

6-14-2000

Text for Moscow: Between moderation and extremes.

Josephine Bosma

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch>

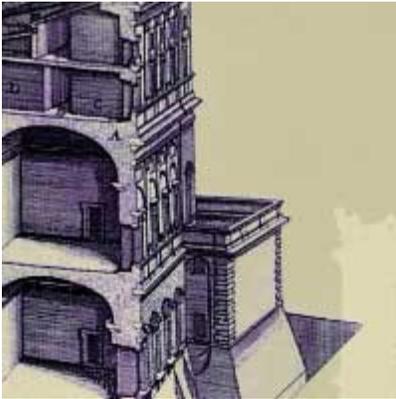
Archived from http://switch.sjsu.edu/archive/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php%3Fartc=234.html. Documentation of the preservation processes used for this collection is available at <https://github.com/NickSzydowski/switch>.

Recommended Citation

Bosma, Josephine (2000) "Text for Moscow: Between moderation and extremes.," *SWITCH*: Vol. 14 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol14/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in SWITCH by an authorized editor of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.



Text for Moscow: Between moderation and extremes.

Josephine Bosma on Jun 14 2000

issue 14

the tensions between net art theory and popular art discourse.

Society on the Internet is hardly different from that off-line. The few differences in cultural, social, and political structures up to now, should mostly be credited to the specifics of its technology and to the inexperience of people working with it. So far - nothing really new. Because we are dealing with a medium that is still under development there is however an ongoing feeling of play and novelty about the net, which evokes and has evoked smaller and larger dreams of a Better World. In the initial excitement about (and exploration of) the new medium we witnessed a strong tendency towards cross- or multidisciplinary work and collaboration in a still relatively small group of online cultural 'developers'. With the effects of excitement slowly fading away, disciplines and discourses appear to separate from each other again, succumbing largely to age-old off-line structures. Do we need to interfere in this development? To what extent have there ever been alternative structures, and are they necessary at all? Is it possible to move beyond the limitations of both technology and 'traditional' social structures? I want to show firstly in a short analysis of the mailing list nettime, that neglecting a critical attitude towards the fundamental structure and outside perception (from different viewpoints at the same time) of one's project, produces negative and even destructive effects in the end. Cross-disciplinary investigations and theory are vital to countering a development of a narrowing down of the possibilities to have influence on the continuing construction of a mediated society, in which art, in my point of view, still plays a significant role. When looking more specifically at net art, we can find this narrowing development in the separation of critical media discourse and net art as it is strongly represented by nettime. In the much broader field outside this list we see another danger for art on the net in the rather strong tendency towards simplification of the net art discourse through a curious focus on web art (as opposed to the broader field of net art). No matter how good some web art is, web art in general should not replace net art through pure lack of knowledge and awareness.

The connection between (net) art and theory is vital. The two should develop together, in order to make sure the institutional reception and handling of this art is as close to the art practice as possible. Art education and presentation are basic elements for a flourishing art practice. Even if art education and presentation are now replaced by self education, exploration and self representation on the net, institutional practices will still be of crucial importance.

Nettime and Cross Disciplinary Theory

The development of net art has been under attack from two sides. On the one hand we see the long predicted institutionalization of art on the net through existing artworld structures, and on the other hand the net arts are being cut off from cross-disciplinary discourse and media theory by key figures of one of its first influential playgrounds: nettime. Net art was embraced as an alternative or radical view of net.culture by nettime from 1995 to 1997, when list moderation first started invisibly, and later

