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The World of Net-art and its Histories : Inclusions, Exclusions and DIY Strategies

Surprisingly few texts, among the ever-increasing literature on Media Arts, have as yet been dedicated to any historical dimensions of the emerging form of Internet-art. Of these, most are on the Internet itself. Interestingly, while the body of Internet-art work produced to date has grown to proportions well beyond the possibility of summarizing it by any simple chronology, all the proposed histories seem very similar and to present similar types of lacks. Thus, over the brief period of existence of net-art some kind of selection process has already begun according to some kinds of conventions of inclusion and exclusion. It is then a most opportune time to take a look at the dynamics of this selection process and to scrutinize the mechanisms of construction of the existing stories of net-art. To examine how these stories are told and how they come to be told in particular ways.

For such analysis it is interesting to regard net-art as a socio-cultural phenomenon rather than in its meaning or role within the frame of Western Art History. Sociologist Howard Becker's approach to art through the "art world" to which it belongs can here be useful. "Art worlds", according to Becker, "consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art" (Becker, 1982, p 34). His concept refers to a pattern of collective, cooperative activity among a group of people who recognize each other as members by their tacit participation in commonly accepted conventions. It is from this interdependent set of practices, says Becker, that art works get their value. It is not in themselves that they have

value qualities, but rather through their common interpretation and recognition by a world of like-thinking people (Becker, 1995, on-line). Eventually, Becker says, an art world "creates a history which shows how it has from its beginnings produced work of artistic merit and how a steady line of development has led inevitably from those beginnings to the present situation" (Becker, 1982, p 346). Thus most histories, Becker believes, tend to deal with winners. He proposes a series of vantage points from which to consider artworlds and their evolution including the conventions governing artistic forms, the resources available for artistic production, the systems of distribution and of aesthetic and critical discourse formation, the classification into categories of members, among others. He also suggests a theory of reputation through which to think about artforms. Such an approach that leaves aesthetic judgment aside can help uncover some of the socio-cultural processes at work in the narratives of the intertextual set of definitions and histories of net-art which have come into being and gained acceptance as net-art evolves.

Net-art and its World(s)

The definition of net-art, or web-art as some refer to it, is a subject of constant debate. This is largely due to the fact that the form and its art world are in constant dynamic transformation in dialogue with the speed of technological change in the computer software and hardware industries on which they depend. Its development is linked to a variety of aesthetic motivations, from artistic experimentation with new technologies and the thrill of creating a "new art form" to the aspiration to marginal and alternative realms of activity independent from the systems of established art, various kinds of activism, and more recently critical engagement with the medium itself and its nature. Such diversity is for a large part due to the conditions of development of the field.

Art on the net is almost as old as the net itself. The phenomena of net-art arose between the early and mid- nineteen nineties as a result and in reaction to the growth of personal computing, the evolution of the Internet outside of the realm of the military-research-academic complex which it served in the eighties, and the introduction of powerful web browsers. It emerged in a large number of geographic locations, mostly of the Western World - United States, Canada, Australia, England, Germany, Austria, France, Belgium, the Netherlands - but also in numerous parts of Eastern Europe (Russia, Poland, Slovenia, Hungary, Latvia, Estonia...) out of the activity of a wide variety of people, groups and centers of the most diverse backgrounds and disciplines such as media arts, media activism, cultural criticism, academia, anarchism, hypertext fiction, techno-hype, cyber-culture, cyberfeminism, computer programming, computer engineering, and hacking, among others.

Because of the connective communication nature of the Internet, all of the geographically and ideologically dispersed experimentation soon organized itself into a series of (usually) intersecting virtual and physical networks and communities. And, with greater speed than any other medium before it, net-art has been able to gain recognition by the established contemporary art world. In addition to various new forms of distribution such as on-line festivals and galleries, almost from the very beginning venues as prestigious as Documenta, the Venice Biennale, the Whitney, the MOMA or the Walker Art Centre, to name but a few, have been presenting, acquiring and commissioning net-art. As a result a new class of art professionals, the net-art curators, net-art theorists and critics and net-art journalists, has developed around the artists and makers. Through this "process of mobilizing people to join in a cooperative activity on a regular basis" as Becker puts it, net-art has then succeeded during its brief existence in forming an ever-growing net-art world (Becker, 1982, p 311).

