

Freizeit as Web Site

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If nothing else, Christo (and Jeanne-Claude, of course) is a perfect metteur-en-scene. His art, not unlike everything else in these days, is that of “putting in scene,” i.e., staging. The creative effort behind his projects quite appropriately reflects the scale at which human activity, leisure included, takes place today, and how their nature is changing. In the summer of 1995, Christo’s stage – the Reichstag in Berlin – almost became the center of the world. As the Bulgarian-born, French-educated, American artist wrapped the (in)famous ruin of what used to be a center of military power and a symbol of the defeat of fascism, he involved German history in the making and perceiving of art in the age of digital communication. It was a major production, an amazing piece of aesthetic engineering, involving thousands of people working in many parts of the world. Germans, as well as people outside its borders, experienced real drama. The finished work was admired by many millions partaking in an experience of global scale. Here some readers might wonder – “many millions,” you say? – not really convinced that during the time the piece was officially shown, many millions could have made it, traveling on the excursion trains, buses, and even air transportation made available by various German enterprises for the event. My number, however, refers to the millions who watched the work progress over the Internet. Indeed, taking advantage of the seemingly never-ending technological revolution, viewers from all over made the world-wide web site of the Reichstag one of the most visited during the course of its wrapping. Christo’s work, as process, transcending such qualifiers of art as product, subject to ownership, and collection, the public dedication (transmitted over television, too), and then the extremely precisely directed unwrapping, including the cutting of the “wrapper” into pieces to be sold as aesthetic souvenirs, took place in the public eye. And became part of the time of those watching it while the number of hits at the web site continued to increase (until the digital highways to and from Berlin started getting clogged).

In this sense, much more than in the sense we expect from television, the performance became part of people’s existence at the level of globality we usually associate with markets and financial transactions, or with the ubiquitous e-mail, with musical performances, but not with art as it was experienced before the digital age. That the condition of Christo’s artwork is different from everything we know from past experiences is a subject beyond the scope of these lines dedicated to the digital condition of leisure in our time.

One of the better known Germanic idioms embodies a whole culture of leisure, which in the not so remote yesterday characterized the making and perception of art, sports, dining, gardening, and much more: Freizeit. We used to be able to clearly distinguish the set of hours, days, weeks, months, and years dedicated to work. The steam whistle marked the beginning and end of a shift. Later, punch cards were introduced to keep track of this time-based record of work. As technology augmented the output of human effort, free time increased. The nature and output of work also changed fundamentally. In only three years from now, two-thirds of work will involve digital processing. Moreover, due to the progress in networking, we register the increase of telework. This changes the equation of work time in relation to leisure time again, and drastically so.

Freizeit used to mean, and still does in Germany, the indulgence in whatever one regarded as an enjoyable time with oneself, with friends, with family, with nature. It meant listening to public lectures, offered in big cities and in small communities all over the country, and pursuing many forms of personal edification. It also meant being members of clubs and associations. (Not to be a member of a Verein means to miss one of the most dynamic forms of integration in a community.) It meant, too, attending a soccer game, gardening (an almost national pastime if you consider the kitchen gardens alongside the endless railroad tracks), singing in a choir, or performing in a band. Freizeit was the Bierstube (not exactly the Beerhall associated with celebrations like the Munich Oktoberfest, in the meanwhile taking place all over Germany and even in the USA); personal and national celebrations – weddings, confirmations, Christmas, Easter – the yearly vacation in the good air of Germany's mountains or at the spas. (What better than a Kur to recover from physical and mental strain?) Freizeit extended to yearly trips to sunnier countries and continents. For some, Freizeit became the indulgence in new media, in particular turning into a couch potato before the television set. And as work, education, and leisure go through changes marking the end of the Industrial Society, Germans feel the effects of globalization, especially because they are truly slow in adapting to the new realities. In this context, Freizeit takes on the negative connotation of undesired free time through unemployment. Retirement itself is relatively recent, but another victory in regaining a part of one's own life. Improvements in healthcare, a major result of Germany's social commitment to quality of life, allow people to live longer after retirement, providing them with what at times appears as too much free time – no one ever thought there could be too much of this – to spend at home or in nursing facilities.

