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The Bus of Les Immatériaux

Jean-Louis Boissier

In what follows I describe how the interactive videodisc installation *The Bus* was conceived and produced, and how it responded to the will to experimentally inscribe technics at the crossroads of art and ethnography. This may in turn help shed some light on the philosophical exhibition *Les Immatériaux* within which it appeared.

The Installation

Within the labyrinth of *Les Immatériaux*, in the pervasive darkness, a vertical, suspended vitrine presents an object which attracts our attention because it is instantly recognisable. It is a model, at 1/10 scale, and very detailed, very realist, of a Parisian bus [Figure 9]. But what draws our attention to it is that, on the little video screens placed behind the windows, there unfolds a filmed landscape which, illuminating the interior of this miniature bus with moving light, places us unmistakably, both perceptually and mentally, in the position of a passenger. We see neighbourhoods, private homes, gardens, buildings, working-class towns, wastelands, market gardens, the university, and always the sky, and views into the distance. Perhaps without noticing it, in pulling ourselves up and leaning in towards the object that offers this vision, we grab hold of a familiar form, the stainless steel column of the same bus, at full size this time. And above all, an object that offers itself up literally beneath our fingers, an aluminium button accompanied by a sign saying "Press for the Next Stop". I press the button, and a message lights up in red: "Stop Requested". A few seconds pass, and the loud noise of the engine and the rumbling of the road completely stop. The video landscape gives way to a series of photos which, changing in rapid succession, transport us, straight ahead and thus

perpendicular to the route of the bus, towards a house, through a door, into a room, and towards a person inside. In this way we will see a child at home and at school, follow a heavy goods vehicle driver delivering cars, discover how a gypsy woman dresses, watch a doctor's consultation, see a retired man in his worker's garden, find out something about the work of a dental technician, and so on. One hundred and twenty such portraits are available, each one consisting of 12, 24, 48, or 96 photographs. The viewer is distanced from the present time figured by the route of the bus, and follows the person instead, follows her home, or to her garden, to her work, in all her movements. We see personal objects, private and sentimental souvenirs. We feel a desire to see, a desire for intimacy, sometimes following somebody all the way into the bathroom, and very often into the family album. Each series of photographs ends on a close-up of a face with a name overlaid onto it: *Carmen, four and a half years old; Madame B., gardener; Madame T., bookseller; Amar, streetsweeper; Nathalie, 18 years old; a man, 91 years old; Alphonso, amateur boxer; Édouard, nurse*, etc. Pressing the button makes this name appear in a list that scrolls along in place of the tracking shot. Choosing a name becomes a way to go back to it. To get on the bus, one must go via a portrait.

At this stage of the description of the installation *Le Bus*, we are reminded of an image that has become emblematic of *Les Immatériaux*: each visitor wears a set of headphones, and is thus enclosed within a vocal space which ceaselessly transmits the texts selected by Jean-François Lyotard for each place. This particular place, this "site", is called *Visites simulées (Simulated Visits)* [Figure 10]. We hear phrases by Paul Virilio, taken from *Negative Horizon*, including this powerful aphorism: "*What will we wait for when we no longer need to wait to arrive?*";¹ a phrase that refers both to simulated events and to communication in "real time" – a term that would come to invade discourses beyond that of technology – generalized tele-observation, simultaneity, and ubiquity.

Design

In fact, the reference to Paul Virilio's ideas is very much germane to our particular project. I read Virilio, I listened to him, I cited him to my students. As an architect and as a philosopher of technology, he anticipated the observation and critical investigation of new digital technologies. We worked in what he would soon designate as *trans-apparence*: "the sudden commutation of the perceptible is ultimately only the general herald of a generalized derealisation resulting from the new illumination of perceptual reality".² After the aerial photo-interpretation of the Great War, he revealed how the illumination of the military theatre had become indirect, a matter

1 Paul Virilio, *Negative Horizon* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 120.

2 Paul Virilio, *Polar Inertia*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Sage, 1999), p. 7.



[Figure 9] Jean-Louis Boissier: *Le Bus*, 1985, installation view, *Les Immatériaux*, site *Visites simulées* (Source: Jean-Louis Boissier).

of interconnected cathode-ray screens. But in doing so he came to identify “infographic technologies [which] will likewise force a readjustment of reality and of its representations”.³ In this respect he mentioned Tactical Mapping System, a videodisc programme that history remembers under the name *Aspen Moviemap*.

