

Andreas Broeckmann
Are you online?

Presence and participation in network art



Even at the beginning of 1997 a lot of people had a strong feeling that this was going to be the Year of Net Art, and that after a brief summer the artists would either have to go and look for new challenges, or try to exploit what would most probably become acceptable for a wider audience and therefore also become increasingly integrated into the "Operating System Art". So last year, interested observers could witness and participate in: extended online discussions about the technological and art historical contexts from which net art emerged; bickering about whether it was pretentious, funny or accurate to speak of net.art, the dot becoming the object of heated debate; international meetings at which the future history of the net.art movement was determined and deconstructed. The presence of some of the heroes and heroines of the cluster of artists — who insisted that they were neither a movement nor a group, mainly because nobody wanted to go down in the expected demise of the net.art label — at major international art exhibitions and media art festivals was looked upon with collective pride and individual envy.

The discussions about net.art (I stick with this label for the moment, meaning especially a kind of hybrid WWW-Situationism) gave us an important break. They made it possible to distinguish more clearly between art on the net and art in the net. Art on the net uses the Internet as a distribution medium, whether in the form of the derided virtual galleries, i.e. displays of 2D artworks, photographs, computer graphics, etc., that in themselves bear no relation to the Internet, or in the form of a channel for conceptual artworks, in which case the Internet is an effective, but potentially replaceable presentation tool. Art in the net is germane to the medium of the electronic networks, it plays with their protocols and technical peculiarities, it exploits the bugs and pushes the potentials of software and hardware — it is unthinkable without its medium, the Internet. At the same time, art in the net shows a keen awareness not only of the technological, but also of social and cultural aspects of the Internet, and plays on them through hybrid, intermedial artistic strategies.

It is obvious that in a, primarily, late-modernist cultural environment, the latter, more purist version of network art was favoured by many. The statements of the .Net juries of the Prix Ars Electronica have also, since 1995, paid tribute to this understandable bias. Only postmodern cynics would have done otherwise. It has been a problem for exhibition and festival curators, however, to present this kind of work for an audience that, even granted that it might be interested in this new art form, was seldom initiated into its rituals. I say rituals because much of the excitement and thrill of network art has been derived from the sense of being present at and participating in an event or process that hinges on the co-presence and the co-operation of several people. In short, from the sense of being online — and this not so much in the technical sense of having access to a networked computer, but as a mentality, a state of mind that evolves in people who work and "live" in a distributed electronic environment that is "charged" with fast and often nervous information exchange — a state of mind which is by no means germane only to network artists.

The worst thing a curator can do is to make a list of hyperlinks to selected websites, put them on the web pages of the festival or exhibition, not pay the artists a fee (using the argument that their projects are online and thus publically available anyway), and then put a series of online computers somewhere in the exhibition where the audience can look at the projects — and surf the WWW freely. The latter point — temporary free access to the Internet — is probably the only positive aspect of the set-up. A variation to this worst-case scenario was the WWW-part of the Documenta X art exhibition in Kassel/Germany in 1997 where the artists were paid, but the projects were running offline and in a sad grey-and-white pseudo office. Do this if you want to prevent your audience from understanding what network art might be about.

The openX environment at the Ars Electronica Festival 97 in Linz was a more creative and more daring attempt at dealing with the difficulties of presenting net art in a festival situation. I will from now on use the term net art in the broader sense, meaning art practices based in the Internet, from WWW-based projects and live-audio experiments, to communication projects that use IRC (Internet Relay Chat), FTP (File Transfer Protocol), Telnet, and other Internet protocols. More than ten different online projects were invited to work on the mezzanine of the Linz Design Center during the festival, and for a week over fifty people spent long days and evenings on their islands of tables and terminals in this localised archipelago of network creativity. Many of the people in the different projects knew and had worked with each other before and were now given the unique opportunity of being able to do what they always do in close physical vicinity: communicate, investigate, write, programme and design in the net.

openX was therefore an almost 1:1 representation of the situation in which net art is being created every day. Artists who sometimes know each other in person and sometimes not, work together in smaller communities which overlap with other such communities. More communication and creative potential is derived from the contacts between these groups, mutual contamination and transformation guaranteed. In practice, this concept worked only in part. The re-mapping of a translocal assemblage in a localised setting showed both advantages and disadvantages for the artists' cooperation. Maybe due to the unfamiliar opportunity, certainly due to a lack of time during the short five days of the festival, much of the situation's potential could not be realised and the artists went away again, slightly dizzy and confused like after a roller-coaster ride.

