

Internet Art as an Index of Ethical Resistance

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Introduction

Like other Internet art practitioners, I work within a framework that emphasises critical engagement with the potentials, properties and protocols of networked cultures and technologies. However, it seems that Internet art is once again in transition, and the questions being currently asked by some Internet artists offers the possibility of a re-evaluation and re-positioning of the relationship between Internet and art. This paper is an attempt to re-think the interpretations of material existence that currently inform networked-based practices, and to begin to consider the potential relationship between Internet and art.

Part 1

Internet art as it currently exists is often understood in terms of its relationship to information and communication technologies, DIY hacker culture, political activism and conceptual art. It manifests itself on different levels of generality ranging from computer code, data sets and repositories, technical and bureaucratic protocol, dematerialised art object, organisational form, virtual community and network. It has a long history of engaging the political as techno-aesthetic micro-tactics of subversion. Historically many online projects have highlighted confrontational hacking campaigns such as those from RTMark and etoy. Others, such as Dutch artists, Jodi, have focused on the deliberate manipulation of the everyday experience of Internet users through the definition of a code-specific and database aesthetic. Others, like Heath Bunting have explored the ways in which art can

eschew representation completely and dissolve into the fabric of the network itself. And others focus more on tactical responses to manifestations of power and control within and outside networked technologies. The latter include attempts to by-pass the rules and regulations of the mainstream art institutions by designing organisational models based on participation, openness and sharing for online Internet art communities, such as Rhizome and Furtherfield. One of the initial aims of Furtherfield's Netbehaviour discussion list, for example, was to provide a non-institutionalised space for Internet artists to show and discuss work, and to explore the parameters of open organisational structures.

Writing about Internet art in 2003, art historian Julian Stallabrass suggests that '[a]s it currently exists, it is the most conceptually sophisticated and socially conscious area of contemporary practice'.ⁱ I would suggest that in using the network to make and distribute work, to communicate, collaborate and organise politically, Internet artists are attempting to understand and describe the invisible processes and relations inherent in complex systems, and to develop a sufficient knowledge to create alternative networks - complex systems - of their own. Aspects of systems thinking such as self-similarity, self-organising systems, and emergent properties, together with relational notions of encounter and co-emergence inform many discussions within the Internet art community. As network theorists and activists, Geert Lovink and Florian Schnieder state, the networking paradigm is focused on 'abstract, invisible, subtle processes and feedback loops' thus escaping 'the centrality of the icon to visual culture'.ⁱⁱ

Part 2A

Almost all Internet art is based within a collaborative, participative, open source philosophy, and believing the openness of the Internet's architecture and culture to be its main strength, artists have understood their networked-based work as being ethically and radically progressive. Indeed, the architecture and the culture of the Internet *are* particularly conducive to certain forms of political activism. A notable example is the >Wartime< project conceived and organised by Internet artist, Andrew Forbes as an anti-war demonstration, which brought together hundreds of artists in Europe, South and North America through the online database of Internet art work and offline events at festivals and Universities. As new media theorists Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker note, the

distributed structure of the Internet, its 'multiple sites of locality, many to many communications channels, and a self-organizing capacity (local actions, global results) - are some of the aspects that are cited as part of the network structure'.ⁱⁱⁱ

Informed by free software and open source models of production and consumption, most Internet artists do not sell their work, but rather contribute time, ideas, work and discussion to their online communities in return for enhanced reputations within and increasingly outside the network. But what seemed, to some, to be an escape from commodified forms of production, is now exposed as a characteristic of the market. In a very recent post to the nettime discussion list, Martin Hardie discussing features of 'post-fordist forms of production and immaterial/unpaid/precarious labour', suggests that open source/free software development exists in a culture of sharing, cooperation, collegiality, community, but this culture in turn sets up the individual to compete freely in the market place.^{iv}

As more aspects of our lives are incorporated through commercial rules and regulations, and the technology is developed to support increased commodification, then it seems to me that an acknowledgment of the intensification of technical control, and the pervasiveness of market criteria is central to a re-radicalising of Internet art.

Social theorist Frank Webster sees the information society as the advancement of the Enclosure movement in that market criteria and conditions have spread with such an intensity that they are likely to cover the globe and in doing so to 'introduce commercial rules and regulations which drive out alternatives (customary practices, public provision, non-market habits)'.^v I suggest that it is with reference to the resistance of such incorporation that Internet art communities such as Furtherfield and Soundtoys can be contextualised. Webster argues that processes of commodification will 'penetrate even deeper into private realms of life, with leisure, child-rearing, and even sexuality more and more subject to market intrusions'.^{vi} And Christopher May^{vii} concurs, arguing that it is the commodification of activities hitherto outside capitalism that is the central dynamic of change in the 'information society'. The production and consumption of knowledge and art, creative and domestic spheres of life seem to be the areas within which commodification is intensifying. No longer is it just

the materialised (or even the dematerialised) art object that satisfies the demands of the market - of interest to businesses now are the very relational concepts, creative processes and methodologies developed and used by artists. Perhaps by taking a more critical look at scholars such as Paschal Preston, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Heather Menzies, Kevin Robins and Frank Webster who suggest that rather than a radical break from capitalism, contemporary societal change is best understood in relation to the *continuities* within capitalism, Internet artists can begin to re-think ways of understanding and subverting *real* social and economic relations.

