

THE THEMATICS OF SITE-SPECIFIC ART ON THE NET

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## ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS submitted by Josephine Berry

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This thesis examines site-specific art on the Internet from the popularisation of the World Wide Web in 1994 until 2001. The artists studied here are those primarily associated with the term 'net.art', although other artists not associated with this term have also been considered wherever relevant. The generic term I use to designate all these artists is thus 'net art'.

The central aim of this thesis is to understand how Internet technology has been used by artists to extend certain avant-garde tendencies in the context of a globalised and networked society. Setting artwork in the busy multi-media 'information superhighway' also used for economic and commercial transactions, media production, private communication, cultural projects, political debate and organisation, creates new proximities and relationships between art and other forms of communication and action. Indeed it can be said of the Net in general that it produces a whole series of new proximities and relationships, including those between geographically disparate communities, the space of the public and private and between the corporate and cultural spheres. It is the assertion of this thesis that the mutability and transferability of digital information is instrumental to this new organisation of social and cultural life. Through a series of thematic discussions, I explain how the participation of art within this informatic regime works both to reveal its inherent qualities and, conversely, to interrogate the ontology of art.

Taking Walter Benjamin's concept of the recession of the artwork's aura in the age of mechanical reproducibility as a starting point, I examine how informatic reproducibility both fulfils and confounds his thesis. I conclude that although the use of information technology works to extend the avant-garde project by blurring boundaries between art and 'life praxis', art is nonetheless able to retain its ontological distinctness – its aura. With regard to net art I locate the preservation of its aura within the unpredictable mutations and instability of digital information.

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## THE AUTHOR

Josephine Berry acquired a BA in Art History at Manchester University in 1994. She completed an MA in German Expressionism at The Courtauld Institute of Art in 1996. In September 1998 she began researching her thesis on Site-Specific Art on the Net at Goldsmiths College. In 1999 she transferred her research to Manchester University.

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## INTRODUCTION

In late 1997 an article landed on my desk at *Mute* magazine which, in a round about sort of way, acted as the trigger for this thesis.<sup>1</sup> It was an article by the Dutch 'net.journalist' Josephine Bosma, which I had been assigned to sub-edit, about a nascent art movement which some were calling 'net.art'. Although I had been following the progress of art on the Internet for about a year by this point, Bosma's article was the first I encountered which formulated this seemingly scattered and esoteric area of practice into something coherent – even extravagant.<sup>2</sup> The article was internally conflicted, insisting that 'net.art' be given the recognition it deserved whilst also celebrating its invisibility, 'transience', frequent anonymity and technical complexity all of which prevented its easy assimilation into art history proper.<sup>3</sup> Bosma's article celebrated an art movement whose high degree of technical referentiality and understanding as well as its elusiveness within a distributed computer network demanded a near expert knowledge to render locatable and meaningful, but it also lamented the fact that this movement might go unacknowledged by history. She claimed that net.art's resistance to professional penetration and commodification had revived an interest in "art's intrinsic value", and concluded by speculating that art might "only profit from this obscurity."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Mute* is one of the only publications in the UK providing dedicated coverage of techno-culture.

<sup>2</sup> Josephine Bosma, 'Is it a Commercial? Nooo... Is it Spam?... Nooo – It's Net Art!', *Mute*, 10 (March 1998), pp. 73-74

<sup>3</sup> As we shall see in some detail in Chapter One, 'net.art' is a much disputed term given to describe a handful of semi-aligned practitioners situating art on the World Wide Web.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.74

As someone with an art historical training and only the most superficial understanding of computer technology, I was both slightly scandalised by the audacity of her claim and frustrated by the line of exclusion which was supposedly being drawn around 'net.art' – or net art as I will be calling it here for reasons explained in Chapter One. Surely, I told myself, anything calling itself art could not be so completely impenetrable to the technically illiterate? And how could net art be simultaneously reviving an interest in art's 'intrinsic value' and yet off limits to art lovers because of its rarefied technical vocabulary? It was probably my frustration at having been excluded from such a challenging and confrontational area of art that prompted me to undertake this study. Now, looking back after several years of research I realise that Bosma was both right and wrong. I have indeed had to steep myself in net culture – its mailing lists, discursive developments and social gatherings – in order to encounter the work and the artists in the first place. I have also had to learn a great deal about the technical functions of the Net in order to understand net art's subtleties. However, during the latter half of the 1990s, Internet use has also become an everyday experience for millions of people around the world and hence many of its technical attributes can now practically be regarded as common knowledge. During this time, net artists and artworks have also found their way into the very art world institutions and histories that Bosma refers to so apprehensively. What could be concluded is that while net art continues to require a certain degree of specialised knowledge to fathom its most hermetic technical attributes and references, it nonetheless participates in a wider info-technological development which is impacting on multiple areas of society and culture, and is thus relevant and of interest to people far outside its various cliques. Therefore, although I

would disagree with Bosma's idea that net art is inordinately endowed with the ability to revive an interest in art's 'intrinsic value' due to its obscurity, I would agree that it operates directly at the nexus of technology and culture which is transforming our very understanding of what that value might be.

The ways in which I have conducted the research for this thesis can in themselves serve to illustrate the wider transformations to which I am referring. Where, for many, research is organised around physical sites such as university libraries, special archives and art collections, I have been able to conduct much of my research from home, or wherever I am, over the Internet.<sup>5</sup> Rather than engaging in occasional face-to-face discussions with artists and the wider discursive community, I have been able to participate – sometimes actively, sometimes passively – in ongoing discussions on a handful of media cultural mailing lists often with upwards of a thousand international subscribers. Far from being able to maintain a distance to the object of study, my participation in such lists has occasionally led me into outright disputes with the artists and writers whose work I am studying. The ability to self-publish over the Net has meant that, instead of having to wait to have research published in various academic journals, I have been able to post my work, unedited, on these lists. A significant outcome of this has been that my research has been subject to a kind of spontaneous peer reviewing system and collective development of ideas – one which necessarily changes both my own thinking and, to however small a degree, the climate of ideas which I am investigating. One example of this was when I published my chapter about art's

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<sup>5</sup> All of the artworks, the mailing list exchanges and other criticism is primarily available on the Net, and only in a few cases has it found its way into hard copy publications.

dematerialisation and the commodity value of information (Chapter Four) on the nettime mailing list.<sup>6</sup> One of the responses to this chapter – echoing the earlier sentiments of Josephine Bosma – was the artist Olia Lialina's hostility towards the idea that a narrowly orthodox history of net art might be emerging. She suggested that instead of formulating theses, art historians and journalists would do better to interview artists and thus allow them to disseminate their own conflicting views about net art. Josephine Bosma, who was also on this list, replied that this was all very well, but that people simply do not have time to be continuously producing interviews with net artists. The final twist was that the artist Amy Alexander suggested artists and critics alike interview themselves so as to avoid any hegemonisation of ideas or practices, so that anyone could nominate themselves a 'star', and duly set up a project on her website – plagiarist.org – called 'Interview Yourself'.<sup>7</sup> What this anecdote reveals is how, within the real-time, networked flows of information across the Net, ideas are transformed by eddies of feedback from multiple positions. It is this distributed, recursive and informatic state of things in which the artwork is also caught up and transformed that I see as impacting on the condition and ontology of art. The site-specific net art with which I am concerned is not just passively affected by these networked and informatic conditions, but seeks to bring them into direct relation with the problematics of art.

What the Internet produces is a global(ising) society whose communicative connectivity outstrips that of any other point in history. As we shall see, this communicative condition becomes the new mode of capitalist (re)production as well

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<sup>6</sup> Josephine Berry, 'Re-dematerialisation/Object/Artist/Biopower', *Nettime*, (10 February, 2001), <http://www.nettime.org>

<sup>7</sup> <http://plagiarist.org/iy/>

as the basis for the general production of knowledge and creativity. The steady shift in the West from manufacturing to service industries, the proliferation of targeted marketing campaigns driven by database profiling of individual consumer behaviour, and the growing significance of the 'creative industries' are all important examples of this and dependent on a highly developed network of telecommunications. As I briefly intimated through the description of my own research, computer mediated communication (CMC) not only facilitates but also epitomises conditions of late capitalist society and postmodern culture which are by now quite familiar. A list of these might include: the collapse of space into time; the telematic extension of agency across geographical and temporal expanses; the fantastical shrinking of the planet; the deterritorialisation and splintering of old forms of identity; membership to imaginative, geographically scattered communities; the lightning speed of information transmission; the extreme mediatisation of culture; the development of a knowledge economy and with it a new blurring of domestic and public spaces; and finally, the widening divisions between the information haves and have-nots and the co-existence of staggeringly different stages of development within proximate locations. Although these historical conditions manifest themselves in myriad forms, the Internet not only exemplifies and accelerates many of them, it also acts as a symbol of their totality. Significantly then, as Bosma identifies, net artists are activating debates around the "intrinsic value of art" within this techno-cultural matrix which is, to a great extent, also responsible for a new mode of capitalist production which entails the increasing subsumption of communication and creativity. How can artists operate within these productive conditions? How does art distinguish itself from other forms of communicative activity within the non-

hierarchical landscape of the Net? How do artists turn these conditions to their advantage? How do artworks reflect without imitating the conditions of which they are a part? What is the dialectical movement between art's (always evasive) ontology and the communicative and informatic conditions of the Net? These are all questions which I address here.

The question of site-specificity, of the ways in which the artwork can be said to occupy and participate in its site, has presented itself as the key to all of these discussions. This is in part due to the very simple point that the art under discussion here could not exist anywhere but on the Net. It is completely dependent on it for its means of production, content, material, compositional elements, viewing context and mode of reception. Another way of explaining the centrality of this question is by defining site-specific art in general as the attempt to convert the situation into the artwork's literal content, thereby effecting the osmosis of art and life praxis by reference to the artwork's immediate situation. Site-specific art on the Net negotiates this boundary between life praxis and art by reference to the virtualised conditions of its context. Put another way, the context inheres with the very (informatic) conditions which are transforming life praxis in relation to which art defines itself. By asking the deceptively simple question of where a site is or what comprises a site in virtual space, one is immediately presented with the disorienting sense of its disappearance – or rather its non-locatability. Likewise, when one asks how something occupies what I will be calling – after Marc Augé – the 'non-place' of the Net, one is again forced to qualify the nature of the space in order to be able to address, for example, how one acts and precipitates actions, forms social ties, collaborates with others, negotiates distances, subverts behaviour, creates disruptions

or diversions, psychologises spaces and so on. What seems to inflect all these questions is how, when one attempts to pin down the nature of site on the Net, it dissolves into a set of processes occurring simultaneously at different points in virtual and geographical space. Rather than resembling a fixed territory with a relatively stable topography, site appears as multiple as the practices which animate it. But despite the difficulty of conjuring site or, better, because of it, it can nonetheless be characterised in very specific terms. It is net artists' attempt to specify an immaterial, disorienting yet cohesive space that I will explore in this thesis. A crucial element in this endeavour is the nature of digital information itself, because it is this medium which decisively fragments so many older formations and yet also provides a unifying logic through which we can read this effect.

Although information is a crucial key to discussing the nature, behaviour, aesthetics and politics of cyberspace and its users, site-specific art has its own internal history which follows a similar path of fragmentation and extension. At the risk of simplifying the chronology of its development, it is possible to characterise site-specific art as having moved from the physical occupation of singular sites (e.g. Minimalism) to temporary, often discursive rather than material interventions within a non-place (postmodern institutional critique). For art historians Miwon Kwan and James Meyer, who characterise this as the movement from a 'literal' to a 'functional' concept of site, Richard Serra's ill fated *Tilted Arc*, 1981, provides a powerful example of the former.<sup>8</sup> When threatened with the removal of the *Arc* from New York's Federal Plaza to a different, more innocuous location, Serra responded: "To

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<sup>8</sup> See Miwon Kwan's 'One Place After Another', and James Meyer's 'The Functional Site', in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, (London: University of Minnesota, 2000)

remove the work is to destroy the work". In this remark, Serra encapsulates the unitary nature of the relationship – no matter how dynamic, or phenomenological – between the physical object and its site in this literalist form of occupation. Kwan and Meyer argue that in the later site-specific work of artists such as Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, Christian Phillip Müller and Renée Green, the tendency is for the work to become either a temporary intervention or to dematerialise completely within a site explicitly linked to and often interchangeable with numerous other globally distributed ones – a site overwhelmingly defined by its function:

"...the functional site may or may not incorporate a physical place. It certainly does not *privilege* this place. Instead, it is a process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and textual filiations and the bodies that move between them (the artist's above all). It is an informational site, a palimpsest of text, photographs and video recordings, physical places, and things: an allegorical site, to recall Craig Owen's term, aptly coined to describe Robert Smithson's polymathic enterprise, whose vectored and discursive notion of "place" opposes Serra's phenomenological model."<sup>9</sup>

To sum up, this later kind of site-specific art tends to operate discursively, to reveal the inclusions and exclusions which construct a space which is thus, in turn, defined more through the discursive vectors that intersect it than through any of its unique physical attributes. It tends towards the multicultural and global.

Of course art engaging in an exploration of functional site is merely one strand in a whole web of art movements from which net art emerges. The reason I raise it here is both by way of setting net art within a wider context of site-specific art, and one which does not necessarily involve technology but which concatenates the often immaterial or performative nature of the artwork (e.g. Andrea Fraser's art

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<sup>9</sup> James Meyer, 'The Functional Site', *ibid*, p.25



tours of MOMA) with a globalised understanding of site (i.e. MOMA is a stand-in for a whole global regime of powerful 'white cube' institutions). In this thesis, I will be reading net art through the historical prism of avant-garde attempts to contest the artwork's autonomy and the artist's singularity through two primary vectors: dematerialisation and global, spatial extension. I have therefore taken the Conceptual Art of the 1960s and 70s as an important point of comparison. This is partly because conceptual artists' deconstructions of 'retinal art' and related dematerialisation of the object present an important precedent for the absence of a unique object in net art. But also because Conceptual Art, occurring at the advent of the information age, often linked the dematerialisation of the artwork with the wish to escape oppressive singularities such as the parochialism of the local context and the commodity value of the unique object, through a dissolution into information and the simultaneous occupation of multiple, global sites – or non-places.

It is also the postmodern politics based on the explosion of 'oppressive' singularities into plural and partial identities, often underwritten by information technologies, which forms a central concern of this thesis. This destabilisation of modernist singularities – master narratives – is undoubtedly a hallmark of postmodern culture. The crisis of knowledge systems, the decentering of subjectivity, the inability to cognitively map, the loss of a metaphysical and ontological framework, the disappearance of the real behind the barrage of simulacra and the loss of belief in utopian politics are all associated with this 'postmodern condition'. And it is this epistemological instability to which the categorical ambiguities and existential paradoxes of site-specific art on the Net certainly belong – an instability which has been celebrated and lamented by turns. Celebratory

currents of postmodern thought have often adopted cyberspace as a metaphor and forum for the radical indeterminacy and play of identity. Donna Haraway's cyborg theory is a conspicuous and important example of this. In 1985, Haraway posited a post-Cartesian utopian vision of the (cyborg)-subject who, in the military-industrial matrix of biotechnics, computing and informatics, is free to play with outmoded categories such as race, gender, class, artifice, nature and species at will.<sup>10</sup> This freedom is largely premised on the fusing of flesh with information, the body's increasing intimacy with technological prostheses and the liberation of identity in cyberspace from what William Gibson has called 'the meat'. The body ceases to function as the guarantor of singular identity and our release from the dogma of singularity and authenticity precipitates the breakdown of related and oppressive categories and allows for a 'performative' subjectivity'<sup>11</sup>

The prevalence of this thinking, especially in the early nineties when the Net was far more a zone of social and technical experimentation than it has subsequently become, cannot be underestimated in regards to 'cyberculture' in general and net art by extension. As will become clear in the following chapters, posthumanism or, more broadly, identity politics often dovetails with the institutional critique of the avant-garde, premised as they both are on the explosion of singularities as a foundation for radical politics and/or aesthetics. The intersection of these two

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<sup>10</sup> See Donna Haraway, 'The Cyborg Manifesto', 1985, republished in *The Cybercultures Reader*, eds. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, (London: Routledge, 2000)

<sup>11</sup> The concept of performative subjectivity is in fact used by Judith Butler in a comparable political move. Butler argues that, rather than sustaining the symbolic order and its interpellative power through an ongoing act of 'presupposing and positing' our appointed identity, radical resistance lies in the production of parodic and varied identities which work to destabilise this process. See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, (Stamford, California: Stamford University 1997).

centrally important discourses has thus become what might be described as the critical focus of this thesis and explains my sustained use of the Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Zizek who has devoted much time to interrogating identity politics and its intersection with the frictionless play of cyberspace. Whilst defending the inclusiveness of political representation advocated by such a politics, Zizek adopts a critical position to what he understands as its 'false transgressions'. Zizek compares the tinkering with identity in the post-political age to the psychoanalytic category of the 'polymorphous pervert' who "brings to light, stages, practices the secret fantasies that sustain the predominant public discourse" as compared to the hysterical position which "displays doubt about whether those secret perverse fantasies are 'really' *it*."<sup>12</sup> At the core of this dispute lies what he sees as the substitution of the Marxist critique of a social whole and associated vision of total social transformation with the reformism of identity politics in which struggle is directed towards the ongoing but always limited transformation of an existing social order.<sup>13</sup> "Post-politics" argues Zizek "is the perverse mode of administering social affairs, the mode deprived of the 'hystericised' universal/out-of-joint dimension."<sup>14</sup> This question can be adapted to a consideration of the deconstructions of artwork, artist, identity and place at work in net art, operative within the non-place of global information space. The question is not whether the authentic, auratic art work of yore could or should be revived but rather how its recession and the historically related

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<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Zizek, 'Passionate (Dis)Attachments', *The Ticklish Subject*, (London: Verso, 1999), p.248

<sup>13</sup> See particularly Slavoj Zizek's 'Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, please!' in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Zizek's *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, (London: Verso, 2000)

<sup>14</sup> Zizek, 'Passionate (Dis)Attachments', *The Ticklish Subject*

disappearance of place, this ontological lack, can work to sustain or undermine the current aesthetic and political order.