If there is a common denominator to all these disparate aspects marking the conflict between past and present, it is the fact that Freizeit, an integral part of the literate culture of Germany, is undergoing fundamental changes, as do work and education. Christo's staging of the wrapping of the Reichstag went beyond what his creative genius anticipated. His work became part of the Freizeit of those, young and less young, who accidentally discovered its virtual presence as a web site, or systematically searched for information about his latest project. But Christo is not an exception. As the German Soccer Association – no different from the NFL or the NBA in trying to control the industry that their respective games became – prevents any Internet dissemination of games or results, these simply escape its control (and monopoly). Indeed, while the world – even the highly structured and excessively regulated German society – frees itself from centralism and hierarchies, dynamic web sites, unofficially carrying all kinds of games, pop up. "Information wants to be free" is more than the favorite slogan of the Internet narcissists in Europe and the USA. It describes a law of post-industrial society.

There is no way that Freizeit under the circumstances of distributed human experiences of simultaneity and globality can be shaped, as it was at the beginning of the century, by political forces or any form of societal control. In Germany, not unlike the rest of the world, some find it exciting to arm wrestle over the Internet, to play chess, to tune into porno sites, to access the Palomar telescope, take classes at a Brazilian or Japanese university, or to visit a new art show opened by some artist full of energy and initiative, but short of the means necessary to be accepted by a gallery or museum. During my summer in Little Compton, on the southeastern coast of New England, I visited JoGo Art, the gallery of Jochen Göttelt, located in Wuppertal, of all places. My first thought was: we live in the same town, and I never heard of this gallery. It exists only in the virtual space of the Web. Through the links embedded in the site, reaching all over the world, people visiting his gallery get the chance to interact with each other. The new Freizeit takes place across borders and results in the emergence of communities of shared

interests. Permanence, a German obsession embodied in its bureaucracy, is replaced by the intensity of transitional pursuits.

Until recently, and in some cases even now, Freizeit was almost exclusively an instance of direct interaction. Different from interaction in work in that it did not translate into quantifiable output, it meant freedom from the constraints of work. Affected by everything that makes direct interaction impossible, the new Freizeit, like the new forms of work, is stamped by increasing levels of estrangement. The visitors to the Reichstag probably missed the long process leading to the impermanent finished piece, but they had the privilege of talking to each other, asking each other questions, posing in front of that evanescent image. On the computer screen – not unlike the ones used in production lines at the Mercedes company or in some breweries – this directness is no longer possible.

In a discussion of Freizeit in contemporary Germany (but not only), one has to deal with the marked alienation embodied by the beer can. How can one compare the experience of visiting the brewery in the monastery at the top of the hill that guards the town and being served by the monks who made the beer to the industrial beer coming in a can? The virtual tour of the brewery, offered by German brewers just as their counterparts in New York and Japan do, is no substitute for the smell, taste, and atmosphere of the actual place. Try www.veltins.de (no pitch intended in my mentioning it here), the site of a brewery with a 175-year-old tradition. Established by Clemens Veltin in the beautiful Sauerland – a region well known to people who like to spend their Freizeit in hiking and skiing – the brewery now offers a spy game: B.O.N.D. (which stands for a fictitious on-line federal bureau of investigation: Bundes Online Nachrichten Dienst). Interested? Once in the database, chances are good that you will select Veltins over the hundreds of other brands of beer offered in real stores all over Germany (and abroad). And forget Andechs, the Bavarian monastery where beer is still produced for those who take their time to hike. Only curious? Get in the chatroom and, while sipping your beer at home, enjoy jokes and stories about what can happen on-line when a fictional Mafia character causes havoc among the “netizens.” Between the direct experience with the Bierstein in hand at Andechs and the substitute for the real thing that happened way back in 1824 in Gravenstein, when Veltin started his brewery, many things have changed.

But few of those who deplore the lost direct experience arrive at the following conclusion: beer, not unlike Bild, the tabloid with a daily run that makes it the fourth largest-selling newspaper in the world, Bavarian Lederhosen, associated with hiking in the Alps, the Christmas Lebkuchen and Stollen, and Sauerkraut, and Bockwurst have undergone the same metamorphosis as has the entire literate culture. They are readily available – an e-mail suffices and any brewer will send you all the beer you want – but mediocre in comparison with what the local beers used to be, although still subject to standards of purity of which Germans are proud. Beer, Lebkuchen, Sauerkraut, and Bockwurst, Bild or Lederhosen – they are less and less the expression of cultural expectations that have been confirmed locally down through the centuries, and more products for large markets carrying an aura of tradition associated with a limited space somewhere on the globe.

