

Sign of the net.art times

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“Sign of the net.art times” was inspired by an observation that 7 out of 10 contemporary net.artists are basically doing the same thing. It was written to think through a lingering curiosity about the largely unarticulated reasons why. The pervasive *transcoding* phenomenon discussed has all the usual trappings of a (net/computer) art *movement.* Comments to improve on this draft are most welcome, especially from nettimers that are better informed about computer science. (URLs for the three projects discussed are in the notes.)

In his influential *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich prominently listed *transcoding* among the founding principles of new media. [1] Discussing the digital practices and operations arising to merit the debated shift into *new,* he singled out the ability of numerically encoded media objects to translate or transform themselves, with unprecedented ease, according to hitherto unfamiliar, boundless properties and coordinates. Although the transcoding concept has received its due share of attention since the book’s publication last year, frequently being quoted as the prime example of *old* cataclysms, the associated grammar of principles has largely ignored many common, more pragmatic uses and applications of the term. At its computing root, transcoding obviously regulates and facilitates the play of presence and absence through math and logic, thereby effectively making its operations active across a vast field, ranging from the foundations of western metaphysics to the latest electronic switches. So considered broadly along with its profound dispersal, which always returns to the consolidating principles deployed, the impending gravity of computer transcoding is hence, and not only epistemologically speaking, immense. To avoid the neighboring rhetorical black hole of sweeping generalizations compiled in rounded nutshells, this brief essay will attempt to theorize aspects of this pervasive impact through specific and prominent trends in contemporary net.art.

To once more narrow the focus on these preoccupations, one can in retrospect appreciate that even the earliest net.art controversies of unauthorized mirroring were less about repeating the simulacra of postmodernism, which had already been exhaustively explored through the medium of photography in the preceding decade, than it was about revisiting questions of authenticity and uniqueness through the added momentum of transcoding. The act of mirroring, seen here as always in a differentiated yet fulfilling presence, in the 1999 actions of 0100101110101101.org did not only clone the destined-for-stardom site jodi.org byte by byte under another domain name, it also downloaded and offered a subversively altered version of Art.Teleportacia, the first art gallery for the Web. Negotiating these mirror phases obviously cast a long glance backward at postmodern questions of replication and reproduction, but it also recognized that the cumulative ability to transfer, transport, translate

and transform, all subsumed and made available under transcoding, had leveled the playing field for a rather predictable set of artistic games to begin anew in a pioneering context. Leaping three giant net years ahead to the present, an attentive look at some recent entries to the net.art catalog will garner attention to a subsequent and related strategy that has become increasingly popular among dedicated practitioners. A striking number of current works literally employ and repeat what one may term an expansive approach to the transcoding principle: they collect and/or generate structured data through various, often rather novel, forms of input and then output this in a scrambled appearance, regularly on rather abstract terms and generally according to simple, non-semantic rules.

To illustrate this rapidly overflowing genre, three projects may suffice: *Taxi Art*, [2] produced by SAS Design in London, uses the GPS tracking of London taxis, which is already done for booking reasons, to offer visitors to the site a series of choices for an online artwork drawn by the humdrum path of taxis on the streets. Pick your minimalist and formalist preference for aesthetics that largely resemble pie charts or graphs in the form of lines or circles - then watch the drivers negotiate the traffic to render your masterpiece. The result: a GPS doodle of urban corridors that, from a cartographic point of view, would probably require that you immediately hailed a cab to get around without getting lost. Another recent example is *Goodworld* by Lew Baldwin, which can be found on the Whitney Museum's lofty artport site. [3] Here you pick any URL and let the site transform your location into colorful blobs for images, where the color field is an aggregate of dominant RGB values in the original, and emotive smiley faces for text. An almost analogous gig for music is the developing *WebPlayer* [4] by Pete Everett, which currently prepares the stage for a filtering of an URL into soft, luscious sounds transcoded from the ASCII values of the hypertext, sans recurring code brackets. Somewhat unexpectedly (unless you first read the process notes that pays homage to how mathematically inspired composers turned repetitive numbers - base note sequences - into sweet music), the result resonates more like naturalistic jingles from the oceans than previous sounds sampled from data and voiced by tinny 386 processors to strike a distinctive digital note.