My decision to organise the material in this thesis thematically is partly due to the fact that while writing it what one might call the first wave of net art was not yet at an end.<sup>15</sup> In other words, a straight chronological account of the net art movement would not have made sense if that history was not yet at an end. The other, perhaps more pertinent reason for a thematic treatment relates to the postmodern theoretical terrain outlined above: in the Net's melting pot of so many separate disciplines, uses, aesthetic trajectories, technological developments, cultural positionings and so on, no single, master narrational curve would do. Having said this, the structuring of the chapters works to unravel a quite narrow set of questions from different perspectives and with different analytical tools.

Alongside the common denominator of art's occupation of 'site' as an informatic nonplace, sits the recurrent question of the very possibility of art's survival under the conditions of networked, info-technological reproducibility. Just as with the entire history of site-specific art, net art toys with its own dissolution within the flux of non-art and by so doing, pushes the boundaries of art to new limits. The longer one looks at the two prongs of this investigation – informatic site and art's continued identity, its negotiation with 'aura' – one sees how they both participate in the dissolution of singularities referred to above: the mutability and reproducibility of information dissolves site in a way that mirrors the explosion and dialogisation of art and artist in its avant-garde and neo-avant-garde histories. In other words, if site

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<sup>15</sup> Net artists Alexei Shulgin and Natalie Bookchin have suggested that this phase came to an end in 1999. See, *Introduction to Net.art (1994-1999)*, <http://www.easylife.org/netart/catalogue.html>

and art's aura constitute the substantives of my thesis, (informatic) fragmentation and multiplication comprise the verb which animates them.

For this reason, the first chapter introduces the movement and its attributes through a re-examination of Walter Benjamin's theory of mechanical reproducibility and the demise of the artwork's aura. I attempt to balance his optimistic, political reading of the technological conditions of modernity against other more negative readings of the banality and endless equivalence produced by postmodernity's informatic tools of reproduction. Here the disappearance of a unique object is connected with information's real time relay and its endless potential for mutation – two factors which simultaneously augur for a democratisation and banalisation of art. Picking up on the question of how informatic reproducibility and networked computing not only affects the artwork but also constructs the spaces in which it operates, I spend the second chapter examining the nature of virtual communities and how artists have connected them to an aesthetico-political project. In other words, how the feedback potential of cybernetic communication not only creates new forms of geographically atomised communities in cyberspace, but also assists in the avant-garde's deconstruction of the author and explicit dialogisation of the artwork. In the third chapter I extend my investigation of the nature of virtual space through an examination of what is known as 'tactical media' – *a modus operandi* of media activism, developed in step with the Internet, to which net artists have aligned themselves. The theory of tactical media relies on the hybridity and instability of information space to promote a nomadic, contingent and 'hit and run' style of activism and cultural activity. Here I lay an emphasis on the co-extensivity of real and virtual spaces and try to debunk the notion of the homogenous nature of

information space. I introduce the idea of the non-place's particularity and address the aesthetic and political potentialities which pertain to this. In Chapter Four, the discussion of these potentialities is considered in connection with Negri and Hardt's theory of 'biopower' – a term which encapsulates the new 'immateriality' of labour and the subsumption of the social *bios* into the mode of production, as well as the potential for subversion which also inheres within this hegemonic order. In this chapter I examine the 're-dematerialisation' of art – art dematerialised within the context of information space – in relation to this new mode of production. I ask how, in contrast to the '60s and '70s attempts to scupper the commodity value of art, re-dematerialised art on the Net operates more ambiguously within this new economic climate to replicate and threaten the new symbolic property of late capitalism. In the last chapter I finally engage directly with the epistemological crisis referred to above in my brief discussion of posthumanism and post-political multiplicity. I look at the role computing plays in producing representations or models of the world which are so complex as to refuse the determination of causality. The result is a radical undermining of Enlightenment rationality and the certainties which went with it. Comparing net artists' use of computer agency to the Surrealists' adoption of dissociative or automatist techniques, I examine how both art movements consider the nature of the 'chaos' which their methodologies unleash. Where for the Bretonian Surrealists, living in the midst of a rationalist, technocratic society, chaos and irrationality could be considered a salutary force of liberation, for net artists working in a period in which chaos has become the order of the day, it means something altogether more ambivalent. Where 'determinate chaos' is often instrumentalised – for instance, to justify the 'naturalness' of the free market – within it also resides the

power to resist such instrumentality. In the handful of works I discuss in this final chapter I show how net artists reveal the dual nature of information technology – its ability to destabilise epistemological certainty and threaten the subject, as well as its capacity to continuously unfold itself, to be in a constantly dynamic state of becoming. It is in this informatic state of becoming that I identify a new logic of art's aura – one which survives the demise of the object's uniqueness and the deconstruction of individual, autonomous authorship.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Art into Cyberspace: Information, Globalisation and Aura

On entering 'cyberspace', the artwork could be said to have finally come to occupy a terrain long anticipated by theoreticians and artists alike. Inasmuch as the advent of cyberspace (a word which synthesises the technics of the Internet with the symbolic economy of information space) signals the constitution of an entirely new field of operation, it also reifies much older imaginary trajectories of cultural and technological development. Paul Valéry's speculative future scenario – cited by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' – would seem to suggest the historical predictability of the Internet's most revolutionary capabilities:

"Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign."<sup>16</sup>

What is important, although perhaps not surprising, about this uncanny prefiguration of both Television and the Internet is Valéry's connection of the increased proximity of visual and auditory images with their mass distribution; not only do they come closer but they also come to all. This development has been seized upon by writers

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Valéry, 'The Conquest of Ubiquity', *Aesthetics*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1964, p.226, cited in Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 1936, reproduced in *Illuminations*, 1970, (London: Pimlico, 1999)



as historically and theoretically disparate as Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard. At stake in such debates is the consequence of the artwork's putative loss of 'aura' under the conditions of technical reproducibility and mass distribution/consumption; the question is whether this leveling of the artwork to the order of banal object (i.e. without cult value) has an inherently revolutionary or oppressively flattening, depoliticising effect. This dilemma reaches its boiling point with the advent of the Internet because the conditions themselves attain an almost unimaginable level of perfection.

This chapter will examine how the recession of aura in the artwork becomes a central concern for artists using the Internet as a new site of practice in the 1990s. It will examine how art operative in the generic, massified, global, and informational computer environment of the Net has made the often contradictory attempt to embrace the democratising and participative (de-auraticising) potential of the Net while critiquing its increasingly regulated, homogenised and commercially controlled development (the negative aspects of technical reproducibility). In other words, it asks at what point art's embrace of the reproductive and distributive potentials of computer technologies becomes a defensive move to guard against the adverse effects of these selfsame technologies. At the heart of this chapter and indeed this thesis, lies the recurrent question over the stakes involved in the erosion of the division between art and everyday life or what Benjamin Buchloh calls the 'regnant episteme'; an erosion tied to the technological conditions of modernity and postmodernity.<sup>17</sup> This chapter will trace some important historical analyses of the

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: from the aesthetic of administration to the critique of institutions', 1989, in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro & Blake Stimson, (London: MIT, 1999)

mutually constitutive and disruptive relationship between art and technology – primarily those of Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson – whilst also sketching the development of net art, the key artists in its early history, and some important although by no means exhaustive precursors to their practice.

Benjamin's idea of aura's demise hinged upon an analysis of the effects of the art object's increased proximity to the masses, associated manipulability and effortless reproduction within the mechanical age. However what seems important here is that art, despite the 'proletarianisation' of its techniques or its liberation from the legitimising requirements of its uniqueness, individuality of style or technical skill, has nonetheless sustained its separate status from other forms of mass culture. As became increasingly clear from the experiments of '60s and '70s Conceptual Art – an essential precursor to net art – not only did modernism's self-reflexive deconstructions of the aesthetic object fail to radically upset the social function of art but so, to a great extent, did the ensuing deconstructions of the institutional framing environments which so crucially underpin the functioning of art, its preservation and official histories. In short, we are left with the question of the extent to which technological processes destroy aura or the degree to which aura, although perhaps mortally damaged by mimetic technologies, can be sustained by the scaffolding of art's framing institutions and ongoing social role. If, as will be argued below using the psychoanalytic hermeneutics of Slavoj Žižek, we understand aura to be the inscrutable evasiveness of the 'sublime Thing', then we are left with the question of how aura is sustained under the new, ubiquitous conditions of media. With this question in mind, it is interesting to speculate on the degree to which the attack on

art's aura is also the key to its survival, or as Guy Debord proclaimed about 20<sup>th</sup> century art if "Its vanguard is its own disappearance".<sup>18</sup> If this is so, if art's survival is in some way indexed to its own negation, it also seems important to keep in mind

Theodor Adorno's caution:

"It is outside the purview of aesthetics today whether it is to become art's necrology; yet it must not play at delivering graveside sermons, certifying the end, savoring the past, and abdicating in favour of one sort of barbarism that is no better than the culture that has earned barbarism as recompense for its own monstrosity."<sup>19</sup>

Adorno warns us against exchanging the art's elite separateness for something far worse; its undifferentiated continuity with the 'barbarism' of everyday life.

As we shall also see from this discussion of net art, the intimate association of aura's disappearance with art's discovery of a new political basis is greatly contested. As net artists have also become increasingly aware, an art without aura runs the risk of merely duplicating the banalised modalities of mass media in its attempts to free itself from the cultish myth of the artist as progenitor of sublime realities. This struggle between art's disappearance and a search for its radical transformation is one that net artists have been engaged in as they attempt to make art in and for a global computer network. Making art in this context begs a related and similarly contradictory set of questions; do globalisation and the spread of Information Communications Technology (ICT) imply the potential for a new socio-political plurality, self-constituting public sphere and new global cultural formations based on the increased connectivity between peoples and cultures, or does this

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<sup>18</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p.135

<sup>19</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1970, (London: Athlone Press, 1999), p.4

expanded web of connections ultimately extend and refine the reach of state/corporate power, cause the recession of public space and the homogenising tendencies of our 'new branded world'?<sup>20</sup> The move in art from a modernist investigation of underlying ontological structures to the radically exteriorised art practice of postmodernity, in which the studio tellingly cedes to the office space or cybercafé, runs the risk of attaining an all too perfect symmetry with the referent it seeks to transform – the distracted, interested communicative culture of the information age. This chapter will introduce net art and some of its key participants and concepts, against this contradictory terrain in which transformation courts self-annihilation.

### Art at Close Range

For Benjamin, both the reproduction of existing works of art as well as the techniques of photography and film provoke a necessary reinvention of art premised on the demise of the uniqueness of the object. No longer able to operate as the singular nexus of a historical journey through space and time, the artwork's function as the repository of authenticity is irrevocably damaged. Conversely the radical malleability of the photographic or phonographic copy, the possibility of introducing it to places out of reach of the original itself (e.g. the sound of a choral production entering the drawing room through the medium of the phonograph), diminish what is at the crux of authenticity: "the authority of the object".<sup>21</sup> This authority relates not only to the uniqueness of its historical experience but also to the erstwhile ritual

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<sup>20</sup> This is a chapter title from Naomi Klein's *No Logo*, (London: Flamingo, 2000)

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p.215

function of the object – the absence of use value in the cult object is recognisable in the 'uselessness' of *l'art pour l'art*. The eliminated 'authority' as well as cult or theological value of the object is what Benjamin subsumes in the term 'aura', and this elimination is the necessary sacrifice for the reinvention of culture, as elite cultural heritage is 'liquidated' and mass culture born from the reproduced object's newfound ability to "to meet the beholder halfway".<sup>22</sup> "To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura" argues Benjamin, "is a mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction".<sup>23</sup> Technological mimesis enables us to penetrate deeply into 'the web' of reality to reveal an 'optical unconscious'; the close-ups, slow motion and freezing effects of film, for example, extend our understanding of "the necessities which rule our lives; [and] on the other hand ... manage... to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action."<sup>24</sup> In Benjamin's analysis, as the ritual basis of art is lost a new basis in politics is gradually adopted.

Baudrillard, by contrast, writing at what he identifies as the close of the society of the spectacle and the opening of the age of information, finds in these selfsame transformations a veritable inversion of the radical potential speculated on by Benjamin.<sup>25</sup> The technologies of reproduction which have converged with ICT have produced the 'obscenity' of over-presence. The total and immediate availability of information, the replacement of metaphor with simulation, the collapse of the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.214

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.217

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.229

<sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, (Brooklyn: Semiotext(e), 1988), p.21

metaphysical order based on the appearance/reality differential into the flattened ontology of virtuality, have conspired to create an unbearable claustrophobia of over-presence – the "ecstasy of communication". Far from the collapse of auratic distance forming the precondition of a revolutionary opening based on the 'universal equality of things', Baudrillard perceives an intensification of the radical equivalence of exchange value. Positing the latter as the "locus of transcription of all possible objects"<sup>26</sup> and the engine of communicative circulation, a circulation he deems 'ecstatic', he concludes:

"One need only carry this analysis to its full potential to grasp what has happened to transience and the obscurity of the universe of communication, which have long surpassed the obscurities still relative to the universe of the commodity.

Ecstasy is all functions abolished into one dimension, the dimension of communication. All events, all spaces, all memories are abolished in the sole dimension of information: this is obscene."<sup>27</sup>

And by obscurity, it is important to add, Baudrillard means that which is "all-too-visible", in the sense that it "no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication"<sup>28</sup>.

But it is this very solubility into information that has provoked some of the most important developments in art over the last three decades. In his catalogue introduction to the 'Information' show at MOMA in 1970, Kynaston McShine formulates the dilemma faced by art's heavy materiality. First and foremost, the hermetic nature of modernism's exploration of its own material conditions seemed

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.23

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pp.23-4

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.22

increasingly illegitimate in the face of what was perceived as "the general social, political, and economic crises" in which "If you are an artist in Brazil, you know of at least one friend who is being tortured; if you are one in Argentina, you probably have had a neighbour who has been in jail for having long hair...; and if you are living in the United States, you may fear that you will be shot at, either in the universities, in your bed, or more formally in Indochina."<sup>29</sup> But it was not only that it had become inconceivable for many artists in this period to "get up in the morning, walk into a room, and apply dabs of paint from a little tube to a square of canvas"<sup>30</sup>, it was also the challenge presented to the 'provincialism' of art by the rapidity of the media's information relay. McShine's formulation is powerful: "An artist certainly cannot compete with a man on the moon in the living room."<sup>31</sup> While McShine and artists such as Hans Haacke (whose *MOMA-Poll* formed a memorable part of the 'information' exhibition) demonstrated an overt interest in political events, other currents in Conceptual Art adopted the 'administrative aesthetic' to refuse art's retinal seductions in a more direct extension of modernist strategies. As part of an attack on aesthetic judgement and style, Sol LeWitt explained that: "The serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of his premise."<sup>32</sup> Either through the role that telecommunications played in the worldliness and political engagement of some forms of Conceptual Art or the role the administrative aesthetic played in debunking the aesthetics of individualism, information (a term which designates the indifferent

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<sup>29</sup> Kynaston McShine, 'Introduction to Information', 1970, in *Conceptual Art*, p.212

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.213

<sup>32</sup> Sol LeWitt, 'Serial Project #1, 1966', *Aspen Magazine*, 1967, cited in Buchloh's 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969', *ibid*, p.531

conflation of facts, knowledge or ideas with the instrumentalised means of their communication) played an important role in the opening up of art and the artist to the wider social field.

