From Physicality to Virtuality—and Back

Art Caught between the Net and the Post-Internet

Art, Aesthetics, and the Political
Prof. Marilyn Ivy
Cherie Chan
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Being a net artist revolves around public relations…Binge on 90's pop culture and HTML5…Find your position between light nihilism and techno-optimism… Allude to critical theories but don't commit to them. Don't engage politically. Approach post everything…Net art is not an alternative. New media is financially and conceptually contracted to the old…

Jaakko Pallasvuo, *How To / Internet* (2010)[1]

0-0 Introduction

The above quotations from Jaakko Pallasvuo's video essay satirically convey the love-hate relationship between the art world and Internet artists, or generally contemporary artists; it also serves as an entry point to unfold our discourses on net art and post-Internet art.

In January 2019, the New Museum, New York City, opened an exhibition titled "The Art Happens Here: Net Art's Archival Poetics" featuring artworks in net art history spanning from 1982 to 2016. The selected works, however, were only exemplary of some from the organizing partner Rhizome's project, "Net Art Anthology," which is consisted of 100 artworks constitutive of the net art canon. Along with the exhibition and the digital database[2], Rhizome also published a 400-page print catalogue detailing accomplishments of the founders, researchers, curators, and artists in the preservation of "born-digital things," in the Artistic Director Michael Connor's words (2019).

Given the didactic positions of these individuals and institutions, I became interested in the constitution of this niche category. Interestingly, post-Internet art, claimed to be an alternative art category, yields equally, if not more, eloquent theoretical contemplation from artists, curators, critics, and media theorists. The audience, though, seems to be forgotten.

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1 Pallasvuo, Jaakko. (2010). *How to / Internet*. [video essay] Vimeo. player.vimeo.com/video/32839686

2 Net Art Anthology. anthology.rhizome.org

The polemics surrounding net art and post-Internet art make me ponder: who are the key

players in the institutionalization process of art movements and genres? How did each

movement form a new "regime of arts," in Jacques Rancière's phrase[3]? How do we makes

sense of the *episteme* in the contemporary climate of media art? Responding to the

categorical distinctions proposed in the examined literature, I will also address: Is post-

Internet art really an alternative to net art? If so, what is the dissensus it created opposing

traditions of old regimes of art? Or are they both contracted to the mode of distribution of the

sensible holding sway in the art system predicted on the same old sources of capital?

Through an interdisciplinary approach, this paper accounts for my interaction with

selected artworks. Followed by an articulation of terminologies, it opens a discourse analysis

in which notable figures generate critical debates. It also focuses on the political dimension in

our discussion from two perspectives: firstly, the politics of canon formation in the art world;

secondly, the mobility of art vis-à-vis concepts of virtuality and physicality. Juxtaposing the

disjuncture between net art and post-Internet art with the rupture between Web 1.0 and Web

2.0, I attempt to interrogate the dialectical relations between art movements and critical

theories.

For the purpose of this theoretical contemplation, I invite the reader to take on a

journey, to enter the void of the digital art world. Every mentioned work is worth exploring

and every link in this PDF is worth clicking, despite your fear of what might look like computer

viruses, which are actually appropriated as net art aesthetics. For the time being, I hope the

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[3] See Jacque Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* and further explanation in section 2 in this paper

links stay active as long as possible, combatting with the ephemerality of online databases and digital objects.

1-0 Net Art
1-1 Defining Net Art

So who gets to decide what net art is? One way to understand this issue is to periodize transitions in the art world regarding societal and technological progressions at the turn of the 21st century. Scholars Rita Xavier Monteiro and Helena Barranha historicize the term "net.art" to associate it with the 1990s artistic movement and designate "Net Art" to reflect a more generic understanding of the art category (2018, 5). In contrast with how net art is usually defined, Canadian media artist Jennifer Chan ascribes "post-Internet art" to contemporary and web-based art that appeared online after 2005, or in general, digital art that has been "translated" into gallery spaces (2014, 107). We can therefore loosely pinpoint the periodization of net art and post-Internet art juncture at the year of 2005. Nonetheless, the following section centers on the way in which net art and post-Internet art are defined according to their aesthetic, ideological and political dimensions.

As one of the founders at Net Art Anthology, Michael Connor actively participated in the process of identifying, selecting and preserving net art and explains in the exhibition catalogue that the repertoire was "intended to be finite, fixed from the outset at 100 works" (6). Drawing upon Connor's criteria of identifying what he envisions as "art of the new societal paradigm," I recapitulate attributes imperative of net art as following (6-9):

- works that are materialist, embodied, critical, polymorphous

- works that give form to important critical position throughout the development of the net
- works that encompass the duality between the performative shaped by participation in network and the archival available for decontextualized consideration
- artful participation is key
- briefly, net art is art that acts on the network, or is acted on by it

"Participation" here connotes a twofold meanings, indicating artists' documentation of their participation in network as well as the spectator's interaction with the artworks. In terms of aesthetics, one iconic stylistic element commonly associated with early net art takes in the "browser-based" form. Recognized as a net art pioneer, Olia Lialina speaks in what she calls as *net.language* in *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War* (1996)[4] with the use of early Windows NT interface, HTML browser frames, hyperlinks, and monochromatic images to serve narrative purposes (Figure 1). This web browser-based project requires viewers' active participation ranging from hovering through the seemingly voyeuristic browser window to clicking every possible hyperlinks in order to follow the nonlinear storyline between a couple separated by war. Another example comes from digital collages *Hybrids* (1998)[5] by artist duo Eva and Franco Mattes, aka 0100101110101101.org, who claim to remix 32 "found" web pages without given authorship and origins. Although to me this project seems carefully orchestrated in a linear sequence in which one site is followed by another, it is also apparent that the artists intend to explore the contingency and transiency of online activities, or how it feels to be a *flâneur* wandering purposelessly in cyberspace. In this respect, both works from

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[4] *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War* restored version http://archive.rhizome.org/anthology/lialina.html

[5] The list of sample sites can be found at http://0100101110101101.org/hybrids/

Lialina and the Mattes reify not only the participatory capacity of net art, but also the preservation of time-specified visual elements of network, to quote Connor, for "decontextualized consideration".

1-2 That Glitch Aesthetic

The affect circulating between such browser-based artworks created in the late 1990s and contemporary viewers who are more used to the current Mac OS or Windows OS interfaces might be very different from the time of their initial displays. What looked innovative to museum-goers or network-inhabitants at that time has become preposterously outdated and probably irrelevant to today's audiences. Yet, because the simplicity of software design demands relatively low level of media literacy to interact with the interface it casts an uncanny affect on viewers nowadays. In fact, for the younger generation who has not borne witnesses to the evolutional design of operational systems, they might view the meaningless garbled text gliding over their screen as a result of virus attacks or computer glitches. This glitch effect though, is another integral part of net art aesthetics.

Often known as a cyber-feminist artist, Cornelia Sollfrank also secures a place in the Net Art Anthology canon. Since 1997, she has been marshaling *net.art generator*[6], a browser-based program algorithmically generating "net artworks." The producing process requires the user to title their "artwork" with one or two words that also function as search terms being picked up by the partnering search engine, which is Google in the 2017 version. The idea is that even with certain degree of liberty to choose what to enter, the user, though, cannot

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[6] net.art generator http://net.art-generator.com/index.html