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----- What is netart ;-)?

The "Internet myth" is the result of a massive self-referentiality of our media landscape. Unlimited communication in a yet unknown conglomerate made of machines, cables and people. The exclusive network of cyberpunks, scientists and artists has been superseded by the thirst for information of the industrialized mass consumption. Nevertheless, the cultural "stylistic howlers" of communication in data networks continue to exist not only in the underground.

Artistic projects, strategy projects, discussion forums and autonomous network structures within the vast Internet, but remote from the glossy, dust-free surfaces, show interesting beginnings for an alternative use of this medium.

--- Netart vs. Art on the Net ---

The art market has discovered the net for the distribution of art. It uses the net to promote art just like ordinary companies. Gallerists, museums and other art brokers provide information about their artists, exhibitions and events. For them, the net is nothing more than a big telephone book in which they too want to (have to) be represented.

However, netart differs from art on the net. Art on the net is mostly nothing more than the documentation of art which is not created on the net, but rather outside it and, in terms of content, does not establish any relationship to the net. Netart functions only on the net and picks out the net or the "netmyth" as a theme. It often deals with structural concepts: A group or an individual designs a system that can be expanded by other people. Along with that is the idea that the collaboration of a number of people will become the condition for the development of an overall system. netart projects without the participation of external persons are perhaps interesting concepts, but they do not manifest themselves as a collective creativity in the net (Dieter Daniels, <http://www.hgb-leipzig.de/theorie/mailart.htm>). The idea is fundamental, but dubious without media-specific translation and without participation of other people. For all netart projects there is a retraceable starting point, an author, so to speak. Nevertheless, what develops from one idea of one single artist with the collaboration of many others, is incalculable. Like the incentive of gambling, here too the openness, the curiosity about an imaginary end, the exciting challenge of taking part in such projects. And that with a medium like Internet, which makes a direct form of intervention possible at the same time on different levels of communication (text, sound, picture, motion picture, real time).

--- Approaches to a Typology of netart ---

There are different manifestations of netart on the Internet. Common to them all is the extension of communications networks, that is to say, logical networks within the physically existing telecommunications systems. In the process two different approaches come to light:

1. Context Systems

Context systems like "The Thing", "t0", "Internationale Stadt " a.o. go back to the idea of developing perceptible claims for artistic-cultural activities on the net, and to do this not as an individual, but as a collective group projects.

Independent structural projects form a context, an art platform for non-commercial netactivities of the most diverse kind. Infrastructures of these kinds are mostly in the hands of the operators themselves, with their own projects and subject matter; they are users of their own structure. That is ultimately also the motivation, to invest a lot of energy in building up of such structures.

The motivation to build up Internet infrastructures goes back to the interdependent relationship of providers and sponsors who enable artists access to the net. Parking oneself at a commercial Internet provider has a high price:

Commercial Internet providers use artists projects to attain higher viewing figures and use them for advertising. Moreover, the space for technically creative experiments is most often limited. For the system administrators make the final judgement for all netprojects. They decide what is technically realizable and what is desirable in the interests of netoperators. For that reason artists opt to work with their own capital so that they do not have to fall back on borrowed funds.

The intention of these context systems is the development of communities. Real as well as virtual communities are developed only by way of identification with the system visible in the net and its operator groups, well-knowing that at the same time every active user can become a perceptible component. In this sense, viewed hierarchically, the structure-giver and active users are on the same level. Of course, comparisons with the relation between curator and artist, or gallery and artist, or museum and artist come to mind. In this case the art institutions have little model function as art brokers, but the net as a free medium of distribution does. Unlike the mass media, the Internet has developed its popularity through the awareness of a constant give and take of its users. The expression of networks, namely to form a processual platform of communication and information, can with respect to context systems be summed up in two short formulas: structure=content and net=art.

Exemplary Projects:

The Thing New York (<http://www.thing.net/thingnyc>) The Thing Vienna (<http://www.thing.at>) International City Federation (<http://www.icf.de>) desk.nl (<http://www.desk.nl>) Obsolete (<http://www.obsolete.com>) Public Netbase (<http://www.t0.or.at>) Ludmilla (<http://www.kud-fp.si>) etc.

2. Researchers, Troublemakers, Individual Perpetrators

Unlike context systems, individual netartists or groups in the net operate without having to take into account the visitors on the Web sites or the limits of the medium. "Service" is the last thing on their minds. The Internet as a new medium is the tool of artistic projects. Often it has less to do with the Internet itself and more with the desires, hopes and aversions which a networked world arouses among so many people. Here the permanent online existence of a future communications society is now being put to the test. Catchwords like dislocation, identity, truth, belief, reality, territory which have

become popular by way of the net are being taken up by net Artists and often radically processed. Here it is not so much a matter of the clarification of such terms as it is a matter of artistic interventions leading to confusions among virtual visitors.

Netart does not have a tight visual language. It behaves rather like a chameleon. It is caught up in a constant process, reacting quickly and sensitively to changes. Netart itself may be short-lived too. For the Internet is a medium which is continuously in movement. Never before in history has the way of a medium from the time of implementation to the massive dissemination been so short as in the case of the Internet.

If one observes the visual appearance of a lot of conventional Web sites somewhat more exactly over a longer period of time one may ascertain a "state of the art" in the design. What is conspicuous, for example, are the smoothed, shadowy icons and images. The underlain shadows suggest that the user is being produced on the monitor by way of the shadows and that it is the user who is beaming instead of the monitor. There is a series of other such creative features that recur on a number of Web sites. One seldom sees deliberate deviations, for most of the Web sites are trying to sell products, and exotic interface ideas should not keep from "clicking." Netartists as researchers of perception are free enough to look after such phenomena. Everything that allows an escape from the young, but tediously styled WWW is experimented with, from the Web sites in black and white to the complete abandonment of design. Netartists are investigating the conventions of the net and its virtual visitors by exceeding them.

Even the hypertext inherent in the WWW is contextualized. Many dispense with hyperlinks right from the start, others use them in such an exaggerated way that any orientation is lost.

So-called "fake" projects are also very popular. Netartists try to park themselves with them in other art territories without being exposed. For that they copy creative elements of a particular communications context and transfer them to their own projects. Products are offered that can never possibly exist, services are promised which no one can possibly keep. Lying is therefore explicitly allowed. In this way believers, unsuspecting surfers can become a component of a netart project. Through such projects, fundamental questions are raised about truth, the credibility of the exchange of information in a media-dominated society. Netartists are experimenting with the belief in the progress of techno culture and are working with its material - information and communication. They are using metaphors from the real world, pseudo-individualizing software and playing with the vanity of their virtual visitors.

The Internet as a mirror of a neo-liberal capitalism is an extremely interesting experimental layout, full of inspiration for artists, hackers and other field researchers.

Exemplary Projects:

<http://www.hgb-leipzig.de/livesource/elive.htm>
<http://www.jodi.org> <http://www.irational.org>
<http://www.icf.de/neonurlaub> <http://namespace.autono.net>

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