The Internet *is* a particularly contradictory space. Although not designed specifically for warfare, it is entangled with American military technology of the 1950s and 1960s and is culturally inscribed at various levels by techno-scientific, academic, grass-roots, corporate and artistic involvements in its development. Not surprisingly then, Internet art is a cultural form that seems to engage the spaces of its own contradiction, stretching them as far as possible. It is produced and consumed in relation to participatory and open network technologies through which emerging patterns of domination are organised.

Part 2B

Described by Manuel Castells^{viii} as “the technological basis for the organizational form of the Information Age’ the Internet is a distributed global computer network that promotes the relational concepts of cooperation, collaboration, participation, sharing and community whilst being rigidly controlled by what Eugene Thacker describes as ‘a set of technical procedures for defining, managing, modulating, and distributing information throughout a flexible yet robust delivery infrastructure’.^{ix} At this protocological level (to borrow a term from Internet artist and theorist, Alexander Galloway) when the cultural veils are drawn back the Internet manifests an explicit phallic logic: a binary opposition between freedom and control. Freedom is evidenced in the open source culture that emphasises the benefits of making source code free and openly available. Seen by Alexander Galloway as equally participative in form is the flexibility with which Internet protocols enable thousands of diverse networks to be linked together, distributing control into autonomous locales.^x But, these open and participative features of the technology are in sharp contrast with its controlling functions. It is an irony of Internet technology that, to quote Alexander Galloway ‘for

protocol to enable radically distributed communications between autonomous entities, it must deploy a strategy of universalization and homogeneity. It must be anti-diversity. It must promote standardization in order to enable openness. It must organize peer groups into bureaucracies [...] in order to create free technologies'.^{xi}

Galloway and Thacker argue that networks need to be historically contextualised and understood with reference to the technological protocols that control them. Warning against a 'metaphysics of networks' within which the network 'appears as a universal signifier of political resistance', they suggest that counterprotocol is the most effective oppositional strategy – a tactical response to protocol that is not based in resistance but is hypertrophic. This means exploiting flaws in protocological technologies in order to encourage an exaggerated complexity or growth in the network. They suggest that 'the best way to beat the enemy is to become a better enemy'.^{xii}

Part 3

But what if I don't want to become an enemy? It seems clear to me that the processes of intensified capitalist development referred to earlier operate within a logic based on the need to either incorporate or reject: a phallic logic. The network, a contemporary bureaucratic form used to plan and control appropriated information and information resources, likewise exposes a phallic logic based on inclusion/exclusion. Is artistic intervention into these established processes of commodification, information gathering and surveillance also to be framed within this phallic logic? Surely, if the only way of thinking the relationship between Internet and art is with reference to resistance, protocols and technologies, then a one-sided and distorted view of material reality is presented. I would like to suggest that this framework, useful as it is in exposing the contradictions inherent in the Internet, unwittingly enforces an incorporation of art – here understood as a potential site of feminine aesthetic and ethical practice – within the organisational, technological and political logic of the Internet.

It seems to me that many Internet artists have engaged (and continue to engage) in creative practice within a dematerialised environment for the very reason that they believe their ephemeral artworks cannot be commodified, and in the knowledge that they can by-pass the established art institutions, connecting directly with audiences without the mediation of curators and arts funders. This desire to

circumvent the competitive and often destructive character of the institutions and to engage in truly participative communities is deeply felt by many. Lovink and Schneider argue that networks still hold out the possibility for radical social change, but that the real purpose of networked participation and sharing has not been adequately debated or defined^{xiii}. Whilst it is now clear that the particular form of networking and participatory activity that Internet artists wanted so much, was itself based in a concealed phallic logic, it is not so say that the whole dream is fruitless. Rather, a different kind of 'logic' or thinking needs to be used to re-frame the desires of artists and audiences for non-aggressive shared creative spaces.