In 1994 – when the development of the World Wide Web<sup>33</sup> had been popularised by the invention of the Mosaic browser's multimedia graphical user interface in 1993<sup>34</sup> and artists were attracted to it in ever greater numbers – a new art practice emerged whose transmission was as instantaneous, and penetration as widespread as any broadcast medium. The debate over the potential of technological modes of (re)production found a new topos while the administrative aesthetic was adapted to the exploding language and logic of computer softwares and protocols. The potential for art's adoption of a political basis resulting from its mechanical reproduction theorised by Benjamin was reenergised by the perceived radicality of the Internet's multi-directional communicative architecture and digitally reproductive power. Paradoxically perhaps, the Internet seemed to manifest both the problem and the conditions of the solution of Baudrillardian obscenity in one. If one of the all defining features of mass media culture has been theorised as the replacement of the 'scene' with the 'screen' and the liquidation of the public sphere (based on a now lost

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<sup>33</sup> "In 1990, the World Wide Web, a multimedia branch of the Internet had been created by researchers at CERN, the European Laboratory for Particle Physics near Geneva. Using Tim Berners-Lee's HTTP protocol, computer scientists around the world began making the Internet easier to navigate with point-and-click programs. These browsers were modeled after Berners-Lee's original, and usually based on the CERN code library", Katie Haffner & Matthew Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late*, (New York: Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 258-259

<sup>34</sup> "NCSA Mosaic was originally designed and programmed for the X Window System by Marc Andreessen and Eric Bina at NCSA. Version 1.0 was released in April 1993, followed by two maintenance releases during summer 1993. Version 2.0 was released in December 1993, along with version 1.0 releases for both the Apple Macintosh and Microsoft Windows," *Foldoc Free Online Dictionary of Computing*, <http://www.foldoc.org>



opposition between public and private spheres), then the Internet would seem to be the expression of this shift *par excellence*. Does the Net not typify the excessive proximity, 'pornographic' presence and narcissistic implosion brought about by the breakdown of the subject/object divide which Baudrillard charges with eroding the scene of politics and the metaphysics of the gaze?<sup>35</sup> But equally, as we shall see in more detail in Chapter Three, Net artists along with many others have seen the possibility of reinventing public space using the very tools of its so-called disappearance – ICT. This many-to-many technology has been heralded as providing the potential for the individual to break out of his/her monadic existence which Baudrillard describes as resembling "an astronaut in his bubble", inside a home transformed by television, radio and telephone into something approaching "an archaic closed-off cell"<sup>36</sup>. A remark by the Belgian net art duo Jodi, however, unwittingly draws attention to the sense in which the Internet's networking of monadic (technical and social) nodes, reversing the habitually receptive role of the media subject, also comes close to a claustrophobic invasion of the private sphere:

"When a viewer looks at our work, we are inside his computer... And we are honoured to be in somebody's computer."<sup>37</sup>

The shift from the one-to-many broadcast model of television to the network structure of the Net highlights the intensifying confusion between private and public space. Where once public space was brought to us as a spectacle inside the private

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<sup>35</sup> "Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when every-thing becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication." Baudrillard, *Ecstasy of Communication*, pp.21-22

<sup>36</sup> Baudrillard, *ibid*, p.18

<sup>37</sup> Jodi, quoted by Tilman Baumgärtel in, 'Art on the Internet: the Rough Remix', *Nettime*, (October 1998), <http://www.nettime.org>

sphere, now the sphere of private communication is further imbricated in the commercialised public sphere and vice versa.

Before 1994, Internet access and service provision was primarily centred in the hands of universities, government, the military and big industry. Since then access, service provision and the production of content has become potentially as ubiquitous as the ownership of personal computers. This, amongst other things, has been seen as offering the possibility of combating the personality cults and commodity fetishism of broadcast media, the monopolisation of the airwaves by state/corporate propaganda, and the structures supporting the persistence of the artwork's aura and commodity value. Together, these transformations all belong to the democratising potential ascribed to the Internet which are implied by the term: 'the electronic agora'.<sup>38</sup> Despite the ongoing interrogation of and often antipathy towards the instrumental rationality of the techno-cultural order in the age of global capitalism from which the Internet is inseparable – a recurrent motif in net art that we will return to shortly – the genre is marked by an interest in releasing the utopian potential of the Internet's 'horizontal' or 'rhizomatic' structure.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note that the decentralisation of the Internet's structure – often identified with its potential for subversive use – was developed in the cold war inspired attempt to create an infrastructure that could survive nuclear attack.<sup>40</sup> The same structure,

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<sup>38</sup> Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Communities: Finding Connections in a Computerised World*, (London: Mandarin, 1995), p.14

<sup>39</sup> The rhizome is a key model in the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari which they derived from botany used to describe a horizontal plane of power relations without central organisation or single dominant principle. A rhizome is a continuously growing, usually horizontal underground stem which puts out lateral shoots at intervals. Deleuze and Guattari paired this with the contrasting metaphor of 'arborescent', or vertical growth structures such as trees.

<sup>40</sup> See *Where Wizards Stay Up Late*

comments Allucquère Rosanne Stone amongst numerous others, "that make[s] it nearly indestructible in event of enemy attack also make[s] it nearly uncontrollable by a single, central entity."<sup>41</sup>

Horizontality, in its techno-social application, means several things: the decentralised movement of information bits across the Net; the global reach of the Net and the (relatively) free circulation of information which has enabled participants to evade the conventions of local identity;<sup>42</sup> the ease with which anyone with access to the technology can self-publish on the Net, thus side-stepping all the mediating hierarchies and barriers to publication and exhibition which exist offline;<sup>43</sup> the intertextuality of the Net which depends upon the hyperlinks between computer files and the possibility of constructing webpages collectively through the use of techniques such as Computer Gateway Interface (CGI) programming; and finally the ease of information duplication and circulation. These structures and techniques which promote the possibility of anonymity and collectivity have played a central role in net artists' extended critique of authorship and the commodification of art.<sup>44</sup>

Common to all these horizontal transformations is the replacement of the obduracy of the object world with a simulacral one, carried by a collection of

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<sup>41</sup> Allucquère Rosanne Stone, 'Preface', *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey, (London: Aperture, 1996), p.9

<sup>42</sup> "When I was just an artist living in Moscow, whatever I did has always been [sic] labeled as 'eastern', 'Russian', whatever." Alexei Shulgin, in Baumgärtel, 'Art on the Internet'

<sup>43</sup> "The beauty of Net art, the aspect of it that was initially applauded, was precisely that the artists themselves can control the distribution of their art works. In the interviews I've done with artists about art on the Internet, this comes up again and again: Finally we have a way to distribute out art without the intervention of museums, collectors, curators, etc." Tilman Baumgärtel, 'Internet Art Haute Couture', *Telepolis*, (August 1998), <http://www.heise.de/tp>.

<sup>44</sup> "Net art challenges the concept of art-making as a more or less solitary and product-producing activity." Robert Adrian, Baumgärtel, 'Art on the Internet'

regularly scaled and endlessly reconfigurable units of information or 'bits'; a transformation which for key theorist of cyberspace, Slavoj Žižek, has a profound effect on the functioning of the symbolic order. In a series of articles, Žižek discusses cyberspace's protean digital consistency in terms of the 'end of Oedipus'.<sup>45</sup> Oedipus stands for the psychoanalytical mode of subjectivisation which entails the intercession of the father/language into the blissful diad of mother and child; the precondition of the child's interpellation into the symbolic order is his/her splitting from the world and the erection of subject/object relations. For Žižek, the symbolic order's waning power or recession in postmodernity is epitomised by the loss of fixity which characterises digital representation. Here we need only think of the difference between a page of text written on a typewriter which, once completed, cannot be altered and one written in word processing software. For Žižek the impossibility of obtaining closure in cyberspace, where a file can always be modified or altered in some way, has come to typify the far more generalised decline of symbolic authority throughout Western society as the older ontological coordinates such as religious faith, Newtonian physics, dominant codes of sexual practice, the nuclear family, class relations and so on are unbalanced, complexified or otherwise mobilised. As a Marxist, Žižek is certainly behind the fight against race, gender and class discrimination. His critique, however, applies to the explosion of coherent social and symbolic formations into a multitude of atomised choices designed to gratify the subject's putative will to self-identity. This finds its cogent analogue in the whole concept of consumer choice, in which our confrontation with an

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<sup>45</sup> See 'Quantum Physics with Lacan' in *The Indivisible Remainder*, (London: Verso, 1996), 'Cyberspace, or, the Unbearable Closure of Being', in *The Plague of Fantasies*, (London: Verso, 1997) and 'Is it Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace?' in *The Žižek Reader*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

encyclopaedic range of superficial choices belies a more fundamental reduction of possibilities. The malleability of digital files and identities in cyberspace is characterised by Zizek as 'false transgression'; as we narcissistically manipulate symbolic codes causing a recession of the entire symbolic edifice, he argues, we also cause the recession of the possibility of a far greater transformation of that self-same edifice.

But Zizek makes an important distinction between his own position and a Baudrillardian 'end of Oedipus' which despairs of a social psychosis brought on by the collapse of the symbolic order and retreat into the pre-symbolic; an effect of the Imaginary's overlap with the Real in the digitised universe of simulation. "The idea" as Zizek characterises Baudrillard's position is "that the computer functions as a maternal Thing that swallows the subject, who entertains an attitude of incestuous fusion towards it."<sup>46</sup> Arguing against the idea of the loss of authentic being through the Real's bombardment with a storm of simulacra, Zizek states that what in fact gets lost under these conditions is precisely not the dimension of the 'real' but that of *appearance*. Appearance, he explains, is the momentary glimpse of "the Supra-sensible sublime Thing", like the face of God, in a piece of fleetingly transubstantiated reality:

"To put it in Lacanian terms: simulacrum is imaginary (illusion) while appearance is symbolic (fiction): when the specific dimension of symbolic appearance starts to disintegrate, the Imaginary and the Real become more and more indistinguishable. The key to today's universe of simulacra, in which the Real is less and less distinguishable from its imaginary simulation resides in the retreat of 'symbolic efficiency'."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Slavoy Zizek, 'Is it Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace', *The Zizek Reader*, p.111

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, pp.111-112

Where Baudrillard posits the pornography of the all-too-visible simulacra whose obscene presence destroys the structuring distance on which the Real is predicated, Zizek posits the demise of the (always already virtual) symbolic whose 'supra-sensibility', its evasive absence, is constitutive of reality (e.g. the threat of symbolic castration can cause 'real' impotence). And, when the Master signifier is laid open to constant manipulations, the freedom to choose, to have desire is foreclosed:

"What happens, then, in the situation of the decline of the Master, when the subject himself is constantly bombarded with the request to give a sign of what he wants? The exact opposite of what one would expect: it is when there is no one there to tell you what you really want, when all the burden of the choice is on you, that the big Other dominates you completely, and the choice effectively disappears – is replaced by its mere semblance<sup>48</sup>"

So, as we have seen, the collapse of distance, the loss of aura (in certain respects 'aura' stands for the very hidden quality possessed by the sublime Thing – i.e. God or the ultimate object of desire – its inscrutable originality) and the malleability of simulations in cyberspace as against the injunctions of the symbolic order, provide the disputed territory around which the genre of net art unfolds. The troubled nature of cyberspace, encapsulating as it does both a radical potential for transformation as well as what Zizek calls its 'unbearable closure' in which the recession of 'the Master' (symbolic order) is accompanied by the decline of desire, constitutes the new site of a site specific art. A site in which the agency of the computer has been inserted into the heart of the symbolic order and where no language can develop in its absence.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.153

## The 'dot' in 'Net.Art'

The tale around the origins of 'net.art' tallies remarkably well with this problematic of the signifier's opening to the interventions of multiple agencies, here both human and machinic, but also sheds light on some of the interesting possibilities such an opening presents. The Russian net artist Alexei Shulgin posted a tale on the nettime mailing list in March 1997 which is almost certainly apocryphal, for its exemplification of the creative dialectic between artist and computer is nearly too perfect to have actually occurred.<sup>49</sup> Shulgin relates how "the Net itself gave [net artist Vuk Cosic] a name for the activity he was involved in!"<sup>50</sup> The circumstances of this auto-baptism were as follows: in December 1995 Cosic received an anonymous message which, due to an incompatibility of software, was practically illegible, appearing as "ASCIIi abracadabra".<sup>51</sup> The only words that could be deciphered were 'Net' and 'Art', separated by a full-stop and bracketed by a sequence of ASCII characters thus: "[...] J8~g#\;Net.Art{-^s1 [...]". Cosic is said to have adopted the term 'net.art' straight away and it was only some months later that he was able to decode the message and discover that it was a "controversial and vague manifesto" denouncing the institutionalisation of art and declaring independence for artists on the Internet. "The part of the text with [the] above mentioned fragment so strangely converted by Vuk's software was (quotation by memory): 'All this becomes possible only with [the] emergence of the Net. Art as a notion becomes obsolete...'"<sup>52</sup> Shulgin

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<sup>49</sup> Nettime is a media, politics and arts mailing list which provides one of the central stages of exchange and presentation for net artists; <http://www.nettime.org>

<sup>50</sup> Alexei Shulgin, 'Net.Art – the Origin', *Nettime*, (March, 1997),

<sup>51</sup> ASCII stands for American Standard Code for Information Interchange and is the basis of character sets used in nearly all present-day computers.

<sup>52</sup> Shulgin, 'Net Art – the Origin'

asserts that the manifesto itself was less interesting than the serendipitous mutation, explains that it has in any case been lost by a 'tragic' hard drive crash, and concludes with the observation:

"I like this weird story very much, because it's a perfect illustration [of] the fact that the world we live in is much richer than all our ideas about it."<sup>53</sup>

This story is useful because it elucidates, better than any 'straight' accounts of the term's meaning, the utopianism inherent in the thinking of the 'net.art' 'group' which has deployed it. Before giving an account of the artists who loosely comprise this group, an exploration of Shulgin's tale is instructive if we relate it to the opposition outlined above between modernist and postmodernist readings of the 'text's' or original object's openness to manipulation and the increasing proximity of media culture to the masses – the loss of aura. In Shulgin's tale, the dot precisely fills in the gap that once existed between the words and, one must also speculate, the entities 'art' and 'Net'. This suspension of the gap is, at least fictionally, authored by the computer which precipitates this convergence of technological and artistic modes. Art takes explicit possession of technology's power to penetrate the 'web of reality' by presenting it to us afresh, by side-stepping the censorship of consciousness and rendering it open to a new kind of deployment. Conversely, technology unites with art's power to reveal and articulate the world in non-instrumental ways. Certainly the strange, quasi-mystical nature of this tale points towards some kind of Heideggerian utopia in which art and technology's erstwhile identity is regained; an idea which interestingly corresponds to the combat against the fetish quality of the artist/artwork

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid



mounted by the administrative aesthetic's seriality, universality and neutrality in Conceptual Art.

Heidegger's investigation of the essence of technology and its proximity to the essence of art in *The Question Concerning Technology* not only provides an alternative to Žižek and Baudrillard's unconsoling scenarios but also sheds light on what we mean by the utopianism which often characterises the net.artists. Stepping outside of the conventional assignations of technology's instrumentality and art's restorative power to reveal, it becomes apparent, in Heidegger's terms, that what might seem like an interrelation of antithetical modes (art and technology) is really more like the mutual recognition of a shared capacity or identity. In this essay, Heidegger fixes upon the notion of *Gestell* or 'enframing', by which he partly means "the gathering together which belongs to that setting-upon which challenges man and puts him in position to reveal the actual, in the mode of ordering, as standing reserve."<sup>54</sup> Heidegger not only argues that 'enframing' is the dangerous force in technology – in fact the supreme danger – because it is responsible for the revealing process which converts all the world and man himself into standing reserves, but that it also blocks us from understanding technology's involvement in other forms of revealing: "Thus the challenging-enframing not only conceals a former way of revealing (bringing-forth) but also conceals revealing itself and with it that wherein unconcealment, i.e., truth, appropriates."<sup>55</sup> Heidegger uses the Greek word *poiesis* to signify this 'bringing forth' into unconcealment; a bringing-forth within which *techne* is contained. Hence the skills of the craftsmen as well as the arts of the mind and the

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<sup>54</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', *Basic Writings: Revised and Expanded Edition*, ed. David Farrell Krell, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.329

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p.333

fine arts are subsumed under the unifying concept of *poiesis* whereby "whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us is revealed."<sup>56</sup> In conclusion, Heidegger posits 'enframing' as the essence of technology which is responsible for the 'destining' wherein the potential for the unconcealment of truth lies: "Thus the essential unfolding of technology harbors in itself what we least suspect, the possible rise of the saving power."<sup>57</sup> It is precisely in learning to see beyond the sheer instrumentality of technology to its essence which is 'enframing' that we are presented with the possibility of escaping the means-end rationale that effaces all other modes of being.

In short, the dot in net.art stands for a utopian thinking about the potentialities within *both* technology and art, or further, in the intersection of technology and art which centre on the hope of freeing both activities from their shared tendency to subordinate their respective forms of *poiesis* to an instrumental thinking. In the case of technology this instrumentality relates to the enframing, ordering and stock-piling of nature with the consequence of man's alienation from the world. In the case of art, this instrumentality might be said to relate to the various social functions that art performs, such as the centralisation and reification of creativity in the hands of an elite group of legitimated actors. But what also seems crucial here is that, as with Heidegger's discussion of the destining of 'enframing' which is both the essence of technology and something beyond it, something which necessarily remains mysterious, the power of net.art's own mode of unconcealment is likewise cast as mysterious. The legend of net.art's auto-baptism exemplifies this in a nutshell; a mode of unconcealment brought forth by the technology itself (an

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.319

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 337

incompatibility of software) which inaugurates an art practice that will try to break with art's own increasing recognition of its instrumental role in tandem with its increasing desire for autonomy after *l'art pour l'art*. As with Heidegger's notion that technology harbours within itself the "growth of the saving power", the net.artists, for however short a time, invested the Net with a redemptive potential.

