Sculptural Form in Net.Art

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[The following text is the draft of a talk I gave at FILE in Sao Paulo this August. I would like to circulate this beforehand and hope it is of some interest. The objective of this talk is to extrapolate some notion of sculptural elements in net.art, in order to introduce my two works for the Internet, "Life Measure Constructions" and "Lee Marvin Toolbox", at the festival.]

Sculptural Form - Net.Art

The internet, it has been claimed, ALTERS spatial experience of human beings. Because it provides immediate communication access for users in one area of the world with others in distant parts, offering mainly written and pictorial exchange. Somehow the Distant has become a part of the intimate surroundings, has infiltrated the Close-by in a way that telephone, television, travel writing, novels in translation, or photo-reporting have, it seems, not been able to. This condition seems to be mainly driven by the temporal quality of the internet: the possibility to access information, post it, and to exchange it in ways that create an unprecedented social environment.(1) If the internet does provide a changed notion of space, then what is its relationship to spatial art, that is Sculpture.

Time and space are an inseparable unit. The notion of a changed experience of SPACE relies mainly on its temporal experience which contributes to an enhanced conceptualization of space. The immediate networking of servers spanning the globe constitutes the tangible materialization within the world. As these nodes operate in parallel real times, they seem to be accessible 'sites' where people can 'be' without actually physically being there.(2) Emotional and social space may be broadenend by connecting isolated humans to a community, bring friends and family together when physically apart. Still the senders and receivers of messages are tied to their locations, moving about at rates far less rapid than bytes. A changed physical experience of space therefore is a different matter. Two main situations can be distinguished: accessing the net at the human's local base and away from that base. As the human body doesn't move when accessing the net, the immobility of online activity at home does not involve any new experiences of location, as all the action takes place in front of a screen that is most likely fixed to a particular area in a room. If in a foreign place, access helps to connect back to home (such as regulating heat in your Internet-House; or checking eMail accounts), and constitutes a means to not feel isolated. Away from the known environment, prancing in new surroundings, provides an unknown spatial experience in a physical sense. Away from the known environment, immersed in online reality, provides an unknown spatial experience in a conceptual sense.

Spatio-temporal experience and conceptualization have been the major element of sculptural practice. SCULPTURE has evolved from an object-based crafting to a form-related practice in time and space, embracing a wide spectrum from social sculpture to installation works and fetishized objects on plinths. For Joseph Beuys, for instance, creating form in a social process was sculptural activity; for him, artistic activity aimed at changing current understandings of art, society, and science - here, social process is intrinsically an artistic configuration without particular site but located in the interaction of human beings.

Allan Kaprow's Happenings similarly brought together a socializing group which, more recently Rirkrit Tiravanija extended to a more poignant political moment. These artistic configurations relied on particular sites: the site of the Happening, or the gallery space transformed into a temporary home. Franz Erhard Walther understood his objects as works only when being worked with: activity and object form a unified entity, which in turn point towards insights from Physics. Time and space are an inseperable unit; consequently, activity and object are ingredients of space-time existence.

Sculptural activity has strong presence in Art-in-public-places as physical manifestations, temporary or intended to last, restricted to spatial settings (cities, roads, land, water) and PUBLIC reactions (vandalism, endorsement, opposition). The internet is a public space whose strongest restrictions are not spatial or political borders but probably language (hegemony of English) and financial backing (hardware, software, server). Here, art can exist without impact on the spatially known enviroment of people (but nonetheless be part of Public Art programmes, such as "Hamburg Ersatz" by Christiane Dellbr¸gge and Ralf de Moll)(3).

Any haptic spatial experience is therefore limited to sitting, or standing, in front of a mobile, or fixed, computer and peripheral machines. Online haptic experience is relegated to a conceptualization of tactility; the eyes need to do the work of skin. Furthermore, the spatial set-up of viewing art online is usually restricted to the distance it needs for a viewer to reach a keyboard and be able to decypher the screen (unless the work is being projected in a gallery situation). Interaction is rather immobile, as viewers need some form of technological gadget to make interaction possible, which in turn requires physical close proximity to the gadget (at least for the time being). By contrast, a viewer of sculptures in the offline world has several viewing angles; a Richard Serra work such as the dismantled "Tilted Arc" provides a situation which sets up several spatial relationships, that are physical, tactile and conceptual at once. The situation is, relatively speaking, flexible and fluid. By contrast on the internet, this situation is limited to fixed viewing angles and little tactile interaction.The understanding of space is therefore a different one and, obviously, net.art's intentions need to be, and are, different(4).