officially. Nettime was started in 1995 by a group of about ten 'media theorists' and 'artists'; as an initiative of Pit Schultz and Geert Lovink. Amongst the artists were Paul Garrin and Heath Bunting. Each list member in the early stages of nettime seemed equally important, and each member brought along his or her contacts. The problem with nettime was (and is) that there has never been a clear explanation or description of its structure, yet it was presented very much as a community effort. It had live meetings and online discussions where the direction and purpose of the list were discussed and all members were asked to perform tasks and develop tools or additions to the list for the benefit of all. The list was supposed to be a radical counter force against a so-called 'disneyfication' of the Internet in all its aspects. Critical approaches of 'political' mechanisms (and those politics could be within governments, military, commerce, industry/ technology, media, or art: as they were all entwined) were its basic driving force. Being a member of nettime more or less equaled joining this battle against commerce, corporate powers, techno-ignorance and cultural deprivation. When the mailing list (and of course the group of Internet users in general) grew, and more and more subscribers joined in order to simply have their daily updates from the by now infamous list (rather than being actively involved) the desire for consensus became strong. The list slowly changed from an exchange forum into a platform (see my interview with Heath Bunting in Telepolis). In this development the balance between active discourse and individual promotion or presentation of texts was lost. Art discourse (by which I mean not only art theoretical discourse, but also experimental representations and exchanges within net art) in this environment was soon seen as noise, as it did not follow traditional and harmonic (read: academic) modes of communication. What then happened, artists were first approached individually, off-list, in order to change their modes of communication (meaning: they should not send experimental texts to the list anymore). This resulted in the first and most important separation of artists from the list. After the nettime meeting in Ljubljana in 1997, Jodi, Heath Bunting, Alexei Shulgin, Rachel Baker and others left the list. This unfortunate development caused quite some debate behind closed doors, and was perceived as unnecessary; the attitude of the artists was seen as provocative. Paul Garrin, one of the last remaining artists from the foundation of nettime, never left the list. His project 'namespace' has a strong political background, and was initiated at a nettime meeting during the tactical art&media festival n5m2 in Amsterdam. Namespace needs to keep in touch with, and needs to be represented within, the environment it sprouted from. Not even half a year after the large list meeting in Ljubljana though, Garrin's posts and disputes via the list were the reason for the 'list owners' Pit Schultz and Geert Lovink to switch on the moderation button, and to start filtering the list. According to them, they had had complaints. A lot of these complaints probably came from the most dominant moderator of the list today, an enemy of Garrin: Ted Byfield. This way, without much open discussion or explanation, there came an end to experimentation and openness on the nettime list. Nettime has and still does profile itself as being in support of, or in search of, new modes of development for the media in society. This aspect of it has however been completely neglected because of the hidden political and personal agenda of some of its moderators, which does not allow for openness or experiments. Nettime has turned into a watered down online version of n5m, with the difference that at n5m art is still, though highly cornered by politics, part of the discourse. The biggest problem with nettime is 'its' unwillingness to reflect on 'its' radical change from exchange forum (with input from many) to moderated platform (with strong influence of a few members mostly) today. Not only does cultural theory suffer from it directly today, also the experiments and thoughts about it from a few years back are made to look suspicious through the consequent denial of their importance and influence.

Nettime was not simply interesting to net art because it brought together a group of people from mixed backgrounds and disciplines. The Thing had done so also, and so did The Well. The Thing however first of all had a much smaller group of members, plus its scope of topics was narrower. It was and is more an art server, both Thing New York and Thing Europe. The Well was too American for the taste of many, and starting a critical discourse around the development of the Internet through a California list probably seemed a contradiction in terms. What was interesting about nettime, next to its cross-disciplinary tendencies, was the strong presence of non-American cultural input on the list (or in other words: the diversity of cultures). Now that nettime has chosen to mostly close the door to art, the development of net art has lost a central point for critical cross disciplinary thought from a multicultural perspective. The development of net art is now largely in the hands of arts organizations, which not only tend to emphasize art practice as one separate from other practices, but which also have strong local ties. The connection to local art environments creates stronger divisions within art discourse online, resulting unsurprisingly in a dominance of American art discourse in relation to how net art is being perceived.