I must emphasize here that it was precisely the discovery of this videodisc, within the vast and erudite exhibition *Cartes et figures de la terre (Maps and Figures of the Earth)*,⁴ at the Centre Pompidou in 1980, that decisively opened up a new horizon for me. Ten years before, in 1969–1970, I had conceived, for GREC (*Groupe de recherches et d'essais cinématographiques*), a scenario which worked on numerous parallel levels of the filmic story furnished by the situation of a train passenger. The unfolding of the landscape, like a cinema tracking-shot, drew the viewer into houses wherein were played, or spoken, scenes borrowed from *Madame Bovary*, and then brought him back into the train, to discover there a contemporary scene with a certain family resemblance to Flaubert’s text. Its title, *Exercice de la découverte*, affirmed the scopic impulse stimulated by an opening in the scenery which, in the theatre, is known as a *découverte*. Thus my intuition was that the interactivity of the videodisc, its capacity to open onto bifurcating signifiers, the computational

3 Paul Virilio, *Lost Dimension* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 26–27.

4 Catalogue: Jean-Loup Rivière (ed.), *Cartes et figures de la terre* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou/CCI, 1980).

combination of text and image, presented the opportunity for an artistic solution that ought to be seized.

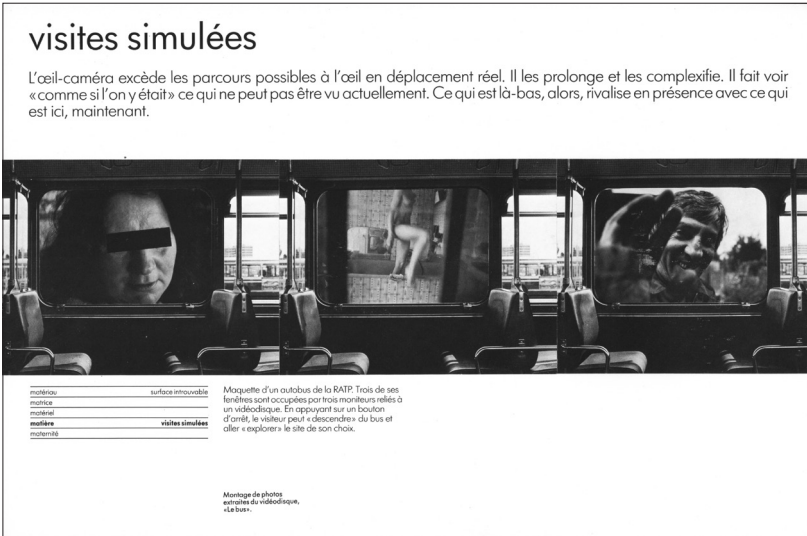
At the beginning of the '80s, as a teacher and as an artist, I pursued a conceptual approach to shooting, making use of photography and cinema, but above all of spatio-temporal protocols designed to challenge the doxa of creativity. "*Allez-y en Nikon [Go there in a Nikon]*", said a then-current advertising slogan, accompanied by a shot of space exploration. The camera is a vehicle – as it had been in the mid-nineteenth century for the photographic assignments of railway companies, in the 1930s for the American photographers of the FSA, and in the '60s and '70s for conceptual artists. "Shooting" refers to a succession of image-collections governed by a programme. In the videodisc this process would take on a concrete form. We spoke of photography or video "from the videodisc perspective" to signify the feedback effect of the interactive support on operations which, up until then, had taken their lead from printed books and the exhibition. Meanwhile, simultaneously, the idea came about to design interactivity on the models of the map, the book, and the exhibition. What I wanted to show was that, with videodiscs, and later with interactive video programs, the computer is not only able to build realities "out of nothing", but to organize real elements and allow access to them.

Production

In 1983, a competition was launched in Paris by two public institutions, the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel and the Centre National d'Études des Télécommunications, for "interactive scenarios for videodisc" of a documentary or fictional nature. This was meant to be innovative, since "no one (or almost no one) has ever written one!" but it required entrants to establish "questions" and "controls" which were stereotyped from the outset. The scenario that I proposed refused these parameters, and *The Bus*, which came about at the same time, radicalised this attitude by making the interactive diagram a constitutive part of a behaviour which itself was borrowed from the real – captured, as one does when shooting.

Virilio's warnings on the military nature of the initial videodisc impelled us to substantially misappropriate the technology, even though we were attracted by its novelty. Some years later, Gilles Deleuze would tell us that we needed to "subvert" control:

the screen's no longer a window or a door (behind which...), nor a frame or surface (within which...), but a computer screen on which images as "data" slip around ... Cinema ought to stop being 'cinematic', stop play-acting, and set up specific relationships with video, with electronic and



[Figure 10] *Inventaire*, site *Visites simulées*, recto (Source: Centre Pompidou, MNAM, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, photographs by Jean-Louis Boissier).

digital images, in order to develop a new form of resistance and combat the televisual function of surveillance and control.⁵

We have mentioned Gilles Deleuze, but not yet Jean-François Lyotard. Both were professors in our arts and philosophy faculty at Université Paris 8, which in 1980 moved from Vincennes to Saint-Denis. *Le Bus* was part of the project for an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, led by the Centre de Création Industrielle (CCI), which was initiated in 1982. Working alongside Frank Popper (also a Professor at Paris 8) on *Electra*, the historical exhibition concerning “electricity and electronics in twentieth-century art” at the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris,⁶ I was responsible for establishing a relationship with the CCI for works relating to design and architecture. I was then alerted to an exhibition that was being planned, and was considered as complementary to *Electra*, entitled *Matériaux nouveaux et création (New Materials and Creation)*. The head of the project at the CCI, Thierry Chaput, immediately invited me to contribute as a researcher in art with my university. Unexpected means became available to produce and exhibit our videodisc.

