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From Readymade to Readybought: An Ongoing History of Computer Art

JODI in conversation with Niels Van Tomme

Niels Van Tomme: I still remember the time when surfing to one of the jodi.org websites would cause your browser to begin to multiply spontaneously. Dozens of black pop-up windows would chaotically flicker on your computer screen. People panicked and actually thought their computers had broken down, while in reality the solution was a very simple computer command. As such, the "drama" of the situation was actually a product of the Internet user's imagination. Many consider Borges' text "The Total Library," 1939, a conceptual precursor to the Internet. Borges also rejected causality and realism in his work. He wanted to free the imagination in order to discover its own rules. How important was this tension between reality and imagination for you in your early Internet works?

Dirk Paesmans: You are describing a website that automatically downloaded software on your computer. Everything would start to go wrong: that was the basic idea. If you tried to do something about it, it only got worse. We were punished a number of times for that website, in the sense that the host server would receive complaints. As a result, we had to move the website to a different location each time.

Joan Heemskerk: It was indeed all in the head of the user, because nothing actually went wrong. The work was about the user's relationship with the mouse, the keyboard, and the monitor. It included three pieces of software, three programs, each externally exploring one of those elements.

DP: As the software started, it took a picture of your desktop, which was then manipulated into different variants. If you tried to stop it, it would take you to a different variant each time. There was, however, no real manipulation of the computer at a deeper level. For us, the computer's graphic interface was sufficiently interesting.

JH: We had researched computer viruses.

DP: Yes, we found a way to look at viruses on our computer without any negative consequences. In reality, most viruses are based on a paranoia effect—the monitor beginning to flicker or worms crawling out of letters. A virus aims to cause damage somewhere deep in your computer, which could also happen invisibly. Here, the creative aspect makes explicit the act of placing a virus in someone's computer. It's almost a Hitchcockian genre. Not everything about a computer

has to be slapstick. Well, a desktop that begins to jump up and down really scares people: "Watch out, everything is going wrong here!"

JH: The fear is enhanced visually. So people forget to react rationally and just close the program. The piece responded to the same command as any other program, "Apple Q" or "escape."

NVT: "ctrl+alt+del" is also one of those commands.

JH: Yes, and then you were actually able to exit. But the minute you saw that visual image, you assumed that your computer was ruined.

NVT: Unlike much new media art, where the fetishization of technology often conceals the artist's personality, your work seems to strongly foreground your input. *My%Desktop*, 2002, provides a good example. Initially, you think that a computer has gone crazy in real-time. Then, you realize that it is a screen grab—or rather, a video recording of a desktop on which you simultaneously execute hundreds of absurd actions. Your work is not necessarily technological, but
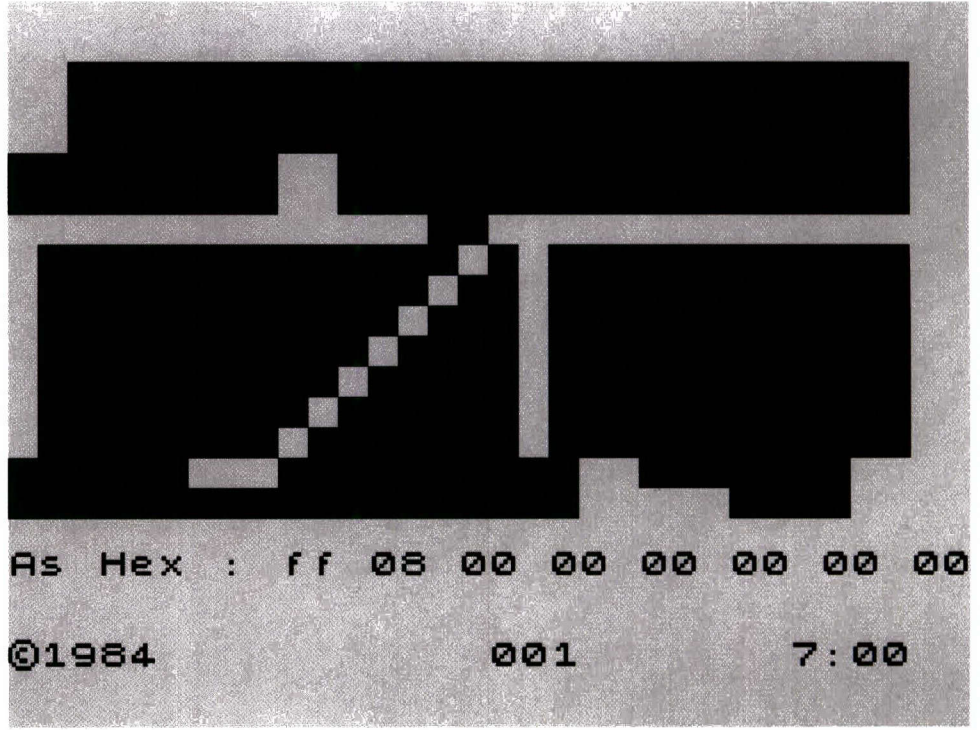
conceptual in nature. How do you relate to the tradition of conceptual art?