For a number of Internet artists aspects of Bracha L. Ettinger's Matrix theory seem to connect with ideas and concerns central to networking: cultures of sharing and explorations of the potentials of participative encounters with known and unknown others. The matrixial sphere theorised by feminist psychoanalyst and artist, Bracha Ettinger refers us to, as Rosi Huhn suggests, matter, mother and womb, and to what Bracha Ettinger herself describes as intimate sharing in the feminine/pre birth space. Moving beyond thinking subjectivity as, to quote Griselda Pollock, 'an accumulation of separations, splits, cuts and cleavages' the Matrixial enables us to 'consider aspects of subjectivity as encounter occurring at shared borderspaces between several partial-subjects'.^{xiv}

Theorising through her own artistic practice, Bracha Ettinger's work is complex and open to misunderstandings. I am only beginning to know her work, and therefore should like to stress that I am not an expert. But, from the first time that I read one of her posts to Jordan Crandall's Underfire project I knew that she was articulating 'something' that was immediately recognisable to me at an intuitive and emotional level. On those first few readings of her post I didn't particularly understand her actual words, but I had an overwhelming sense that she was accessing a psychic space that I 'knew' but which that up until this point had existed as an ungraspable shadow. Perhaps what surprised me most was that this psychic space - a feminine space - is routinely denied - in life and in art, and even in Internet art. As I get to know her work a little bit more, I am beginning to understand the extent to which the (albeit fluid) frameworks within which Internet art currently exists can only ever approximate the kind of shared spaces articulated by Bracha Ettinger.

As part of an online dialogue with new media and Internet theorists and artists entitled 'the impossibility of not sharing'^{xv}, Bracha Ettinger discussed her ideas with specifically with reference to net art, arguing that even though it may seem that 'art on the net is 'perfectly' suitable for adopting these terms' it is important to clarify the 'distinction between 'intersubjectivity and interactivity.'^{xvi} She goes on to say:

In spite of its technological potentiality and in spite of the artists' intentions, net-art doesn't necessarily produce a matrixial affect; from my experience it is even very rare; I find the effects I have been exposed to by net-art up till now mostly in resonance with conceptual art mingled in graphics, while the beautiful is whatever succeeds – as object or event, process or operation [...].'^{xvii}

Bracha Ettinger uses the term 'painting' 'as a metaphor for other artistic operations recognisable in the work of certain artists or artworks that realizes an encounter with trauma that is affectively shared.'^{xviii} Painting is not necessarily the concern of all 'Art': of work technologically situated, or consciously intended'.^{xix}

If matrix theory offers the potential of developing aesthetic and ethical practices with reference to a non-phallic symbolic, a symbolic that, to quote Griselda Pollock, 'does not displace, drive out, take over from, master, exclude', then rather than attempting to position this practice outside the Internet and its capitalist bureaucracies and technologies, I am interested to see if it can exist alongside. It is this potential relationship between Internet and art, framed within an expanded symbolic, that I wish to explore further within my aesthetic and ethical practice. My work (some of which can be found at www.gloriousninth.com) continues with a deeper desire to articulate this space through the interweaving of art, ethics and politics.

Notes

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- i Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*, (London, Tate Publishing, 2003) p 8.
- ii Geert Lovink and Florian Schneider, *Notes on the State of Networking* posted on <nettime> 29th February 2004
- iii Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Limits of Networking* posted on <nettime> 25th March 2004 (originally posted on 15th March, but resent due to glitch in network).
- iv Martin Hardie, *post fordist tv* posted on <nettime> 24th May 2005
- v Webster, F, 'Information, Capitalism and Uncertainty' *Information, communication & Society* (3:1 2000), p.72
- vi Webster, F, *op cit* p.72
- vii Christopher May, 'Information Society, Commodities and Continuity' *Information, communication & Society* (3:1, 2000), pp 91-94
- viii Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 1
- ix Eugene Thacker, 'Foreword: Protocol is as Protocol Does' in *Protocol: How control exists after decentralization* (London: MIT Press, 2004), p.xv
- x Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How control exists after decentralization* (London: MIT Press, 2004), p.142
- xi Alexander Galloway, *op cit*, p.142
- xii Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *op cit*
- xiii Geert Lovink and Florian Schneider, *op cit*
- xiv Griselda Pollock, *Thinking the Feminine: Aesthetic Practice as Introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the Concepts of Matrix and Metramorphosis* in *Theory, Culture & Society* 2004 21: 5-65. p. 6
- xv Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, *Impossibility of not sharing* posted on <eyebeam><blast> 26th February 1998
- xvi Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, *Impossibility of not sharing* posted on <eyebeam><blast> 26th February 1998
- xvii Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, *Beauty and Trauma* posted on <eyebeam><blast> 5th April 1998
- xviii Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, *Beauty and Trauma* posted on <eyebeam><blast> 5th April 1998
- xix Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, *Beauty and Trauma* posted on <eyebeam><blast> 5th April 1998