Essay About History and Futurism of the net.art Story

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1. Net.art between 1994 and 1998

The World Wide Web is cyberspace (W. Gibson), electronic landscape (B. Sterling), computer network (J.P. Barlow) or matrix (J. Quarterman)

In 1994, a handful of artists ventured into the electronic landscape. They threw away their tools and started creating with the Internet (as a tool and content), for the Internet (as the medium), and on the Internet (as the exhibition place). They found the Web to be equivalent in range of content and expression to the world they had been used to. For them, Gibson's cyberspace was much more than yet another new medium, next thing after video, or a technological novelty like photography or moving pictures in the beginning of the 20th century. They felt that the impacts of this computer technology, which quickly became a tool and a medium in its own right, would go beyond the mere fascination with something new.

They interpreted science fiction as social and cultural theory, and thus net.art - art in cyberspace, seemed the final and definite art. They forgot in their eagerness they were looking at the future and not at the world around them.

Net.art is not the only art on the World Wide Web and is actually just a tiny part of cyberspace. Art history would describe it as a movement, while other artistic approaches still wait for their history to be written. Once art history is logically extended into the history of visual concepts - a general history of visualised concepts (Michel Fehr, 2001), net.art 1994-1998 will become part of the visual heritage of the Internet. And an embodiment of the concept of art as proposed by A.C. Danto in 1967.

First art on the Internet - the net.art - is just like the art one can see in galleries, but obeying the rules of cyberspace, instead. One has to be familiar with the life and the ways of cyberspace to interpret it correctly and properly understand it.

At this point one should ask perhaps how net.art changed art in the material world. And if it actually did, how exactly did it change? Were video art and painting affected? One thing we can be sure of is that net.art has offered a strong impulse for the shifting of our perception of other media and the world.

One could say that the first four years of net.art demonstrated how to "transfer" conventional and classic(al) art onto the World Wide Web. They have shown that the Internet was not only an archive, a database, a communication tool and a new shopping centre - it was a place for art as well. One could link this to the theory of relations between the text and the context (Peter Weibel, 1971) Art is always

contextual. It is exactly putting things in contexts other then their own, in viewing them from a different angle. It is logical therefore that the context makes part of the content of a work of art. Net.art is contemporary art produced in the context of the World Wide Web - through careful reading, understanding and manipulation of the elements of cyberspace.

Virtual world, or cyber-world, lives in parallel to the material one. The two worlds are tightly coupled. They influence each other and there's a strong process of identification in both directions. The world is bi-polar in all the senses (Viktor Misiano, 2000). One learns this in relation to oneself and to the environment through analysis and time, philosophy and science. The consequence of this process is self-awareness, which started symbolically with the French revolution and has continued as philosophy, based on psychoanalysis, in the 20th century. The next step of self-awareness is self-reflexion (Martha Ward, 1998) - assuming critical stance in relation to one-self and one's surroundings.

Let me remind you once again of the modern and romantic wish of art - admitting no hierarchy, no politics, no obligations - and no morals (Peter Schat, 1991) But, what happens when artists, living in a bi-polar and free field, start to get more interested in real-life than in grasping the opportunity to manipulate and provoke around galleries, or create and explore on the Internet. After the term artistic world was invented, and especially in the nineties, artists themselves wanted to get out of it, and enable an unbiased and objective art experience. This process is far from being complete. We'll have to wait a while before artistic world falls apart. Meanwhile, art in the galleries and on the Internet actually enable us to see that Art is everywhere around us.

Not unlike most other art movements, net.art proclaimed a new worldview, new rules and relations, which they took from cyberspace. These new rules and relations constitute a modern (political) left (Borut Savski, 2001), which underlines self-awareness in the understanding of post-hegelian, post-freudian, post-lacan and, soon, a post-cyber subject. We live in a world of maimed subjects, a world where genius has long been dead.

2. The end of net.art

In the electronic landscape, positions are assumed according to events in the material world (and vice versa). The philosophy of psycho-analysis claims that on one hand we live in an imaginary world, where things are real that don't exist, in a series of immaterial calculations, which regulate all material, real and imaginary (éiûek on Lacan, 1996) - and on the other in a virtual world, which is a simulacrum of the material world. All we are left with are feelings and time, which are real in the imaginary world.

Positions are also built upon differences in technical proficiency among the people who live the self-serving life of a computer programmer in the cyberspace. The inventors of the matrix are already developing software for a new virtual world, which would favour technologically proficient individuals. (Tim Jordan, 200)

What happened to net.art of 1996, 1997 and 1998 at the turn of the century? Since virtual world didn't replace the material one, net.art didn't become the

definite art. It represents just art on the one pole of the world, so founders of net.art proclaim it's end. At the end of the 90's it became clear what the Internet was coming to: the increased profanity of cyberspace. Net.art was affected in a similar way.

In brief, the end of net.art was proclaimed because the virtual world didn't replace the original one, because cyberspace and net.art have been made profane, and finally because one cannot escape excessive self-reference leading into larpurlartism. Net.art had to become it's own context and content, sooner or later. Net.artists, and not only them, but everybody in the virtual realm are post-structuralist left-wingers by default, self-aware and self-reflecting, who know very well that citing one-self is quickly reduced to repeating one-self. 1998 marks the end of net.art as the end of an art movement.

Ironically, it was just another proclamation of an end, so nothing really changed in everyday life. Net.art remains an attractive denominator. This means that somewhere, somehow net.art continues to live. As does the painting, and many other forms of artistic expression. Art media change positions, roles, ways of use, etc. Speaking figuratively, media sometimes replace themselves with other media.

3. 2000, 2001 - futurism about net.activism

Net.art continues to live, along with the rest of art and its tendencies. The distance between worlds of our world is still too large and greatest pleasures await us at junctions, where interchange and transitions occur. Boundaries have been shaken and everybody is seeking the one world. Everyone needs to experience everything - so one has to allow for everything and try to understand everybody. Our everyday life does not support this, unfortunately, so art and its makers feel dies-empowered and useless. They don't care anymore for detached, provocative or engaging art. The time is right for them perhaps to breech the limits of artistic world.

Some artists started actively participating in the continuing and necessary process of social change. Since Internet is cheap and easily accessible, simple and adaptable, initial subversive actions of net.artists introduced smaller revolutions of net.activists. The Web enables information to flow freely, and a system of coding and passwords is used to keep sensitive information safe and occluded. Matrix is transparent and physically inoffensive. Real-time web actions present a strategy of physically inoffensive obstruction of power. Through hacking and keeping the information flowing, net.activists destabilise systems belonging to governments or corporations - centres of political and economic power.

The strategy attacks very specific targets - the biggest targets are groups that follow conformist policies, motivated by capital, sometimes directly stimulating discrimination, social gaps and even ecological catastrophes. Pointing out the problems is the present activity (art) of art makers, now doers. This activism does not imply that artists all of a sudden turned politicians. They act as artists in politics, attracting attention to certain problems and enhancing the awareness of the power of an individual.

4. Simple logic

The Internet makes some voices stronger, and current problems more detectable. The matrix represents a post-structuralist ideal. Everyone on the net is a legitimate multiple personality. All differences co-exist without hierarchy (Maria Lindt, 1999). Everything is allowed and nothing can stay hidden, in principle no-can can set limits and nothing can be stopped. Possible restrictions are the reflections of the material world.

This world at the same time leads a romance with the Internet. Even distribution of power is just one of the ethical objectives of cyberspace. This ethic imposes a new distribution of values and drives change in the relations of an individual to his or her surroundings (partner, friends, society) and vice versa. Once again - new relations in the world must be invented.