Network 404

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1

I must admit that I find it incredibly difficult to write about networks. I started out by trying to define what a network is, by spelling out, point by point, what are the inherent qualities of networks and how this might relate to art in general and to the work of the artists in this show. But soon I found out that this gave me writers block. Over the past few decades and especially at the start of the internet boom so much has been written about networks, that the ideas have somehow exhausted themselves. Everybody knows the buzzwords by now, I guess. We have been told again and again that networks are de-centralized, bottom-up, hierarchy shattering entities. We have heard about rhizomes, about micro-politics, about self-organisation. Almost magic qualities have been ascribed to networks. How they would empower the marginalized and bring about a more democratic world, sustainable economic progress and maybe eternal peace. Type 'network' into the search engine Google on the Internet and you get 70,500,000 results. If you type 'jesus' you get only 13,100,000. It seems that 'network' is the new god. For some it certainly is. I am talking about the Extropians here, about people who believe in the sudden emergence of a global brain, about techno-determinists of all kinds and variations. But over the past decade not only speculative internet theory has blossomed, there has been also a growing body of critical writing. (1) The techno-libertarians and the dot.com guys have been given a good and thourough bashing. We have also learned, I hope, to be sceptical about analogies (2) taken from science and technology and used in the social sphere, which tend to lead to theories full of Social Darwinism of the most nasty kind, that reduce human societies to beehives and bacteria cultures. We have been through all that, the good the bad and the ugly, with network utopias and their reversal into dystopias. What struck me as most significant when visiting some of the websites of former cheerleaders of the internet revolution during the research for this article was that most of the sites have become largely dysfunctional. Clicking on links inevitably throws up 404 error messages, the broken links come to signify broken internet dreams. So why bother anymore, if even the former 'digerati' cant be bothered to keep their websites alive?

2

The notion that networks are a somehow benevolent power is relatively new. It is a view that has been popularized by the blurb that was used to sell us the New Economy and by the availability of affordable home computers. Now networks are seen as something soft, human, creative. Before that change of viewpoint, we were much more likely to fear the control and command aspects of networks.

Networks were perceived as belonging to the domain of large industrial systems, from organs of the state such as Inland Revenue, Health and National Insurance to now privatized utilities such as water, electricity and gas. Networks in combination with powerful computer mainframes had inscribed themselves into our minds as totalitarian superpowers against whom the individual is often helpless, a victim of kafkaesque circumstances produced by systems which neither really listen nor speak to us, except, of course, entirely on their own terms. But networks are neither innately good nor bad. Environmental activists who harbour only the best intentions for the future of the planet organize themselves in networks, but so also do groups of the far right and terrorists. Think Tanks working for the American military have created a discourse about infowar, cyberwar and netwar (3) that has had a big influence on the general thinking about networks. Artists, such as Electronic Disturbance Theatre (4), New York, and juvenile hackers regularly create their own little skirmishes with the network organs of the military industrial complex. Infowar, surveillance, the Echelon network, the society of control, these are some of the keywords that refer to that other side of networks, which does not simply go away because we can now also play back a video from a server. Networks can be agents of segmentation and stratification of which the biggest is the growing divide between the information rich and the information poor.

Technology cannot heal the wounds that are inflicted by cluster bombs and deep structural inequality. "The stupifying naivety of the technology-dazed but well-meaning, politically correct and liberal Internet user who believes that all problems will be solved when everyone is wired into the World Wide Web is symptomatic of the schizophrenia of (post-)modern media culture." (5) It is therefore the case that the most important task is to detach ourselves sometimes from the networks that have become such a dominant influence in our lives and revel in re-discovering the analogue world.

3

Consume.net is an initiative to build a wireless community network. Similar initiatives exist now in almost every major city in the industrialised world. (6) The basic idea is to use collective purchasing power to reduce the cost of broadband internet access. But this is only a starting point. Closely interwoven with this first idea are others that seem to come straight out of the theoretical toolbox of an earlier internet utopia. Wireless community networks do not actually build networks that cover town and country and follow a master plan that is steered from the center. What they do is to propagate the idea that everybody can set up a wireless node for open access. They show how this can be done at a minimum of cost, DIY style. Those who have the skills to build antennas and configure routers teach others how to do that. Ideas are being discussed if and how to formalize the relations between free wireless access points and its users. The bigger plan is to make wireless connections between the individual access points to create a meshed network that would cover large parts of the respective metropolis. There are obstacles to this, partly technological, partly having to do with urban topography and the distance between nodes. But once this is achieved this would

be networks very different from those of large internet or mobile phone service providers. The network as a whole would not be owned by anyone. Each access point would belong to somebody else, but they would all inter-connect on the basis of self-devised rules. It is intended to keep these rules simple. The network should be kept open, accessible to everyone and non-discriminatory regarding the content that is trafficked through it. And it is hoped that the network would have some social benefits too, that it would help to create awareness of what is going on in a certain area and enable people to collaborate and develop new services. In the grander scheme of things it does not really matter if wireless community networks ever manage to establish sustainable large meshed networks. The window of opportunity that has allowed wireless community networks to grow, could close again soon, because of changes in the regulatory environment or because, and there are already some signs of this, big commercial operators muscle in on the field. The point is that a relatively large infrastructural network can literally be "pulled out of the ground" as James Stevens, one of the founders of consume.net, said in a recent interview. (7) Infrastructural networks are usually built either by city and council administrations or by big corporations. But wireless community networks try to 'grow' the network, rather than build it, out of the resources of a community, and thereby prove the viability of the concept for a self owned, self-regulated net.

