

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SANFORD KWINTER

BY JOHAN BETTUM

Sanford Kwinter is world-renowned American architectural writer and theorist. He has been called ‘one of the leading American philosophers of our time.’ His main fields of interest are contemporary technology, material cultural and intellectual issues in art, design and architecture.

With Bruce Mau and Jonathan Crary, Kwinter co-founded the influential publishing company ZONE Books (later to become part of MIT Press), which includes the journal ZONE, a serial publication on topics in philosophy and contemporary culture. He was co-editor of ZONE 1/2: *The Contemporary City* and ZONE 6: *Incorporations*. Besides numerous important essays, his own work includes the books, *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture* (2001), *Mutations* (2000), and *Rem Koolhaas: Conversations With Students* (1996).

Kwinter’s ideas and work have been influential in a range of fields, including design, architecture, art and the humanities. His published work has pioneered new ideas that reformulate the way that we understand and go about cultural production in the widest sense. The shift represented by these ideas comprises a more intimate and holistic approach to matter and materials. The work process as much as the experience of artifacts and environments become in itself a creative process through which the material sources at hand are turned into a more potent and virtually endless source of output and possibilities.

Kwinter received his Ph.D. in comparative literature from Columbia University and is associate professor at Rice University in Houston, Texas. Currently he also teaches at the MIT in Boston besides being a frequent guest in numerous universities and institutions throughout the world, including Harvard University, Princeton University, the Architectural Association in London and the Berlage Insitute in Rotterdam.

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This interview was conducted in a series of sessions in Frankfurt am Main from March 3 to 6, 2007. The interview was held in connection with the end of the first phase of the project, *the Space of Communication*, for which Kwinter acted as a special guest and consultant. The interview was partly conducted as a joint writing session and continued via Internet exchanges in the evenings.

## COMMUNICATIONS AS COSMOLOGY

**As a working title, we have named our project ‘The Space of Communication.’ At first glance, the title could be said to be about all and nothing – especially in a time when communication technology saturates our daily and professional lives. What is at stake in this rubric? In what ways does such a starting point offer a useful springboard for approaching contemporary cultural conditions in an inquisitive and productive manner?**

Behind the conjunction of the seemingly generic terms ‘space’ and ‘communication’ actually lie two of the profound insights of modern times. The first is the realization that space is not a passive, unchanging physical object inside of which interesting things happen but is actually the interesting thing itself: a living tissue constantly changing and adapting to events. Indeed space is created by those events and is inseparable from them: it is an event or organism itself and not just the container for them or a background phenomenon. The second insight is that matter – I mean literally the material world – is made up not of particles but of relations, in other words, by ceaseless exchanges, not only of energy but of information. The idea of ‘communication networks’ today lies at the very foundation of our attempts to understand physical reality. While these ideas first emerged within esoteric developments in early 20<sup>th</sup> century science (quantum mechanics and biology), they became broadly accepted only after the arrival of computers and advanced communications technologies into everyday life the 1960s and ‘70s. One of the great formulations of those times was made by the American social philosopher Daniel Bell who coined the term “communications” to designate the central social-industrial development of our era, the convergence of communications with the automation power of computing. While we take these developments largely for granted today, they remain the most powerful engine driving the transformation of contemporary social and economic life. Yet because these processes have become so pervasive, and for that very reason invisible, we no longer really know how to grasp them in order to explore the possibilities they

possess. I see the project's working title precisely as a bold challenge to the hidden, pervasive and increasingly inaccessible aspects of how communication webs and modalities are determining the conditions of our lives.

## THE ENCHANTMENTS OF DISTANCE (LIFE AS SOCIAL APP)

**One thing strikes me immediately: we are speaking about a process of development already 100 years old, and I can think of extraordinary work in both the arts and architecture that has been motivated by the emergence of computers and computational processes in our lives. And yet, you seem to imply that there are also things lost in the wake of these developments, losses that we still need to face, address and explore. What would these be?**

Well there is a kind of romance here, I admit, with an imagined world not yet completely 'disenchanted' by tools, equipment and economic rationality. Having said that, the greatest industrial innovations have always, in the end, been communicational, whether they concern the clock (which coordinated previously separated human activity), the stirrup (which integrated diverse forms of work into a single action), or the printing press (which automated and began the democratization of writing). In our own era this is even more obviously true: the telephone, radio, television, and of course internet. Every great "killer app" as technology strategists glibly say is a "social app." Yet there is a very deep truth in this claim: virtually all gains in efficiency is derived from being able to extract 'work' or value from social reservoirs. Indeed all 'work' is social. (When I use the word 'work,' it is not as a Marxist but rather as a "Maxwellian": I refer to order or form in the way that the 19<sup>th</sup> century physicist James Clerk Maxwell talked about heat. "Maxwell's Demon" as it was known, sat at a doorway and chose which atoms to allow into a chamber; by choosing only green ones, the demon would reverse the universe's natural tendency to let things mix and become increasingly formless and disordered; a chamber of green atoms was a recognizable form that required maintenance or work, not only to produce, but to sustain. Any time

you can get a demon to do work for you, you can get it almost ‘for free’.)

