RESONANCE:

LOOKING FOR MR. MCLUHAN

Suddenly it's upon us: The centennial of the birth of Marshall McLuhan. A new exhibition, **Resonance: Looking for Mr. McLuhan**, has been designed to showcase the timelessness of Mr. McLuhan's ideas on the advancement of media. For anyone trying to make sense of the current media environment, McLuhan's books and lectures, which date back to the 1960s, remain both contemporary and pertinent sources. Profusely productive, he wrote about all forms of media, language, and speech: the telephone, typewriter, movies, radio, television, computer, photograph, and the written word.

Among the plethora of themes, the future of media and his insight that one day tourism would be "a big industry" were paramount.

He foresaw the technological future, having the prescience, as early as 1964, to see that sooner or later we would "transfer our consciousness to the computer world." "Resonance" is inspired by McLuhan's progressive ideas, which anticipated that massive international and social changes would be brought about by the burgeoning mass media. Yet even McLuhan did not truly anticipate the enormity of the changes to come; he could not foresee the global consequences of these changes, the hybridization of diverse media, instantaneous networking, and the transition from print and linear culture to a tactile and non-linear, electronic culture.

Many scholars in the 1960s thought McLuhan's theories to be a form of "scientific mysticism," insinuating he had found them by peering into a crystal ball. As an inconspicuous professor of English literature at the University of Toronto and a fervent Catholic, he became a media celebrity—even *Playboy* magazine interviewed him—by hypothesizing that: "The laws of media interact;" "News, far more than art, is an artifact;" "A computer technology is replacing a cottage economy;" and "The book is about to cease being a vehicle of self-expression."

In the publishing fields and elsewhere, he was mocked by fellow academics who used the term *McLuhanesque* to belittle ideas that were unclear or inexplicable. He always responded by saying: "New ideas and new attitudes are disruptive."

Since the invention of the telegraph and telephone in the nineteenth century and television and computers a century later, technological development has changed the way society communicates. Neither reviewers such as Robert K. Merton, James Morrow, and Michel Bliss, who called McLuhan the "false prophet," nor McLuhan's academic colleagues, were paying significant attention to either the explosive, new media environment or the rapid development of the new social phenomenon that we now know as technological and global society. As Douglas Copland says: "Marshall was forced to study the terra incognita of [his] post-industrial brainscape."

One obstacle for academicians (and general audiences as well) was McLuhan's language, which was sparkling, yet dense with ideas. He broke academic rules that, since the invention of the printing press, have demanded that people think and express themselves in a linear fashion. In *Digital McLuhan*, Paul Levinson says McLuhan was "against the expectation of traditional scholarship...he was writing as if he was contributing to the Web."

A consummate "Renaissance man" whose friends included the English writer and poet, Wyndham Lewis, McLuhan had an immense admiration for James Joyce, devoting several years to his work; he also wrote books and articles on Ezra Pound, and wrote his doctoral dissertation on the work of sixteenth century English poet and playwright Thomas Nashe.

McLuhan's wide-ranging knowledge was uncommon in a period when specialization was still a residue of modernity and comments on the culture industry reflected Marxist thought via the Frankfurt School.

McLuhan, on the other hand, was convinced that reorganization of "our intellectual and emotional lives" would be the product of the ordinary flow of news and images from every quarter of the globe.

His ideas about hybridization of culture and the effects of media cross-fertilization, among others, form the background to a set of ideas that became the basis of much contemporary theoretical thought. His writings on the language of media, its non-neutrality, and especially his ideas about the nature of a message were fundamental to theories of deconstruction which have defined the post-modern era. About 20 years ago, Jean Baudrillard reflected on McLuhan—who was dismissed by Baudrillard's colleagues as a "technological determinist"—saying: "There is the technological optimism of Marshall McLuhan: For him the electronic media inaugurated a generalized planetary communication and should conduct us by the mental effect alone of new technologies."

"Resonance: Looking for Mr. McLuhan" is a selection of works from the 1960s to the present which raises subtle questions about the mediation and proliferation of images and our digital present, including the transition from analog to digital culture. As subtext, this selection examines post-WWII society. The work of Marcel Odenbach, *Das große Fenster*, shows Adolf Hitler through a panoramic view from the mountains of Germany. In spite of the romantic landscape, his video suggests the end of the epoch of the Third Reich, which brought us to the post-war era when several communications technologies developed for the military were adapted for commercial and domestic use. The work acquires further resonance as we mark the 50th anniversary of the building of the Berlin wall whose construction began in August 1961, when McLuhan was working on *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (published in 1962), in which he extended his prior insights into the way media alters society and the shift from print culture to visual and oral transmission. This book contains the first accurate description of the transformative effects of major media, especially upon language, speech, grammar, print, and books. Odenbach's work, installed in the gallery window, is analogous to television, which for many years was called a "window on the world."

