by Susan Hoeltzel provided an overview from the Fluxus-inspired performances of the late 1960s, through video work in the 1970s attacking the desensualized nature of TV by encouraging viewers to touch the screen, to the first satellite art performance, broadcast from the Houston Astrodome in 1976. The Lehman performance deconstructed the traditional notion of performance as sacral event: for Davis, the performance becomes the ephemeral trace, and the documentation, now infinitely rich through layers of hypertext accretion, is the central "event" now globally available on Internet.

"Breaking Out" culminated by opening "The World's First (and probably longest) Collaborative Sentence," an interactive, open-ended sentence on the WorldWide Web that anyone can add to. It begins with a picture of Novarina's face and her opening words from the "Discours": "I DID NOT FEEL SEPARATED I FELT VERY CLOSE EVEN THOUGH WE WERE THOUSANDS OF MILES APART AND I WAS SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE HERE . . ." By the time Davis closed the sentence at midnight, Feb. 15th, and reopened it with a P.S., additions had been made from around the globe in several languages. The only restriction is that participants may not add a period; many have added hypertext files and images.

The "Breaking Out" home page contains numerous access points to video, sound, texts and photos from the exhibition, and essays by Davis, David Ross, Director, Whitney Museum of American Art, and Michael Govan, Director, Dia Art Center. To retrieve it and read or add to the sentence, you need access to the Web through a browser such as Mosaic or Netscape. The address (U.R.L.) is <http://math240.lehman.cuny.edu>.

-- Dan Rubey