DIGITAL HORSESHOES
Discovering Asturias through *Donkijote.org*. Thoughts on the journey of an artist and a super-computerised donkey

by Roberta Bosco and Stefano Caldana

Selecting one project from amongst 95 candidates – all of them very interesting and complying with the requirements of the *Digital_LAB* open call of LABoral – was not an easy task. Yet, from the first moment, the proposal of Cristian Bettini a.k.a P.ankh stood out as one of the favourites. The competition was held in accordance with a fundamental aim: expand and consolidate LABoral's presence on the Internet, tightening the link between its presential and virtual activities, through a project carried out in both the physical space of the centre and on the internet.

Donkijote.org not only possesses an installative and a virtual dimension – as required by the competition – but it demonstrates a perfect combination of them both while also taking place across the territory of Asturias, bringing the centre – in both senses of the word – to the periphery.
The strength of *Donkijote.org* resides in its open and dynamic nature and in its multiple potentialities, arising directly from its interaction with "others," whether they are visitors to LABoral, residents of rural Asturias, lost surfers of the Internet or lovers of cartography.

The super-computerized donkey and its travelling companion together form a multidisciplinary work, a mixture of performance, telematics and media art, accessible through the Internet from any point on the planet, possessing an interactive exhibition space in LABoral.
It is not merely a work in movement and constant evolution; it is a work that finds in movement itself its reason for being, its drive, and its purpose. It is a work that reconciles nature and technology, creating a new synergy and a new rhythm between them, by travelling, searching and rediscovering the territory from an artistic point of view.

Minuto is a young Asturian donkey. Cristian Bettini a.k.a P.ankh (beyond the semantic evocation of the famous "punk" music-cultural movement, in Hindi *pankh* means heart and *ankh*, wings) is an Italian artist, based in Barcelona. Together they will go on four journeys across the land of Asturias, retransmitting daily experiences and unusual events, stories and legends, cultures and geographies, discovering hidden tales, re-evaluating forgotten places and mapping out new realities, through a system of artistic and personal parameters.

Minuto, the donkey, will carry the computer, the modem, the GPS and a system of solar panels that will supply the energy needed by the equipment. Cristian, the artist, will carry the cameras.
The animal will supply instinct and rhythm and the man, creativity, passion and logic. Together they will become an unusual interface between Asturias and the rest of the

world.

Their experiences and their travels will be recorded and retransmitted in the Gallery Platform 1 of LABoral and on the Internet, as well as being described and narrated in photographs and brief accounts that, together with the videos, will make up a dynamic online diary (**www.donkijote.org**) of the vicissitudes that they undergo. In this way, Asturias and its world can be lived through the experiences of a donkey, its consort and any other more or less sporadic companions that join them along the way.

The donkey and artist will be inseparable, travelling and sleeping together, alternating locations far from conventional routes with more familiar places, seeking shelter at night in small towns, schools, stables and private homes, where the artist will set up his tent. The people that they meet along the journey and those that want to become involved in their experiences –students, artist collectives, rural associations, tourists, or simply inhabitants of the region– will contribute to setting the course of their travels and tying invisible links between LABoral and its widespread public.

The idea is to give shape to different maps of Asturias, identifying ecological trouble spots, the places man has damaged the most, wi-fi connection zones, and many more. Nonetheless, the inspiration is not merely to perform ethnographic research but **to investigate new ways to live the technology, not only tightening the links between physical and virtual reality, but also creating the new reality required by the contemporary human being**.

In addition to supplying a vast amount of data and information on the territories through which they pass, **Minuto and Cristian will offer those who follow their travels the opportunity to get involved physically and virtually in the project**.
Virtually, on the web, participating in concrete decisions, making requests, or simply talking with them, enriching the journey with commentaries and recommendations.
Physically, at the installation situated in the Gallery Platform 1 of LABoral, where the public can contribute to the augmentation of a huge map of Asturias by adding their information, contributions and opinions.

Between journeys, donkey and artist will return to Gijón and settle in the ecological garden beside the art centre. Their stay at LABoral will give them the chance to deposit the specimens that they have collected along the way (for example soil and water samples to be analysed, with the objective of creating a contamination map), adding icons to the large map of Asturias exhibited in the gallery, involving the public in conferences and workshops on territory, hybrid reality and the conservation of the environment.

In this way, the web and the installation will both grow and evolve during the course of the journey thanks to the contributions of the artist and his followers and the interaction among them.

The donkey and the artist constitute a contemporary image, professed heir of the Spanish literary tradition. Nonetheless, this time it is not a question of battling

windmills; instead it is the struggle to appropriate technology, to liberate it from the false needs created by multinationals and to adapt it to the needs and rhythms of its users.

The journey is one of the major themes of our collective imagination, the subject of innumerable novels, movies and, of course, works of art. Since antiquity, the meeting between artists and the pleasure of discovering and describing locations has been extremely fruitful. In the 17th century, at the peak of the *Grand Tour*, the voyage of discovery of young aristocrats to the cradle of Mediterranean culture led to the birth of a genuinely new genre, which includes works by artists of the stature of Turner, Ruskin, Delacroix or Gauguin.