Net Art Discourse and the Artworld

Although there are interesting, sometimes rather obscure conferences and festivals on

special aspects of net art in Europe and elsewhere, the perception of net art both online and in the mainstream media is more and more colored by the state of net art in the United States. The creation of the Webby by SFMOMA certainly has caused mainstream media to finally wake up, but the Webby seems to be almost the logical consequence of an opening up of the traditional artworld to net art from within an American context. Its mailings don't have the atmosphere of a TV show for no reason. Ironic gestures aside, the Webby looks like an early step in the direction of a Web TV award. The loss of a conscious, cross-continent, cross-disciplinary discourse on net art has brought American art discourse into an advantageous position, due to its dominance in a few respects. Firstly language (the German speaking countries have a strong art theoretical discourse and a forerunner position in the field of net art theory that is obscured because publications are not being translated into English), and secondly 'the Americans' have a highly dominant input into the development of the Internet. We now face a net art discourse that is strongly influenced by American economic traditions and mechanisms. Especially as the role of web designers, and their connection to soft- and hardware designers, becomes more influential. Rules of web design slowly gnaw away at net art practice and theory like acid gnaws at iron. The term net art gets confused with or replaced by web art as if the two were interchangeable, without many questions asked. Traditional art practitioners too easily turn to the structurally (in terms of basic development of net.technology) and economically important 'group' of web designers for what they think is the highest form of knowledge of a medium they know little or nothing about. Art historical analysis is barely applied to net art, and if it is, it usually happens through the slightly younger tradition of video art. A historically deeper and therefore more radical analysis of the difference between the Internet and mass media, like TV and radio, that includes global economic and political developments as well is rare. Replacing the term 'net art' by 'web art' causes a negligence of art history within a political and economic environment. The radical implications of net art are replaced by the much less threatening aspects of web art. It therefore of course also becomes more compact, easier to grasp and more marketable.

Net art has shown a conceptual overlap between all art forms through the variety of its manifestations and the uneasy definition of it as one artistic 'style'. In fact it even shows the potential for questioning popular/common art history, in which marketability of art has been the primary point of departure in ranking artworks and artists (and for keeping a stable economic environment for other art professionals.) One could almost speak of critical art history or if that sounds too sharp, specialized art history, as a - secret- history that is almost lost for the next generations. Within this secret history we can find traces of predecessors of what is now called net art. When we combine these traces with a cross-disciplinary analysis of the present situations that surround net art, we might (it almost sounds like an alchemist recipe, but I have to stress I am -not- referring to a so-called 'spiritual' perception of the arts) arrive at a conceptual, or basic core of, art practice within a technological society. It could very well be that it is this mostly unspoken desire to know what the basis of the artistic experience is, and the - feeling- that disclosing this knowledge is near (when using the Internet as a medium), what excites and drives many net artists. The narrower the definition of net art, the more we lose sight of this almost 'secret' art history. With a narrow definition of net art, we stay in the tunnel of mass media hyper-reality.

Unstable 'Objects'

With the entrance of electricity, of new media in the arts, we entered an era of instability. Instability is something western society has fought traditionally. In the arts this tradition (of fighting instability) expressed itself in a radical commodification of art. It expressed itself almost totally in a market orientation, in which concept was submitted to business. The age of new media is the age of the accident, as it was expressed at the Dutch Electronic Art Festival in 1998, which had "the art of the accident" as its theme. Have we seen this instability reflected in art history though, in its full force? Do we need to acknowledge the virtues of instability, or do we at least need to acknowledge its undeniable part in the state of art and culture today?

Tilman Baumgaertel made an attempt about 3 years ago to sum up the pre- net art history through events and work in 'traditional' art history. You can find this text online in the archives of (again) Telepolis magazine. He goes back as far as the early twentieth century. Going back to the beginning of modernity is important for net art criticism. One can not only see the struggles of artists with new technologies, or their fascination with them, one can also see how art develops more and more into the direction of purely conceptual. Matter does not matter anymore. The mixture of art with other disciplines, from psychology to science to even war (if one can call that a discipline), might be represented in all kinds of materials or media; in the end has led to a diversion away from the art totem to the meaning of it. Even if the work is purely visual or aesthetic. Meaning is not stable. To criticize the construction of art as object we can also look at a famous and much used art analysis by Greenberg, from

around 1940, which can serve net art theory or Art Theory Today. First of all Greenberg's development of criteria by which one can distinguish art from kitsch is of course a protection of the art market from being flooded by mass produced or copied works. The age of reproduction, the age of new media (in the definition of Lev Manovich) had matured considerably by 1940. Greenberg serves and protects the art market. On the other hand, after he has sealed off the artworld from works made in the new media of his age, he hands us a tool by which we can -now- condemn most contemporary art as kitsch. One definition of kitsch by Greenberg is namely: a work that is made to look like art, a work made to at first glance easily fit within the category of art. True art apparently has to be original: an original. As nobody would like or would dare to see art this way, as kitsch (even if a lot of artworks might deserve it), Greenberg's theory can now be used to put art history into perspective. It is no longer the art object that has to suffer the most changes, rather it is art -theory- and (popular) art history. The dominant art object can be seen as a manipulation, a theoretical construction.

