SWITCH

5-15-2001

Lifelike

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Recommended Citation

SOCIAL NETWORKS 2

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Nora Raggio on May 15 2001   **issue 16**

LIFELIKE is an interdisciplinary survey of all things LifeLike--on the web, in the gallery, and in the theater. This interview will be with Lisa Jevbratt, curator for the show. The launch will on June 27 at www.newlangtonarts.org/network/infome and includes the following artists: Elliot Anderson, Marc Bohlen, Natalie Bookchin, Steve Dietz, Alex Galloway, Arijana Kaifes, Diane Ludens, Eddo Stern, Lev Manovich, Ken and Jennifer McCoy, Mark Tribe and Geri Wittig. Just as the Human Genome Project strives to map the mysteries of human's DNA, Mapping the Web Infome attempts to discover a secret behind the code that created the web. Software robot crawlers, harvest, map, and sequence the web, treating pages of information as organisms with determined lifespans.

Abstract:LIFELIKE is an interdisciplinary survey of all things LifeLike--on the web, in the gallery, and in the theater. This interview will be with Lisa Jevbratt, curator for the show. The launch will on June 27 at www.newlangtonarts.org/network/infome and includes the following artists: Elliot Anderson, Marc Bohlen, Natalie Bookchin, Steve Dietz, Alex Galloway, Arijana Kaifes, Diane Ludens, Eddo Stern, Lev Manovich, Ken and Jennifer McCoy, Mark Tribe and Geri Wittig. Just as the Human Genome Project strives to map the mysteries of human's DNA, Mapping the Web Infome attempts to discover a secret behind the code that created the web. Software robot crawlers, harvest, map, and sequence the web, treating pages of information as organisms with determined lifespans.

NR: Tell me a little bit about yourself, how you got involved in LifeLike
LJ: I do net art myself, I was involved with C5 and we were invited to do a show at New Langton Arts in San Francisco...and we got a Bay Area Art Award in net art two years ago... and then I got involved with New Langton and started to curate net art for them... it's been difficult to understand what my role is...I mean all institutions are going through this ...how can an institution be involved with net art, which I believe does not inherently need an institution, it's almost bad for net art to be involved in an institution, it almost becomes non-art if it has institutional support...It's very noticeable that when we send out submissions to get net art projects we don't get very interesting projects submitted, because the people that are interested in submitting projects are not the people doing the stuff that's interesting, basically....in San Francisco, people working in net art are very design oriented, not very conceptual...it's not political, it's not looking at the structures of technology... and then I'm an artist, not a curator, so I can't be like...what people are doing is what people are doing so that ...I talked to Steve Dietz about this. He comes from the other direction and he's the curator for the Walker Art Center...and he's like, I sample what's out there....and that makes sense, he can have that mindset... ...but I don't know really, since I was invited as an artist to be a curator, I'm not going to pretend that I'm a curator and not an artist...so I can't just sit back and say well, you guys do that design stuff and I just have to accept it...because it's not interesting to me...and I'm not going to leave my artistic agenda for... yeah, so I decided that there was a better way to go for me, if I was going to be a net curator there, it was better for me to focus the submissions or the projects by being more involved, basically. And now I'm very involved with it and I'm sitting here programming every day, basically...so...

NR: What's your contribution to the project?

JB: New Langton Arts was curating a show called LifeLike, opening this summer and curated by Marcia Tanner... and we decided that it would be nice to have all the different programs take on a different parts of the exhibition...so that the Video Program, and the Performance Program, and the Net Art Program would be part of it... So then I sent out a call for submissions and I didn't get anything that seemed to be very interesting in terms of looking at the internet as a LifeLike organism and or in any way engaging the network as an organism... So then I was thinking that I can do more than sit back and look at what's coming in, and I decided to make a system that would allow people to more easily make the projects that I wanted them to make...so basically I'm making a Photoshop for Crawler Art, so that those people who have interesting ideas but don't know how to do them technically, would have help from me from what I know technically about this medium...and since I've been teaching this stuff for such a long time...well I have all these pieces of code here and there...I have all these examples for students...I can just combine it all and create a Crawler Project software that artists could use to create this project that I think would be interesting to see...which, of course, is a much larger endeavor than I could ever imagine and I have no idea how it's going to be done in three weeks...absolutely no idea...but something's going to have to be there for people to use

NR: Let me back up a bit here...you're curating the show and Marcia Tanner is curating the show...