This net-art world, then, has developed and revolves around a large variety of individuals, collectives, groups, centers, events, conferences, festivals and institutions. However, of this multitude only a few, often always the same ones, have become known or highlighted. The emerging world of net-art is thus already being criticized for becoming institutionalized along the same hierarchical model as the established world of contemporary art.

This selection process, in the particular case of net-art, is to a large extent driven by the prominence of the exposure and distribution of work - of net-art as or documentation about it - on the Internet itself, as it is the principal environment of all the activities of the net-art world and the principal starting point for any historical research into the area.

Access to Net-art: An Organized Network of Manifestation and Documentation

The fact that most net-art activity and documentation about it is located on the Internet represents for the most enthusiastic members of the net-art world the utopic promise of total transparency of information, of completely democratic accessibility, globally available free and 24-7 to anyone world-wide having access to a computer with an Internet connection, in comparison to other artistic media and their hierarchical gated systems. Both net-art and the discourse surrounding it do not however escape hierarchical patterns of organization, some Internet-specific, others reminiscent of past art worlds.

Becker's version of the theory of reputation proposes that the reputations of artists, works, and venues result from the collective activity of art worlds. Indeed, just as the members who collectively come together in the world of net-art tend to form new hierarchies of worlds within worlds, so do the net-art interventions and documentation about them also tend to fall into hierarchical organizational patterns

of intersecting worlds and networks. Thus, in actuality, the ever-increasing material on the Internet is in no way equally accessible.

The primary sources for any contact with net-art are the net-art works themselves, often remaining on-line indefinitely. While many of the works ever created are still on-line somewhere in cyberspace, they are not all evident to locate. With the net-art world's tendency to develop along a more traditional hierarchical model of art production and distribution, certain sites have become known "nodes" or "hubs" for net-art, belonging to self-referencing loop of links, such as certain recognized virtual galleries, the net-art sections of some museums of contemporary art, the sites of well-known festivals and reputed collectives. Because of their more and more established reputations, they tend to appear as the top "hits" on search engines and to be increasingly considered as the best and most typical examples of net-art. Independent net-art initiatives by individuals or groups will basically be accessible only if the makers succeed in sufficiently promoting their work over the net-art world's known channels of information distribution or if they possess the technical knowledge to specifically design their sites in such a way as to attract surfers. Thus the sites of lone creators will often only surface through long patient searches across mysterious cyber-locations.

Secondary sources of information on net-art are also abundant on the Internet, a proliferation certainly cultivated by the facility for anyone to publish anything in cyberspace. These range from solitary artists' statements and manifestos, to curatorial texts, to net-art and event information sites, to electronic newsletters and announcements, to net-journalism and criticism in a wide variety of electronic publications, to academic research, and to discussion lists and groups as well as on-line archives.

Artists' statements can often be found accompanying lone net-art works or on artist's home pages, but also in the on-line "catalogues" of on-line exhibitions

and their venues, where net-art curatorial statements also frequently figure. Some of the best-known regular on-line exhibition venues include, for example: the Walker Art Center's Gallery 9 (<<http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/>>), Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal (<<http://media.macm.qc.ca/homea.htm>>), Whitney Museum of American Art Links (<<http://www.echonyc.com/~whitney/weblinks/main.html>>), Dia Center for the Arts Artists' Projects for the Web (<<http://www.diacenter.org/rooftop/webproj/index.html>>) or ZKM (<<http://www.zkm.de>>).

Other resources for artists' and curators' writings are the sites of periodic or regular net-art events and festivals which also provide extensive information on the events themselves (for example: Ars Electronica (<<http://www.aec.at/>>)). Net-art galleries - such as Turbulence (<<http://www.turbulence.org/>>) or Adaweb (<<http://adaweb.walkerart.org/>>) - are also repositories for textual information on net-art. As well, the on-line sites of research media labs such as Ljudmila (<www.ljudmila.org>), or once again ZKM (<<http://www.zkm.de>>), will usually contain a great deal of documentation on their activities and artists.

Journalistic material and articles of all sorts on net-art are present on the Internet in a variety of on-line publications which have sprung up since the mid-nineties. Some of these are specifically dedicated to net-art and net culture or digital and media issues. Paris-based Synesthesie (<www.synesthesie.com>) as well as Hanover's Telepolis (<www.heise.de/tp/>) are among the oldest. Other e-zines which have been around for some time include: Revue électronique du CIAC (<www.ciac.ca/magazine>), Archée (<<http://archee.qc.ca/info.htm>>), NeT-ArT (<<http://www.netart.it>>), Intelligent Agent (<www.intelligent-agent.com>). Most host complete archives of all of their back-issues.