Works by Elena del Rivero, Ignacio Uriarte, Terry Berkowitz, Magdalena Pederin, and Monika Fleischmann & Wolfgang Strauss address these subjects from different viewpoints and contribute to a complex and nuanced dialog with McLuhan's ideas. Both Uriarte and del Rivero work with the subject of typewriters. In the series, *Mended Flying Letters*, del Rivero deals with the "creative flight' (inspired in Deleuze's writings),

the impossibility of communication, and the passage of time. Using large pieces of paper, she types words with red, black, and blue ribbons on typewriters she has collected throughout the years. When the letters coalesce into words, they convey nothing; syllables and consonants layered on top of each other become an ocean of dark patterns where any message is impossible to decipher.

In Uriarte's video *The Story of the Typewriter*, actor Michael Winslow imitates with his voice varied sounds from 62 typewriters from different periods, countries, and technologies. Tracing a journey through almost 100 years of history, he pays homage to the typewriter's sound and its former omnipresence in the office. The last typewriter factory closed last spring in India. McLuhan noted that the introduction of typewriters not only brought the novelty of the justified left-hand margin, but also was responsible for the presence of women in offices for the first time. In his view, the typewriter allowed the poet, much in the manner of a jazz musician, to have the "experience of performance." Pederin's *The Name is an Anagram* endlessly multiplies signs in a rhythmically blinking repetition of audio-visual space, projected from a DVD player. The viewer is literally drenched in a typographic bath. Using a digital frame like an electronic book, Berkowitz has created a new piece, *Book Without End,* which attempts to bridge the space between what we now know as books and what we will (or will not) know in the future.

Will future formats create a new literacy? McLuhan was sure that sooner or later mass society would see print and linear culture replaced by tactile and electronic culture. Somewhat along the same lines, Fleischmann & Strauss's *Semantic Map* creates an unconventional digital archive for the interdisciplinary field of media art, where no cross-subject system exists. It works as a virtual art encyclopedia whose level of information increases with each user. As McLuhan often said at the end of the 1970s, "The user is the content;" he wasn't speaking in the context of an electronic digital archive, but his thought is confirmed by this piece, where the user generates his/her own content.

It was McLuhan's writings about television that made him internationally recognized. In the 1960s, television images—the massive extensions of our central nervous system—had enveloped Western man in a unified, sensual, and imaginative life. Television, and subsequently portable video, was also a strong influence on the art world. In 1963 the American art viewer was first exposed to an environmental installation using television sets: Wolf Vostell's *TV Dé-Coll/age* at Smolin Gallery, New York. Vostell's video *Vietnam*, from 1971, was filmed in Super 8 directly from the TV screen; it shows seven minutes of an unfocused image of a soldier in the midst of a blaze. The sound is heartbreaking, and touches upon one of McLuhan's observations: how the media subtly manipulates information. Television—"the timid giant"—reappears in Nam June Paik & John Godfrey's landmark work, *Global Groove*, and in the four works of Joan Rabascall, who since the 1970s has explored the subject of mass media and communication. The cool medium also appears in the recent work by Juan Carlos Robles, *Pensión Eternity*, where a small TV set is sole witness to the loneliness of a figure inside a minuscule room.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Reporter with Borders* uses a high resolution, interactive display that simultaneously shows 864 video clips of news anchors taken from TV broadcasts in the United States and Mexico. A viewer standing in front of the piece sees his or her own silhouette and the image of reporters talking within it. The clips change every five minutes—using a database of 1,600 clips—and classifies them by gender, race and country; for instance, only American reporters might be seen on the left, while on the right, only Mexicans. Although not addressing television directly, Txuspo Poyo investigates the mechanism of control, which many consider to be a consequence of the media apparatus.

If television was for McLuhan "a complete *gestalt* of data gathered almost at random," one can only imagine what he would say about Google—which is more than simply a mass media company, but rather a massive niche for a new mass media. Martin Kohout's video installation *Moonwalk* evokes the immaterial lightness of being digital. Com&Com created the animation *Google Earth Art* in collaboration with Google Switzerland, applying the technology and aesthetics of Google Earth software for an art project. Wolfang Plöger used Google Image Search as a source of material for his series of elegant, leather, hardcover books, which he collected and collated from the results of his Internet probing. Each book addresses one subject and contains images culled from Google Image over a period of time. With this usage, Google images have become a new kind of found image, as one art critic put it.

Finally, the film *Content*, by Chris Petit, is a personal, visual essay exploring lines of communication in both the digital and the real world. This accords with McLuhan's idea of "placeness"—that the act of communication is independent of any particular place where we live. This film-essay is evidence of the decline of centrality within contemporary society.

Works created 50 years ago and those created today have connections with McLuhan's ideas about the transition from print to electronic culture and the new languages which increasingly supplement writing and print. The world has caught up with his prophecy of an "instantaneous network," which challenges common ideas about space and time and delivers an explosion of visual culture, which McLuhan never witnessed, since he died on New Year's Eve, 1980, just six years before the Internet Protocol was created. By the mid-1980s the Internet was a well-established technology supporting a broad community of researchers, and a generation after the first experiments with new video technology, electronic mail became a widely used means of communication across the globe.