The understanding of the connection between technology and the deepest aspects of biological necessity frequently stops at an acknowledgment of increased access to the direct material requirements of existence. It rarely acknowledges the more abstract but arguably more fundamental underlying drive to create structures of collective organization, a principle not reducible to the action or instincts of a single organism, but an emergent drive from which all compound ‘gain’ or optimization can be derived.

In many ways this is a simple extension of the first forms of animal organization that made possible the gains that could be enjoyed by collective hunting. This form of optimization is the foundation of social existence (not only among humans but among many animals and even plants as well); it is the foundation of civilization itself and probably of the entire organization of the human nervous system and the mysterious apparatus of the instincts. (Some humanist biologists, it is true, argue that the acquisition of language drove socialization, but this formulation transgresses the basic Darwinian principle that “the function always precedes the form”.)

In sum, we are hardwired for social apps. But we make a grave mistake when we mistake the machines and routines through which these drives are made to pass with the ‘space’ that calls them into being. To say this another way, we must acknowledge that ‘communication’ is a very profound and rich thing, and while it is the foundation of what we are, it is neither exhausted nor explained by the one-dimensional activities and apparatuses within which we increasingly confine our lives. This is why planning in industry and in technological milieus needs more than just scientists today. These milieus need artists and designers and other experimentalists to drive speculation into the world of social, and not only industrial evolution. It is no mystery that new communications technologies and modalities are most quickly and fully exploited and developed

by the ‘tribal’ organizations of adolescents. The tribes are where innovation finds its forms.

### **And the losses?**

We replace broad spectrum communication in which there are multiple systems and orders of exchange – smell, facial expression, color, rhythm, posture, context, temporal duration, to name only some, etc. – with single stream signaling. Email and SMS dialects, for example, are but an extension of other routinized forms – and impoverishments – of language use that we saw take place via television and other media in the 1990s. Even adolescents in Scandinavia today speak creoles that include the flattened shorthand expressions of American “Valley-speak” (Valleygirl English from California’s San Fernando Valley, once a regional dialect, now a universal language). Many will argue that these represent merely changes and transformations, not impoverishments or losses. The question is whether you can understand them as lone developments or as part of a systematic evolution. When color processing was introduced into photography and cinema, the gain was thought to be obvious. The losses of course were not: the surfeit of nonessential ‘information’ obliterated a less identifiable level of affective communication. The black and white image provided a certain barrier and a pathos that infused the image with the drama of obliqueness, mystery and distance that caused certain features of the image to organize hierarchically in the imagination and the senses. The ‘information’ stored in this hierarchy was effectively lost in the flatter (falsely candid) manifold of the colorized, more intimate and democratically organized details of the polychrome (in which every detail is presented as fully disclosed).

## THE COMPULSION TO COMMUNICATE

**If these represent some of the evolutionary tendencies in communication right now, can we also see a social dimension being affected?**

The answer, a priori, is yes. The difficult part is to provide the description and catalogue of these developments. They are moving, provisional, often below radar detection, frequently subtle, distributed, fragmentary and highly labile. But as an ensemble they are systematic; the unity must be constituted in thought on the basis of speculation and experiment. We already know some bizarre facts: Americans slept an average of 9.5 hours in the 1930s, 8 hours in the '60s and only 6.5 hours today. In the thirties we slept a full 54% longer than today! What has to change in order for such a dramatic transformation to happen and for us to not notice that it has happened? Do we not today live in a regime in which we are literally compelled to communicate ceaselessly and relentlessly not only for work but for leisure, social life, and commerce? You will never discover where the missing 3.5 hours went, so don't even try to look. But that does not mean you cannot deduce the answer: the time today is spent communicating. . . compulsively and against your will, as if at the mercy of an invisible jailer. . .