Net art is an involuntary provocation. Art has been declared dead so many times that art professionals, whether they come from the popular or near 'secret' approach of the art institutional processes, have come to accept their work field as a stage for representation (of an image of art shaped through some 'traditional' use of matter) almost completely. The focus on the art object seems to only have become stronger throughout the twentieth century, instead of it losing ground as one might have expected when following the thoughts or concepts around early modern art. This strange contradiction was of course often noticed and pointed at, but somehow the victory of the art object through the art market and subsequently also in popular art history was taken for granted quite easily. It nearly arrived at the point where we would have to accept that 'art as object' is 'the way art simply is'. Art forms that contradicted this definition threatened to be seen as forms of radical or conceptual performance or theatre, that serve as theoretical experiments which in the end only inform other artworks, art objects, but are not of the same importance as those objects. Fortunately this last definition is somewhat losing its potential firmness in the presently powerful position of video art within the artworld, which of course has been due to the development of technology throughout the twentieth century. The unstable, intangible value of the art object in the age of new media could no longer be denied importance when more and more artists started to work in new media and multimedia. Net art however takes the instability of the art product one step further, namely a further step away from 'art spaces'. At least temporarily the 'art spaces' (galleries, museums, etc.) are in the position of being an -addition- to the representation of an artwork, rather than being the most important means for the presentation of art. This aspect of net art alone is enough for at least a few controversies. Should for instance small parts of or additions to net artworks have any value, both for art history and for the art market? Some artists fight or resist the art market. When listening to them, the dominant definition of value today might need reevaluation as well.

The New Art Elite (sic)

The basics of art selection are also increasingly unclear. The major difference between 20th and 21st century art could probably be that the definition of high art is more and more one of 'sampling' individuals or groups which 'compile' an artwork or art environment, opposed to the 20th century dictum of art as cultural selection by institutional processes. The loss of tangibility, the loss of the art object, is the aspect of net art that is debated most, but of much more importance to art 'selection' now is the loss of -clear boundaries- to an artwork in cyberspace. This results especially in a change within the role of the art audience. The much sought after 'interactivity' does not reside in well designed interfaces and interesting buttons to push (or windows to fill), but lies hidden within the presence of the audience inside the network. Collaborations of variable intensity, exploration of networked art pieces and the discourse around these are causing the audience to directly enter the realm of critical and artistic practice simultaneously. We can draw from the early art performance practices on the Internet to imagine a 'new' role for art institutions, for galleries and museums. As in the early twentieth century, art spaces could be places for social spectacle and events again, in which presentation, selection and exchange of ideas and norms are the central activity, as opposed to the consumption of preselected works, which is the dominant activity in museums now. A space like this can serve as an area of accumulation of communication, an addition to the individual experience behind the personal computer, an experience that is still growing in number and importance. The development of art in computer networks (which is of course part of, or in addition to, a larger electronic culture) in this sense takes the early 20th century avant-garde idea of art untouched by the sublimation and selection of an authority and realizes it by default. The audience that enters into an artwork in order to explore it to the utmost extreme, or the audience that witnesses an unfolding art project over a period of time and provides it with some level of 'artistic' value. Whether this audience does or does

not enter into the artistic process itself, is part of a system of evaluation that informs the new art history.