A videodisc can contain 54,000 images – analogue video images, but attached to a digital code. Designing a programme for videodisc means imagining

- 5 Gilles Deleuze, “Letter to Serge Daney: Optimism, Pessimism, and Travel”, in *Negotiations 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 76.
- 6 *Electra*, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 10 December, 1983–5 February, 1984. Directed by Frank Popper. Catalogue, 464 pages, French and English, designed by Jean-Louis Boissier.

a logic of relational sequences. Cinema (video), the chronophotographic sequence, the diaporama, are possible forms this might take. But our scenario relates strictly to the still image. A fictive line is determined, in a zone of this mixed suburb some distance from Paris, which contains the university. On one hand, for eight months during 1984, fourteen local performers, including twelve students, would go out “shooting”, identifying people, photographing them according to a formal protocol, but in very varied circumstances, and as amateurs. Many thousands of negatives were developed by the technical service at the Centre Pompidou. The tracking shot of the journey itself, of five minutes duration in either direction, was produced very professionally, with the camera mounted on an arm substantially above any parked cars. I made the chronophotographs describing the 120 descents from the bus myself, in one day, as an exhibition curator might take care of the wires that attach frames to a picture rail. Once the images were calibrated and the disk pressed, a small company called Imedia, who did research for the Direction Générale des Télécommunication, and were thus linked to the public sector, programmed the control of the piece, using completely new techniques, including those for the overlaying of text in the screens.

Inclusion in the Exhibition

When, in the fall of 1983, Jean-François Lyotard became the commissioner, naming it *Les Immatériaux* and, in an unprecedented operation, shifting its emphasis toward philosophy, the exhibition in preparation – he preferred to call it a “*manifestation*” – would conserve its essential constitutive elements. Lyotard’s approach would be to bring together many different players along with their specialisms, to listen to them, to integrate them, and to allow them a considerable freedom, because the concrete content, that which would be exhibited, would ultimately come from them. Setting out from the rich material thus identified, his conception of the exhibition would become more dense and took shape rapidly. Conversely, he would sometimes produce rather mundane illustrations.

If the exhibition is multiple, difficult to make out, then it succeeds in its primary aim of showing the difficulty of communication, as opposed to a certain modernist idea of “transparency”. This is a proposition for the transformation of the exhibition genre itself. It refuses the model, “inherited from the eighteenth century”, of the “story” that one follows from room to room, just as much as it refuses the alternative model (very much in vogue at the time) of a spectacle-exhibition that would absorb the visitor. It takes a radically unprecedented form: there are no picture rails, no partitions, but instead frames, grilles, with everything suspended from the ceiling. It is a kind of labyrinth, “a maze of situations organized by questions” wherein one cannot really go astray, but may very quickly get the feeling that one may never get

out. “The Garden of Forking Paths”, “The Library of Babel” – references to Borges are numerous in Lyotard’s project, and in the propositions of the architect Philippe Délis. The space fabricated may be that of a nocturnal garden, with lines of force, nooks and crannies, a few impasses and, in spite of it all, some perspectives. In *Les Immatériaux*, the visitor firstly sees an envelope, relations of closeness and depth, of interior and exterior, of transparency and opacity, of abstraction and legibility. There is a plan, a conceptual and linguistic matrix, but there is no path traced out in advance – the route must remain aleatory, and its plotting falls to each visitor. Sound, by immersing visitors in an enigmatic textual universe, deliberately prevents all communication between them: “Solitude is the price to be paid for complexity”, as Lyotard says.

It has been suggested that Lyotard’s work was first of all, and very powerfully, that of an editor. *Le Bus*, while it was being made, would find its place within the axis “Content” (*Matière*). A content which does not refer outside of itself, which is inexhaustible. This idea of a critical mass, associated with the database, was for me at the time an essential aesthetic motivation.