After all, Freizeit was a luxury, as the watches measuring it were, especially when compared to the throwaway Swatches™; or as having access to a fine local brewery was, and being able to buy custom-made leather shorts from the skins of animals hunted by the locals or tended on a farm you could visit. The many beer sites that pop up brought on a new activity: brew your own beer. Passionate beer brewers share recipes, practical advice, information on informal

meetings, and on ways to capitalize on their passion. Other Web sites offer to sell Lederhosen tailored to customer specification transmitted over the Internet, including the possibility to recycle older leather or to use various synthetic material in order to avoid killing animals. Publishing a news magazine, with rigorously reported articles and even more rigorous commentary, or with an idiosyncratic style is now possible, too. A Web site can be turned into a powerful “printing press” of a “newspaper” no longer reduced to paper and ink, and no longer subject to making a profit under the burden of a huge overhead. In checking out these personal publications of students, professors, homemakers, environmentalists, feminist organizations, and many other types, the potential reader can choose and compose his or her own composite daily reading: a piece from the barber on the Ost See, a caricature from an artist living on the outskirts of Frankfurt, and maybe even something from the on-line edition of Bild or Der Spiegel. It is obvious that the dynamics of the transition from the superb Industrial Society that Germany used to be to the provincial digital outlet for American innovations and Japanese imports of consumer electronics (cheap by German standards) fundamentally affected not only the quantity of free time, but also its quality. In the heated and prolonged intellectual discussions that one can experience only on the old continent, and especially in Germany, this change falls under criticism for the most part. And rightly so, if one considers the arguments. Alienation affects everyone to the extent that people care less for each other. They might send each other thousands of e-mails, but it took months until the body of a deceased woman was found in her apartment overlooking the city panorama of Hamburg. She was literally buried under an enormous amount of newspaper clippings collected over many years. Not the published texts concerned her, but the pictures. And images, especially those transmitted through television and digital media, increasingly become the focus of young and old, educated and less educated people living their Freizeit as an instance of the lives of celebrities. Or as part of the virtual world of digital characters – avatars in pixelated 3D – in which frustrations of all kind sometimes take shape. The innovative hackers of Germany, country of order and discipline, made it into the secret sites of the American defense establishment, protesting a world still much too dedicated to war machines instead of opportunities to secure peace. Obsessed with a different protest, the neo-Nazis are quickly establishing their own presence for a cause that receives little direct support in Germany.

But no matter from which direction they come, they march to the drumbeat of forces associated with the digital revolution. Consequently, no one can or should ignore the meaning of such forms of Freizeit. If everything is possible, good and bad are less easily distinguishable. Those who demonize the Net could as well idealize it. Indeed, the extremes of opportunity and deceit meet in the digital geography of endless potential discoveries or pitfalls. Nevertheless, the time that the average German spends on the Internet is slowly but surely equaling that spent in front of the TV set, and both are greater than reading as a form of enjoying Freizeit.

As far as my experience goes, I notice a strange but telling ambivalence in my dealings with students, with colleagues at the university, with the academic administration, and with companies soliciting my expertise. People tell me they want progress; they are not against the latest technology. But they also want to preserve the past, by which they mean a sense of quality that seems to be overridden by increasingly efficient digitally driven processes. That this preservation of an idealized past, which includes the German concept of Freizeit, is no longer possible simply does not fit into their emotional or rational equation. I experience these people excited over each new book fair – which they actually visit – as they actually read less and less. Not because they play digital games or navigate the Web; rather as a consequence of conditions of life and work that require less reading. Students asked me whether Leibniz, a

precursor of the digital age, was the owner of the cookie and cracker factory of the same name. My American students had the same problem with Einstein: they knew the furniture outlets, but not the relativity theory. In order to cope with the new challenges of their time, they do not need to know who Leibniz was or what Einstein accomplished. I experience Germans dedicated to e-commerce, as trading on the Internet came to be called, but still clinging to a strong D-mark that will guarantee them a good Freizeit when visiting the USA or Thailand. They are upset that the search engines – fast programs that swallow all the zeroes and ones making up the increasing number of Web sites in the world and index the words and images for which they stand for possible queries – do not understand German, although the Germans' own spelling is degrading by the hour, making the new Rechtschreibung (as the official actualized rules of spelling are called) obsolete before it is put into effect. The trans-national and trans-cultural nature of the Web escapes their understanding.

