to the new communicative and creative phenomena, in a world of diffused power and proliferating images.

Notes

[1] DEBORD, Guy. *La sociedad del espectáculo.* Buenos Aires: La Marca, 1995 (1967) (epígrafe I)

[2] Ver BREA, José Luis. *La era postmedia: Acción comunicativa, prácticas (post) artísticas y dispositivos neomediales.* Salamanca: Centro de Arte de Salamanca, 2002

[3] In this same publication, Marisa Gómez muses over the new space-time concepts in Cyberculture.

[4] See LIPOVETSKI, Pilles. *Els temps hipermoderns.* Breus. Barcelona: CCCB, 2007

[5] WENDERS, Wim. La memoria de las imágenes. Textos de la emoción, la lógica y la verdad. Valencia: La mirada, 2000

[6] Ver JULIER, Laurent. *L'écran post-moderne. Un cinema de l'allusion et du feu d'artifice.* Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997

[7] SERGE, Daney.*Cine, arte del presente.* [en línea].   Disponible   en: <http://www.trenensombras.com> [Consulta: febrero 2008]

[8] QUINTANA, Angel. "Formatos innobles". *La Vanguardia* [Barcelona], 13 de septiembre de 2007

[9] Ib. Id.

[10] Ver el artículo de Paloma Gonzáles Díaz en esta misma publicación.

[11] CASACUBERTA, David. *Creación Colectiva: En internet el creador es el público.* Barcelona: Gedisa, 2003

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■ ■ ■

Art and Politics in the Web: Towards a Critical Culture

[Gabriela BERTI]

"The aesthetic processual paradigm has ethical-political implications, because talking about creation is talking about responsibility towards what is created."
(F. Guattari, Chaosmosis, p.132)

Circumstances

The term net.art first appeared around 1994 and its paternity is generally attributed to the artist Vuk Cosic who, while mocking "labels," said that he had bumped by chance into a name on the Web that best defined what he had been doing for some time. Cosic had received an email in which all that he could understand, amidst several ASCII characters, were the words: net.art. Since then, the term net.art has been circumscribed to those artistic practices carried out in the Web.

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Beyond Cosic's joke, repeated in various texts that deal with the issue (including this one), this type of art has been known under many different monikers: net.art, New Media, digital art, art in the net, Browser Art, Web Art, etc., surrounded by their corresponding share of nominalist disputes (which we shall not deal about here).

If we had to characterise net.art we could say that it is technological-art, but this is nothing new in art history. The Dadaists, back in the 1920s, already made use of new technologies (as were available in their era) to produce art; then came such relevant figures as Nam June Paik and so many others. Therefore, its roots feed from a solid artistic tradition (especially that of avant-garde movements such as Fluxus, Situationism, etc.). Nevertheless, it is striking that the term net.art feels the need to justify itself stating, despite its direct link to technology, that it is an artistic form as such. Indeed, we feel no need to talk about Dance Art or Paint Art, as their "artisticness" is taken for granted, but we somehow do feel a need to explain that net.art, is not only technology but also art.

The institutional acceptance of the impact of technologies in art occurred in 1968 when the ICA in London devoted an entire exhibit, "Cybernetics Serendipity" [1] to this theme. Having said this, since the 1990s, the progress of new information technologies and the influence of cyberculture have started to project themselves in art. As a result, the interests of certain artists have undergone radical shifts in terms of the instruments of their art, as well as the strategies and ideas that they implement. From this point onwards, we can identify a form of art that is specific to the Web, and thus, we can define a work of net.art as a work of art presented through a series of interactive resources, which exists in and for the Internet (losing its characteristics if it is rendered off-line)[2].

The piece by the MTAA collective "Simple Net. Art Diagram" presents a graphic and concise consideration on the place of net.art.

It clearly illustrates that net.art is a space of encounter and connection between spectators-users of art, the artist and technology; if this does not occur then the piece does not work as such.

Consequently, the technological medium that it employs does not define net.art. It is more a state of relation that organises multiple results, according to their level of interactivity and connectivity. Net.art influences productive processes and strategies, as well as aesthetic propositions; it modulates the creative act as a use value rather than an exchange value. It therefore relates to the practical deployment of relations and the experience of enjoyment, to the establishment of a common sense concerning the stale exercise of art as an exchange value and its own desire to reflect the world.