Academic articles and research related to net-art and net culture also appear on the Net in specialized on-line scholarly journals such as Arthur and Marielouise Kroker's C-Theory (<<http://www.ctheory.com/>>) or MIT's Leonardo Electronic

Almanac (<<http://mitpress.mit.edu/e-journals/LEA/>>) as well as more general academic e-journals.

Much net-art and culture discourse has developed through on-line mailing and discussion lists which evolved out of the early nineties artists' BBSs like The Well, Echo or The Thing. Among many such lists, today Nettime (<www.nettime.org>), Syndicate (<www.v2.nl/east/>) and Rhizome (<www.rhizome.org>) are certainly the best known and most often referred to. These are extremely lively on-line discussion and information forums involving artists, activists, curators, theoreticians and journalists from all over the world. Though their lists are all at least slightly moderated (a notorious subject of discord in on-line discussions) and their databases at least slightly filtered, they represent the largest archives of net-art related material on the Internet, often featuring not only records of their own activity but also of other organizations and individuals, such as Rhizome's ArtBase. They thus participate in an important way in shaping a certain network of inter-related net-art activity and information with its nodes and hubs, centers and peripheries.

With its various, albeit "light", gateways and filters, however, this collective network of interdependent information in itself mirrors, by the hierarchical tendency of its organization, the hierarchical social patterns and the power relations, of the collective, cooperative activity of the members of the net-art world in Becker's sense. It also provides the source material for the existing stories and histories of the phenomenon of net-art which in turn tend to reproduce hierarchical models.

In spite of their similarity due to their predominantly common source material, and even if they have a tendency to reference one another regularly, these first existing histories of net-art are nevertheless instructive and important as records of certain aspects of the evolution of the phenomenon of net-art. However,

as they preserve certain moments of the development of the new art form and of the formation of its art world, in the absence of other histories, they are instrumental in generating a certain "official" history and a certain "official" art world of net-art with its new distribution of labor, its new star-system of reputation and its new conventions. Interestingly, considering the diverse range of disciplinary and ideological origins of the form, the predominant historical perspective of existing histories of net-art remains the vantage point of Western art history. A new economy of inclusions and exclusions is thus increasingly associated with net-art. This economy does not leave much room for a whole variety of outsiders like the artists relegated to secondary status or the non-artistic members of the net-art community such as hackers, programmers, activists, etc. As well, it makes it difficult to accommodate linguistic difference or artistic practices which do not belong to the Euro-American artistic tradition. Thus, the net-art world shapes within the "global" realm of cyberspace a map of its activity with new real and virtual borders, centers and peripheries, most notably of economic, geographic and linguistic nature.

Missing Links

A focus on what is missing, on exclusions rather than inclusions, can provide a useful critical lens for the analysis of the territories constructed by existing net-art stories. Exclusion applies to any participant in some way productively involved with the phenomenon of net-art, individual or collective, who does not make it into the mainstream star-system of the net-art world which is recorded by existing histories. There are numerous motives for exclusion, among which artistic, occupational, technological, economic, geographic, linguistic, cultural and ideological.

Artistic exclusion is based on the net-art world (or any other art world) not recognizing the artistic value of net-art related work (be it creative, textual, curatorial) for reasons as varied as style, technique, subject-matter, reputation, and thus not acknowledging it in existing exhibitions, documentation, criticism, etc. Occupational exclusion dismisses the non-artistic net-art practitioners such as programmers, hackers, geeks, webmasters, who though often crucial for net-art activity are hard to incorporate into the narrative of Western artistic tradition.

Technological exclusion discriminates on the basis of the type of technology used like considering work which is produced with equipment which is not state-of-the-art as unworthy of which prevails in many areas of media art.. It also excludes the public using older model computers (such as most of the Third World...) perhaps involuntarily, from participation in the universe of net-art work using the latest web-design gizmos like Java or RealMedia. Technological exclusion often goes hand in hand with what I would call economic exclusion. Economic exclusion, typically stemming from the Western world, does not acknowledge the economic situation of individuals and especially nations as a determining factor for the shape and presence of net-art work. In the case of net-art, economic conditions are of great importance, determining Internet speed, reliability and access. They also determine the situation of State or private funding which will have an important bearing on the type and quantity of equipment, the number of members and time available for work, the ability to hire a webmaster who could ensure the reputation of an organization by adequate up-dating as well as exposure of a site on the Internet. For obvious reasons of world distribution of wealth, economic exclusion is thus often geographic.