While these are intricacies of on/off-line cooperation, a crucial problem of the presentation of network art is the relationship between the artists or producers, and the audience. As hinted before, how does one show the essential thrill of online art to a curious outsider? Some of the openX participants were still under shock from their experience at the Documenta X that summer, where the Hybrid Workspace of the Berlin Biennale had offered Kassel's Orangerie as a 100-day media cultural workshop for different international groups. The Hybrid Workspace itself was a flexible, multi-functional working environment, and most of the dozen or so workshops were great successes with many good results. Yet, how do you deal with a thousand or more Documenta visitors who come in every day and who want to see the art? In Kassel, it was very difficult even to begin to communicate to the audience what the workshops were about, given the short attention span of the exhausted art show visitors.

Unlike the Hybrid Workspace, openX had a smaller and probably more online audience, with many of the visitors having their own, often extensive experience with the networks. Yet, participants of both projects found it difficult to reconcile the wish to work together in the workshop, with the necessity to represent that work to a larger audience. Some were better at this than others, especially those who were dealing with campaign-like themes and strategies. But few were happy about the fact that their processual work was on display as though it was a performance about the artist at work. What they normally do at their terminals at home or in the studio was not only changed quite significantly through the sudden physical vicinity to the other artists, but was also exposed in a way that it normally isn't. Real-life presence and confrontation is normally not something that comes into play in net art, large parts of the net being a meshwork of distributed private spaces, rather than a public space.

A description of the different functional layers of the electronic networks can help to elucidate the invertedness of some of the current net-based art. The following will be familiar to readers, but in times of electronic commerce and the Ubiquitous Buy-Button it seems important to reaffirm the diversity of tools for net-based creativity. In the first instance, the net is a communication-scape where via a multitude of channels (E-Mail, Newsgroups, Mailing Lists, IRC, CUSeeMe, etc.) conversations are going on between individuals and groups of every size, from two to several thousand. Like any good conversation, these get better the better the participants know each other. The international Xchange network of net-radio enthusiasts is a good example of such a distributed group that builds their creative cooperation in live-audio streaming, on the communication channels that connect them. The people of Xchange and others are thus also exploring the net as a sound-scape with particular qualities in data transmission, delay, feedback, and open, distributed collaborations. Moreover, they connect the network with a variety of other fields. Instead of defining an "authentic" place in their artistic work, they play in the trans-medial zone of media labs in different countries, mailing lists, net-casting and FM broadcasting, clubs, magazines, stickers, etc., in which "real" spaces and media continuously overlap and fuse.

The use of the spatial, perspectival metaphor of the "scape" may be misleading as it may call up the association of a euclidian, three-dimensional space which encapsulates these different functions. Instead, one must remember that we are talking about digital data being sent around in a network infrastructure of computers, cables and wireless transmitters. The datascape of the net is a multi-dimensional, continuously transforming topology rather than a landscape with a horizon. It is worth mentioning that there are now an increasing number of studies and projects that try to describe or map this datascape by means of dynamic 3D-structures created in VRML (Virtual Reality Modeling Language). These projects remain, however, limited by the three-dimensional framework. Even when this three-dimensionality is upgraded with hyperlinks and morphing shapes, it is still unable to capture the complexities of the network topologies.

Although the net is an expansive and heterogeneous medium for communication between people, it is, in the first instance, a machine-scape. Computers are connected to computers, exchanging large chunks of control and coordination data at an almost unimaginable rate. To get a glimpse of the extent of machine communication, just study the full Path information of any E-mail message: an elaborate series of IP-numbers, exact dates, and information about software and encoding protocols which travels with and is accumulated by any data packet that travels across the net. Some recent art projects deal with the particular aesthetics of the machine scape, like I/O/D's Web Stalker which scans the hyperlinks of WWW-pages, displays their HTML code as the Stalker agent analyses the pages, and maps the hyperlink structure in plain and evocative graphs, allowing a surprising look at the underside of the Web. The degree to which this techno-topological infrastructure of the net is invested with — open and disguised — economic, political, symbolic power has been exposed critically by Paul Garrin's name.space project. Yet, the more precise such projects become in a technical sense, the more esoteric they appear to those who don't know how to read the ciphers and letters.