In an early attempt to define a Net-specific art practice, and using the term 'net.art' to signify those artists whose work is self-consciously 'parasitical' on the computer network, Andreas Broeckmann makes an important distinction between it and the network-based art existing prior the WWW. Identifying the telephone network which has long been used for live-audio performances, or for connecting fax machines together, as well as the postal service which provided one of the first networks for artistic collaboration at long distance, he foregrounds the entry of the computer into the network system:

"The use of computers in the electronic networks has added independent machine agency as an extra dimension of such practices: the communication and data exchange among networked computers in processes which are not controlled or initiated by human actors, has taken on an aesthetic quality."<sup>58</sup>

It is my contention here that the dot which closes the gap between Net and art stands for the implosion of the space which structures the relationship between intention, cause and effect, art and technics, and human creativity and computer agency. The computer's agency, in the first formulations of net.art, is understood not only as a means of ordering data, an instrumental force, but also as a mysterious essence which can be used to counter this same instrumental tendency. The positing of this

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<sup>58</sup> Andreas Broeckmann, 'Net.Art, Machines, and Parasites', Nettime, (March,1997)

unidentifiable agency, this mysterious excess which counters the oppressive transparency of computational techniques and information culture, interestingly reinserts an auratic residue into the conceptual project of 'de-auratisation'; a practice which often relied on the quantitative, ordering and neutralising qualities of information. What follows will be an attempt to sort, both chronologically and discursively, the thematics of art's opening to the multiple agency of collective production as well as 'independent machine agency' in line with the potentialities and problems foreseen by theorists of techno-culture.

Nevertheless, the confusion over terms still requires clarification. What we will here be calling 'net art' without the dot has also been variously termed: net.art, Web Art, browser art and art on the Net, among numerous other terms. The volumes of debate generated by artists and critics wishing to pin down the precise nature of the genre or warning against the dangers of such an endeavour points to several possibilities: that there are many 'schools' of Internet based art, that the distinctions between those schools is not always easily definable, that even when the practice is comparable the participants have become factionalised and wish to maintain their distinctive identities; and, finally, that despite their much vaunted contempt for the process, net artists have from their very inception been concerned to control the terms of their own historicisation. The long debate that surrounds the term suggests that this hostility towards historicisation is the flip-side of the anxiety not to be misunderstood or wrongly accounted for by historians.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> For the best collation of these debates, which occurred on the Nettime mailing list around this subject, see the online version of ZKP4 (a periodical publication of selected texts from the Nettime mailinglist), 1997: <http://mila.ljudmila.org/nettime/zkp4/41.htm>

In this thesis, I am interested in those artists for whom the Net is "a necessary and sufficient condition"<sup>60</sup> and not, as the net artist Joachim Blank put it, "nothing more than a big telephone book in which [artists] want to (have to) be represented", by which he means a platform for distributing multimedia representations of already existing works of art.<sup>61</sup> But there are other qualifications which makes this distinction more pertinent. These entail situating the practice between its media art precedents where, given the difficulty and expense of broadcasting, artworks tended to have a discrete existence in singular locations (local screenings, video cassettes, computer hard drives, CD-Roms etc.), and the conditions of the network with its capacity to distribute globally and to effectively combine all media into single HTML documents. "To paraphrase Turing", writes the media artist Simon Biggs, "the computer is the medium that can be any medium".<sup>62</sup> This observation should be extended to the Internet for which the metaphor of the collage is often applied to describe the way that different media (film, video, audio, photography, animation, computer generated images etc.) are drawn together into one, albeit heterogeneous, entity. However, the idea that the Internet "has no form, [but is instead] a carrier of forms and of information and an enabler of communication" but which is instead a "dissolution of media", is sometimes used to oppose attempts at finding a serviceable term for net art.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Steve Dietz, the Walker Art Gallery's online exhibitions curator, used this definition in the introduction to the 'Beyond Interface' show. See, 'Beyond Interface: net art and Art on the Net II',

<http://www.ieor.berkeley.edu/~goldberg/courses/S99/sfai/dietz.html>

<sup>61</sup> Joachim Blank, 'What is netart ;-)?', April, 1997, ZKP4

<sup>62</sup> Simon Biggs, cited in Dietz, 'Beyond Interface'

<sup>63</sup> Jeremy Welsh, 'Net art vs. Video art?', March, 1997, ZKP4

This position ignores all sorts of new technological conditions which come into being with the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web, some of which have already been touched on above and which will be expanded on in greater detail in due course. A cursory list of these conditions would however include the following: the scripting language called Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) which allows heterogeneous media to be formatted into single documents; the many ways in which, compared to broadcast media, the user can gain access to the construction of the webpage itself, e.g. the possibility of viewing the HTML code in a browser window (one simply chooses 'view source' in the pull down menu); the prevalence of commercially produced browser softwares (primarily Netscape and Microsoft Explorer) which gives rise to a standardised and interactive interface through which the artwork is viewed and which becomes the subject of much interrogation/manipulation by net artists; the numerous additional scripting languages such as Java, Shockwave and Flash which augment and are embedded into HTML code creating demands on the viewer's hard and software which often hampers or inflects their ability to see the work *in toto* and makes a homogeneity of reception impossible; the speed of technological development which constantly subjects artworks to the possibility of obsolescence as softwares are updated in keeping with the exponential growth of processing power<sup>64</sup>; the vulnerability of the

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<sup>64</sup> In an interview with Josephine Bosma, the net art duo Jodi give an example of how the developments in the Netscape browser software have rendered some of their early works obsolete: "[With Netscape 2.0] you could have this background that would change all the time: background 1,2, 3 etc. You could make great movies with that. You could let it run ten times in a row. They took this out in Netscape 3.0. It was used a lot on the Net. The first part of our *Binhex* was based quite heavily on it, we used it a lot. They thought it was a bug. I can't see the bug here, it was just a free animation effect that was in there. It was threatening the stability of a certain type of layout, it was disturbed too easily. So they took it out." 'Interview with Jodi', Josephine Bosma, March, 1997, [ZKP4](#).

computer network (and hence artwork) to bugs, viruses, hacks and system crashes; the ease with which networked digitally encoded information can be copied and altered; the global span of the computer network itself which creates an international space of, amongst other things, communication, activism, community building, legislation, surveillance and regulation; the fact that the Internet combines the relative cheapness of using the computer as a media production tool and its distributive capabilities, thus bringing to fruition the early aspirations of media art; the precise nature of its information transmission system across the (distributed) network structure of the Internet which rests upon the two technical cornerstones of 'packet switching' and TCP/IP<sup>65</sup>; the hyperlink structure (as mentioned above) which

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<sup>65</sup> Packet switching, initially devised by Paul Baran for RAND in the late 1960s, was designed to protect the communications network in the event of an attack (envisaged as Soviet and nuclear). Rather than having a centralised or even decentralised network structure, the idea was to create a 'distributed' network where each node is connected to upward of three other nodes (a redundancy level of 3 or over), so that information has a very high chance of being able to route around 'holes' in the network. The packet switching itself works on the principle of fracturing digital data sets into a series of regularly sized packets which individually find their way across the network and are then reassembled again by the receiving computer. These packets themselves are routed across the network by switching nodes, each of which "contained a routing table that behaved as a sort of transport coordinator or dispatcher... The table indicated the best routes to take and was constantly updated with information about neighbouring nodes, distances and delays... The continuous updating of the tables is also known as "adaptive" or "dynamic" routing." Katie Hafner and Matthew Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay up Late*, pp. 61-62

TCP/Ip stands for Transmission Control Protocol/ Internet Protocol. TCP, developed by Vint Cerf and Bob Kahn in the early 1970s enabled different kinds of networks (e.g. satellite, radio and telephone cable) to communicate amongst themselves, thus creating the Internet. TCP created compatibility by establishing gateway computers between the various networks which could communicate with each other – despite the variations in data packet sizes and transmission speeds – by encapsulating and decapsulating information: "Under the framework described in the paper ["A Protocol for Packet Network Intercommunication"], messages should be encapsulated and decapsulated in "datagrams," much as a letter is put into and taken out of an envelope, and sent as end-to-end packets. These messages would be called transmission-control protocol, or TCP, messages. The paper also introduced the notion of gateways, which would read only the envelope so that only the receiving hosts would read the contents." Ibid, p.226

literalises what Barthes has called 'the plurality of the text' and 'the writerly text'; and finally, the penetration of the site of reception and production (the PC) to places which were typically off limits to the practice of creating art or viewing it (in a subjectively determined way), most notably the office or workplace. These are just some of the features that comprise the specificity of the medium, one which is certainly not just a dissolution of the boundaries between other media, and one which net artists are explicitly involved in exploring.

### "Net.art per se"

To focus exclusively on the artists associated with the term net.art would be to preclude a discussion of the many other artists whose work makes important contributions to the investigation of some of these Internet specific conditions, and would limit our account to a constant measuring up of the oeuvre's unfolding to those early aspirations which attach to the term. Nonetheless, the term is important because it gathers together some of the sharpest articulations of net art's perceived radicality, the coming to consciousness of a (web)site-specific art practice, as well as providing us with an instance of an artistic community formed through the Net which includes some of the most celebrated practitioners of net art to date.

The 'Net.art per se' conference, organised by the Serbian artist Vuk Cosic and held in the Teatro Miela, Trieste, 21-22 May, 1996, marks the first attempt to formalise the group's identity. Although the conference, described in less formal terms on Cosic's documentary webpage as "a gentle conversation", included a selection of ICT-oriented theorists, activists, technologists and art bureaucrats from



across eastern and western Europe, it crucially brought Cosic and the Russian artist Alexei Shulgin together with the purpose of exploring the term 'net.art'.<sup>66</sup> These two artists, together with English artists Heath Bunting and Rachel Baker, the Dutch/Belgian duo Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans called Jodi, the Russian artist Olia Lialina and the American artist Natalie Bookchin should be considered the core subscribers to the net.art epithet. Although only Shulgin and Cosic met at this conference it marked the beginnings of a self-conscious group identity which turned a scattered handful of professional and non-professional artists who had mostly met through the Net into something approaching a coherent movement. Notwithstanding their divergent positions and disagreements concerning the correct interpretation and future orientation of net.art, they have consistently collaborated together on art projects as well as successfully promoted one another's practice through inclusion of mutual links on websites, group exhibitions and the discussion of each other's work in interviews and public discussions.<sup>67</sup> The even weighting of nationalities between eastern and western Europe, as well as the conspicuous minority of Americans in the

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<sup>66</sup> The list of participants as well as their nationality and organisation is listed as follows on Cosic's website: " Adele Eisenstein, C3, Budapest Akke Waggenar, net.artist, Cologne/Groningen Walter van der Cruijssen, Desk.nl, Amsterdam Oliver Frommel, AEC, Linz Alexei Shulgin, WWWart Center, Moscow, Igor Markovic, Arkzin, Zagreb, Marjan Kokot, Koda, Ljubljana, Gomma, Decoder, Milano, Andreas Broeckmann, V2, Rotterdam, Pit Schultz, net.artist, Nettime, Berlin, Vuk Cosic, Ljudmila, Ljubljana, Luka might also come." 'Net.art per se', <http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk>, 1996

<sup>67</sup> As we will see in chapter four, one of the most significant disagreements between the net.artists was Olia Lialina's position over the non-commodifiability of the oeuvre. In an interview with Tilman Baumgärtel in August 1998, two weeks after opening Art.Teleportacia, the first online net art gallery, she remarked: "For me, to 'give up freedom' would be to go the way of a lot of critics, artists and activists earning money and making a career out of constantly stating that Net art has no monetary value. That's not fun from the start. Article after article, conference after conference, they want to convince me that what I'm doing costs nothing. Why should I agree?" Baumgärtel, 'Internet Art Haute Couture'.

overall make-up of the group is an important aspect of not only net.art but also net art in general. Cosic, in his conference announcement, set the agenda for a discussion of the "crossroads between art and technology" in the era of digital communications by laying special emphasis on "the east-west problematics".<sup>68</sup> This problematic, which refers to the globality of the medium whose advent coincided with the break-up of the Soviet Union after 1989, was formulated by Cosic in one of his series of questions which inaugurated the conference: "does the automatic globality of audience necessarily mean the universality of the topic?"<sup>69</sup> The uncertainty manifest in this question flags net art's constant oscillation between its celebration of the collapse of political and physical borders (a sort of 'art Glasnost' as critic Tilman Baumgärtel has called it) and the ongoing affirmation of the insurmountable material, cultural and political differences between its communities. Net art exists in the very crux of globalism's contradictions which Jon Tomlinson has formulated as the incommensurability of connectivity and proximity.<sup>70</sup> Briefly, Tomlinson's point is that being connected does not confer on communities the same effects as being proximate. The experience of net art's history certainly complicates this distinction by adding to the equation the evidence of artists who sometimes identify more closely with remote practitioners, with whom they are constantly connected, than with their immediate physical (artistic) communities. In other words,

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<sup>68</sup> Vuk Cosic, 'Net.art per se'

<sup>69</sup> The complete list of questions, as it appears on Cosic's 'Net.art per se' website are as follows:

"Is there a specific net.art?

How does the artist use the control over the distribution of his/hers work?

How does the modernist/romantic perception of the "art work" as a tangible piece influence the net.artist? Is hard copy obsolete?

Is territory (really) obsolete? (does the automatic globality of audience necessarily mean the universality of the topic?)", *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Jon Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999)

Tomlinson's distinction does not take into account the disorienting experience of discovering an intellectually and aesthetically sympathetic group of people amongst whom mutuality is not necessarily intensified by proximity. Conversely, however, these are also artists working with a set of more or less universal tools and technological conditions which in certain ways obscure the artists' greatly diverging range of experiences and preoccupations.

Interestingly, in what is probably the most comprehensive public statement on net.art, those multiple contradictions and exclusions implied by art's existence on the Internet are played down in favour of an emphasis on a less politically divisive institutional critique and exploration of the formal implications of the medium. This statement was delivered by Alexei Shulgin and Natalie Bookchin some three years after the Trieste conference in their work, *Introduction to Net.art*.(fig1.)<sup>71</sup> This work functioned as a kind of retroactive manifesto which simultaneously enumerated and destroyed the oeuvre's claims by ironically carving what was championed as extra-institutional, anti-bureaucratic and anti-historical into stone tablets. In a stark gesture of foreclosure these tombstones of net.art dispelled any dreams of having eluded the commodification of art through its dematerialisation in cyberspace. It is also significant that this bitter-sweet work was exhibited at *net\_condition*, the first comprehensive show of 'art and politics in the online universe' mounted by the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany, September 1999; after this show, all attempts to plead net art's freedom from the institution appear optimistic at best. If *Introduction to Net.art* opens with as uplifting and comprehensive a list of net.art's utopian claims as one may hope to find, it

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<sup>71</sup> The online version of *Introduction to Net.art (1994-1999)* can be found at <http://www.easylife.org/netart/catalogue.html>

quickly shifts into a mercenary account of how to knock out a piece of net.art and how its outsider status guarantees its entry into the bosom of the institution. *Introduction's* pragmatic, even cynical tone, tinged though it is with nostalgia, together with its use of the past tense and abrupt termination of this chapter of art history, implies that what occurred in the short window of time between 1994 and 1999 was always already understood as a fleeting transcendence from the norm. What is strange here is that, despite this time window implicitly having to do with the opening of the Net, for the first time, to the wider public in the early nineties and the opening of Eastern Bloc countries to cultural traffic after decades of state control, the main focus is laid on issues internal to art.

What follows is an excerpt from the initial part of the *Introduction*, before its cynicism becomes overt:

## **Introduction to net.art (1994-1999)**

### **1. net.art at a Glance**

#### A. The Ultimate Modernism

##### 1. Definition

- a. net.art is a self-defining term created by a malfunctioning piece of software, originally used to describe an art and communications activity on the internet.
- b. net.artists positioned themselves on the outside of institutional structures overly burdened with bureaucratic, budgetary, corporate and ceremonial duties and responsibilities.
- c. net.artists temporarily eliminated the need for endowments, grants, material production and consumption of objects and boards of trustees as the only viable means of achieving support, visibility and legitimization for non-commercial art activities.
- d. net.artists sought to break down autonomous disciplines and outmoded classifications imposed upon various activists' practices.