These facts are worth mentioning because the ambivalence in question is relevant to the sense of insecurity that is associated with a Freizeit so frei, i.e., so free, that one cannot rest any longer on rules for appropriateness or correctness. In the universe of e-mail, the majority of Germans have freed themselves from the rule of capitalizing the first letter of nouns. They also free themselves from the ridiculous burden of hierarchical forms of addressing each other: students and professors who have to call a university president by the title Magnifizenz. The German cyberdivers share their experiences on Web sites of broad public interest while administrators of the Internet still wonder whether this is acceptable use and who is entitled to own the copyright to their images. (This is a characteristic of the broader picture experienced throughout the world.)

Against the digital background, national borders and prejudices are transcended. Generations grow closer, grandparents play computer games via the Net with grandchildren, and even help them with their homework from some remote location where, in the real life of disconnected generations, they seemed forgotten. Commerce continues on the Web even after the business hours, whose closing is controlled by law. New companies take up the challenge and offer services in a society where production is still seen as the main (if not the only) dignified form of human activity. Students, fed up with an education system of feudal mentality, search for alternative means of study. Cooperative projects involving designers, computer science majors, mathematicians, and others unfold even as I write these lines. These rather tight descriptions of the dynamics of social life, education, and work are not accidental. After all, Freizeit is not independent of the context in which it defines itself. Digital means remain ultimately means, not a goal in themselves.

The fuzziness of the distinction between Freizeit and Arbeitszeit, i.e., leisure time and work time, is probably as relevant as the change in their proportion. Once upon a time, the duration of work exceeded by far that of leisure. The opposite is now the case, with more leisure to add up in the individual time budget. Actually, the productivity of major human endeavors, from agriculture to industrial production, reached such high levels that a minority of the people could support the needs and expectations of all society. We do not yet know how to redistribute work, as we do not know how to redistribute leisure time. Between our biological clock and the clock of our endeavors, a gap keeps widening, often leading to a sense of confusion not at all helped by the increased speed of our journeys. Returning from Mallorca or from the Dominican Republic, the German tourist faces differences in time zone, temperature, language, culture, and rhythm of life. After a virtual reality immersion, the reconnection to reality can be even more taxing. But even after routine surfing through the Internet, the feeling is that time has gone by extremely

fast without being noticed. This characteristic was somehow experienced by the Germans who drive their well made cars on the only highways in the world (Montana excluded) without speed limits. But now speeds even higher are reached when an individual becomes immersed in the sunshine of Santa Monica and continues on the virtual path of the rush hours on the Los Angeles Freeways until landing in Hollywood. Freizeit as escape from one's own condition can be enjoyed directly in the Cologne carnival, or virtually in Rio de Janeiro, embodied in digital personae participating in the exotic celebration of the locals. In the Lufthansa chat room, a variety of dialogs make up a new world of exciting richness and powerful expression. Having more Freizeit in their hands, some people dedicate part of it to knowing themselves better; others, to running away from themselves. In the blurred territory between work and leisure, they establish new contacts with the world, play the games they missed when they were younger, or fulfill dreams, such as pretending to be the best soccer player, singer, political leader – you name it. What's more, they change. The nature of the digital transaction, be it browsing through the world-wide-Web or learning a language, offering a product, conducting an inquiry, or taking a test is such that those who come in contact, as accidental as such contacts can be, influence each other above and beyond the time of interaction. At the risk of idealizing the consequences of what becomes a ubiquitous digital medium, one can see how those characteristics upon which prejudices and intolerance are built are continuously replaced by genuine openness and tolerance of differences. The Internet, in its current condition or in its new embodiments of higher speed and broader band, is not, in itself, the alternative to the national state or the final cause for its demise. But the Internet personae that emerge in work and leisure need no passport to explore the world, no hard currency to take care of travel needs, and no bi-lingual dictionary to find a restaurant or a police station. The world might not become a better place overnight, but we, those making it up and whose identity is marked by the digital experience of rich interaction, have possibilities that no one had before.