12-31-1969

net.art Year in Review

Alex Galloway

Recommended Citation

Galloway, Alex (1969) "net.art Year in Review," *SWITCH*: Vol. 13 : No. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol13/iss1/4

DATABASE
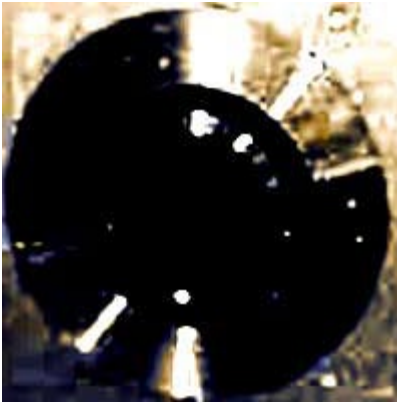
net.art Year in Review

Alex Galloway on Dec 31 1969   **issue 13**

State of net.art 99

What an exciting year it's been in the world of net art! Let's start with a few highlights to refresh your memory, followed by three morbid eulogies for 1999 (give or take a few months):

- Jodi says "fuck you" to the Webby Awards after being awarded top marks in the Art category.

- Ars Electronica says same to hard working net artists by awarding their lucrative Golden Nica to "Linux" (whatever that is).

- MoMA says same to Postmasters Gallery and Maciej Wisniewski (both hard working) after an eleventh hour suspension of support for Netomat, a sophisticated artist-produced browser.

- Big-bucks website eToys.com (with the "s") says same to legendary media mavens etoy.com (**http://146.228.204.72:8080**), by suing them over control of the domain name "etoy.com." Backed by hundreds of organisations and individuals world-wide, RTMark organizes a global "multi-user game" to protest the action. eToys's stock price drops by over 40%.

- ZKM launches "net_condition," a major exhibition of networked art.

- The Electronic Disturbance Theater releases the public edition of Floodnet to artivists around the world: "The June 18th action in conjunction with Reclaim the Streets went so well that The Sunday-London Times accused EDT of helping Launch a cyber war against London," remembers Ricardo Dominguez.

- Stadium (**www.stadiumweb.com**) gets swallowed up by DIA Center. Stadium founder Ron Wakkary gets a new job in Canada.

- First net art conference in France, organized by **http://pleine-peau.com**

- Wolfgang Staehle tries to sell an old version of The Thing website (**http://old.thing.net**) on ebay. Others such as Jeff Gates and Eryk Salvaggio explore the net.artistic potential of the ebay environment (i.e. short-term free web pages).

- An announcement from the Whitney Museum reveals that, for the first time, net art will be included in the 2000 Whitney Biennial.

- etoy "liberates" a golden nica from an animator at the Ars Electronica awards party and presents it to RTMark.

- Rhizome.org launches the ARTBASE (**http://rhizome.org/artbase**).

1. Net-dot-art is dead

Or, as Tilman Baumgartel has noted, it's "the end of an era. The first formative period of net culture seems to be over."

People want more than email. They want new interfaces. They want killer aps. They want to escape the offline. All art media involve constraints, and through these constraints creativity is born. Net.art (the jodi-vuk-shulgin-bunting style) was the product of a particular technological constraint: low bandwidth. Net.art is low bandwidth through and through. We see it in ASCII art, form art, HTML conceptualism--anything that can fit easily through a modem. As computers and bandwidth improve, the primary physical reality that governed the aesthetic space of net.art begins to fall away. Today, plug-ins and Java are good. And software trumps them both.

Software art is not new. Ever since a collective of British outlaw artists wrote the code for I/O/D 4--a carnivorous browsing application known as the "Webstalker"--artists have been twisting and tweaking the very tools we use to surf the web. Yet with artist/programmer Maciej Wisniewski's Netomat (**www.netomat.net**), which premiered earlier this summer at New York's Postmasters Gallery, we see a new level of intensity, a new commitment to coding.

Forget buzzwords like "immersion" and "interactivity." The Netomat is all surface. Images and words fly across the monitor as the user navigates by typing words and phrases. No clicking and no URLs. For Wisniewski, the interface itself has an aesthetic appeal. Featuring an open architecture for endless reconfiguration--provided you know XML, of course--Netomat brings an exciting level of maturity to the fledgling field of net art.

Communimage (**http://www.communimage.ch**) is a digital mosaic made up of hundreds of gif images uploaded by web surfers. Each image is placed on an imaginary field so that it is contiguous with at least one other image. As the uploaded images accumulate, a mosaic begins to form. The user can navigate around different quadrants of the mosaic, and can zoom in out. Yet as the user zooms out, each gif in the mosaic shrinks to the size of a single pixel, allowing a new image to form. Thus grows a "picture of a thousand pictures."