Art Before and After 'Going Online'

The word net art was always problematic. It held the risk for both the artists and the art to be too connected to a limited use of a small, specific media environment, as David Garcia wrote back in 1997 (on the nettime mailinglist). Yet artists have mostly tried to escape the word 'art' in it, not the word 'net'. Most probably this happened because of problems within the art establishment as I have described earlier. It has been quite clear for many from the beginning though, that net art was going to be only a -temporary- 'file' in art discourse for putting certain new practices into while they were developing. Going against the grain, and therefore risking stepping on some toes, I would say the development of art in computer networks forces us to ditch the general, popular definition of art entirely. We could speak of a pre- and post- network situation. 'Post-network' in this context points to the by now near total internalization of the internet, or computer networks in general, by our environment, our society. I am of course aware this process is not complete, or may never be completed, in all parts of society (and of the world) equally in terms of availability and popular use. What I for now call post-network art is coming forth from a life and culture that is saturated by the new media networks, in which a distinction between online culture and off-line culture is very hard to make.

I was talking to a friend of mine, Walter van der Crujisen, a few days ago. He is founder of the digital city and other important projects in Holland, and he is currently working at the ZKM in Karlsruhe. He was also part of net art projects like Refresh in 1996 and the Ascii Art Ensemble in 1998. We agreed entirely on the reevaluation of art in the present setting, a reevaluation that has consequences for the popular conception of net art as well as from the perspective I just described (pre- and post- network art). When I speak of net art, I always have the broadest possible definition of it in mind. It does not stand for one specific group of artists, and it is not all purely self-referential or criticizing the network medium, as some say. It covers not only browser based art (which should be clear) or the even more restrictive definition of 'site based' art, but also art that happens in any other kind of software, any other kind of time frame than the individual now-ness of site based, site anchored art. It also includes live performance like dance, music or theatrical enterprises, or performances delayed in time, which are more like intervention art. What is maybe unexpected though is that art that at first glance does NOT use the Internet as a medium at all can fall under this definition. I came to this conclusion two years ago, when I saw Alexei Shulgin's performance 'Real Cyberknowledge for Real People' in Vienna. In this piece he handed out newspapers from the mailing list nettime to the Viennese shopping audience. The newspapers were mainly discarded, Shulgin was harassed by an extreme technophobe, and a similar performance had been done before, but that was all unimportant. In his apparent attempt to do the ultimate lazy act as an artist, in a conscious attempt to do something he maybe thought nobody would consider net art, he created net art. Worse than that, he broadened its definition. Here we see post-network art. It is not a new phase to come; it has been here since artists made work from within a networked environment. (So not outside of it! The network has to sort of be 'internalized' or integrated into the life and work of the artist) Post-network art is the state-of-the-art in net art today, even if we use both terms, they are one really. Just an anecdote: Walter van der Crujisen is expressing this phenomenon in an exhibition he will be curating for Mikro in Berlin next year, an exhibition called Radikale System Malerei (Radical System Painting). An amazing strategy in a time when painting has approached nearly the same status that playing the violin has in contemporary arts.

The unstable media V2 in Rotterdam has placed at the center of their work, the variable media that Jon Ippolito proposes as a solution for the transition we experience (from pre- to post- network art); Net artist Cary Peppermint calls his work 'restless!'; the term 'not.art' that came forth as a reaction to net.art; and my term, post-network art, these are all different words intended to escape an untenable friction between popular art history and contemporary art practice. The well-known exhibition net_condition at ZKM, Karlsruhe, attempted to avoid the problems this friction has been laying in front of the art world (and which it has done for decades already). They did so by emphasizing that they were -not- making an art exhibition, but rather that they wanted to give an overview of some aspects of net -culture-. Even though I was quite happy to find so many net art works I like gathered and presented in one space, I found this shying away from making the event an -art- exhibition somewhat cowardly. Even if the makers were trying to desperately escape the problematic situation of art between eras. If they were in other words avoiding dealing with the problematic definition of art, I think it would have been wiser to in fact show the broad overlaps and blurry boundaries between art and other cultural phenomena from exactly this thing called -art- as a central point of departure. I of course say this in the first place

because net art has suffered enough put downs and denials by art professionals. Secondly a theory from within net art, a discourse from within net art, has started far too late in the development of the net art practice. I had a private email exchange with Timothy Druckrey in which he stated that net art was suffering from too much theoretical discourse. I could not disagree more! If net art is suffering from theoretical discourse, then not from its own. Analysis from within the networked field is what we desperately need more of. I think we can still quite easily sum up the good texts in this area. Good theory is absolutely necessary to help shape the environment into which the art is going to be received and represented. It should be, needless to say, that such a theory has to be in very close communication with the practical field.