The Beginnings of the Best Possible Scenario

Ever since the appearance of the first works of net.art, several heterogeneous artistic propositions emerged in the Web confronting political and social aspects through a simultaneously creative and critical perspective. Clearly, the Web has revealed itself as an excellent scenario for the exercise of social criticism through the prism of art. We associate the Web with values and ideas such as community (global), cooperation, participation, collaboration, processability, interdisciplinarity, interactivity, ubiquity, etc. These values of the digital world (shared with the visionary paradigms of historic avant-gardes) represent an excellent breeding ground for social criticism, as well as for a critical perception of the art world. And they do to such an extent that among the artists that work in and with the Web, there is a will to promote their own creative spaces as fertile ground for horizontal communication and the autonomous, independent and alternative manifestations that transform the relation with the public, stripping its passive role, involving the spectator in the reflection, action and active participation. Therefore, net.art would

seem to place itself alongside the Internet's democratic utopia, based on three generally accepted axes: anti-institutional spirit; overcoming physical barriers and last but not least, inverted circulation and distribution.

1-Anti-institutional spirit (participation, interdisciplinarity). The e-revolution embodied by the Internet implies that its decentralised space is an environment that fulfils the precepts of democratic universality, as it operates with a certain degree of horizontality and universality of access. Furthermore, once inside anyone can become an actor capable of intervening with a unique voice, transforming creation into a participative, person-to-person, activity that bestows power onto those previously relegated to the rank of "consumers." The digital instruments that are available to us all enable us to produce high value added contents in the field of image, video, sound and text, traditionally reserved to their, up to now, unique producers: the institutions devoted to the arts and knowledge. Moreover, if the Internet is the proper forum for net.art, and considering that, the former is essentially participative and interdisciplinary; therefore works of net.art are in themselves transformative as they contain a counter-institutional spirit. We generally consider art institutions as non-participative and prone to establish barriers between those who take part and have access to them and those who do not.

Works of net.art have no need for museums or art institutions to present themselves, so much so that they rarely function in such spaces, thus maintaining a certain sense of independence from institutional bureaucracies. Furthermore, net.art also excludes the figures of art collectors and consumers who seek private and exclusive enjoyment. We are used to admiring contemplative works of art as finished systems, whereas works of net.art require the presence of an active spectator, who must also act as user for the piece to function properly. Furthermore such art lacks all

meaning when seen hanging from a wall. Each person that "enters" a work of net.art can "own it" by activating it, therefore access is also democratised and value is suppressed as a symbol of art.

2- Overcoming physical boundaries (ubiquity, global community, participation). No boundary can contain the multinodal communication and information processing power of the Web, which is capable of establishing limitless communications between all of its nodes. The Web is a space, which given its very nature, acquires the characteristics of an autonomous, transnational and transclass public sphere, (the new instruments of power that rely on the digital world and the internet provide greater factual possibilities for class insurrection, speeding it up and reducing distances with respect to the powers that be). The strategic instruments of production and distribution create a parallel universe to that of traditional institutions. Institutions established on powers acquired in the physical space, because in a technical sense, as John Gilmore [3] proclaims, the flows on the internet decipher censorship (or intercepts) as if it were a technical glitch, automatically discovering an alternative route for the propagation of messages. This particular condition of the Internet, specifically from the point of view of net.art, implies that it is possible to eliminate art's boundaries, as does the medium in which it exists -the Internet. The possibility of coming into contact with anybody in real time, disregarding physical terms, is a power that this medium offers.

If we consider the so-called "heroic era of net.art" (from 1994 to 1999) we can see that for the first time, Eastern Europe artists had the same, or even greater, relevance than those of the West. As well as the aforementioned Cosic, Oliana Lialina and Alex Shulguin further confirm this, fulfilling the desire to leap over recurrently marked geographic barriers and limits. This gave those who lived in the "periphery" or whose

voices could not be heard, greater visibility and capacity for intervention.

3-INVERTED CIRCULATION AND DISTRIBUTION (cooperation, collaboration) The last axis is related to the previous ones, as it is thanks to the horizontality of access and participation on the internet that works of art that use it as a medium manage to bypass the canonical centres for art distribution and diffusion. Furthermore, we can establish two lines of action, on the one hand the distribution and exhibition of works of art, and on the other hand the distribution and production of know-how, discourse and texts regarding the phenomenon, which weave a thick fabric of interpretations concerning production. Therefore, the Internet eliminates the intermediate institutional steps between the artist and the exhibit, finally leaving the decisions on their art in the hands of the artists themselves. In so doing, this inverts the canonical relation between artists and the public as well as the systems of production.

