

The Ups and Downloads of Net Art

Nam June Paik, the founding father of Video Art and unflagging guru of things medial, imagined a future in which each artist would run his own private TV station. His was the paradoxical dream, already envisioned by the historical avant-garde movements, of a non-objective, relational art, one that could be addressed directly to its viewers without the need for institutional mediators. That prophecy lives on in a collage he dedicated to Ray Johnson, the American pioneer of the 60s Mail Art movement. Paik's reference to Johnson makes the episode even more interesting when we consider that Mail Art — which promoted the direct exchange of artworks via a worldwide network, the postal system — is now considered one of Net Art's significant harbingers. Contemporary art's fascination with the tools of communication is evidenced by countless experiments that have characterized many artists' output over the past three decades, from performances involving the telephone or fax machine to those pointing even higher, to satellite technology. Due to the ephemeral nature of these unusual and often costly "events," many risked disappearing from the history of art without leaving a trace. The connective possibilities offered by today's telematics, which reached a planetary scale with the advent of the World Wide Web, have established a new landscape within the contemporary arts, characterized by the progressive integration of communication technology.

The digital codification of information allows a cost-efficient transfer of texts, images, and sounds to any part of the world, making the Internet a champion of mass communication, one that has changed the habits and psychology of our entire society. The artists' projects that make use of the Net represent, once again, an attempt to analyze the medium, to deconstruct and question it, to take advantage of its current possibilities and prefigure future developments.

We have come to call this phenomenon *Net Art*, the designation now adopted by wide consensus on the part of the participating artists themselves in their ongoing critical discussion of the nascent genre. The most commonly held misunderstanding is that Net Art simply involves the digitization and distribution of preexisting artworks, such as painting or sculpture, via Internet. This now common practice can be seen in the websites of both single artists and the great institutions, whose virtual galleries offer a sampling of their permanent collections and temporary exhibitions. True works of Net Art, on the other hand, are created expressly for the viewer's online experience, necessitating the use of a dedicated browser program running on a PC that's hooked up to the

Internet via modem. These projects necessarily make use of common programming languages — HTML for a start — that produce two of the new medium’s defining characteristics, the interface and hypertext. These two instruments function as “interpreters” mediating between the user (or viewer) and his language and the computer and its language, making for a more intuitive or user-friendly experience. And yet, as we shall soon see, it is precisely these two defining characteristics that artists have chosen to challenge by using them in new and experimental ways.

To trace the recent origins of Net Art, we must return to the early 90s, back before the birth of the Web, when online communication took place over the small-scale local networks called BBSs (Bulletin Board System). These were to be the early breeding grounds for such pioneering high-tech artists as the German Wolfgang Stahele, whose *The Thing* (1991) was a BBS conceived as an experiment in “social sculpture” à la Joseph Beuys. With the advent of the Web, it would become an internationally accepted Mecca of the artistic community on the Internet. Other such early think tanks in the nascent world of Net Art were mailing lists like Rhizome, Nettime and Syndicate, which provided artists the chance to communicate real-time by Email, presenting their own artworks and ideas in an arena that encouraged discussion, feedback, and immensely significant collaborative possibilities.

The first true Web projects, like Antoni Muntadas’s *The File Room* (1994) or Jenny Holzer’s *Please Change Beliefs* (1994) aimed primarily at taking advantage of the Net’s interactive possibilities. Such early works were characterized by an attitude of enthusiasm for and urgent curiosity about the new medium. The “archival” structure, which characterized many of the first works in the early 90s, emphasized the ease with which digital information can be exchanged and manipulated, stored and shared. In analyzing the work of artists such as Jodi, who came online in 1995, it is apparent how this attitude was already changing. The HTML code now faced deconstruction as artists lined up to debunk the technology so that we might better read between the lines. Above all, they were interested in evoking the anxiety generated by information overload. These were the beginnings of a more critical approach to the real possibilities of the World Wide Web and the false myths that accompanied its explosive popularity.

Many of the artworks produced in the second half of the last decade were, in fact, tinged by a deepening sense of skepticism about the Web’s much-vaunted democracy and the underlying power of the corporate high-tech world. The artists sought to alert the user/viewer to risks involved in the passive acceptance of this new technology. Organized support for a decidedly low-tech, process-oriented, performative, conceptual approach characterized much of Eastern Europe’s Net Art scene

through the mid 90s, for example. Artists like Vuk Cosic and Alexei Shulgin worked at the practical and critical definition of the movement not just by producing artworks but by organizing a series of conferences and less formal get-togethers on the Internet and elsewhere. (The first of these, “Net.art per se,” took place in Trieste in 1996.) Even then, artists were beginning to speak of a new cultural subject, the so-called “network operator”: no longer a solitary artist but that person who activates and coordinates new contexts for exchange and group creativity. The Internet-based artistic experiments also seemed to de-localize the production and consumption of the works, posing the possibility of a truly “global” art.

One interesting trend that emerged in the late 90s has seen artists engaged in the creation of alternative software. These experiments are designed to challenge one of the Web’s most deeply rooted conventions, that by which all information is laid out on virtual, scrollable “pages,” as if the Internet were an enormous multimedial book to be leafed through. Projects like Maciej Wisniewski’s *Netomat* (1999) or Mark Napier’s *Feed* (2001) are just two examples of how artists of astonishing technical competence are attempting to “rethink” the Internet, to demonstrate its true potential by surmounting artificially imposed limitations.

Net Art is at present in the early phases of that inevitable process of institutional and art historical inclusion. Museums like the New York MoMA, the Tate Gallery in London, or the San Francisco SFMoMA have opened their doors to that which seemed the artistic avant-garde’s last frontier, purchasing artworks, organizing online exhibitions, and commissioning new projects. The reaction of the Net Art community, which foresaw — and in part feared — this inevitability, was immediate and heterogeneous. Apart from the predictable, almost ritualistic accusations of the genre’s demise (having been stripped of its avant-garde status), recently there have also been some interesting exchanges concerning the possible developments in the field of online art, its exhibition, conservation, and commerce. This willingness to encourage introspective analysis, far from being a self-referential exercise in wheel-spinning, is yet another confirmation of the immense potential of a medium like the Internet, which offers its practitioners valuable opportunities informed by continued collaboration, dialog, and interdisciplinary exchange.

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