##### 2. 0% Compromise

- a. By maintaining independence from institutional bureaucracies

- b. By working without marginalisation and achieving substantial audience, communication, dialogue and fun
- c. By realizing and actualizing tangible ways out of an inherently conservative and overly academic art world protectively shielded by radical theories
- d. T.A.Z. (temporary autonomous zone) of the late 90s: Anarchy and spontaneity

### 3. Realization over Theorization

- a. The utopian aim of closing the ever widening gap between art and everyday life, perhaps, for the first time, was achieved and became a real, everyday and even routine practice.
- b. Beyond institutional critique: whereby an artist/individual could be equal to and on the same level as any institution or corporation.
- c. The practical death of the author

## B. Specific Features of net.art

1. Formation of communities of artists across nations and disciplines
2. Investment without material interest
3. Collaboration without consideration of appropriation of ideas
4. Privileging communication over representation
5. Immediacy
6. Immateriality
7. Temporality
8. Process based action
9. Play and performance without concern or fear of historical consequences
10. Parasitism as Strategy
  - a. Movement from initial feeding ground of the net
  - b. Expansion into real life networked infrastructures
11. Destabilization of categories
  - a. Eg. simultaneous reading and writing (consumption and production)
  - b. A new type of communication of extremes, eg. Simultaneously highly personal or private and fiercely public
12. All in One:
  - a. Internet as a medium for production, publication, distribution, promotion, dialogue, consumption and critique
  - b. Disintegration and mutation of artist, curator, pen-pal, audience, gallery, theorist, art collector, and museum

Despite the claims of having moved beyond 'institutional critique' and of achieving the 'practical death of the author', most of this inventory centres on issues by now traditional to the history of the avant garde. Despite the convergence of a

Benjaminian reading of the revolutionary qualities of reproductive technologies (the destabilisation of categories, the blurring of consumers and producers as well as art and life, the de-auratisation and massification of art outside the academy etc.) and the later strategies of institutional critique, the newer conditions of art's transformation seem somewhat underplayed. Although mention is made of the new representational equality between artists, institutions and corporations as well as the Net's potentially explosive facilitation of plagiarism and the collision of public and private worlds, art is understood as carrying these transformations lightly. Net.art, in this rendition, appears more preoccupied with its traditional battles with the institution than the wider social transformations implied by the new global multimedia architecture.

### Global Art in a Total System

Since the advent of the WWW, the Internet has simultaneously become conduit, icon and symptom of globalisation in late capitalism.<sup>72</sup> From its hyper-acceleration of global communications and data transfer, provision of a new and what temporarily appeared to be infinitely expandable economic frontier, its facilitation of corporations' administration of multinational production, its role in the West's shift from industrial production to 'immaterial labour', right down to the

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<sup>72</sup> A term coined by Ernest Mandel and popularised by Fredric Jameson and other leftist thinkers which denotes a shift to a new socio-economic formation – the third stage of capitalism – whose signature attributes are the multinational reach of corporations, information technological modes of production and the mediatization of the commodity. This term is used by factions of the Left as a contrast to the term 'postindustrialism' which is condemned as an attempt to do away with the primacy of industrial production and the omnipresence of class struggle.

homogeneity of the individual's experience of surfing the Net through the browser interface, the Internet is multiply redolent of the processes of late capitalism. In her description of the user's passage through the Net, Josephine Bosma hits upon a paradigm of experience that resonates far beyond the limits of her specific discussion:

"To me this very simple fact that one cannot see anything of the network beyond the lines one follows while clicking away is an important factor. It could become even more important when certain commercial blockbuster sites from, for instance, large existing media networks start dominating the traffic routes. But already from the beginning this aspect of obscurity, of darkness beyond the path of links, has created a splintered online culture, when one compares it to how offline culture has developed."<sup>73</sup>

This experience of a world that falls steeply away into darkness on all sides, of an amnesiac world in which the past is nearly instantly forgotten and the future is unplannable is precisely the dehistoricised, cognitively unmappable postmodern world described by Fredric Jameson.<sup>74</sup> A world which has lost its depth models (essence/appearance, subject/object, signifier/signified, base/superstructure etc.), its ability to situate itself historically, to have any macro-political projects, to have critical distance – the precondition of a cultural politics – and which replaces those metaphysics of truth with the oppressive flatness of intertextuality and the infinite play of difference. Whatever liberating potential has been attributed to intertextuality, i.e. a model which shatters oppressive structures such as false binaries and the fallacy of autonomous wholeness, is also cast into doubt by its resistance to cognitive mapping and the claustrophobic over-proximity this results in.

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<sup>73</sup> Josephine Bosma, 'Interview with Steve Dietz', *Nettime*, (January, 2000)

<sup>74</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1996)

Jameson's reading of this cultural condition is worth considering in contrast to those other key theorists of postmodernity Baudrillard and Lyotard, because he does not abandon the existence of the unified 'truth' of an underlying cause – namely late capitalism – nor abandon hope of finding an equivalently unified politics with which to resist it. This is of interest to us here for several reasons. The first is that in as much as the user's experience of surfing the Net (across an unmappable expanse of URLs and through the browser) can be said to exemplify the depthless, slippery surfaces of postmodernity, the Internet itself (and this distinction is crucial) can also be taken in its totality to stand for the condition of globalisation within late capitalism. This is a totality both unfathomably complex and yet consonant with a singular truth:

"The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerising and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentred global network of the third stage of capital itself."<sup>75</sup>

Although Jameson, writing before the advent of net art, cites cyberpunk as the best figural moment of the 'global computer hookup', which advances a typically 'paranoid', theory of the endlessly complex network of deadly and competing information agencies, he also perceives within it the albeit degraded attempt to "think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system."<sup>76</sup> For Jameson this impossible spectacle of networks in all its awful magnificence would seem to re-establish that metaphysical distance so effectively collapsed by postmodern culture:

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p.38

<sup>76</sup> Ibid



"It is in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that, in my opinion, the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorised."<sup>77</sup>

It is interesting to compare Jameson's discussion of "the new decentred global network" to a critique, central to net art, of the "universal development of metaphors" within computer software design.<sup>78</sup> A development that, although decidedly central to much of net.art and net art in general, is not accentuated in Shulgin and Bookchin's *Introduction* despite its significant role in the exploration of a globalised computer culture. Where Jameson posits the spectacle of the totality of small competing networks as providing a dim glimpse of the postmodern sublime, net artists – working in a context in which the exponential commercialisation of computing has created an unprecedented degree of homogeneity in the field – have often turned their attention to the deceptive narrowness of the browser interface. In other words, that great tangled complexity to which Jameson refers has become increasingly obscured through the universalised logic of interface design. In the progression from the first Unix-based text-only browsers to Microsoft's Explorer and Netscape's Navigator which now dominate the market, what has been lost is a sense that these interfaces are only two (virtually identical) solutions to the nearly infinite possibility for representing information on the Net. In short, the underlying unity of capitalism, far from producing the (deceptively) fragmentary epiphenomena in culture whose representation was so furiously debated by European Marxist critics in the Weimar period, or the dimly perceptible, sublime complexity of systems to

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Matthew Fuller, cited in 'Storming the Interface: Mindvirus, I/O/D and Deceptive Interaction', Belinda Barnet, *Nettime*, (January, 1998)

which Jameson refers, manifests itself instead in a handful of universalised metaphors employed by the graphical user interface (GUI).<sup>79</sup> It has been a central project within net art to rupture the reductiveness of these interfaces and in particular the browser interface for the sake of restoring a sense of both the huge complexity beneath and the potential diversity of screen representations of the underlying network.

The London based group of artists and programmers I/O/D's<sup>80</sup> 1998 piece *Web Stalker* is a case in point.<sup>81</sup> *Web Stalker* is a browser software whose premise is to break with the "technical-aesthetic monopoly" of the Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Explorer browser softwares to reveal, on one level, that there is nothing in the HTML code being streamed to a computer which forces an adherence to its design instructions.<sup>82</sup> As group theorist Matthew Fuller has put it: "These instructions are only followed by a device obedient to them."<sup>83</sup> I/O/D conceives of the HTML stream as a current which could be interpreted by a different kind of software in a way that has nothing to do with its purpose.<sup>84</sup> I/O/D also understands the metaphors employed in both computer desktop and browser interfaces as techniques for producing the subject, for shaping ways of "seeing, knowing and doing". The use of the desktop metaphor (with its files and wastepaper baskets), the

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<sup>79</sup> See particularly the Bloch/Lukacs debates in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, (London: Verso, 1995)

<sup>80</sup> I/O/D is a London based collective whose members are Simon Pope, Colin Green and Matthew Fuller

<sup>81</sup> The *Web Stalker* software can be downloaded from <http://www.backspace.org/iod>

<sup>82</sup> Matthew Fuller, 'A Means of Mutation: Notes on I/O/D 4 The Web Stalker', in *Readme! Ascii Culture and the Revenge of Knowledge - Filtered by Nettime*, ed. Josephine Bosma et al, (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 1999, p.37)

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p.40

<sup>84</sup> "Every <HREF> could switch something on, every <P> could switch something off – administration of greater or lesser electric shocks for instance." Ibid, p.38

page metaphors employed by word processing softwares, and the geographical metaphors used by the browser softwares are not just obscuring, they are also constitutive of the subject as a virtual internationalised office employee. As our experience of computing is increasingly narrowed and pacified into the role of chair-bound user/consumer, we are dazzled with visions of whizzing around the globe at the speed of light:

"This echo of location is presumably designed to suggest to the user that they are not in fact sitting in front of a computer calling up files, but hurtling round an earth embedded into a gigantic trademark "N" or "e" with the power of some voracious cosmological force."<sup>85</sup>

In practical terms the *Web Stalker* has six main functions: the Crawler which actually links to the Web, looks for links inside a URL and logs them; the Map which takes the HTML stream from the Crawler and represents all HTML documents as circles and all links between them as lines (this map is dynamically linked to the Crawler's constant production of new data which can, in turn, be mapped); the Dismantle function which gives more detailed information than the Map function; the Stash function which is a way of saving the user's web use; the stream function which demonstrates how the HTML 'feed' from all the sites being explored are mixed together as a single stream; and finally, the extract function which strips a document of its text and then displays the text in its own window. When the *Web Stalker* is opened it turns the entire screen black, the user then takes the cursor and draws a window and repeats this action for every extra function they want to employ. Although the background colour can be altered, its default setting is black,

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.40

something that Fuller describes as announcing "a reverse nihilist moment", by which he means that where browsers conventionally screen the network activity out, "suddenly everything is there".<sup>86</sup>

The *Web Stalker's* representation of the WWW is atypical, only nominally functional and disruptive to the intentions of website designers and users, not to mention the entire host of interests which centre upon the preservation of near universal standards in the webpage's production and consumption. Conspicuously, *Web Stalker* cannot represent a variety of the more complex scripts and file formats available on the Web such as GIFS, JPEGS (picture files), Java, Flash and frames, some of which create heavy demands on slower computers. From this we can infer that *Web Stalker* deliberately screens out 'eye candy' or multimedia which the WWW carries and which massively extends its spectacular power. So in a certain respect its representational schema transforms that realm of multiplicity and intentionality, albeit premised upon a homogeneous set of parameters, into a single interpretative frame. Or rather, the wealth of Web pages which comprise the WWW are subordinated to a singular hermeneutic exercise. This effect is the contradictory result of the Web Stalker's "struggle for the means of mutation" by which it breaks with the oppressive universalism unleashed by the technocratic forces of globalisation.<sup>87</sup>

It is interesting that in order to reveal the WWW anew, the *Web Stalker* relies on a strategy of conversion and partial obscuration. In this respect *Web Stalker* fits within a broader tendency not only within net art but computing in general whereby information or data is constantly transcoded in order to signify differently in different

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p.41

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p.41

contexts. The entire relationship between the increasingly abstract, high level programmes (which most users never get beyond) and the underlying electronic functions of the machine relies on this very principle: every programming command must ultimately be reducible or transcodable, via the assembler, to an executable binary code. It is useful to set this infinitely mutable aspect of digital data, its capacity to be multiply transcoded, against the Heideggerian notion of *poiesis* outlined above. What might be said of computer technology is that its capacity to reveal becomes far harder to circumscribe than a technology whose primary mode of functioning is unitary and repetitive. If the same data can be parsed from one level of programming to another as many times as there are programmes available, then, even if it is incompatible with the parameters of that programme, it will always reveal something different - even if that is only pure gibberish. As we shall see in Chapter Five, far from revealing something akin to Benjamin's optical unconscious, a hidden dimension of the world which can at last be encountered by way of photographic technology, the 'virtual unconscious' no longer presents us with a closed system which can be captured off guard but rather something self-generating and open ended. Returning to the terms set up above and the specific case of the *Web Stalker*, it is my contention that digital media, despite their increased proximity and manipulability, do entail a sublime, auratic dimension. By this I do not only refer to Jameson's notion of the technological sublime as a totality of networks and agencies revealed in cyberpunk fiction, but also the dimension within digital data which always remains elusive, which can never be exhausted, which precisely retains what Zizek understands as 'appearance'. But, in alignment with the compatible concepts of the symbolic order's recession (Zizek) and our inability to cognitively map

(Jameson), *Web Stalker* acknowledges the need to create a distance, to leave something out in order to reveal a sense of the overarching edifice. The viewer's inability to view certain aspects of the webpage is the price paid for a different insight into the functioning of the Web's underlying protocols and the interconnections between different sites. The necessarily partial position of the website within the entirety of the Net, the impossibility of finding some overall way to map, represent or capture the Web is a recurrent aspect of net art – one that is understood, by turns, as a danger and a strength to the art which exists in a newly decentralised and nonlocatable location.

#### Communicative Art without Space

It is, however, also important to introduce another sense in which net art attempts to engage with the global proportions of the Internet without conjuring up the spectre of globalisation in its darkest, most disempowering forms. Although the informatic forces and relations of production within late capitalism are often viewed in terms of their exploitative, homogenising and panoptic capacities, their liberatory sides have also received their fair share of celebration. Some of the most excessive and questionably utopian scenarios surrounding the global expansion of ICT have been advanced by 'extropians' such as Hans Moravec who, in the cyberpunk-fuelled late eighties, dreamt of uploading consciousness and gaining immortality through a complete jetissoning of the flesh.<sup>88</sup> Occupying a political position substantially to the

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<sup>88</sup> The Extropian Group was a loose organisation of cyberpunk enthusiasts dedicated to the discussion of artificially enhanced forms of evolution. For a discussion of extropianism and post-humanism see Tiziana Terranova's 'Post-Human Unbounded', *The Cybercultures Reader*, eds. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, (London:

left of the extropians' individualist and super-voluntarist ideologies, many post-human or cyborg theorists such as the above mentioned Donna Haraway have argued, more soberly, for a redrafting of the subject's boundaries which would encompass technological prostheses and the informational codes to which our biology is increasingly reduced. This constitutes an attempt to embrace the new lattice of information and bio- technology which envelops us as a means of liberating the subject from oppressive Enlightenment categories such as gender, race and class. Right across the political spectrum, from extropianism and post-humanism to the West Coast neo-libertarianism exhibited by magazines such as *Wired*, cyberspace and technoculture have excited ideas relating to our digitally extended range of affect and the subject's subsequent transformation. Implicit in this extension of man is the separation of perception from the body and idea from its material support or direct enactment; the separation of the signifier from the sign. As Marshall McLuhan has argued media produce the extension of man across space and time and these extensions lead to a kind of 'autoamputation' or numbing of those perceptual capabilities which have been extended. As McLuhan puts it, "Self-amputation forbids self-recognition", by which he means the shock of extension produces a self-protective numbing.<sup>89</sup> McLuhan roots the origins of this concept in the myth of Narcissus who become fascinated with his own mirror image (which, it is worth emphasising, he does *not* take to be his own). This fascination made Narcissus deaf to everything – including the solicitations of the nymph Echo – which fell outside the closed circuit he formed with his own image. In a move that thoroughly preempts

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Routledge, 2000) pp. 268-279

<sup>89</sup> Marsall McLuhan, 'The Gadget Lover', *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), p.43

the boundary extensions of post-humanism, McLuhan adds a layer of complexity to this formulation by arguing that although the sequence extension, autoamputation, numbness leads to a lack of recognition, the electronic age is also "strikingly the age of consciousness of the unconscious"<sup>90</sup>. For the first time, he adds, man "becomes aware of technology as an extension of his physical body"<sup>91</sup>.

It is evident that the concept of autoamputation relates not only to the Benjaminian idea of the demise of aura but also the whole move towards non-retinal art, originating with Duchamp, which reached its apogee with the Conceptual Art of the late 60s. It is worth noting that the advent of Conceptual Art is roughly coincident with the publication of McLuhan's book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* in 1964. Sense perceptions such as vision, unbounded from the body through the apparatus of the camera or the microscope, lead to a numbing, a detachment from the viewed object's affect which opens up new fields of possibility by turns. Likewise Sol LeWitt's immortal remark "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art", rests upon the assumption that art can be separated out from its 'perfunctory' material realisation.<sup>92</sup> A separation which seems implausible without the historical autoamputations of media to which McLuhan refers and which were developing apace in the 1960s. As we have seen, LeWitt consciously evokes the realm of clerical or modern office work; an order of work which is dependent on the reproducibility of information across distances and the modularity or exchangeability of its tools and personnel. The ascendancy of art's concept over its retinal qualities or material process is clearly inextricable from the historical context of the 1960s

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p.47

<sup>91</sup> Ibid

<sup>92</sup> Cited in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, Lucy Lippard, 1973, (London: University of California Press, 1997), p.xiv



defined as it was by the huge advances in telematic, electronic technologies such as colour television, the Internet itself (or ARPANET as it was known then), stereo hi-fi broadcast sound and even mobile telephony.<sup>93</sup> This perceived separation between idea and its reification which structures '60s conceptual and information art is contingent on a series of spacings: between the idea and its articulation (say, in the form of instructions), between its articulation and its execution or manifestation, between the time and place of the idea's origination and the (potentially multiple, temporally disparate and always secondary) sites of its realisation.