JB: We're several...she's curating the gallery show, she's the one who came up with the idea for the concept of the show...and she's doing the gallery, all the visual artists...the rest of us, the other curators are taking on other pieces, for example the performance curator curates for the performance pieces, but she's not curating for those pieces...

NR: So there's basically several curators for LifeLike...across media

JB: yes, but the one who came up with the original idea and commissioned the rest of us to do this was Marcia Tanner and we were contributing our specific parts to it...

NR: You're curating the net art part of the show, but you're also creating the infrastructure for it...

JB: Yes, I'm writing the software so that it can be used in this show

NR: So what is LifeLike about and what are the most salient parts of the project?

JB: LifeLike is the whole gallery show...the net art part, the part that I'm working on is called Mapping the Web Infome

NR: OK, let's focus on the Infome project...

JB: Well the Infome project...I'm thinking of it as being a lifelike entity... I was thinking of collaboration as a lifelike process...like looking at these artists and me and several other people working with me on producing the software, actually, looking at our collaboration...setting up system that has a kind of lifelike feel to it

NR: In what ways?

JB: In the ways where each entity doesn't really know, does not need to know what the other entity is doing... I'm trying to set up this system where all the artists can collaborate without knowing that they are collaborating because they are essentially collaborating, they're sending me ideas of what they want to do...and I create the software so that everybody can use it... so their ideas are mixed and the data that they collect with the software can be used by everybody else...so that was how I started to think about it...

NR: What process in life do you think that mimics?

JB: Well I'm thinking more of a cell-like kind of organism...so that we're all kind of parts of this collaborative organism...that's how I was thinking of it as lifelike... but then I think about the web as being this lifelike organism constructed by a language that is...I mean we completely made up this language...it's TCP/IP and on top of that it's http and these are protocols that we design and we know them...but I think they're set up in an open way enough, so that complex thinking can occur from a simple set of instructions on how to send information...that's really what it's all about... so we're having these languages that we've been using for some years, I mean the web is not that old, I don't know I always forget this, it's like 89 and people really haven't been using it until Netscape came out, so that would make it 94, 95... but anyway, it now seems that it is so complex...the web is something...it's an entity grown out of this language and it seems to me to be interesting that...rather than analyzing the language from the language perspective...and looking at it like...ok we wrote the language here and this is what we got out of it...rather come in and look at this thing and find something about ourselves or find something about this organism from the outside... so thinking about it as if, as if we're exploring it rather than inventing it...now it seems complex enough so that we can explore it...so I started to think about it that way... this software is following the http, that's what it's doing...it's kind of doing things with http to kind of try to find things about http... someone said when I was showing another project I was working on which was mapping the web...

NR: Is that your Stillman project?

JB: No, the IP address, 1:1 project where there are all these pictures that are basically images of the web, but someone said when I was presenting these images that it's kind of ridiculous, it's kind of like I'm lying down underneath the microscope and looking up and saying...ooh! I think there's life up there and I like that, I love that...it's like

yeah...I don't know...but it kind of makes sense and it makes sense for this project too... well we know what's there, but it's still interesting to look at it from the outside as an organism and kind of take it apart...so I was using this metaphor... the way the collaboration happened with mapping the human genome where someone wrote about it like letting all these people into this black room and no one knew what they were looking for, they were just tumbling around, and then someone started to find things that were soft and pink and started to look for things that were soft and pink and someone else is around the corner looking at the person finding things that are soft and pink...and then the third person decides to go in straight lines and turn ninety degrees and see what they found and so...all these different strategies for zooming in on the object that you're looking at...but not really knowing what you're looking for in the beginning.. and so that's exactly what I was thinking about this project...letting these artists into this space...letting them come in and probe it in different ways pretending they don't know what it is...and I don't think we know what it is...even though we created it...yeah...

NR: Which aspects of the process of the project feel like a collaboration and which aspects of the process feel more like managing a corporate holding company--so more hierarchical?

JB: Well, the reality is that I'm sitting in here working from the early morning to the late evening...so that's fairly non-collaborative, although the people that are working with me... because, I have been thinking about this for about two years...it wasn't like we were together developing this idea, it was more like they were brought in to kind of help out... so they can come up with ideas here and there...in terms of the visual part I feel that there, they may be more involved because they've heard these ideas before but other people are like solving little specific problems I'm giving them....then everyone is involved in different ways. Brett Stalbaum is involved and he's taking on...like he solved this thing for...Geri Wittig who's one of the artists who will be participating...he made a specific thing that you can do with the software that I wouldn't know, I wouldn't come up with so that's his...so people do participate in different ways... so the system part is definitely more hierarchical but then what the artists can do...that's another level...yeah, I'm not really participating there...I don't tell them what they...I just tell them that...I want them to feel that they can do whatever they want to do...which is of course, impossible, but at least I want them to have that feeling...so I write them emails back saying you can do whatever you want... but I think collaborations are always like that...there are so many different levels and layers...and it's obvious with C5, that there are several layers of collaboration, within one big group and then there are different projects which involve different collaborations...