## AFFECTS

**In your writing you frequently make appeal for us to find or understand a totality. Above you refer to the 'systematic' nature of social developments despite the fragmentary nature of their appearance. Elsewhere you described the need to see "the grand movements, the ensembles" as an activity of recognizing the irreducible fact of communication. . . you described it as "a form of love" (or at least you said that Goethe would have described it this way. . .).**

Goethe was not only a Romantic writer but a Romantic scientist (his analytical power is routinely estimated to have been greater than

Einstein's). The holism to which you refer is a central feature of Romantic thought (and by no means dismissible on this count alone). The doctrine of holism states that the properties of wholes cannot be deduced from the sum of properties of its parts, but rely on the manifold of active relations between the parts. Parts communicate and their communications are what constitute the real concreteness of the world.

The basic tendency of matter to send and receive is a proto-Buddhist concept, yet one finds it in many advanced thinkers, especially physicists including Erwin Schroedinger and others. To listen to the Greeks, one understands Love as an affinity that 'causes', affinities like those one finds in the interrelated movement of the planets, and this is no different from the movements of the soul. Today many of us speak of 'affects' (Spinoza by way of Deleuze) to describe our capacity to affect the world or to be affected by it. Communication ceaselessly generates the disturbances that we call affect. It is no doubt an excellent way to begin to theorize the production of the social world. The forces of 'Love' or affinity that produce tribal organizations are powerfully ascendant in today's society. . .

## TRIBALISM

### **Can you elaborate?**

The astounding success of internet and SMS sociality in recent years is a product of the tribalism of the child's world, comprised of small, bounded groups of 'buddies', etc. that operate like guerilla formations within, and in many ways against, the 'global' communicational 'Ecumenon.' Even the much discussed 'micro-loan' experiments in developing countries and programs where cellphones are rented to locals, spawn relays and networks of a very specific kind, often connecting disparate social mechanisms such as the London Stock Exchange with ultra-remote and illiterate textile weavers in rural Pakistan. Nicholas Negroponte's "\$100 laptop" initiative has at least one brilliant idea going for it: the unit is

conceived as a tribal communicational device with an automatic link to all other laptops within a 1 mile radius. This not only optimizes the cumulative processing power distributed in the local network, but opens a communicative web between users that no one knows how it will come to be used. The computer is conceived first and foremost as a communicational device (and no longer as an orthodox work machine). Similarly, it is no accident that Apple dropped 'Computer' from its name just as it transformed its iPod (or even its iMac) into a telephone. . .

## RESISTANCE

**Are you suggesting that resistance and oppositional strategy play a central role in driving development and use of contemporary technology?**

I don't know if I'd go that far. But one thing is certain: telecoms and hardware companies have nothing to fear from rebellious youth or political resisters. On the contrary, these groups are the primary reservoirs of innovation that the industry has tapped into. Industrial strategy simply follows 'the street' today: informal use patterns and protocols are determining the direction of product development. Nokia's once enormous advantage was in knowing this first: as technology advances it must strive to approximate and facilitate the most primitive forms of animal interaction. The mobile phone in Scandinavia is not only wired to banks, but to procuring food (payout at automat machines) and mates (real-time date alerts Irriidium's EMMS). The scope of political thought today simply does not encompass an interrogation of the social implications of the medium itself. Most 'political' innovation today is directly harvested by industry. No one conceives of their cellphone or MP3 player as Trojan horses planted by the enemy, rather the contrary. I don't know of a time when the alignment of corporate and street interests has been so close. If the "medium is the message" this is certainly one message that has been lost today.

**In other words, we need to reconceive social space and social life. We need to reconceive it, in order to save it from becoming a mere byproduct of gadgetry and commerce. . .**

You put it pretty brutally, but I suppose the answer is yes. It is important things to think about existing tendencies already established and rooted in our economies that now determine the directions of technical and social development. For example, telephone ‘objects’ are about to vanish. We will make ‘hard’ calls from a variety of different places and things, but there will also be a plethora of automatic calling that will report both on us and to us. The new ‘space’ will be very hard to escape. . .

**For an architect, and perhaps an artist, this can be scary news. If the ‘hard’ objects are about to vanish, if there are no more things to design, are we merely left to formulate the interface – or, at worst, not even that? Is technology receding out of sight and, paradoxically, emerging as the single controlling node of the space that we inhabit? What is the relation between the ‘hard’ and the ‘soft’, between the material and the oscillations of the medium?**

Of course this will never happen. The point is not that there are no more objects, and nothing left to design, but that there is an increasingly important non-physical dimension attached to objects that is taking over our lives. Only at our peril do we fail to recognize them, fail to claim them as belonging to the realm of design thought and design action. Designing a telephone object, and not the interface in the broadest sense, is like arranging the desk chairs on the Titanic on its last night fatal night. . .