This net can easily be cast much broader and wider in all directions to catch numerous projects that indulge in the type of transcoding alluded to. But to save the impressions formulated thus far, we can discern the repeated predilection toward taking ordered stacks of data and reshuffling the packets: GPS traces in longitude and latitude turns to coordinated strokes, graphical RGB values coalesce in bland color fields and HTTP rocks on through the speakers, all according to *Radio Taxis*, *Goodworld* and *WebPlayer* respectively. The reason all this reverse-engineered data mining and logical-mathematical magic can unfold is of course due to the common binary denominators of all data: 0 and 1. Translated into the bitplane through binary notation a decimal value of, let's say 97, will read 1100001. But this string of 97 reinterpreted through ASCII code is in fact the *a* in the fact just presented and represented (given that this message does indeed appear as ASCII). And the 97 may of course also be attributed, and reassigned, to a medium dark pixel value in an image or the pitch of a programmed tone. Consider, then, that this 97 probably already circulates around the Internet in many wrappings, from the corner of a company logo via the central *a* in every wording of Mac to a frequency in an embedded sound object, and you get the basic picture (or word or sound) of the Esperanto-styled computing these projects are practicing and pointing to. Within this mind-blowing conundrum of the computer medium lies the rationale why these types of projects are both incessantly compelling and instantly mundane: on one hand, since we are indeed talking binaries here, their claims to isolate the multifarious behavior of data bits

to their own limited operations subdues the potential madness of an arbitrary bit architecture and thereby grounds protocols in an oppositional, highly reasonable context. But, on the other hand, the projects themselves reveal these operations to always already be active and working away within this selfsame structure. It is not insignificant in this regard that most net.art transcoding endeavors appear to indulge in rather semantically poor output at the front end. In the three works discussed, we get abstract shapes and patterns along with base sensory information scattered in HTML grids and mellow MP3 music submerged in atmospheric harmonies. This choice, and it is crucially a choice on the scripters/programmers behalf, basically serves to move away from the widely conversant computer literacy promoted by transcoding, which implies the successive application of established protocols, toward the linguistic plight of translation as transformation. The flexible exchange rate of bits remains the *modus operandi*, but the currency of the data outlet fluctuates in value - from ordered to scattered, meaningful to meaningless and so on. Given the identically encoded origin here, this treatment signals a distinctly asymmetrical rupture in prevailing systems of representation and signification, making interconnected expressions appear equal despite very obvious differences.

To better appreciate this fascinating move, a tangential shift into semiology is desirable to avoid completely sidelining the fact that computing has, or even is the product of, a cultural history. Traditionally posited as a science of signs, semiology generally operates with a tripartite structure of sign, signifier and signified to elucidate the relationships between, very roughly speaking, things, words and people. The largely unstated goal is to reveal something about the processes of signification with the aim of securing an unequivocal ground for meaning itself - dubbed the transcendental signified in semiological jargon. A short, chronological list covering how this science has developed, and implying how semiology is understood in this context, may include Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand Saussure, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, but this narrow trail of groundbreaking changes to the discipline branches out just about everywhere, for example into the psychologism furthered by Jacques Lacan, or, for those more familiar with photographic theory, the psychosemiology of Victor Burgin. (I introduce this list to basically avoid repeating every argument here and refer anyone interested in a fuller discussion of semiology to literature by the aforementioned authors.) Only roughly sketching this particular context serves to drastically shorthand the above scenarios for how the sign, signifier and signified interact, what roles they respectively serve within the prescribed signifying chains, and even how or by what each entity and each link is constituted. Needless to say, every author mentioned gradually gets entangled in solving questions raised by their own arguments. But the contested point of finding a locus for logos, attached to these conjectural contortions, is of course far from trivial and essentially perpetuates the debate. The important legacy of immediate use here is that the presupposed division of sign, signifier and signified prevails; it is of direct relevance to how the concept of transcoding is built into computer logic and accordingly understood and practiced within new media theory and net.art.

Having acknowledged that the distinction between signifier and signified is problematic at the root (as it relies on the unity of the sign to make the concept present in and of itself through, and despite of, this opposition), let us turn briefly to a quote from an interview with Jacques Derrida conducted by Julia Kristeva before returning to a more comprehensive discussion of computer transcoding. Speaking of the opposition between signifier and signified Derrida notes:

That this opposition of difference cannot be radical or absolute does not prevent it from functioning, and even from being indispensable within certain limits - very wide limits. For example, no translation would be possible without it. In effect, the theme of a transcendental signified took shape within the horizon of an absolutely pure, transparent and unequivocal translatability. In the limits to which it is possible, or at least appears possible, translation practices the difference between signifier and signified. But if this difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of transformation: a regulated transformation of one language by another, one text by another. [5]

Translation, to playfully paraphrase the same again in other words, implies the seamless movement of pure signifieds across platforms and formats (languages and texts) that the signifying apparatus supposedly leaves untouched. It denies any precarious intertextuality, invoking a chain of substitutions, in favor of an original that effectively surpasses any and all transformation.