In large part, the history of man is the history of his migration. Since the time of the first hominids who left behind the ancient African continent, passing through biblical and mythological exodus, until the conquest of space and mass tourism, the primordial aim remains the same, meanwhile the way of traveling went through greats changes, that have been multiplied by the introduction of new technologies in everyday life.

By definition, the Internet is a sea of content. The consequent analogy, that has given rise to a whole vocabulary of surfers and navigators, has inspired many artists to launch their own journeys through this medium, granting places, discoveries and emotions immortality on the Internet. **We are always talking about diaries, though in digital form, from the first examples of hypertext diaries to the birth of the blog, they have provided unexpected possibilities.**

Back in 1997, Philip Pocock, a pioneer of media travel, wrote a digital and interactive diary inspired by a book written in 1740 by an ancestor traveller. Pocock recorded his travels through the Arctic Circle, the Tropic of Cancer and Ecuador[1], remote places that Internet users can visit without leaving their homes.

Three hundred years after James Boswell recounted his travels to the Hebrides in *A Journal to the Western Isles*, the artists Nina Pope and Karen Guthrie followed in his footsteps, both really and virtually, recording it in *A Hypertext Journal*[2], a classic work for the evolution of art on the Internet.

For enthusiasts of pre-Columbian civilisations there is *Liquid Mexico*[3], the digital journey of Víctor Martínez to the mythical lake upon which was born the capital of the Aztec empire. It immerses the visitor in a virtual expedition to a place that no longer exists and that yet, nonetheless, stimulates reflection on the past and the present of a city overwhelmed by demographic growth and environmental imbalance.

Those who prefer the serenity of river travel can opt for the poetic atmosphere created by Joseph Lefèvre and Martine Koutnouyan who, in *Au bord du fleuve*[4],

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[1] Philip Pocock, Florian Wenz, Udo Noll & Felix Huber, *A Description of the Equator and Some Other Countries*: http://aporee.org/equator

[2] Nina Pope & Karen Guthrie, *A Hypertext Journal*:
http://www.somewhere.org.uk/hypertext/journal/index.html

[3] Víctor Martínez, *Liquid Mexico*: http://www.bereda.com/losos/L-M

[4] Joseph Lefèvre & Martine Koutnouyan, *Au bord du fleuve*: http://www.turbulence.org/Works/lefevre

present their travels up the St. Lawrence River in Québec though images, sounds and brief textual fragments, that the visitor can reconstruct by creating his or her own journey.

The journals of the American explorer John Wesley Powell, written during the first expedition down the Colorado river in 1869, serve as a point of departure for *Voyage into the Unknown*[5], a journey somewhere between reality and fiction by Roderick Coover, that invites the visitor to explore a wide digital panorama in which can be found memoires of the expedition, drawing from the period, contemporary routes and journeys that heralded the discovery and development of the American continent.

A journey between the real and the virtual even managed to win a Golden Nica award at Ars Electronica in 2005. Through the secular tradition of origami (the Japanese art of paper cutting and folding), *The Road Movie or Origaminization Road Movie*[6] materialises a journey that the members of the Japanese collective Exonemo took through their own country in a bus named *Moblab*, equipped with webcams that – at a constant pace and from different perspectives – recorded images of the landscape that were subsequently posted on the internet and added to the silhouette of a bus. These pictures are now available in pdf format on the project's web page so that navigators can download them, crop them and edit them to create their own original souvenir of the art work and journey from which they came.

The examples are many and varied. Nonetheless, unlike these similar projects, *Donkijote.org* offers the public the chance to share the exploration of Asturias, its places of interest, its stories and contradictions, in nearly real time with barely any mediation. Above all, it provides the opportunity to become involved in different ways in the very course of the journey.
A voyage of discovery with the most ancient vehicle and the most up-to-date technology, powered by the sun, eternal source. Kilometres walked that translate into hours of digital travel through the far reaches of the Internet.

At a time when new communication technologies have irreversibly modified our vital and social experience, **Donkijote.org presents itself as an artistic tool, both sophisticated and simple at the same time, provoking uncertainty, raising questions and, without a doubt, establishing a new relationship between LABoral and its surroundings, the ones closest to it as well as the most remote**. In conclusion, in the words of Proust, "The true voyage of discovery does not consist in the finding new paths but in the opening of new eyes."

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[5] Roderick Coover, *Voyage into the Unknown*: http://www.unknownterritories.org
[6] Exonemo, *The Road Movie*: http://exonemo.com/RM

Herraduras Digitales is the curatorial text of Roberta Bosco and Stefano Caldana for the exhibition *Donkijote.org* (23/09/2009-10/01/2010) at LABoral Centro de Arte y Creación Industrial (Gijon). http://www.laboralcentrodearte.org/es/exposiciones/donkijote.org/
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