On the other hand, certain projects previously on the margins of mainstream art and which offered a set of discourses on the phenomenon or served as spaces for the contextualisation and theoretical diffusion of works or art and artists, used the internet as a privileged medium for alternative spaces regarding publications and considerations on art. The creation, promotion and dissemination of on-line publications such as Bianca's Smut Shack (1994), Nettime (1995), äda 'web (1996), Rhizome (1996) and Aleph (1997), gave much visibility to art in the Web, although with very limited resources [4].

These three axes summarise some of the most frequent justifications used to establish the very close relationship between net.art and politics or activism. All of them place the accent on the medium employed, leaving aside the aesthetic component that spills over into social and political issues. To analyse artistic practices focusing on their supports or techniques, is little more than a formal exercise, even when it may help to extract some consequences that were not included among the basic premises. An attentive observation leads us to focus on the concepts that motivate the practices, as ultimately net.art lacks a physical or material support. The aim is neither to adopt a series of more democratic or inclusive aesthetic strategies, nor to approach social and political problems by criticising representation within the confines of the art world. The aim is to commit to an active process of production trying, at least, to change the rules of the game, endowing subjects and communities with the instruments that stimulate social change [5].

(1) As regards the ideal of reaching an anti-institutional form of art, the facts demonstrate that it has failed, as art centres, museums, theorists, and commissars, still exist, providing visibility and a platform for the interpretation of net.art. Furthermore, there is still a marked predominance of European and North American artists. Indeed, the subsidies and cash prizes, awarded by institutions, which artists (legitimately) crave for, are far from disappearing. Net.art was not only included in the Whitney Biennale, it was represented by a broad selection of projects, including pieces by Fakeshop, Annette Weintraub, Mark Amerika, Ken Goldberg, ®™ark, among others.

(2) If we look back at "Waiting Room" by Mark Napier (exhibited in the Bitforms Gallery in New York, 2002) [6], we can see that it is a Net piece made in collaboration with the users, upholding practically all the democratic requirements of the Internet. Within a shared virtual space, the visitor becomes part of the construction of a "painting" in movement. A simple click activates the piece and gives it shape, changing the screen through different processes, creating shadows on a wall or suggesting ephemeral architectures. There is only one copy of this piece in one server; this work of art was sold in 50 fractioned shares at a price of $1,000 each in a software art

party in the home of a collector, while "Waiting Room" was being executed in situ. Those who were not present could connect and interact with the party attendants, while Napier answered questions regarding his piece. Now, if this is the way of experiencing cooperative art and social environments, certain weaknesses are blatantly obvious.

(3) When turning our attention towards the alternative forms of Net Art promotion we can see that its initial enthusiasm generated a feeling that interest for these new contents would be sufficient to sustain them in an independent manner. In October 2006, Rhizome celebrated its ten-year anniversary, programming a series of events in collaboration with various art centres such as the Guggenheim Museum (NY) and the Vera List Centre, who held several encounters on tactical media and the aesthetical and political potential of open source systems [7]. According to this description, the actual success of net.art may threaten the more revolutionary forms of net.art. The Web as a parallel, immaterial, etc. space for action is collapsing under the weight of its own manifestations; the anti-institutional spirit that is part of its essence has made it succumb once again to the institutional siege. The Web, as radio and television were before it, is as well suited for the creation of civic life as for its undoing. The Web, understood as a public sphere, can also serve to cloak conflicts that exist in any political action, thereby the Internet, as a process of collective action, does not become resilient and politically active through the medium itself, but rather when it is capable of acting, breaking the laws that are alien to it.

Art, Politics and Critical Culture

Despite all that we have said, the Internet's admirable capacity to inspire artistic work of a political and "artivist" nature cannot be disregarded. It is too easy to criticise, underestimating these Internet linked experiences because the Whitney or the Guggenheim have hosted exhibits and encounters on the subject. Net.art operates in the boundaries between virtual and real, and thus, its main appeal is to see how different actions and interventions develop on this boundary against established hierarchies and cultural dominions. Nevertheless, in this context, we have yet to circumscribe the link between art and politics in the Web.

Net.art managed to adapt and promote numerous aesthetic-critical practices, relating them organically to elements of activism, as well as different social movements. We shall consider three main focal points, without pretending to be exhaustive, to examine this bond between politics and net.art, bearing in mind that the latter is not a technical-artistic factor that revolutionises politics, but rather a politicised visual culture that takes advantage of a technology.