It is only a short conceptual step from the separation of art's idea from its material realisation, to the problematisation of the role of the artist; a progression to which the net artists are acutely tuned. The relationship between telecommunication (extension/amputation) and the role of the artist was articulated in Shulgin's essay 'Art, Power and Communication' written in October 1996. In it he speculates on whether the 'will to power' invested in the act of representation and indeed the role of art and artist *per se* will be washed away by an Internet-driven explosion in communication:

"The problems of net.art as I see them are deeply rooted in a social determination of the notions of 'art' and 'artist'.  
Will we be able to overcome our egos and give up obsolete ideas of representation and manipulation?  
Will we jump headlong into [a] realm of pure communication?  
Will we call ourselves 'artists' anymore?"<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> For a diagram of the growth of telecommunications devices from 1847 until the present day see Stephen Graham & Simon Marvin's *Telecommunications and the City: Electronic Spaces, Urban Places*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 16

<sup>94</sup> Alexei Shulgin, 'Art, Power, and Communication', *Nettime*, (October 1996)

From Conceptual Art, to Fluxus, to mail art, to fax art, to pre-WWW computer network art, to net art one can trace an integral relationship between distance, dematerialisation and the notional death of the author. We can trace the prevalence of instructions – an impersonal trope that casts the concept's execution as secondary and perfunctory – right across 20<sup>th</sup> century art: from Moholy-Nagy's telephone pictures from 1922 (where the idea's translation into form is still valued and carefully controlled)<sup>95</sup>, through the ambivalence of Lawrence Weiner's ubiquitous disclaimer stating that 'the artist' could construct his artwork *or not* ("each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist" because in any case "if the piece is built it constitutes not how the piece looks but only how it could look"<sup>96</sup>), to the net artists' circulation of sets of instructions amongst themselves or the public which, as the task is collectively performed, generate the work in the manner of the *corps exquisite*. In all cases, the loosening of the artist's controlling grip of the artwork and the admission of outside agency into its realisation – a process integrally linked to communication and its increasing efficiency – entail, to borrow another term from Marshall McLuhan, a 'cooling' down of the artwork. In other words, when the artist retains full control over the realisation and execution of his/her work it conveys the identity/touch/intention of the artist without redundancy – everything speaks of the

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<sup>95</sup> Although not strictly an example of collaborative, networked art practice, Moholy-Nagy's Telephone Pictures from as early as 1922 are certainly prescient. These works employed the communicative distance of the phone system to question the authorial role of the artist. Moholy-Nagy is thought to have read out the specifications of his enamel sculpture over the telephone to a technician, using the co-ordinates of a matrix. The artist's widow Lucia Moholy has, however, disputed this account, claiming instead that Nagy merely declared, on receiving the pieces, formerly titled *Em compositions*, "I might even have done it over the telephone!" Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), pp. 31-33

<sup>96</sup> Lawrence Weiner, cited in *Six Years*, p.74

author, it is 'hot'. When others are admitted into this process, then the artwork ceases to convey the identity of the artist with such efficiency; it becomes a collection of disparate intentions, moments and perhaps anatomical indexes – it is 'cool'. Distance seems to be an important element in the process of cooling down the originality of the artist, for it helps to introduce redundancy: for example the misunderstanding of an instruction given over the telephone or the postage stamps and markings accrued by an envelope carrying a postal sculpture.

In some of the more celebratory moments of net.art we can see an extension of this strategy to worldwide proportions to produce something approaching a global agency; a complication of the artwork's collective identity through the inclusion of national, geographical, linguistic, political and economic diversity. The collaborative net artwork is a kind of mongrel which, in contrast to its conceptual precursors (for whom the Platonic idea could never be reified but which sustained an ideal singularity), uses the incommensurability of its multiple consistency to foreclose the possibility of singularity and originality. In this respect, net art certainly fulfills some of the utopian dreams of McLuhan's global village; translocal, electrified and 'cool'. Or in Žižek's more pessimistic terms, it presents a practice that occurs within a waning symbolic order where the radical openness of its structure of signification belies an oppressive closure: the inability of the artist to know his own desire, to exercise choice. Here, paradoxically perhaps, the introduction of authorial distance into the artwork is predicated on technology's collapse of distance or physical space into time. As we have seen in this chapter, technology's conquest of physical distance correlates to the recession of symbolic efficiency: as one expanse diminishes another (symbolic vacuum) opens up.

A work that closely anticipates this turn in net art is the 1983 piece *La Plissure du Texte* (The Folding of Text), instigated by the respectively British and Canadian artists Roy Ascott and Robert Adrian.<sup>97</sup> This piece used a worldwide time-sharing computer network owned by I.P. Sharp Associates to connect artists across continents. Robert Adrian had previously convinced I.P. Sharp to write a mailbox software called Artist's Electronic Exchange Network (Artex) which was used in this later project to write a 'telematic fairytale' between participants in Vancouver, Vienna, Pittsburgh, Sidney, Honolulu, Bristol and Paris. The result of this collaborative endeavour, now archived on the WWW, is like a very extensive *corps exquisite* (played without the element of concealment) mixing languages, role playing, and rambling narratives in such a way as to make it nearly impossible for an outsider to follow. The writing of this text lasted several weeks and provokes a strong sense of the passage of time and the development of group rules, codes, jokes and identity. The sequencing and time span of the event is marked by the numbers assigned to each message sent and the inclusion of the date and time as well as computer ID in the mail, thus: "NO.632 CC FROM NORM TO NORM SENT 19.58 20/12/1983"; "FROM BLIX TO NEXUS SENT 17.08 08/12/1983" etc.<sup>98</sup>

But if one compares *La Plissure du Texte* to a later work called *Refresh*, instigated by Alexei Shulgin in 1996, the further recession of the role of time and by extension place in the collaborative construction of artworks online is instructive. (fig 2.)<sup>99</sup> Where the time lags between messages in *La Plissure* is marked both in the mail headers and in the chronological organisation of the text as it was later

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<sup>97</sup> <http://www.t0.or.at/~radrian/ARTEX/PLISSURE/plissure.html>

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

<sup>99</sup> <http://redsun.cs.msu.su/wwwart/refresh.htm>

displayed on the Web (one has to scroll a long way down the document to reach the last mail), *Refresh* collapses the time taken to make each component part into the time it takes the browser to execute the 'refresh' command. In practical terms, the 'refresh' function involves inserting a command into the HTML code which instructs the page to be refreshed after 10 seconds and, in the case of Shulgin's project, substitutes the first downloaded file for the next in a chain of files, usually stored on different servers. Shulgin put out an open call for participation on the 7-11 mailing list together with a short set of instructions: participants should design a page and send the URL back to him, whereupon he would add the URL to his list and the page would then be included in the refresh loop. The effect is like a slide show of constantly downloading webpages, separated by different time delays depending on how easily they can be located, how large the file is or what the volume of Net traffic is at a particular time. In other words, the time delays in play correspond to a technological specifications not geographical or temporal divides. Of course there are still some clues of locality – for example, the inclusion of a national top level domain (TLDs) such as '.de', '.cz', '.hu' in some URLs and the use of different languages on the page. Nonetheless, these markings have become mere linguistic ciphers of spatial distance and temporal sequence. Above all, space has been superceded by a procedural time referring to technological process.

What happens when this communicative distance, also crucially predicated on large lapses of time, is completely subsumed within the 'real time' setting (instantaneous delivery) of the Internet? Here we must return to Benjamin, and state that what might to him have appeared as the collapse of distance and hence aura in the medium of film is collapsed yet further by the introduction of the real time

element of the Net.<sup>100</sup> Film, argues Benjamin in *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, levels the disparities of scale between objects through its ability to obtain a close-up of any object and disposes with the uniqueness of locations through reproduction. Benjamin's observation about the photographic displacement of objects from their original locations is updated by postmodern theorists of machinic vision such as Paul Virilio, for whom the post-industrial age has also eliminated the dimension of space altogether<sup>101</sup>. Virilio notes:

"the progressive derealisation of the terrestrial horizon,...[which results in] an impending primacy of real time perspective of undulatory optics over the real space of the linear geometrical optics of the Quattrocento."<sup>102</sup>

Lev Manovich, in his essay exploring Benjamin and Virilio's discussions of distance and aura, points out how the differences between the industrial modes of technological reproduction (photography and film) and the postindustrial ones (digital imaging and ICT) are predominantly quantitative not qualitative. Crucially, both technological modes convert objects into mobile signs (in the latter case, however, those signs are rendered endlessly mutable) which are then sent into circulation – a central technique of capitalism itself with its capacity to melt all that is solid into air. However the postmodern collapse of space into time certainly presents problems for the notion of a cool art. In as much as the cool artwork is mongrelised by multiple agencies working in a global context, those different

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<sup>100</sup> Lev Manovich formulates this idea in 'Distance and Aura', *The Language of New Media*, (London: MIT Press, 2001)

<sup>101</sup> Ibid

<sup>102</sup> Paul Virilio, 'Big Optics' in *On Justifying The Hypothetical Nature Of Art And The Non-Identicality Within The Object World*, ed. Peter Weibel, 1992, cited in Manovich, *ibid*, pp. 172 - 173

qualities and dimensions are also rendered singular by their subjection to the circulatory logic of the information age in which space is reduced to real-time data flow and ultimately to the singular logic of binary code. Tilman Baumgärtel has pointed out that the Internet entered the former Soviet Union at the same time as the free market. In fact its avid promotion in the ex-Communist Bloc by neo-liberals such as George Soros and the Internet architecture's role in the advancement of the free market in general mean that this joint development is anything but a coincidence. The celebration in net.art and net art in general of the new found freedom to cross old borders is accompanied by the transformation of geographical distance and cultural difference into 'mobile signs' sealed together in the endless equivalence of information and commodity exchange.

### Open Society and Ideological Closure

This powerful contradiction is also present in another key determinant in net art's development, namely the infamous market manipulator and currency speculator George Soros. This US based ex-Hungarian financier, notorious for orchestrating currency crashes, has supported "marginal cultural projects" throughout the Eastern Bloc since the early 1980s and has, since 1989, built a network of Soros Centres for Contemporary Art (SCCA) and funded the development of telecommunications infrastructures throughout the post-Communist Bloc.<sup>103</sup> These activities form two

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<sup>103</sup> Ervin Hladnik-Milhar writes: "I first heard about George Soros in the beginning of the eighties in Budapest. People were talking about an American millionaire of Hungarian origin who invested money into the free university and supported marginal cultural projects.", in 'An Interview with George Soros' by Ervin Hladnik-Milhar, Nettime, (March 2000), Ibid.

components of his Open Society Foundation, which stretches from Ljubljana to Kyrgystan and costs around half a billion dollars per year to run.<sup>104</sup> Besides funding art, the foundation funds newspapers, radio stations, English language programs, and initiatives to reform local governments amongst a host of other projects.<sup>105</sup> Soros, whose particular enthusiasm for investing in new media culture has played a significant role in the development of Alexei Shulgin, Olia Lialina and Vuk Cosic's careers, is renowned for his contradictory position on global capital markets.<sup>106</sup> He has simultaneously made a fortune out of currency speculation causing some the most spectacular crashes in national economies in recent history, whilst also warning against the potential devastation of an unregulated global market:<sup>107</sup> "To put the matter simply," he writes, "market forces, if they are given complete authority even in the purely economic and financial arena, produce chaos and could ultimately lead

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<sup>104</sup> "[The desire to create the right conditions for an Open Society is] the motive behind his network of foundations, which operate in over 30 countries and disburse nearly half a billion dollars a year. He writes as if it's the most natural thing in the world that a billionaire should set political and cultural agendas through his philanthropy.", Doug Henwood, 'Let George Do It', Left Business Observer, 88, (February 1999)

<sup>105</sup> See Ervin Hladnik-Milhar, 'An Interview'

<sup>106</sup> While she was running the Cine Fantom film club from her apartment in Moscow, Olia Lialina applied to the Open Society Foundation for a travel grant and instead received a computer. In an interview with Florian Schneider, Lialina commented: "Actually I'm a child of the Soros foundation's policy to provide computers instead of money. In 1995 our film club, CINE FANTOM, asked for money to invite people from abroad, but we got a computer and a modem instead." Lialina has also described how the shape of Internet coverage in Russia follows, to a great extent, the topos of Open Society Institute funding: "Of course most of the facilities and connected people are in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Outside the capitals the geography of Runet has a curious shape which bears the trace of OSI computerisation programmes (Open Society Institute; funded by the philanthropist George Soros). Some small cities are completely computerised but they're surrounded by desert." 'Interview with Olia Lialina', Florian Schneider, Nettime, (February, 2000).

<sup>107</sup> Doug Henwood, 'Let George Do It'



to the downfall of the global capitalist system."<sup>108</sup> Relatedly, Soros is a zealous proponent of the concept of the Open Society which he inherits from the philosopher Karl Popper. It rests on the principle that truth can never be established beyond doubt and is always provisional and subject to correction. As a consequence, societies should be open to allow for the possibility of social change in accordance with the changeable nature of truth. However Open Society, in Soros's hands, is little more than an elevated term for the capitalist democracy exemplified by the USA. In as much as Soros wishes to create the conditions for an Open Society through cultural philanthropy, he also wants those Open Societies to develop in accordance with *his* ideas and in line with the demands of the global capital market. Soros tellingly insists that this development should be engineered by western democracies "in all parts of the world where it is *in their* interests [emphases added]."<sup>109</sup>

Soros's attempts to "serve the common interests" by creating a "global society" to match the global economy, is predicated on the preservation of difference whilst working to effect a homogenisation of political and cultural diversity cast in the totalising mould of the Open Society.<sup>110</sup> As Doug Henwood has pointed out, this relates to the ideology behind the development of property rights in America, where the diverse 'faculties of men' were seen to be reflected in the (uneven) distribution of property; a naturalised distribution of wealth protected by the state:

"The whole constitutional machinery, with its array of checks and balances that liberals so blithely celebrate, is concocted to frustrate the popular will and keep property insulated from democracy, dispelling Madison's

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<sup>108</sup> Geogre Soros, *The Crisis of Global Capitalism: Open Society Endangered*, cited by Doug Henwood, *ibid*

<sup>109</sup> Ervin Hladnik-Milhar, 'An Interview'

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*

nightmares of 'a rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project.'"<sup>111</sup>

Although Soros sees the civil society stepping into the gap vacated by the state in late capitalism, this solution nonetheless preserves the same fundamental contradiction: the institutionalised tolerance of naturalised difference which refuses any true appearance of difference which seeks to reveal or disrupt the inequities of that system. Not only does this provide a strange parallel to the celebration of difference and simultaneous collapse of spatial relativity in net art discussed above, it is also directly implicated in this process. Soros's wish to promote the artistic use of new technologies (as part of a wider project to 'wire' eastern Europe) is intimately linked to his desire to train societies in what are fast becoming the rudimentary ICT skills required for participation in the global job market, i.e. to acculturate ICT. This campaign also entails the attempt to hook-up relatively isolated societies to a communicative network in a bid to facilitate the 'free' exchange of ideas whose foregone conclusion is a capitalist democratic consensus.<sup>112</sup> Soros's utopia entails a world in which we are all free to be exactly the same just as ICT gives us the freedom to be involved in global scale dialogues whilst collapsing the space that structures that dialogue into the overproximity of real time. It is strange to observe that net art, a genre which has associated itself with autonomic concepts such as

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<sup>111</sup> Doug Henwood, 'Let George Do It'

<sup>112</sup> "[I have built] the network of Open Society Foundations in which individual units function as prototypes of Open Society. They are self-organised and have substantial autonomy in bringing [sic] decisions. They accept responsibility for their actions. They serve the idea of Open Society by functioning as Open Society. The network is well positioned so that it can contribute to the success of the Stability Pact." George Soros, quoted in Ervin Hladnik-Milhar in 'An Interview'. This quote perfectly demonstrates the deterministic light in which Soros views these notionally autonomous centres.

Hakim Bey's 'Temporary Autonomous Zone' (TAZ) and which has often celebrated the Net's decentralised structure, facilitation of a nomadic cultural practices and ability to revitalise a properly discursive public sphere owes its thanks to the support of men such as George Soros.<sup>113</sup> But it would be wrong to argue that the impossible contradiction of the Internet – its dual role as decentralising force for uncensored mediation and facilitator of a reinvention of capitalism – is left unacknowledged by net artists, as we have briefly seen in the work of I/O/D and will explore in more detail in Chapter Four. The exploration of the tension between the radical potential of the Net and its increasingly conservative commercial use and regulation has become an urgent theme amongst net artists especially towards the close of the century.<sup>114</sup> Perhaps not least because the Net's commercialisation mirrors net art's own assimilation into the mainstream museum system; a tendency confirmed in 1997

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<sup>113</sup> "We recommend [the TAZ] because it can provide the quality of enhancement associated with the uprising without necessarily leading to violence and martyrdom. The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it. Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can "occupy" these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes for quite a while in relative peace." Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 1991) p.101

<sup>114</sup> I refer here to the many pastiches of commercial interfaces that started to appear in net artworks in the last years of the 1990s, as well as works which parody the privacy protocols of commercial enterprises. The zenith of this form of pastiche is *The Ljubljana 2000 - Banner.art Competition* organised in 1999 by Teo Spiller and Brian Goldfarb in which submissions were judged on their ability to 'prostitute' themselves by devising a successful money making mechanism for the net artwork: "Work must incorporate at least one money-earning mechanism, such as the hosting of a commercial banner or other economic scheme to prostitute their [sic] work. They could for example make their own net.art in the form of a banner on a commercial site for which they have been commissioned. Or perhaps their site could be supported by a commercial entity that pays for some form of affiliation with the artist's site. In any case, the jury will base its decision equally upon the aesthetic qualities of the art and the creative conception of its relation to its commercial prostitution." <http://www.teo-spiller.org/banner.art/>

by the inclusion of this supposedly outsider art genre in the Documenta X, one of the contemporary art world's key events.