The internet, however, has sculptural form despite or because of its lack of a centre. The placement of servers around the globe is a sculptural installation. Ready accessability to a network has created a translocal condition and shifted the understanding of centralized being. The immediate home, urban or rural environment is connected to the potentially Everywhere, but it needs the contact, the communication aspect, to actually establish the

networked Everywhere - then, it can become a visual extension of Here, reaching out to There, making my location visible elsewhere; then, it helps form social and political groupings. In doing so, the internet contributes to an enhanced acceptability of MOBILE existences: mum and dad can see their distant offspring by viewing online photoalbums, emailing messages and so forth. (Although, it rarely replaces an emotional desire of physical proximity to a loved one, nor does it replace the usual desire for settling down and staying put.) Social activity can now be conducted in social isolation; it no longer requires physical proximity to humans - a process which, in turn, centralizes the self. Net.art has been largely successful in making this situation its topic: by highlighting the network visually; by highlighting its technology; by utilizing its network; by employing the viewer-user's active participation in the work. Yet I think, it hasn't thrown the baton back to the viewer-users to refigure and ask themselves, "Look at yourself" (rather than "Look at me" and "Look at this" as it usually asks). It hasn't produced a spatial situation that uses the satellite existence of self as its premise to target one's offline existence on a base existential level.

Existence has sculptural form, because it is executed in a spatial environment. The placement of urban or rural features; of objects in a household; of furniture in a hotel room: they constitute sculptural arrangements. LIFE, when lived with a minimum of self-reflection, is formed in ways similar to an artefact. Art, on the other hand, can become an operational tool for existence similar to a household object: by being less of a representational device but more of a tool for self-reflection. As soon as art assumes such a condition, it assumes material, sculptural quality. Net.art, by assuming a conceptualizingly spatial role that operates as a reflection tool for one's existence, could then contribute to a physical alteration in the experience of space.

Life Measure Constructions - Lee Marvin Toolbox

The objectives for these TWO works were manifold. At first, I rather innocently just wanted to create an online environment, more abstract than imitating reality. Later, I wondered whether there is a means to create a sculptural materiality online. Flash seemed to provide a visualization tool that could replace the heavy text or photograph based work, that I had seen online before. I wanted to avoid to produce another online version of what I saw as a continuation of 70s Concept Art; but also wanted to create something that did not look like website and design; something that lived by its own rules.

"Life Measure Constructions"(5) evolved from sculptural practice. Objects here are used as flexible configuration tools. Mostly abstract shapes, they reflect on the relationship of objects for the construction of reality, as a means to measure life, so to say. In this work, they can be placed in an online "allotment" which becomes part of a stored landscape. Once stored it can be changed by others, so that effectively, over the years the landscape might change. Some of these stored configurations are called up when the user accesses the work. As these graphic representations of objects are movable, they have a sense of tactility via the hand moving the mouse, or the fingers stroking the pad on a notebook. It is sculptural in the sense that also these

objects are moved around in a vaguely proper perspectival view of imagined space, or IMAGINARY space. On screen a situation is created that reflects spatiality and an individual's response; it also reflects on an individual's behaviour towards givens: it could potentially be vandalized.To avoid the browser interface, the work uses a full screen command.

"Lee Marvin Toolbox"(6) was intentionally continuing from there: its small window structure also deliberately avoids the browser interface. On the other hand it develops a sculptural sense by opening as small items that can be moved around on screen. It consists of several small components not only in its visual structure, but also in the possibility to download its fragments as standalone works of art, one pdf-eBook, one mp3, and nine projector animation files. In subject matter, the work is dealing with imaginary, EXISTENTIAL objects; the soundtrack, a re-recording of Lee Marvin's "Wanderin Star", emphasizes an existence not fixed to a particular location. Again space, and the construction of space, are being visually conceptualized through specific forms available only in this medium.

Footnotes

(1) Bernd Guggenberger, "Virtual City. Jetztzeitwesen in einer 'ortlosen' Stadt", in Ursula Keller (ed.), *Perspektiven metropolitaner Kultur*, Frankfurt/Main, 2000, pp. 37-59, p. 44.
(2) William J. Mitchell, "Replacing Place", in: Peter Lunenfeld (ed.), *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media*, Cambridge/Mass., London, 2000, pp. 112-128.
(3) http://www.hamburg-ersatz.trmd.de
(4) Peter Weibel, "Die virtuelle Stadt im telematischen Raum", in Gotthard Fuchs, Bernhard Moltmann, Walter Prigge, *Mythos Metropole*, Frankfurt/Main, 1995, pp. 209-227, p. 218.
(5) http://www.lifemeasure.org
(6) http://www.leemarvintoolbox.net