Not only is the web interface elegant, the software behind Communimage is quite sophisticated. Users are matched automatically via email with their "picture neighbors." Also, a yet to be unveiled feature of the site called "facets" will then extract different cross-sections of the communal image. In the same way that Rhizome.org's STARRYNIGHT interface can draw constellations of certain cross-sections of the Rhizome archive, Communimage will be able to redraw the mosaic in a number of different ways: by user's favorite color, by country of origin, and so on. Communimage is a creative cross between the traditional web collider and a more sophisticated information map.

Linker (**http://www.mongrel.org.uk/Linker**) is a new piece of software from Mongrel. Linker is based on the multimedia software Director, an industry standard for authoring high-end multimedia CD-ROMs and kiosks. Like Director, Linker is used to link together different media such as text, graphics and video. Linker uses the metaphor of the map, and its interface allows the user to link together different media objects onto the surface of this map. As Matthew Fuller has noted, "Linker is the multimedia equivalent of a throw-away camera" (**http://rhizome.org/cgi/to.cgi?r=1567**). It's quick, easy, and gets the job done.

2. Nettime is dead (long live nettime)

1999 is about the offline. Escaping it, longing for it, trapped by it, getting rid of it. Nettime has always had an intimate relationship with the offline, with the real world. Yet today it is forced to evolve, to become web-specific. Yes, Nettime--that email list that used to make me *want* to read my email--has now lost its old world (read "offline") charm for one truly ugly web reality, the general public! What was once an elite gathering place, has now begun to sag under the weight of its own subscriber base.

When asked to report on the current status of Nettime, former listmaster Ted Byfield replied curtly, "it's a list; it works." So, what happened?

Maybe the change happened when Geert Lovink and Pit Schultz originally decided to let their creation evolve into version 2.0 a year or two ago. Maybe it happened when they got their own domain name, www.nettime.org? Maybe it happened when they moved servers to similarly terminal comrades, The Thing? Maybe their obsession with offline publishing (the ZKP papers, the book) proved fatal? I asked Byfield if he was still involved with Nettime: "i'm still involved, yes, but in a consultative role much more

than in day-to-day work--but these things are fluid, there's no defined roles. Felix Stalder (Toronto), Sebastian Luetgert (Berlin), and Scot Mcphee (Sydney) are all sharing the work."

Later, I asked Byfield to comment on his favorite thing that happened in 1999: "the ways in which, in fits and starts, people have been responding to the fact that the future is about to vanish. the twenty-first century had served for much of this century as the token of 'the future,' and 'the future' has in turn served as the circumstance in which problems will be solved. once it arrives, we'll be left with a very curious cultural dilemma: the future will be *here and now*."

3. The underground is dead

1999 is the year net.art became rarefied. Although Documenta 10 was the first large scale art exhibition to feature net art, the opening of this year's Net_condition exhibition at the Center for Art and Media Technology (ZKM) marked a watershed moment for net art in the institutionalized, offline art world. The need for such an exhibition was so long awaited that Net_condition was received as simultaneously an introduction to and a retrospective of net art (despite its relative youth as a medium).

Also to blame, yet for very different reasons, is Hell.com, that elite net.art training ground that is off limits to web surfers. Hell.com has rarefied net.art by selecting its kings and queens, by creating an artistic pantheon. Yet when queried, Hell's representatives are very clear about their status as an arts organization: "we don't do net.art. we don't do art." Yes, of course they don't. Then why moonlight at art museums, as Hell did earlier this year at the ICA's New Media Center with "skinonskinonskin" (a piece by Michael Samyn and Auriea Harvey of entropy8zuper.com)? Kenneth Aronson, Director of Hell.com, explains: "experience from our private web is made available at art & cultural orgs for three reasons: 1) we prefer that nothing is available at hell.com," i.e. all content at hell.com is password protected, "2) we don't want what we are doing tied to any 'commercialism,' 3) who else is there left to host it." Bingo. Net.art heads to the museum.

But what's notable is that hell.com, the greatest consolidator of net.artists, was itself spoofed by mysterious newcomer 0100101110101101.ORG. In February, Rhizome.org "went to Hell" by opening up the private web site for a 48 hour exhibition. During this Rhizome.org window 0100101110101101 downloaded and cloned a portion of the demonic domain. Ooops! Hell.com was not amused. The cloned portion of Hell.com is now open to the public at **http://www.0100101110101101.org/hell.com**.

Hell and 0100101110101101 tussled publicly over the issue. "You are in violation of international copyright laws!" fumed Hell.com in a May 11th email. Suddenly the argument was back to intellectual property: copyright vs copyleft. And Hell is on the rarefied right. Once upon a time, Vuk Cosic cloned the Documenta 10 web site. During that moment, he was both a custodian and a net.artist. Yet in the case of Hell vs. 0100101110101101, we have no custodians, only misers and thieves.

::CrossReference

about | contact | credits | subscribe