### Office Art and the Technological Sublime

Returning to the question of administrative aesthetics and the changing identity of art and artist, it is useful to take a closer look at how the computer has fundamentally altered the nature of art production. Of course computer technology is only one of a wide range of conceptual, sociological and technological changes which have led artists out of the conventional environment of the studio.

Performance art, happenings, Fluxus, Pop art, site specific art and 'kitchen table' genres such as mail art are just some of the avant-garde movements whose challenge to the separation of art and life have entailed a rejection or reconfiguration of the studio model. But the desirable and marketable general computing and design skills acquired by net artists have led to an unusually high degree of employment and cross-over with commercial sectors.<sup>115</sup> This wresting of artists from the more traditionally cloistered surroundings of the studio or art school contributes to a reconceptualisation of the artist – one that coincides with the artwork's declining aura. In her book *The Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist*, Caroline A. Jones argues that the last high point of an auratic studio practice – one coinciding with the autonomous and individualist ideals of *l'art pour l'art* –

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<sup>115</sup> During the writing of this thesis Vuk Cosic has turned almost entirely to commercial web design work. Also, Backspace, the open access media lab in London which served as a work space to Heath Bunting and Rachel Baker until its closure in 2000 was run by the commercial design company Obsolete whose offices were located in the same building.

occurred in the postwar period before the industrial orientation of '60s Pop, Minimalism and Conceptualism.

In an oblique reference to the 'sublime' expanse of the artist's own inner world, Willem de Kooning said in 1951:

"If I stretch my arms next to the rest of myself and wonder where my fingers are – that is all the space I need as a painter."<sup>116</sup>

On being confronted by the photographer Alexander Liberman over the cramped conditions of his studio in post-war Paris, Alberto Giacometti replied:

"The more I work the bigger this studio seems"<sup>117</sup>

Jones's project is to read the construction of artistic identity through the ideologically laden zone of the studio, focusing on the centrality of the studio to the New York School's construction of a myth of the artist. The studio – despite its long history of collective work (assistants, apprentices) as well as its frequent doubling as an entertainment space or salon for viewing, discussing and selling art – is constructed in the postwar period as a metonym for the solitary, contemplative, and interior nature of artistic practice. The artists' own putative social exclusion found its expression in the rough and uncultivated surroundings of the studios themselves; these were the spaces in which men sunk deep inside themselves to produce an externalisation of the sublime worlds they carried within. In Jackson Pollock's own

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<sup>116</sup> Willem de Kooning cited in *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist*, Caroline A. Jones, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), p. 20

<sup>117</sup> Cited *ibid*, p.31

words: "I am Nature".<sup>118</sup> Jones relates the New York School's insistence on leaving the tainted external world of "politics, ambition and commerce" behind, to create new worlds within the space of the canvas, worlds created by and for the individual.<sup>119</sup> The need to create an 'egotistical sublime', argues Jones, was prompted by a desire to reinvent or Americanise the romantic sublime. As nature receded in this boom time of intense post-war economic and industrial expansion, the Abstract Expressionists sought another kind of sublime immersion and near annihilation in their own psychical excavations. An experience which tapped deep into the myth of American individualism in order to escape an alienating political landscape split between totalitarian socialism on the one hand and solipsistic industrial capitalism on the other.

Turning again to net artists, we must ask a similar question about how their mode of working functions in metonymic relation to the wider political and economic context of the info-technocratic global order. If we consider the New York school to be working at the time of the romantic sublime's rapid demise and as positing a promethean model of the artist partly in order to defend against the ubiquity of society's technologisation, what then is at play in the computer-bound production techniques of the net artists? It is very rare, if not exceptional, to hear of net artists who make artwork in a studio. Instead, net artists can be found working from home,<sup>120</sup> cybercafés, offices and public or private institutions.<sup>121</sup> In an

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<sup>118</sup> Cited *ibid*, p. 44

<sup>119</sup> Clyfford Still, cited *ibid*, p.22

<sup>120</sup> Olia Lialina does, in fact, inject a note of social alterity into the practice of net art when she compares making art at home to the 'kitchen art' of Soviet Russia: "It is connected to this kitchen culture; in Soviet times the kitchen was a substitute for clubs, cafes, galleries...", private communication, (31 March, 2000).

<sup>121</sup> Vuk Cosic spent several years working at the Soros funded Ljudmila media arts centre in Ljubljana and Heath Bunting and Rachel Baker worked intermittently at

environment of contract working and self-employment, many of these spaces, not to mention the computers themselves, serve the dual requirements of commercial and artistic work. It is the ease with which the technology and design skills required to produce net art can be commuted into commercial production skills oriented to a mass market which gives rise to terms such as the 'digital artisan'.<sup>122</sup> "Like the artisan of the proto-industrial epoch", writes Richard Barbrook, "digital workers have to use craft skills to produce quality artefacts. Like labourers in a Fordist factory, they can reproduce multiple copies of the same product." Without explicitly mentioning net artists, Barbrook draws our attention to the conditions of production under which the previously polarised worlds of repetitive production and that of creative design unite inside the computer. Similarly, the worlds of art and work are mixed together, as art negotiates its own identity within the conditions of infinite reproducibility and commerce comes to depend ever more on the 'arty' skills of semiotic manipulation within a mediatised reality.<sup>123</sup>

Abstract Expressionists receded inside themselves in order to explore subjectivity as the originary site of creation, and saw the creative wellspring of the subject/studio as sharply at odds with the world of "politics, ambition and commerce" beyond. Underscoring the radical disjuncture between the studio and the world outside, Mark Rothko described the feeling of watching paintings go out the

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London's Backspace before its closure in 2000. Commenting on the fax art he was engaged in before making net art, Bunting has remarked: "I was doing fax art when working for a multimedia company in London. We used their phone lines at night," private communication, (2 April, 2000)

<sup>122</sup> See Richard Barbrook's 'Digital Workers and Artisans: Get Organised!', Next 5 Minutes, (1999), [www.n5m.org/n5m3/pages/programme/articles/richard.html](http://www.n5m.org/n5m3/pages/programme/articles/richard.html)

<sup>123</sup> The show *Crash: Corporatism and Complicity* at London's ICA, December 1999 – January 2000 focused exclusively on the implications of this disappearing boundary, and included net artists Heath Bunting and Rachel Baker.

door: "It is...a risky and unfeeling act to send [them] out into the world."<sup>124</sup> But developments in art and media after this point have increasingly imploded the distinction between the space of art and the space of the everyday, in a parallel and related development to the increasing erasure of the boundaries between public and private space in the society of the spectacle. Furthermore, the space of work – often associated with such self-alienating processes as enacting repetitive tasks, abdicating choice and agency and conforming to stereotypical standards of efficiency and sociability – has grown closer to the space of art. In a demystifying statement which aims at adjusting perceptions of artistic labour, Frank Stella remarked: "I just want to do it [make a painting] and get it over with so I can go home and watch TV."<sup>125</sup> From the banalised, industrialised or corporatised working practices of the 1960s right up to the office-based moonlighting of the net artist, art practice has travelled far from its earlier modernist prototype in the cloistered studio. This change of place and order of practice fits into the wider attempt to desubliminate aesthetics and force a self-reinvention of art within a destratified cultural field.

If Jackson Pollock was nature itself then the net artists – working in a simulatory economy in which nature's very existence is contested – are more likely to understand themselves as constructed by the technological matrix of our times and to fear or long for total immersion in the technological sublime than to make any paternal claims to its genesis. Net art is practiced in intensely public, externalised, disrupted, noisy, and communicative spaces, mostly employing generic software and hardware which repel any notion of creation *ex nihilo*. Heath Bunting and Rachel Baker, for instance have worked in the interchangeable space of the Easyeverything

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<sup>124</sup> Cited in Jones, *The Machine in the Studio*, p.32

<sup>125</sup> Frank Stell, cited in Caroline Jones, *ibid*, p.57



cybercafé chain where the price of being online is indexed to the ongoing fluctuations in the rate of phone calls. "I like it there", Bunting has remarked, "as most people are checking hotmail while I am doing programming – it's a good disguise."<sup>126</sup> But net art is also made between the publicness of spaces such as the office or the cybercafé and the communicative thrall of the Internet. As Natalie Bookchin puts it:

"In the very beginning, I was working with Heath Bunting and Alexei Shulgin on various projects [and] we would bounce mails back and forth literally all day long, [then I would] go back to teaching or preparing for my classes. It was a highly addictive way of working, constantly connected on and off line."<sup>127</sup>

The personal computer is a strangely deceptive tool, masking its communicative potential behind its monadic physical dimensions. To observe someone from a distance sitting in front of a computer typing on the keyboard is not necessarily to know if that person is engaged in solitary and meditative work or garrulous communication. Equally, the PC, when connected to the Internet, folds into itself the multiple conditions of production and consumption, creation and reception, not to mention its capacity to handle multimedia. In these respects, the capabilities of the tool used by the net artists manifests the same heterogeneity that has characterised late modernist and post-modernist art practice; the attempted elision of art and life. Far from rejecting the collective nature of cultural production in the manner of the New York School, net artists co-author artworks practically in real time. The virtual salons of mailinglists such as 7-11, nettime, Syndicate and Rhizome so essential in

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<sup>126</sup> Heath Bunting, private communication

<sup>127</sup> Natalie Bookchin, private communication, (5 March, 2000)

knitting artists together into a virtual community of discussion and production can be reached, in a matter of mouse-clicks, through the same browser interface used by the artist to create the artwork. In these spaces art production and critique are often hard to differentiate.<sup>128</sup> A far cry from the painful antithesis of these private and social spheres remarked upon by Rothko. Finally, the experience of viewing the art itself occurs in an environment of distraction. The viewer, often conscious that every moment of contemplation correlates to the unit cost of connection, might well arrive at the artwork through the advertisement-saturated interface of a search engine or break from their meditation in order to send an email or do some online shopping. Jodi actively incorporate this fact into their work, commenting: "You have to get people very quickly. You need to give them a karate punch in the neck as soon as possible."<sup>129</sup> But importantly and perhaps ironically, especially if one considers Shulgin's optimistic prediction of the imminent supercession of art within communication, the radical externalisation of art's production and reception is also experienced as threatening art's own survival. Commenting on the hyperlink structure of the Net where context can never be controlled because a site can always be linked to from the outside – hence the fragile context of the artwork – Shulgin asks: "And if we get rid of that word 'art', what shall we have then?"<sup>130</sup>

In a piece which centres on the demystification of the process by which an artwork is made, Olia Lialina comes close to effecting the complete implosion of art

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<sup>128</sup> See especially the 7-11 mailing list (<http://www.7-11.org>). The high volume of traffic that passes over this list, set up by Vuk Cosic and Luka Frehlih from Ljudmila in 1998, typically mixes typographic and linguistic wordplay with declarative statements denouncing the cultural activities of the other participants of the list.

<sup>129</sup> Jodi in 'We Love Your Computer: the Aesthetics of Crashing Browsers', interview with Jodi by Tilman Baumgärtel, *Telepolis*, (October, 1997), <http://www.heise.de/tp>

<sup>130</sup> Armin Medosch, 'Interview with Alexej E. Shulgin', *Telepolis*, (July 1997)

into the banality of bureaucratic work through the trope of fastidious inventorising. Her piece *Last Real Net Art Museum Archives*, 2000, takes an earlier work, *My Boyfriend Came Back From The War. After Dinner They Left Us Alone*, 1996, as the object of this demystificatory exercise.<sup>131</sup> (Fig 3.) If we are to appreciate the near brutality of her later *Archive*, it is necessary to grasp what was at play in the original piece. Set against the background of the Russian war with Chechnya, *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War* entails a differential field of sublimation and desublimation. The intimate and painful associations of the work's title and assumed content is prevented from reaching any coherent articulation – one that might correspond to the requirements of romantic fiction or authentic experience – due to the hyperlinked and nominally 'interactive' structure of the work. The grid of clickable text and image files (JPEGs and GIFs) which compose the interface and provide hyperlinks to a whole array of further files, present the viewer with a series of choices by which he/she is compelled to impose his/her own narrative arrangement onto the array of data fragments. In this respect Lialina reconfigures her own notionally personal narrative using 'the database logic' of the computer. As Lev Manovich has argued, the lack of any primary means of accessing a database (it is irrelevant whether one searches by alphabet, chronology, file type etc.) denies the sort of inherent narrative sequence that we find in the structure of film.<sup>132</sup> *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War* examines the implications of this new technical and cultural logic and its impact on narrative, but nevertheless mocks glib idea that interactive media automatically turns the viewer into 'co-author' through her use of slogans to counter the seemingly multiple narrative possibilities of the work. Her

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<sup>131</sup> <http://myboyfriendcamebackfromth.ewar.ru/>

<sup>132</sup> Lev Manovich, 'The Database Logic', *The Language of New Media*

words instill self-consciousness in the viewer through their emotive allusions to the separation that exists between him/her and the artist/subject: "I can't see you", "kiss me", "Nobody here can love or understand me", "Who asks you". These terms establish the sense of an unbridgeable gulf between artist and viewer which ultimately creates an optimum narrative curve within the work; the narrative of social alienation. I use the term 'narrative' because of the sequential and demonstrative unfolding of this subject. Through the highly personalised material which doubles as a utilitarian front-end to the architecture of networked computers (a woman's face is also a hyperlink and our most trivial gesture, the point-and-click, releases a cascade of emotive appeals), the viewer is made increasingly conscious of his/her consumptive behaviour.

In her *Archive* piece, however, one could argue that the conversion of artistic process into a pedantic inventory of the work's technological, contractual and social relations which works to dismantle any sense of the kind of coherent creative agency so crucial to the original work, risks a total dissolution of the artist. In this work, Lialina deconstructs *My Boyfriend* through its conversion into a list of constituent parts: (HTML, JPEG and GIF filenames); series of portraits of all those significantly 'associated' with the work; their CVs; a set of accounts for all the money earned and spent on the piece; the geographic location of the various servers on which it has been stored; the success or failure of certain search engines in locating it and finally a web award that it has won. It seems only possible to salvage some residual sense of creative agency through its absence, a negative trace wrought by the remorseless stripping away of the original work's poetic content. This tendency is also at play in Vuk Cosic's piece *A Day in the Life* in which the promise of revealing the artist's day

is diverted into a series of links to preexisting sites many of which provide the official interface to the Ljudmila Digital Media Lab at which he was employed.<sup>133</sup> Referring to this work, Cosic has said: "But actually it is a little bit worrying how [the term art] puts you into a certain corner. So instead of deleting the word 'art' as etiquette for what I do, I gave the word 'art' to *everything* that I do."<sup>134</sup>

In these two examples we see a near direct inversion of the Abstract Expressionist notion of art's relation to the sublime in which the psychologised interior becomes as awesome and expansive as nature itself. Despite the flippant and somewhat self-aggrandising tone of Cosic's remark, it nevertheless dramatises an arguably more bleak state of affairs; the banal blurring of art into everything else in this post- or late conceptual moment. Afterall, the claim that 'everything I do is art' is just the obverse of the claim 'nothing I do is art'. Likewise, Lialina's strategy to reduce an earlier artwork (in which the authorial voice is preserved through its evasiveness) to the inventory of its social and technical parts and encounters emphatically seeks to bring the artwork into line with other techno-bureaucratic forms of labour. At first glance this combined dissolution of the artwork and art practice into a series of discrete, quantifiable everyday activities suggests a decisive attack on art's aura. But it is also possible to see running through both net art and Conceptual Art's adoption of the administrative aesthetic, a fascination with the potency and immensity of this technologically driven *modus operandi*. Accessing the language of bureaucracy through, for example, the referent of the inventory or computer file structures connects art to the by now global methodology of business,

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<sup>133</sup> <http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk>

<sup>134</sup> Vuk Cosic in 'Art Was Only a Substitute for the Internet: an Interview with Vuk Cosic', Tilman Baumgärtel, *Telepolis*, (June 1997)

its info-technological determination, the multitude whose lives are shaped by this kind of work and the complexity of its structures. In other words, the adoption of a techno-bureaucratic language summons up the technological sublime in its awesome immensity, a surprising outcome of the development of art's desublimation.