The popular new media concept of transcoding does indeed speak of a limitless and highly effective translatability. Coupled with the associated premise of numerical representation, it proposes that the application of protocols to numbers has conjured up a science that programs closure into every transaction, every translation, and every transposition of what presents itself, in each transmuted instance, as the transcendental identity of the signifier/signified. There is an unprecedented equivocality at play here, one that operates in the dark passages of hardware and comes to light through software, and which is consequently instrumental in separating itself (and its objects) from the elucidating passage of the signifying operations. Translation, practiced as the aforementioned difference between signifier and signified, consequently succumbs to a science of logical-mathematical notation. As such, it signals the practical apotheosis of semiology, which has precisely been conceived of as a *science* of signs to break the metaphysical bounds. Hence the longstanding semiotic project - founded upon the tripartite sign, signifier, signified - reaches a certain *organic* totality through computerized transcoding, bringing the necessary presupposition of a priori, an innocent and independent writing before the letter, to communication.

What is not yet accounted for in this view (although it is there through the founding signifier/signified opposition) is the move that previously brought out the psycho prefix and applied it to semiology. The signified, although attributed to the signifying chain that revolves around the elusive conglomerate of a sign, may instead be part of a general psychology, a scenario of mind over matter seeking a uniform social body with a cohesive psychology to ground the sign in a detached collectivity. This position, explored by Barthes through the gathering concept of myth and more directly by Burgin in his reliance on Freudian psychoanalysis, should of course not be discounted with regards to affective, as a counterpoint to effective, data. The very human back/front end of transcoding will of course always be subject to the same semantic mysteries as any pre-digital entity when it comes to these instructive semiotic structures. The key point, however, is that the appearance, the coming into being, of the signifier/signified through transcoding hinges on the murky fusion of zeroes and ones - the base, western metaphysical counterpoints that now crucially couple through a machine and not mental conjunction. Although this latter digression is ripe with the

usual analogies of mind and machine, the link between semiology and psychology when it comes to computer operations essentially broadens the usual turns of the logical circuit by further implicating a range of associated discourses in the central transcoding principle.

But despite the documented and discussed ability of transcoding to transform, witnessed in the listed net.art works and noted via Derrida, it appears that the representational claims to metonymy rather than analogy actually conjure up directly *_translatable_* aspects that perceptively and conceptually manage to fully survive this revolution. In *Taxi Art*, does the work not indicate a blinking orange, signaling left or right, at every turn of the colorful geometric drafts? Does Baldwin's *Goodworld* not bring an inebriated textual smile to blurry color vision only through comparison with the clearly aliased input URL? Do you not descend into soundscapes of corresponding hypertext when *WebPlayer* embarks on its heavily transmuted aural voyage? Isolating such experiences, sensory as well as conceptually, makes for a far more complicated analysis of transcoding. The effect produced and described is doubly stunning: on one hand logical-mathematical notation denies to confirm the, in lack of a better word, theology of transcoding as the virgin passage of translation; on the other, it retains an empirical contingency of unprecedented representational and signifying power. It may very well contest the formalism of equivalence by logically and mathematically scrambling the bits beyond recognition (in a classical representational sense), but the overriding yet obscure science of this operation, the alchemic feat of numbers and logic, brings an overwhelming empirical closure to the experience, a strangely distorted yet comforting sense of *deja vu*. What sunders then ultimately unites; numbers break apart but finally add up. The checksum of all this is that each and every one of these projects, and they only comprise three exemplary instances of an overwhelming trend, believe in the divine translatability of transcoding to the extent that complex semantic devices are readily and purposefully sacrificed for a metaphysics of the excruciatingly simple, reflected in Euclidean cartography (*Taxi Art*), typographic emoticons (*Goodworld*) and the Muzak of the deep network (*WebPlayer*). This reductive approach to the sign obviously echoes the overwhelming progress of logical-mathematical notation, but crucially it does not fundamentally question the unity of the semiotic division, or the universal scientificity of the process that now brings it to bear so fancifully and persuasively. On the contrary, the troublesome collaboration between applied science and metaphysics that gives rise to a pre/post-scientific empiricism has reached its apotheosis in transcoding, and this is indeed the sign of our net.art times.

Notes

- 1) Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001)
- 2) <http://www.radiotaxis.net>
- 3) <http://www.artport.whitney.org/gatepages/artists/baldwin/index.html>
- 4) <http://www.twofivesix.co.uk/snd/index.html>
- 5) Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 20.