NR: So who is involved in the project...and there seems to be at least two layers...one layer consists of the artists who are invited to participate...the other layer consists of people who are helping you with the infrastructure...describe their involvement...

JB: Yeah, the people who are working on it are one student from CADRE and a former undergraduate student of mine who's been doing really interesting projects so I thought it would be a good idea for her to be involved... Brett Stalbaum who was once a grad student here and has taught at CADRE and is in C5 and is a good friend... I would say he's the main...he's been doing a lot of work...also in terms of bringing in his students where he's teaching and having them, as part of a class, doing things for the project, which is then much more directed by him and by me and it's like specific tasks that they're working on...but he's been really helping out with the whole structure...

NR: Then in terms of artists...invited artists...

JB: artists...they're thirteen...which I think is a good number (smiles)... Marc Bohlen, he's a robotics artist...Arijana Kaifes... and then I go to the coast, artists on one coast or another...Kevin and Jennifer McCoy, net artists in New York, Diane Luden who's also a net artist in New York... Lev Manovich who's a theoretician in San Diego and I think... he's the person I wanted to do...it's like he's the first person I asked...long time before I ever knew what I was doing I wanted him to be involved because he's writing about these things in such an interesting way...he's really like the user I was thinking about...my dream user... Back to New York, Alex Galloway and Mark Tribe, who are both on Rhizome ... their system is actually collaborative so that I wanted to include some of that thinking...both of them are working on projects that seem related...Alex Galloway would have the knowledge to do all of these things himself, but I thought it would be fun to have him involved in this... Then back to the West Coast, Natalie Bookchin at Cal Arts who is also doing things that are very relevant to this... specially from her projects...what I've seen is the collaborative structure with which she develops her projects...a way of un-explicit collaboration...and I think that it's much more interesting to think about than really explicit collaborations...so like the one where she set up this homework for students...I was really happy she wanted to participate...I think that was a real inspiration for this I would say...that kind of net endeavor seemed to be the reasoning behind this.. Steve Dietz...that's like kind of a joke with myself...because he's a curator... and to me...something that I've been thinking about a lot...working in net art and art and technology seems to be a lot about inviting and being invited and participating in other people's projects and that kind of whole oscillation between roles, the switching between roles between invited, inviter, and not invited...that seems to be really what art is about... and so for me to invite

Steve Dietz who's invited me before...to make a parasitic project on his site...it seemed to me that was kind of fun...I wanted to be the curator for him and let him be the artist... Geri Wittig, who I mentioned before, who's part of C5 that I'm working with...and she's been writing a lot about autopoetic theory and coming from a biological-scientific context which seems very interesting...so she comes with that theoretical background... Elliot Anderson, who's an artist down in Santa Cruz... he got involved because after I had started the project he came to Marcia Tanner and said I have this proposal for a project for a net art thing...and so it seemed that since there are so many projects in LifeLike one other project would be confusing...so I invited him to this...I'm not very familiar with his work but the proposal seemed to be related... Eddo Stern, he was a student at Santa Cruz, that's where I got to know him and graduated from Cal Arts like last year... and he's doing projects that seem related...and though he hasn't been working specifically with internet-related things...he was doing a very interesting project where he was hacking an online game environment from an analog perspective...he wasn't hacking them digitally, because you can't, but he was hacking them in an analog way by messing with the keyboard which is just really funny, so he was able to write bots that would enter this game space, not by writing software but by modifying hardware, modifying the keyboard and to feed into the game environment other kinds of things...so he made an environment that is not programmable, programmable...which was just really smart and interesting. I did invite this woman that was featured in the Mercury News as Antiorp but she had more of an Eastern European name...and it was interesting that I invited her before she was "the net artist in the newspaper"...

NR: Of these artists, do you know what they're going to work on, or do we need to wait until the infrastructure is ready?