It would find an echo in the very nature of *Les Immatériaux*. The notion of interactivity – a new notion which began to appear in dictionaries in 1980 – would also be diffused throughout the exhibition. Being involved with the work of Thierry Chaput and Philippe Délis, I followed the rising fortunes of this term, which they made into a guiding principle. Lyotard accepted it and took it up on his own account. For the exhibition sought to be neither encyclopaedic nor artistic. It sought to be a “work of art”, a “constellation of images-objects, poetic and literary”, an “opera”. It would thus have a dramaturgy that would be explicitly designated as an “interactive dramaturgy”.⁷

What Happened Next

Le Bus would not have been made were it not for its inclusion in *Les Immatériaux*, and it proved to fit in well with the global concept constructed by Lyotard. The singular nature of the exhibition made possible works that had no claim to belong to contemporary art, even if they contributed something to it, whether in the field of image, text, sound, or – even more so – that of digital media. In both its modest dimensions and its aesthetics, our videodisc was significantly different from *Aspen Moviemap*, which demanded a great deal of work on Michael Naimark’s part to draw out its artistic valence, including the revelation of its hidden dimension of “micro-documentaries” descended from

7 Jean-Louis Boissier, “La question des nouveaux medias numériques”, in Bernadette Dufrene (ed.), *Centre Pompidou: 30 ans d’histoire* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2007), p. 374–391.

cinéma vérité, under the influence of Richard Leacock.⁸ Incidentally, Michael Naimark would be involved in 1985 in a prototype ordered by the Paris metro company RATP, which in the end was never taken forward.

In parallel with the design and realisation of *Le Bus*, during 1983–1985, and under the influence of this process, with the help of researchers and technicians at Paris 8, I made several videodisc essays: a walk on the north-south axis of Beijing in April 1983; a herbarium after Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1984–1985; and, above all, *Pékin pour mémoire (Peking for the Record)*, an installation presented as an artwork, reproducing the performance of shooting around Beijing in 1985, according to a geometrical itinerary and a fixed temporality. It would be shown at the 1986 Venice Biennial, but under an “Arts and Science” banner, in the section “Technology and Information” directed by Roy Ascott.

In 1988 I used the formula “dramaturgy of interactivity” as the title of a manifesto text, where I argued for “an aesthetics of the impossible”.⁹ In the same year, I made my first experiment for a Macintosh, with images made only of black and white pixels, organised with the software HyperCard: the installation *Album sans fin (Endless Album)*. It was exactly along the lines of *Le Bus* and *Les Immatériaux*, since it explored the rapprochement, if not the hybridization, of reading and spectacle, of book and cinema: how to place a filmic substrate into the pages of a book. My later research, such as the *Flora Petrinsularis* installation and CD-Rom produced by the ZKM¹⁰ would be largely devoted to this question, a formal and technological stake as much as a cultural and artistic investigation.

This way of not deciding on whether or not the work belonged to the artistic field would again be my approach in *Anthologie d’images de synthèse scientifiques (Anthology of Images of Scientific Syntheses)*, my videodisc for *Passages de l’image*, at the Centre Pompidou in 1990 – alongside pieces by Dan Graham and Bill Viola that were incontestably artworks, by way of works by Michael Snow and Chris Marker. And again for the *Revue virtuelle*, which I designed from 1991–1997, still at the Centre Pompidou, and whose mission was to bring to light the aesthetic potential of the digital.

8 Michael Naimark, “Aspen the Verb: Musings on Heritage and Virtuality”, 2006. Online: <http://www.naimark.net/writing/aspen.html>.

9 Jean-Louis Boissier, “Dramaturgie de l’interactivité”, in *La Relation comme forme* (Geneva: Mamco, 2009), p. 22–29.

10 Jean-Louis Boissier, “Deux manières de faire des livres”, *artintact 1* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1994).

The Problematic

In the context of the tension produced by the “digital revolution” that was announcing itself – unless the change of paradigm had already taken place and it was a matter of adapting everything to it – Lyotard was asked about interactivity, in the very year of *Les Immatériaux*, in the seminar “Art and communication”. He declared that, as far as the reception of artworks was concerned: “the demand for an activity or ‘interactivity’ ... proves that there should be more intervention, and that we are thus through with aesthetic feeling.” Faced with the futile dilemma between passive and active, he advocates the *passible*. He denounces “the retreat of the passibility by which alone we are fit to receive and, as a result, to modify and do, and perhaps even to enjoy”.¹¹ Such a passibility is necessary in order for us to recognize a work of *art*. “Interactional ideology” is the very opposite of this.

For some years now, I have kept a black book – but one with a pink cover – where I note down what seem to me to be symptoms of what I call the “ideology of interactivity”. In it we find seemingly simple phrases such as “At every moment, the viewer is free to ...”. Without holding to Lyotard’s nostalgic refusal, but sharing his suspicion, I have tried to develop a practice of interactive works that would make them passible – that is to say, a practice that would be concretely designed for us (for you).

Translated from the French by Robin Mackay.

11 Jean-François Lyotard, “Something like: Communication... Without Communication,” in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 117.