Empowering Art Practice by Emphasizing its Diversity

I would like make two suggestions for empowering the net art field, to create an empowerment that allows for diversity and experimentation to have room within art education and art discourse in an information society. I would like to plea for an open-minded attitude towards the virtues of 'negativity', and I would like to propose something I like to call 'net art monuments'. Net art practice has been dominated by two main forces, that have always created a wonderful mix: web design and anarchy. The extremes of net art are represented by artists that live by the rules (or the possibilities) of the technology without being bothered much by moral restrictions. It is this wild, unpredictable and experimental side of net art that is obscured further by developments within former social spaces such as nettime or through new institutions like the Webby awards. It is not easy to convince people it needs support when the discussions are always pushed towards the edge by, amongst others, its loudest and probably best known representative: the artist formerly known as antiorp. Projects like Heath Bunting's 'donate', in which net art works are given to museums for free (and anyone can submit and donate a work), criticize and balance the discourse and the economy of art online. These subversive works and actions are the projects in art practice that are closest to theory, and they provide connections and moments of reflection in the chaotic 'space' between pre- and post- network art environments. The negativity in some works of both Bunting and antiorp lies in their willful destruction of power structures, power structures that do not obey the structural anarchy of the Internet. These works are constructive for net art discourse though, in the sense that they deconstruct art institutional habits and show the empowerment of outer institutional forces by the net.

The way network art is entering education, be it traditional education or self study, (so whether there is the opportunity to access knowledge) has always been one of my strongest motives to spread texts and interviews broadly. In order to make sure the diversity of net art remains a given fact and does not get lost within art education (where in academies etc. making net art alas almost equals web design completely), I would like to suggest to simply give certain works the status of monument. A monument is a place for contemplation of events, behavior and situations of the past, these three then being both negative and positive in nature. These unstable monuments of art on the net have been of great importance for net art in some way. I therefore end my talk with a list of possible net art monuments, which for various reasons have been influential in the short history of net art. I'm keeping it brief and do not include forerunners of the net. I invite you to come up with more suggestions.

not in order of importance:

Olia Lialina's My Boyfriend Came Back From the War
(first net art work to be sold)

Cornelia Sollfrancks Female Extension
(using 288 fake identities to subvert the first institutional net art contest in 1997)

Heath Bunting's old cybercafe site: all projects
(the Tokyo project is very impressive yet simple net performance)

jodi.org
(depth in view at first glance, poetic sense and playful deconstruction of code)

the anti NATO protest by 'antiorp' during Kosovo war
(most compact example of this artist's radicality)

Alexei Shulgin's Viennese performance
(first clear sign of 'net art beyond the net')

Shulgin's Form Art
(effective simplicity with astounding (unintended?) former eastern block feel)

superbad.com
(the first in a seemingly specific genre in web art)

fakeshop.org
(for their use of software, their use of the web, and their use of sound, all poetically entwined)

First page of hell.com
(shows an attempt to obscure and separate work from general net culture)

RTMark
(for the strategic and at the same time theatrical use of anonymity, exchange and communication in the net)

Finally:

Net art was never depending on representation in institutions, yet it has always needed central points for discussion, social exchange or exchange of knowledge (something announcements also do: sharing with an audience the where, what and how of a work). Early net artists have developed their networks in such a way they do not need such central meeting places anymore. Yet because of the lack of cross-disciplinary discourse platforms (where audience, 'critics' and artists meet in a more open social space with a broad cultural feel), newcomers in the networked cultural field are caught between institutional art discourses and obscure lists.

What is interesting is that one can find all different views and representatives of various positions on the arts meeting within the same medium, yet somehow th



::CrossReference

last 5 articles posted by Bosma

:: Text for Moscow: Between moderation and extremes. - Jun 14 2000

[about](#) | [contact](#) | [credits](#) | [subscribe](#)