While organizing this project, I re-read McLuhan´s best-sellers as well as several books published in the past decade which revise or explain McLuhan's ideas to the post-Woodstock generation, born when McLuhan's books "were sent to the attic" (the phrase is from Lewis H. Lapham's introduction to a revised edition of *Understanding Media*). Who was Marshall McLuhan? If there is one convincing conclusion from this reading, it is that much of what McLuhan said in the 1960s makes sense today. While McLuhan's "technical" or "mechanical" terms have different meanings in current jargon, his theories about media, on how an older media becomes the content for a new one, and his vision of the spirit of a digital age, are more relevant today than when they were written. As was said elsewhere, the *Wired* generation is now turning to McLuhan's work to understand the global village in the digital age.

"Resonance: Looking for Mr. McLuhan" is a brief visit to the vast "Planet Marshall"—his writing includes many other ideas useful to understanding the current media environment, which made the selection process of this exhibition difficult. "Art" appears infrequently as a subject in his writings, though here and there he saw the artist as a creator of new environments and suggested that changes in the electronic information movement would deeply influence the role of the artist. Even though he was an outsider and not entirely up-to-date on what was happening with art in the 1960s—although he had visited Andy Warhol—he also said that interactivity and the hybridization of the media—the meeting of two or more media—will bring freedom. It took almost 20 years for interactivity and hybridization to arrive in the art world. Yet, when they arrived, the art world and the role of the artist had changed forever.

Berta Sichel, guest curator, October 2011

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Gallery hours:
Tuesday–Friday
11 AM–6 PM

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

RESONANCE: *LOOKING FOR MR. MCLUHAN*

Terry Berkowitz
Book Without End, 2011
Video frame, edition of 10,
8.5 x 5.5 inches

We Like to Watch, 1989
Linoleum print on paper, artist's proof,
10 x 14, framed 12.5 x 16.5 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Com&Com
Google Earth Art, 2008
Video animation in cooperation
with Google Switzerland, 5 mins

Courtesy of the artists and Bernard
Bischoff & Partner Gallery, Bern, Germany

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer
Reporter with Borders, 2007
Video with shadow box,
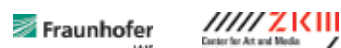31.5 x 41 x 4.7 inches


Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Orwicz

**Monika Fleischmann &
Wolfgang Strauss**
Semantic Map, 2004
Net-art and video wall projection

Courtesy of Monika Felischmann and
Wolfgang Strauss, ZKM Center for Art
and Media/Fraunhofer IAIS

Fraunhofer IAIS   **ZKM** Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe

Martin Kohout
Moonwalk, 2008
Video projection and reflective
glass, continuous loop
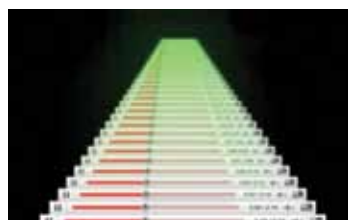
Courtesy of the artist and
The Future Gallery, Berlin

Marcel Odenbach
*Das große Fenster
(The large window)*, 2001
Video, 12 mins, 79 secs

Courtesy of the artist

Nam June Paik & John Godfrey
Global Groove, 1973
Video, 28 mins, 30 secs

Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix
(EAI), New York

Magdalena Pederin
The Name is an Anagram, 2006
Video with light box, continuous loop

Courtesy of the artist

Chris Petit
Content, 2009
Video, 76 mins, 18 secs

An Illuminations Films production
made in association with More4
and ZDF in cooperation with ARTE

illuminations|films

Wolfgang Plöger
Google Image Search (Map),
December 1, 2006
Artist books

Courtesy of Konrad Fischer
Galerie, Berlin/Düsseldorf

Txuspo Poyo
Control, 1997
Video, 9 mins, 28 secs

Courtesy of the artist

Joan Rabascall
La Voz de Su Amo
(His master's voice), 1974
Photograph, 39.37 x 39.37 inches

His Master's Voice, 1975
Photograph, 39.37 x 39.37 inches

Monument to Mobile Television, 1994
Model, 1.97 x 2.76 x 5.12 inches

Four Ways of Distance Communication, 1974
Four plastic tiny objects inside a wood box
covered by methacrylate, 16.54 x 15.54 x
1.97 inches

All courtesy of the artist

Elena del Rivero
Mended Flying Letters, 2010
Typewriter, silk thread and ink on
collaged handmade abaca paper,
82 x 82 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Juan Carlos Robles
Pensión Eternity, 2010
Photograph, diptych, 68.89 x 25.59
inches each of 2

Courtesy of the artist and
Oliva Arauna Gallery, Madrid

Ignacio Uriarte
The Story of the Typewriter, 2011
Voice impressions by Michael
Winslow, Video, 20 mins, 50 secs

1s y 0s, 2011
Artist-made sample pages from
various models of manual typewriters,
8.25 x 11.25 inches each of 12, detail

All courtesy of the artist and Nogueras
Blanchard Gallery, Barcelona

Wolf Vostell
Vietnam, 1971
Video, 7 mins, 33 secs

Courtesy of The Wolf Vostell Estate