4

Speaking about wireless community networks offered a way into a subject that would otherwise have been blocked. They put some elements of the working hypothesis 'network' into practice, which enables me to write about 'networks' without going through all the cyber blah blah again. These projects show that the ideas and hopes that have been associated with networks cannot be summarily discredited, just because a few dot.coms went off the rails and too much gibberish has been tossed around. The lines of flight between the commercial sector and net culture have crossed at some points, but generally developments have been far from parallel. While the mainstream of society has gone through the boom-and-bust cycle, others have worked quietly on the foundations of a future networked society which is neither utopian nor a digital revolution. The empowerment that networks are said to facilitate is not an automatism but the result of deliberate human agency within specific historic circumstances. Wireless community networks, online collaborative environments, art servers and context systems (8) can flourish only because of a longer continuity of the collaborative spirit in techno-culture. The computer programs that manage core functionalities of the net have been developed by scientists in an era when shared knowledge was the basis of technological progress. They created the most basic layer of network technology, the protocols that determine the format and transmission of data, TCP/IP. These protocols belong to the public domain which means that nobody owns them and everybody can use them and build applications around them. The open source and free software communities have continued to work in this collaborative tradition and created software that is deliberately kept in the public domain. Their 'open code' model guarantees that the public domain in computing survived throughout an era, when almost everything else was privatized. They developed operating systems, web servers, programming languages and audio and video file formats, which can be freely used by everyone. People can use the software, change it, develop their own applications and even make money with it. American lawyers have introduced the term "digital commons" to describe the relevance of this open code phenomenon.

Their claim is that "it was this commons that engendered the extraordinary innovation that the Internet has seen. It is the enclosure of this commons that will bring about the Internet's demise." (9) Because "the commons was built into the very architecture of the original network, its design secured a right of decentralized innovation. It was this "innovation commons" that produced the diversity of creativity that the network has seen." (10) Yet despite the combined efforts of legislators and large corporations to privatize the digital commons and restrict digital freedom through the introduction of ever more restrictive laws and the creation of media conglomerates who do not only own the content but also the means of distribution there is no sign of a decrease in file sharing, peer-to-peer networking and other collaborative networking practices. On the contrary, millions of users are simply ignoring legislation which is directed against behaviour they consider as natural, and the tools are there in abundance to support digital civil disobedience on a massive scale. In the light of these developments the emphasis of the debate has shifted away from networks towards code and intellectual property. Code, pregnant with meaning, has become the new challenge for artists who try to work on a more structural level. They understand that it is the digital commons that gives them the space to breathe and that it is important to keep this space open. The 'open code' model is getting tested for its applicability in other areas.

Experiments with 'copyleft' licences for works of art and 'open content' models are getting circulated. Collaborative work, sampling and re-mixing have long been important cultural techniques, but are now seen in the context of a wider struggle about the future shape of the so called information society.

5

On a sunday some weeks ago a group of people met at the old Limehouse Town Hall in East London. They came to the monthly open workshop of Consume.net. Most of them had laptops, but some had also brought along other things, tools, cardboard, wire, some old computers. From midday to the evening, people got their heads together around a large table and got involved in a number of activities. Some tried to get the old computers running, by installing FreeBSD on them; some built antennas of different sizes and shapes; some played around with the live streaming facilities on a web-server; and some just sat together, their laptops on their knees, the red lights of their wireless cards flashing, as they talked and typed at the same time.

Notes

(1) A landmark text, that revealed the ideology behind the early stage of the internet gold rush is Richard Barbrook and Andy Camerons "Californian Ideology", http://cci.wmin.ac.uk/HRC/ci/calif5.html

A large body of critical writing about the net can be found on the archive of the mailing list nettime, http://www.nettime.org

(2) The issue of analogies transfered from science and technology on to the social sphere has been investigated recently by John Barker, in "Dodgy Analogy", *Variant*, number 15, Summer 2002,

(3) "The Advent of Netwar", John Arquilla, David F. Ronfeldt, http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR789/

(4) Electronic Disturbance Theatre, http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd.html

(5) Robert Adrian X, "Infobahn Blues", *CTheory*, http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=63

(6) A good resource for wireless community networks is http://www.freenetworks.org/

(7) Interview with the author of the article, unpublished.

(8) Both the terms "art servers" and "context systems" refer to collaborative online platforms that support the creation of art works for the net. This notion has been explored by the conference *Art Servers Unlimited*, London 1998, http://asu.sil.at The term "context systems" has been introduced by the German artist Joachim Blank, who was involved with the creation of such a system with the now defunct Internationale Stadt Berlin, http://www.icf.de/

(9) Lawrence Lessig, "The Internet Under Siege", http://www.foreignpolicy.com/issue_novdec_2001/lessig.html

(10) *Ibid.*