JH: I think our work simultaneously embraces and rejects it. Much conceptual art begins with a concept that is then executed. For us, there remains a vague idea that we explore through experimentation. It contains a number of variables, which are not discernible in advance.

DP: Most of the time, we cannot predict where we'll end up. In that sense, our work might be more closely related to the history of experimental film, video, and television art than to traditional conceptual art. Of course, it also relates to exhibition context. Our work is not made for the art circuit. Nor do cinema and the Internet function in a commercial gallery. We're experimenting with a mass medium, which means a one-to-one relationship with someone—just like TV or a book, which ultimately creates a highly personal connection. If you were interested in considering television or

video as a medium of distribution—as I was—and you suddenly discovered the Internet, that is, the emergence of a radically new type of "Global TV," you'd want to explore it.

NVT: You are referring to the 1990s here. In a burst of sardonic pride, you have claimed JODI as the very first "Internet artist." How did you come to use the Internet as an artistic medium, rather than a simple platform on which to present artwork?

JH: The Internet was academic, educational, and militaristic at that time...

DP: And poetic as well. Hypertext and those kinds of things.

JH: Back then, we were living in Silicon Valley. As such, the Internet was growing right around the corner. But it was not yet used as an information-transmission channel. The advantage of working with computers is that you don't need

to translate your work onto another platform. It literally remains where it gets produced.

DP: It is site-specific in that sense. We realized very quickly that there was already a developed culture of alternative computer users, which we decided to study. We started using specific formats in our work, older forms of visualization such as simple line drawings in harsh colors set against a black background. Our first website had quite a retro feel. We wanted to show our appreciation for the history of computers by integrating elements such as abstracted teletext.

The most important aspect was, of course, the code. It's impossible to create interesting work without it. Code involves a lot of math, which was unfortunately not my strength. So we started making mistakes on purpose. It was possible, for example, to give the same command a few hundred times, and have the browser effectively execute it. For instance, by repeatedly placing the image of a plane on the
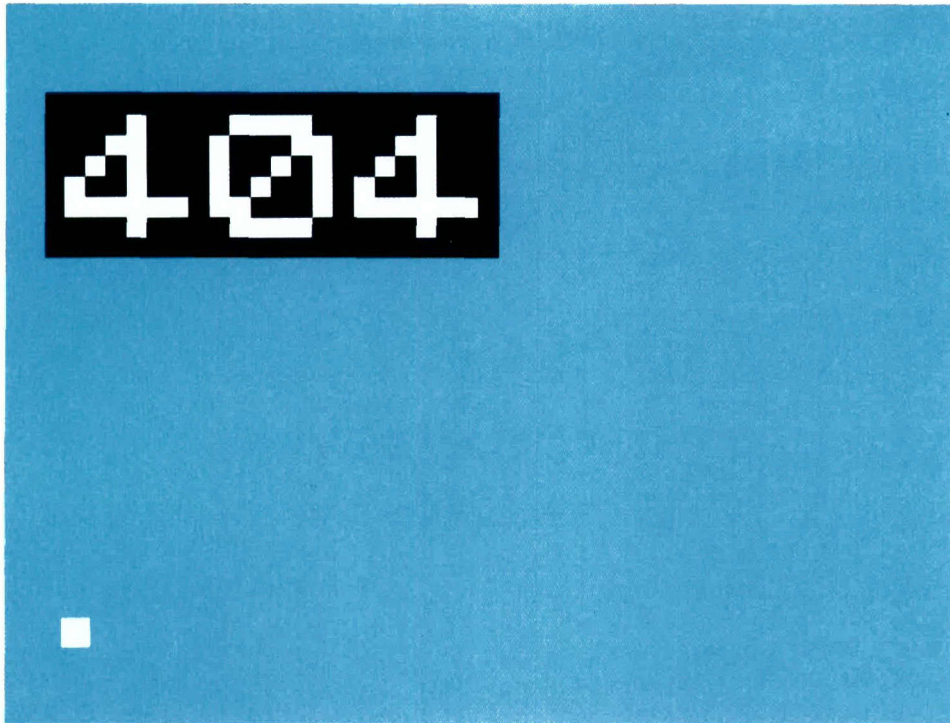
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exact same spot, the image would start to move around and tremble...

JH: It became an animation because the same command was given repeatedly.

DP: We made the biggest basic code mistake on the first page of our very first website. We simply forgot to include a forward slash in the first command. If you forget this, you don't get a nice drawing. Instead of being a properly spaced diagram, the drawing was all over the place on the screen. We first thought something was wrong with our computer, but ultimately decided that the effect was quite interesting. We published the mistake online, and, as it turned out, this meant that it was endlessly reproduced. Everyone saw the exact same mistake in his or her browser, which got us quite a few angry emails.

By daring to make that mistake, we made the code the subject of the piece. When you subsequently requested to view the source of

that webpage in your browser, the correct version of the drawing was revealed.

NVT: It's not irrelevant to mention that the code was a diagram of an atomic bomb!