Geographic exclusion, however, is more than anything, on the Internet, linguistic. Indeed, with the main language of the Internet being English, net-art activity using other languages, be they of the first or third world, gets relegated to

the periphery. France is a case in point. Indeed, because French culture is not inclined to English translation much of its thriving activity never makes it into the "official" histories of net-art which are predominantly written in English, even if by non-anglophones. If relatively economically powerful France can barely sustain its presence on the world map of net-art, one can just imagine the situation of struggling nations of exotic tongues such as for example India or Thailand or the countries of the ex-Soviet Union.

Though linguistic exclusion could be called cultural, by cultural exclusion here I have a much broader spectrum in mind. For lack of terminology, by cultural I refer to nationality and race, but also gender and sexual orientation, I also refer to culture as pertaining to beliefs and theories, in other words ideological, political and religious identity. Here pages of examples come to mind starting from the different conceptions of art of different cultures which function in completely different systems than the dominant Western contemporary art aesthetic of official net-art history. Other examples include the lack of emphasis on the activist or ideological dimension of certain practices in existing net-art histories or their absence from them altogether. Cyberfeminist practices are a good example of such a fate. All such marginalized, or simply ignored practices tend to fall out and even disappear from the "mainstream" discussions and definitions of the net-art world and hence to not make it even in passing into the "official" histories of the form.

Such exclusions and others offer interesting alternative perspectives to reflect upon a variety of questions relative to the historiography of net-art such as: why the majority of net-art histories seem to somehow predominantly take place in the U.S.A., England, Germany and the Netherlands? why the net-art practices which make it into the existing histories of the form seem to be the ones most compatible with contemporary Western art traditions? why available histories of net-art emphasize artistic concept over technological development? why are they

not more situated in relation to the evolution of commercial Internet software and hardware and commercial web design? why net-art stories are seldom told from the point of view of minority cultures of national or linguistic or gender or sexual nature? In addition to the insight they can bring to such questions, such categories of exclusion can serve as starting points for the construction of needed "other" more diverse or more specific histories of net-art that would contribute to a broader appreciation of the phenomenon particularly for interested parties on the outside trying to look in.

In this paper I have explored the selection processes at work in the available histories of the relatively recent phenomenon of net-art through a sociological approach to art based on the idea of an art world. With such a framework, questions about the evolution of the emerging art form become questions about the development not just of the resulting artistic practices but also of the whole world of cooperative activity which makes the form possible, with its conventions, organizational patterns and distribution of labor. Issues of organization, reputation and conventions as well as different relational categories of exclusion then provide vantage points to think about the formation of the historical discourses of net-art which are instrumental for imagining strategies to incorporate the missing participants and practices into the official or alternative chronologies of the emerging form. With net-art more than any other artform to date this is of particular relevance because of the nature of the Internet medium where independent initiatives can for the moment, if carefully planned, make a big difference in the big picture. The plagiarist.org IY ironic and playful project depicts the current situation of the history of net-art quite accurately:

Net art critics are short on time, and having them spend it doing interviews seems to have created a new Art Star System - a whole new Art World accidentally spawned as we were fleeing the old one! ...and look what it's wrought; overworked critics, unhappy net artists... this won't do....

At plagiarist.org, we propose a new approach, as part of the Plagiarist "New Millenium Disorder" project: The Interview Yourself, or IY-IY-IY-IY-IY Project. It's easy! Just interview yourself, and post your interview to the usual mailing lists (nettime, rhizome, syndicate, etc.); and of course, Plagiarist will gleefully mirror them here as well (use our handy Interview Submission form).

Think of the benefits... it subverts the Net Art World Institution, and makes everyone a star.... or, uh, makes nobody a star, depending on how you want to look at it... it finally gives the interviewees a chance to answer the kinds of questions they *wish* they'd be asked about their work... it gives shy people who sometimes clam up with real interviewers the chance to finally open up in an interview... and, it saves wear and tear on critics and journalists! Concerned that the tough questions won't get asked? Not to worry; IY-IY-IY-IY-IY doesn't preclude critics from doing interviews, just sort of er, open sources the interview process. (we at plagiarist.org just love working "open source" in anywhere we can...)

So, hop to it everybody! (you too, critics!) you've got an interview to prepare - History Awaits!

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