JB: I'm right now feeling like this is not going to happen so it feels very strange to talk about it... this is not a project...this is like me sitting in the lab for three weeks going crazy...but let's say that it does turn into a project, yes, a lot of them have ideas, but I think it's kind of difficult...and I like that...I know it makes a lot of people nervous too...I like that they don't really know what they can do with the software and I don't really know what they can do with the software...so I'm trying to take small steps like asking them...there's something that make complete sense...like someone asks me if they can use cookies, and I say yes, using cookies is easy...but then I get other questions like...well, I don't know about that...let's say that that will work...and they don't really know, especially in terms of the output...it's easier to envision what these projects are going to collect rather than how the results will be presented to the audience...so I think I'm confused about that and they're confused about that...and I can't give them really good answers on that...but it would also might be a good idea to get ideas from them on how to do that...but in some way, that doesn't worry me...I kind of feel a little bit of excitement that the output will be unclear...but...

NR: So let's go forward to the opening this summer in late June...what will that look like?

JB: I think there will be several different outputs from this... I think there will be pictures that will show the behavior of the softbot... maybe more system-specific...and then there will be things that are much more open for the artists to decide...some artists may choose to display only one link...the softbots are doing all this work, but the end result is just this one link...for example it may be a link to the most interesting page on the web or whatever this system decides what this is...so that could be an interface to the process...

NR: So if I were an audience member coming into the gallery, what would I see?

JB: I want to have some printed stuff...I'm very suspicious about this interactivity...I don't really like that. I think it takes away from the real...what's really interesting with computer systems and networks... interactivity brings it down to this one-time scale, like human time, like you click, something happens...well this is a system that doesn't behave on that level...on the one hand it acts much faster...like it sends a package...boom-boom...it also behaves on a much slower, longer level where the system collects information, these artists engage with the system...and to show that...if you just choose to show a 1:1 level here and now kind of experience where click, something happens...I think it takes away from those other time scales that are much more interesting...and much more important for this kind of project...and...yeah... so there's this myth that it has to be interesting for the audience to engage with...I think it's not going to be like that... yeah...so that's why I say prints...prints might be a great way of showing this...different kinds of big prints...but also interfaces to the web, so there might be a link...and that needs to be on the web... so it's going to be computers...some interfaces that are produced by the system...and some prints...that's what I'm thinking...

NR: Who are the sponsors for this project?

JB: I don't know who the sponsors are for the whole show, Lifelike, for Infome there's only one...and that's CADRE...I mean sponsoring this by providing access to their system while I'm working on the project...definitely CADRE is a sponsor...

NR: How would you position this project in contemporary art discourse?

JB: Network art is about people moving around between these different roles...being inviter, invitee, and non-invited...and moving between these roles...that's where this kind of art is created...that's its locus, that's where it exists... this project is doing that

very much...playing with those roles... and then it's kind of very traditional art...it's trying to find something about the environment we're living in...or that is disappearing...whatever this is...the web might not be there in a few years...but...it's understanding your environment... yeah...

NR: How did you come up with the word infome?

JB: When I was working on this project, the human genome was revealed to us...I just read about that work...the genome and what it means...and basically it's just a combination between genetics and chromosome... the strange thing is that the "ome" ending...it was a suffix that started to mean "everything", like all the things, so like biome, is kind of like the whole biological environment in which biological rules are playing out...and genome is kind of the whole genetic material of the individual... so infome is the whole set of information that is needed to understand this creature... and I was going to register infome.com but it was already taken...but it's not really used, it's not like a website...so I don't know how they came up with it, and what they wanted to use it for...

NR: So any closing comments?

JB: I'm usually kind of an optimist...but I have a doomsday feeling...I'm now kind of this optimist-pessimist...and I have this feeling that the web is really like... http might not be the best protocol in the world, it might not produce...or actually, I think, we're not really able to use it the way that it could be used...or actually the internet in general...I tend to think that we don't deserve the internet because we mistreat it, we want to restrain it and put up this privacy...these kind of rules that don't really make sense for this type of technology... so the web might be dying...and so I'm trying to map it, to contain it, as the last... and I thought I heard somewhere...and this might be an episode of the X-files...but there's like a mountain somewhere where they store samples of animals and plants and humans and so on...so that they can derive DNA from it in the future...to kind of remember what we had here... I thought that that was something that we all knew that was happening... but then I thought that maybe this is an episode of the X-files and it really didn't happen...but in any case, I would like this data, that this database that this project is generating...I want it in there... I want it in that mountain...like...the web...yeah.
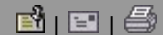
::CrossReference

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