DP: Yes, there was that too. The work included instructions on how to make an atomic bomb. That hidden layer was a very interesting way to draw attention to the code, which is inevitably behind everything.

NVT: *folksomy.alpha*, 2009, your performance at Performa 09, was a chaotic assault on the senses, a deconstruction of YouTube, which included one channel showing people destroying technological equipment in aggressively dedicated and widely varied ways. These videos looked like they belonged to an unknown subgenre of snuff movies with machines, but also referenced aspects of Fluxus art. How does this work express your relationship to high and low culture?

DP: Fluxus, of course, the destruction of pianos, violins, and guitars...this idea had to do with the seriousness that accompanies such instruments, that is, the way they represent classical culture. But, in a certain way, it also evoked the notion that these were all tools of power.

Some people bury their broken computers in their backyard and film the procedure, which they then put on YouTube. Such acts do reveal something about their symbolic relationship to these devices. This notion is closely related to art and performance. You see people doing interesting things, things that I have never seen an artist do. In some sense, this piece is a reaction to the resampling of YouTube by many media artists. Our point of departure is rather sociological, as we're trying to address YouTube as a genuine culture, sincerely appreciating what these people are trying to do. We're aiming to emphasize the folklore surrounding web 2.0.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: JODI, *404.jodi.org*, 1997, website; JODI, *namespac.es*, 2009, websites, installation

In that sense, we are producing a work that pins the honest expression of all these people against our ideas about art. It is the age-old story of the artist who is jealous of the non-artist, because he or she can formulate his or her expressions in a very direct way.

NVT: Most computer games come with a manual that explains how a certain game should be played, so that the gamer can learn how to navigate it. By contrast, you dissect games down to their most basic elements, up to the point of complete abstraction and unplayability, like in your game modifications of *Quake*, 2006, and *Max Payne 2*, 2006. To what extent have manuals and read-me texts altered our relationships with computers?

JH: You refer here to two different games. With the first one, *Quake*, we came to the realization that the game consists of image, sound, and code, just like anything else in a computer. So we tried to separate these parts. It's almost like an analysis of how the game is constructed, or a type of perspective-engine. When a monster suddenly stands in front of you, friction is created. In our modification of the game, a bloody dog becomes a little square, which still carries the original sound. In that specific game, we abstracted these elements to a large degree. Like surgeons, we dissected the whole into parts and then pieced them back together.

With the other game, *Max Payne 2*, we actually didn't change anything. It was not really game modification in the strict sense. Rather, the game is played with the cheats, that is, the unofficial manual.

DP: These types of commands are written in small font on the last page of the manual. For example, if you are stuck in the game, you can use one of those cheats to find a way out. If you don't, the game stops being fun. There are all sorts of other commands. For example, you find out how to look at the 3D environment with

your camera, which means that you can place it in the 3D models. Those are essentially empty, hollow drawings. By inserting the camera into them, you can look from the forehead of a model downwards, where you only see totally abstract forms.

NVT: This is something you can do if you buy the game, right? It does not require any hacking.

DP: Indeed, you don't have to be a technical hacker. It is essentially the idea of a ready-made—or, in this case, a readybought. It's literally in the game when you buy it. It's bad behavior—behavior that isn't prescribed in the booklet. Ultimately, however, it is but one of the possible ways to behave in such a game.

We don't want to make anything functional with a computer, nor are we trying to convey some kind of message. The biggest enemy is the transmission of information, which we have always hated with a passion. This would be comparable to buying a photo camera and deciding to only take lovely pictures of smiling people. That would be ridiculous, since you could also take photographs of the sea, a horse that passes you by, or anything else. Prescribed behavior is neither enjoyable for the creator nor for the devices.

NVT: I recently read an interview with Manuel de Landa, in which he stated that we need a vaccine against computer games and simulations, against all layers of virtuality on top of simulacra. According to him, we should acknowledge that all these virtual layers are in fact real—what he calls "the real virtual"—because they run above a material basis, which defines the source of power in our society. Doesn't your work precisely reveal this source? Does this not hold whether we consider the "meaning" of a work hidden in a certain html code—like with your first website—or your misuses of the *Max Payne* environment?

Aren't you essentially showing the audience how to deconstruct and appropriate devices and ways to relate to such sources of power?

JH: It is certainly not an act against the computer, against what happens inside it, because without it, we would not be able to produce our work. It's a love-hate relationship. We aren't concerned with the destruction of technology, but rather with a creative way of dealing with it.

DP: Well, if I look at our work retrospectively, the basic idea might be to get a better insight into the ways a computer system functions, or rather, how you can tell stories through all kinds of symbolic tricks. Through manipulation, you can discover how the machine is constructed; how it is trying to have you believe that something cannot be done differently. We show that it can certainly be done differently!

Niels Van Tomme is a curator, researcher, art critic, and frequent contributor to ART PAPERS. The Director of Arts and Media at Provisions Learning Project in Washington, DC, he lives in New York City. His independently curated exhibitions have been shown internationally.

Translated from the Dutch by Sonja Simonyi.