• **Hyperpolitics.** We can find a series of works of net.art that articulate a political notion from traditional symbols often organised around the image of an enemy or a hegemony that must be defeated. In this case, the modern illusion is still valid whereby power has a head (or several) that we must be able to distinguish and disarticulate. Therefore, it is crucial to generate strategies to overcome these powers to the point where we can "cut Robespierre's head off." Thereby, (antagonistic) political "manifestation" tactics are introduced against another (dominant) political "manifestation", using the same language but different instruments, acting in the "enemy's" place to construct a counter-hegemony. By means of coordinated actions, the artist organises an operative infrastructure, capable of infiltrating every nook and cranny. Adopting a term coined by Peter Sloterdijk, we could say that what is at play here is some form of Hyperpolitics [8] that aspires to become all-encompassing favouring the emergence of planetary scale, participative democracy of the masses. Hyperpolitics incorporates many macro interests, attacking the structures of institutional systems, and often, the

infrastructures of capitalism themselves; it is an extension (hyper) of politics and its possibilities.

Flood Net is a piece that we could inscribe into this concept. Developed by the Critical Art Ensemble [9], it is the first that introduces the model of electronic civil disobedience, and symbolic threats, through cyber-sabotage. This piece adheres to the Zapatista struggle and aims to boycott, through methods of antagonistic action and virtual sit-downs, the institutions that promote the oppression of peoples. The system, entitled "Swarm", was presented in Ars Electrónica (1998), together with the British "Reclaim the Streets", leaving no doubts as to their critical position concerning the techniques of domination, as well as the ideological and economic structures that underlie technological advances. To this end, they collaborated with independent nodes from Mexico, the United States and Europe.

In this case, cooperative alliances in the Web are essential to guarantee the effectiveness of political struggle through artistic action; they are therefore far more than a mere consequence of the technological era. "Swarm" represents a "classic" mode of activism, which is demanding, committed and ethical, where art operates as a space to redefine the scope of social imaginaries.

•Identity Theft and Guerrilla Communications. These artistic and "artivist" practices do not follow from the tradition of social art; they aim at the construction of a space-time beyond the concept of representing the alienation and subjection of the masses. This does not imply that they renege from hegemonic social relations, but rather that they distort them in a parallel space-time, recoding them (altering the code instead of destroying it). Net.art focused on guerrilla communication stresses this aspect and its form of articulation. They work on the problem of space, not as in the exercise of sculpture, painting or performance, but rather creating symbolic

territories that disrupt channels of communication, using the same spaces of power than institutions but playing with their codes, rejecting them frontally. For them, the Internet is not an autonomous sphere of action, but rather a point, from which it is possible to work on the permeability of the media. The Web is therefore a meeting point and a centre of diffusion, although it generates a series of simultaneous consequences in the "real world." Furthermore, the Web brings together collective cooperation and the pre-existing desire to act, without projecting any kind of technophile imagination on it. In many cases, these projects reflect the organisational and operative structures of capitalist systems geared at obtaining funding, surreptitiously diverting their interests towards collective action, as well as cultural and political benefit.

The Yes Men, is an artivist collective linked to ®™ark. They are experts in identity theft, often through fake Web pages that simulate the original. They carried out what they refer to as "identity correction" (as they reveal who it really is), on representatives of the World Trade Organisation, Dow Chemical, etc.[10]. Their duplicates do not operate as mere plagiarisms, as the group does not subscribe the authorship of these pages. One of their better-known identity corrections was the one they did in 2004 on President George W. Bush, duplicating his Web page, modifying some of the images and texts, to reveal Bush's truly reactionary policies to his fellow citizens. They included phrases such as, "only George W. Bush has had the political courage to adopt global warming as a useful weapon in trade wars". They also altered the appeal for sympathisers to sign the USA Patriot Pledge, which stated, "I support fiscal cuts that favour the elite and will voluntarily pay my taxes to the elites, so they can invest their money in our nation's economy." These interventions made President Bush and his entourage hit the roof; their outrage was such that in a public speech, Bush stated the need

to restrict the freedom of expression.

Cultural Criticism. One of the characteristics of this third axis is that it does not pretend to reform or correct the flaws of traditional politics through artistic actions. Instead, it uses irony to question the conventions of contemporary art, new media culture, and the cogs that sustain politics. Ironic deviations (détournements inherited from Situationism), critical sense and sarcastic humour, the adaptation of concepts, etc., are part of their creative exercise that renounces techno-utopias, without pretending to destroy the power or the cliché image of "high politics." From this perspective, they do not ascribe to a political agenda that is committed to a specific "pack" of ideas, but rather focus on condemning certain codes that sustain political agendas. Nevertheless, cultural criticism does not fail to object to the political status quo, but does so offering alternative languages and manners of using the system, all of which spiced with sarcastic acidity. These "digital citizens" have political knowledge, sources of information and interests, which are not the result of the usual political channels, and therefore they express, through art, some weariness towards old-fashioned political forms.