Obviously, the net is also an image-scape, and the World Wide Web is its news stand, art gallery and photo album. It is worth remembering that the WWW was initially designed to allow for the display, distribution and hyperlinking of texts and images, tasks which were supported by the first standard WWW browsers. Sounds, moving images and interactive functions were added later and still require a series of more or less standardised software plug-ins. The text-and-image-legacy of the WWW can be derided as an online equivalent of the 2D-graphic and print media, but this might be the function that it is best at for the large audiences that its commercial developers are interested in. It is important that the WWW is a simple enough publishing medium that allows lots of people to show their stuff. But what if not everybody wants to become an active participant, what if not everybody wants to go online?

The Internet is, finally, also becoming an action-scape, an environment that supports particular types of agency which, at a time of general demise of democratic decision-making and control, suggest at least the possibility of new forms of action in the public domain. The IO_Dencies project by Knowbotic Research is an attempt at exploring the potential for acting in translocal, networked environment. It creates an interface between the communication-scapes and the machine-scapes of the net and asks what the topology of agency might be in such hybrid and connective environments.

The above is by no means an exhaustive analysis of what the Internet is. Trading, game-playing, gambling, multi-casting of texts, sounds and images, all these are prominent functions of the net. The WWW is an intermedial environment that supports or gives access to

some of these different functions. What makes network art interesting at the moment, however, is happening away from the WWW. The decision of the .Net Jury of the 1998 Prix Ars Electronica shows this, since three projects for the prizes which are all not or not primarily WWW projects have been selected.

The experience of net-based art is closely tied up with online presence and an active participation in the creative process, whether it is located primarily in a machine or in a networked community. To reformulate an earlier statement: a key problem of the presentation of network art is that there is no distinction between the artists and the audience, between production and reception. You perceive through being a participant, you produce by receiving. Net art is online, and it is for those who are online.

The theory of network creativity, and of the creative use of digital media in general, has emphasised the fact that this technology empowers every user of a computer to become a creator and to participate in the "global concert" of online artists. Even if digital media theoretically offer this possibility, what we can see now is that the same network environments might be of exclusive interest for those people who actually want to become producers. Participation becomes not only an option, but a condition. If this is true it means that the Brechtian utopia of a community of media producers could fail once again, in part because commercial interest prevents strong uploading channels, but in part also because large sections of the prospective producer-receivers would make no use of the tools and the bandwidth, even if they were available.

This is not a very satisfying analysis, certainly not from the perspective of critical cultural practice in and through digital media. Does it mean that, online and offline, we are stuck with fancy interfaces and an interactivity that only "works" if it is entertaining? And, in contrast, what would it mean for festival audiences and others to go online, to "become online" in the way that many artists are who are doing net-based work? Or rather, what if festivals were to facilitate the online experiences of participants and visitors being brought together, so that they could meet, conflict and cooperate with each other at the multiple points of contiguity and intersection between the different online worlds (hackers, NGOs, business networks, etc.)? What would the festivals and exhibition spaces be like that would really allow an audience to come and observe, participate, operate?

The question of how to present network art, and how to articulate online presence and participation, can thus be posed on two levels. One is that of connecting different forms of online-experience, and the other is the demonstration of "mediated space and real space as all one constantly interlocking and changing topology" (Lisa Haskel). In curatorial practice, this means that more emphasis needs to be placed on the interface, alongside the representation or critical practice that forms the content of network art projects. The interface is both the terrain and the tool where the forces of an intermedial field converge, and which can be developed as a field of agency, and a field of subjectification. Presence and participation might be unlocked through the development of hybrid, plural and porous interfaces that cut across mediated and "real" experiential terrains, involve different audiences and that facilitate forms of becoming online that are, at the same time, ways of becoming public.

Thanks to Lisa Haskel and Tapio Mäkelä for critical comments and suggestions.