GUN (Global United Netforce). This piece developed in 1999 by the Santofile collective, shows how a series of words, expressions and images can be linked as labels, to the philosophy of the cyberworld (information society, transculturality, tele-work, tele-artist, globalisation, etc.) and assimilated in an uncritical manner. These concepts possess a symbolic value which circulates in the artistic-theoretical milieus, and are used as a form of "intellectual masturbation" (as they themselves confess to) or as units of cultural information (memes) that are formally transmitted from person to person (they are inherited) without being modified, analysed, or questioned.

One of Santofile's characteristics is the use of irony to force thought and to provide political ideas with flexibility in a hypertextual manner, underlining paradoxical concepts, as well as conflicting, contradictory and complementary concepts, to establish an apparently simple visual topography, while warning against the speculative universe that is being weaved around the sustained reports of political criticism.

Independently of the kind of relation that net.art works establish with the universe of political action or denunciation, the goal is not to try to resurrect the Benjaminian thesis that deduces the aesthetic and political properties of art from its technical attributes, to understand this relation, or to perversely appropriate politics through art. Politics relate to what is visible, to what can and cannot be said, to the possible spaces and time in the common destiny. Whereas art, beyond its mediums has a formal-aesthetic value, its forms and symbolic projections on reality possess political significance. In so doing, we believe that judging the social content of works of art developed in and for the Web cannot disregard the aesthetic values that they propose, taking into account the aesthetic process and its ethical-political implications.

[1] Exhibit curated by Jasia Reichardt, http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/exhibitions/serendipity (last consulted in March 2008).

[2] Nowadays we can see that this definition has become more flexible. Although it is still relevant for the pieces to be based on the Net, they can be exhibited in a performative manner (as does the Uruguayan netartist Brian Mackern) or they may be associated with direct actions that are initiated in the Net and directed "outside" the Net (for example: ®™ark and The Yes Men).

[3] Official Web page of activist John Gilmore, http://www.toad.com/gnu/ (last consulted in March 2008).

[4] www.bianca.com; www.bianca.org; http://www.nettime.org/; www.adaweb.com; http://rhizome.org; http://aleph-arts.org

[5] Cf. Nina FLESHING, "¿Pero esto es arte? El espíritu del arte como activismo". In:

Paloma BLANCO, Jesús CARRILLO, Jordi CLARAMONTE, Marcelo EXPOSITO, Modos de hacer. Arte crítico, esfera pública y acción directa, Salamanca; Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca; 2001; p. 73.

[6] www.potatoland.org

[7] http://www.elpais.com/articulo/ocio/Rhizome/cumple/anos/

[8] Cf. Peter SLOTERDIJK, En el mismo barco. Ensayo sobre la hiperpolítica; Siruela; Madrid; 1994.

[9] They later changed their name to Electronic Disturbance Theatre.

[10] www.theyesmen.org

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Linkography

Heath Bunting, http://irational.org/heath/
Oliana Lialina
http://www.teleportacia.org/swap/
Vuk Cosic http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/
http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/exhibitions/serendipity/
http://www.artfutura.org/02/Roberta.html

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RECLAIM THE BACKBONE: Rethinking the Internet as a Public Space.

[David CASACUBERTA]

0. Introduction

It is a commonplace to refer to the Internet as a public space. In fact, one of the first metaphors used to explain the Internet to people was that of the "agora" or public square. This vision is doubtlessly attractive and adapted to ideologies that define the Internet, consciously or subconsciously, since the 1960s. However, this manner of representing the World Wide Web is neither consistent with the processes of governance on the Web, nor with the way in which users interact with it on a daily basis.

This text aims to reconsider this vision of the Internet as a public space, firstly pointing out the diverse problems that difficult this perception of the Internet as a public space. After which, we shall analyse how digital art can help us to reassess some characteristics of the Internet as something public, that are not necessarily all that desirable for its future development.

1. Where does the Idea of the Internet as a Public Space Come From?

There are many legends as to the forces that designed the Internet's protocols, as we know them. It is often claimed, that the Web emerged as a spin-off of military research on communication tools capable of withstanding nuclear war. The truth is that although the creators of the first version of the Internet (DARPANET) did try to "sell" a project of this kind to the military, the latter were unconvinced. In the end, the development of this first horizontal computer network aimed to facilitate the communication between