In relation to this question of the technological sublime, the work of Jodi becomes extremely important. Where artists such as Cosic or Lialina might quite straightforwardly adopt the form of a commercial webpage or the dry inventories which clutter the world of work, Jodi alter code – probably the key cipher for ITC and thus, by extension, the world of technology and bureaucracy – so that we reencounter the environment of the Net in a quite alien form. One interesting aside on this subject is Jodi's manner of presenting their work online. Eshewing the more commonplace adoption of a list of links to various works on the artist's homepage they simply update their site [www.jodi.org](http://www.jodi.org) on a regular basis substituting one work for another.(fig 4.) The viewer is thrown into Jodi's artwork of choice immediately on entering the homepage without any introductory preamble or orienting information. In this respect the administrative demands made of the artist to create easily locatable artworks and to catalogue them in some way is rejected.<sup>135</sup> This refusal of what we might call a bureaucratic artworld convention links interestingly to Jodi's investigation of the underlying code structures of the Net. Where other net artists conjure up the Net's vast expanse through metonymic references to the different kinds of normative processes which animate it, Jodi accesses its sublime dimensions by digging down into the hidden layers of various softwares and

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<sup>135</sup> It should be noted that Jodi's entire body of work is always online and can be reached either through entering the precise URL (such as [www.sod.jodi.org](http://www.sod.jodi.org)) or searching the work's location name in a search engine. To those unacquainted with their work, however, this method of finding individual pieces is less than simple.

programming languages, bringing them to the 'surface' (the browser window) which effects a defamiliarisation of the known and a familiarisation of the alien. For example, in their sprawling piece *wwwwwwwww.jodi.org*, the roles of the underlying HTML code and the browser representation are switched. The work's first webpage consists of a string of green ASCII characters against a black background evocative of early screen representations predating the icon-based environment of the Graphic User Interface (GUI), Web browser softwares and other software environments such as Microsoft Word. This anachronistic and apparently crude computing environment is in reality something far more sophisticated: an HTML formatted page filled with hyperlinks to other files on the the Web. But the presence of crude ASCII in a webpage relates to the deeper layers of code which lie beneath the obscurations of high-level softwares such as web browsers. Conversely, if the viewer were to go to the 'view source' option in the browser's pull-down menu s/he would encounter something very surprising: instead of the expected reams of HTML code consisting of typically unformatted alpha-numerical characters, s/he would find a series of alpha-numerical characters (the HTML code) arranged into a sequence of semi-abstract patterns. Jodi have taken advantage of the latitude of the HTML code (which is unaffected by the introduction of tabs or of character returns) to produce a series of highly visual representations reminiscent of concrete poetry where one would expect to find a tangle of code.

Interestingly, Jodi take a part of the globalised computer hook-up, the PC, in order to make a commentary on its totality. Although their work exists on the Internet, it excavates a depth model of the computer's structures and protocols rather than probing or constructing a topographical model of its global coverage and

multiple agencies. An observation confirmed by Jodi's remark: "We replace the mythological notion of a virtual society on the Net or whatever with our own work. We put our own personality there."<sup>136</sup> Despite digging down to reveal some notional machinic core, Jodi's work does anything but demystify the transformative process by which such discrete processes as the execution of various codes and the play of electrons become that semiotic totality known as cyberspace. If we consider again Zizek's discussion of the demise of the master signifier within the oppressive pliability of cyberspace, it is possible to adduce a related but ultimately very different symbolic function at play here. Where the master signifier declines, in Zizek's description, through its constant interruption and inability to attain a finite state, the work of Jodi demonstrates how the master signifier – in this case cyberspace and the postmodern condition it implies – can be dismantled without diminishing its totality. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that the work does not dissolve itself into its referent, but manages to maintain the particularity of cyberspace as a referent for the differentiating operations of the artwork. Whilst plummeting the depths of the computer's local and networked operations it manages to maintain the auratic distance of cyberspace by figuring its totality in a series of metonymic and illusory fragments.

In this chapter I have posed the question of how the activities of net artists problematise the contested site of cyberspace using the concepts of 'aura', 'ecstatic communication' and the demise of the master signifier. As we have seen, net artists mobilise what Peter Bürger has termed the 'social subset' known as art along with the

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<sup>136</sup> Jodi, cited in Baumgärtel, 'We Love Your Computer'



constant threat of its disappearance to interrogate the experience of a wired world.<sup>137</sup>

The condition of living within a many-to-many mediascape in which the creative output of individuals can easily find immediate and global distribution is one that augurs, amongst numerous other changes, a redefinition of art and its separateness from the general creativity of the social field. Equally, it is this self-same environment that simultaneously threatens the very collapse of the symbolic economy into a flattened and narcissistic wasteland of simulation and distraction – an environment in which our inability to figure or cognitively map the totality of a technocratic late capitalist society provides the 'ideal' conditions for our disempowerment within it. As we have seen, the artistic engagements with this predicament tread a perilous path between figuring that condition – through the varying strategies of metonymic representation and transformation or the whole-scale redesign of its elements such as software – and hence opening up a critical distance, and/or disappearing within an endless field of simulatory equivalence. Particularly important to this encounter is the way in which the artwork's aura is simultaneously attacked and commuted into the awesome dimensions of the technological sublime. One might conclude that the ability for art to withstand the collapse of its auratic distance rendered by reproductive technologies implies the ability for that self-same cultish distance to manifest itself precisely in the shape of those same intricate, expansive and colossally powerful technologies. Nonetheless a deliberate and simultaneous banalisation of the artwork has to be acknowledged, one that prompts us to consider the veracity of the scenario presented above in which the demise of aura is pessimistically understood as inaugurating the victory of a

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<sup>137</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 1984, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996)

massified culture industry rather than a revolutionary cultural practice. In other words, is it right to conclude that the demise of aura can no longer be taken as a precondition for a revolution in culture?

## CHAPTER TWO

### In Search of Community, or Information as Common Condition

Net art, along with most of net culture, has been involved in an ongoing attempt to articulate and reflect the new conditions and identity of a global, disembodied community of computer users. For net artists, the computing environment offers several ways through which these dispersed communities find and negotiate a new social and communicative relationship. In this chapter I will investigate how geo-virtual relations, the narrow, homogenous 'language' of the computer's interfaces and the underlying condition of information are explored simultaneously as the agents of social alienation and a new commonality. Acting under a certain nostalgia for the more direct social engagement of traditional communities and within a history of the abstract and symbolic expressions of collectivity which increasingly surface in modern and postmodern art forms (dialogics), net artists have found themselves working in a technically new but perhaps conceptually familiar terrain. In the short developmental period under investigation, from 1994-2001, we will see how the search to understand new conditions of community often end up affirming older ideas of social investment, obligation and belonging. But before attending to the progression of artworks with which this chapter will concern itself, it is necessary to outline a few preliminary conditions, terms and positions relating to community both 'actual' and 'virtual'.

## Communities Virtual and Otherwise

The advent of networked computing has simultaneously fuelled the dislocating effects of globalisation and provided the setting for the disembodied and abstract restaging of community – the virtual community.<sup>138</sup> The Internet has become nearly consonant with the process of deterritorialisation which is taken to mean “the loss of the ‘natural’ relation of culture to geographical and social territories” through, most crucially, its collapse of geographical space into the real time relay of information.<sup>139</sup> However the Internet also serves as a crucial environment for the reimagining and reinvention of public space and community relations within the expanding dimensions of the 'global village'. A new imaginative suturing of global cultures and communities is being effected by technological connectivity – a situation celebrated by IBM's advertising slogan "Solutions for a small planet" which attempts to construct the global society as both intimate and manageable.<sup>140</sup> But clearly our experience of the newly small planet lacks what Raymond Williams identifies as the crucial precondition of traditional communities in his 1977 essay "The Importance of Community", the inhabitation of shared geographical space:

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<sup>138</sup> "*Virtual Communities* are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationship in cyberspace." Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Communities: Finding Connections in a Computerised World*, (London: Mandarin, 1995)

<sup>139</sup> Garcia Canclini, cited by John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p.107

<sup>140</sup> See Michele Willson, 'Community in the Abstract: A political and ethical dilemma?' in *The Cybercultures Reader*, eds. David Bell & Barbara M. Kennedy, (London: Routledge, 2000)

“I do not mean that people all liked each other. I do not mean that people didn't have disputes. I mean that there was nevertheless a level of social obligation which was conferred by the fact of seeming to live in the same place and in that sense to have a common identity.”<sup>141</sup>

In the same essay he characterises the shift from 'community' to 'society' as one involving increasing abstraction due to the escalating scale of the socio-political system:

"If you think back, for example, to that change of meaning in the word 'society', it can seem a loss. It was indeed in one sense a grave loss, that 'society' lost its sense of immediate direct relation to others and became the general abstract term for a whole social-political system. It is undoubtedly a loss, and yet that abstraction was a crucial way of understanding the nature of a quite new historical phase which was presenting problems which could not be negotiated, let alone understood if the sense of something quite systematic and distant, something which was not in that sense accessible in any direct local mode, was established."<sup>142</sup>

The global computer network, it seems, is nothing if not abstract; a system which combines the metaphors of software (especially of the office) and the material-technical functionality (cabling, satellites, hardware, flows of data packets, execution of programmes etc.) into an instrumentalised simulation and extension – a virtualisation – of the world. A spectacular regime in which distance is collapsed and substituted by the linguistic sign of country domain names (.uk, .de, .it etc.), if at all. A place in which movement does not result in a better or less worn path but the amount of banner advertising on a site or the hits on a counter. The nature of interaction itself is also highly abstract as social actors become "thin / emptied-out"

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<sup>141</sup> Raymond Williams, 'The Importance of Community', in *Resources of Hope*, (London: Verso, 1989), p. 114

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, p.115

or more precisely reduced primarily to the communicative medium of text.<sup>143</sup> A situation which is undoubtedly changing – as bandwidth gets broader, data compression more efficient and download times faster making the transmission of video and audio streams more usual – but which nonetheless will always reduce social interaction to narrow technological and symbolic procedures. Crucially, communities in cyberspace are also elective, driven by interest, political commonality, the desire for entertainment, shared hobbies and the drive to collectively build virtual objects like software, etc.. In other words, people, finding themselves alienated by an overly abstract, mediated and deterritorialized world, can pick and choose the nature of their associations on the Internet; the abstract and impersonal nature of modern society is mitigated by the equally abstract, voluntary membership to semi-anonymous, primarily text-based communities. Howard Rheingold, an enthusiastic advocate of virtual communities and author of *Virtual Communities: Finding Connections in a Computerised World*, underplays the abstract quality of these experiences, preferring to nostalgically evoke the idea of a lost community seemingly regained:

"I suspect that one of the explanations for this phenomenon is the hunger for community that grows in the breasts of people around the world as more and more informal public spaces disappear from our real lives."<sup>144</sup>

But for Rheingold, choice also entails the freedom to gather information for oneself, to cut through the monopolistic media control of public debate and the direct involvement in the building of public space:

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<sup>143</sup> Michele Willson, 'Community in the Abstract', p.651

<sup>144</sup> Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Communities*, p.6

"We temporarily have access to a tool that could bring conviviality and understanding into our lives and might help revitalise the public sphere. [...] The vision of a citizen-designed, citizen-controlled worldwide communications network is a version of technological utopianism that could be called the vision of 'the electronic agora'."<sup>145</sup>

The voluntary nature of these communities, often based on a narrow set of concerns, interests and needs which cannot be gratified locally, should be seen as a key factor in their success. In ways which, not coincidentally, have been compared to the foundation of breakaway communities in the Americas, early virtual settlers believed that they could create *ad hoc* communities based on collectively shared ideas rather than the unshirkable obligations of membership to permanent communities.<sup>146</sup>

Utopian constructions of cyberspace often refer to its promise of choice, anonymity, discrimination, and the self-selection of identity; it offers a site into which people can escape from the unwanted claims and conditions of terrestrial societies as well as the imposition of identity sealed by the physical body. This new condition of self-determination and choice has been termed the 'control revolution'.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, p.14

<sup>146</sup> Hakin Bey's concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), which makes direct reference to new computer-based social networks, is based on an anarchistic belief in the need for constant insurgencies, rather than the inevitable consolidations and failures of revolutions, to resist oppressive power structures. Key to Bey's theory of insurgencies is the need to resist territorialisation of any form through the 'strike and run' tactics of temporary, nomadic collectivities either in physical or virtual space. Bey sites, as historical precedent, the mutinies, ad hoc settlements, Indian assimilations and pirate communities of the New World – those groups who rejected the 'burdens of civilization' and opted for the 'state of Nature'. See Bey's 'The Temporary Autonomous Zone', in *T.A.Z.:The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1991), pp.116 - 124

<sup>147</sup> See Andrew Shapiro's *The Control Revolution: How the Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World We Know*, (New York: Century Foundation, 1999)

Notwithstanding the obvious problems associated with the idea of community based primarily on choice and desire, what is also often overlooked in the haste to define what is new and exciting about virtual communities is the elective, telematic, temporary and abstract nature of certain preexisting types of community. This is especially apparent if we consider the highly mobile and geographically disparate nature of artistic communities which earlier technologies such as printing, trains and cars not to mention the postal service simultaneously created and held together. In this vein, Vuk Cosic has compared the informal grouping of globally spread net artists to the Futurists and Dadaists:

"Now we have this communications system that reminds me of the communication between the futurists or later the dadaists. There were two guys in Berlin, four guys in Paris, two in Russia, and they all knew each other, and they were all 25 years old. How did they get in touch? It was because of the strength of their beliefs and the good communication channels, because there were a few guys travelling. What we now have is the same....This time it's the internet. Earlier it was Picabia who had the money to buy an expensive car and travel and print one issue of his magazine in every town he came to."<sup>148</sup>

It is important to remember how historically, avant-garde art movements have striven to overcome parochialism and escape from the binds of local community into an international community of sympathetic thinkers and/or universalising language of artistic style. Although conflicted by nationalist dreams of Italian ascendancy, Marinetti's "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism", 1909, conflates the story of the Futurists' world melting nighttime drive in a car with a call to break with the museums, cemeteries and "smelly gangrene of professors" – the leadenness of all

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<sup>148</sup> In 'Art was only a substitute for the Internet: Internet with Vuk Cosic', Tilman Baumgärtel, Telepolis, (June 1997)



that is rooted in history and locality – and dive into the bedazzling electro-mechanical future. Marinetti summons his friends with the cry: "Let's go! [...] Friends, away! Let's go! Mythology and the Mystic Ideal are defeated at last. We're about to see the Centaur's birth and, soon after, the first flight of Angels!... We must shake the gates of life, test the bolts and hinges. Let's go!"<sup>149</sup> Speed, technology and travel become the literal and imaginary vectors through which the Italian Futurists freed themselves from the local into the quasi-transcendence of the future. Returning to Cosic's analogies between the net artists and the historical avant-gardes, what can also be detected however – in marked contrast to the Futurists' theatrical contempt for tradition and history – is precisely the nostalgia for older forms of physical proximity and conviviality. In one statement Cosic compares the ease with which net artists can constantly keep themselves informed of each other's developments over the Net to the proximity of Picasso and Braques studios in Paris in 1907. He adds, "It's like me and Heath Bunting and Alexej Shulgin and Olia Lialina and Jodi had studios next to each other."<sup>150</sup> This comment can be seen simply as an attempt to make sense of the new experience of connectivity by reference to the best real world comparison that comes to mind – proximity. But it is also possible to see in it the inability to specify the new conditions of telematic community – an inability which, as we shall see, has changed quite significantly since the date of Cosic's interview in 1997.

So far, in this brief introduction to virtual communities, several conflicting concepts have emerged. On the one hand there is the idea that the ineluctability of

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<sup>149</sup> Fillipo Tommaso Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism', 1909, republished in *Art in Theory 1900 – 1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.146

<sup>150</sup> Ibid

shared geographical space forms *the* precondition of community and that, by extension, the idea of community based on choice and desire is oxymoronic. On the other, there is the idea that virtual communities can 'revitalise the public sphere' through *ad hoc* participative action which defends against the ongoing obliteration of informal 'real world' public spaces. Underlying both these ideas is a nostalgia for a lost but authentic community – a nostalgia which even inflects Cosic's perceptive remarks about the always-already telematic nature of artistic 'communities'. This chapter will attempt to address, through the analysis of some key artworks, the struggle between a sense of the new geo-social relations triggered by the Net's communicative capacities and the sense of lack which haunts a community that does not find what Baudrillard would call its 'finality' in geographical space. Here I am not really interested in making a lot of comparisons between traditional and virtual communities nor of engaging in sociological analyses of formal virtual communities, but in attempting to understand how lack, newness, shared relationship and particularity are identified and articulated in net art and net culture. When our local context has become 'phantasmagoric', in other words when the distant origins of commodities and cultural forms are often concealed behind the comfortable familiarity of the local context and where presence is often predicated on absence, creating social contexts within the blatantly phantasmagoric space of the Net converts this condition from an 'in itself' to a 'for itself'.<sup>151</sup> With this idea in mind, I will ask: what kind of global culture and community is viable; what feedback exists between virtual and physical worlds; what languages of self and collective identity do artists find within online culture; how do the dialogics inherent to all art cultivate

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<sup>151</sup> See Tomlinson's discussion of A. Giddens in *Globalization and Culture*.

new dialects and colloquialisms indigenous to a technological non-place; how have artists' definitions of and investment in virtual communities changed over the brief history of the movement from 1994 until now? At the heart of all these questions stands the disconcerting experience of the Internet's role as the primary unifying symbolic, cultural and political referent and basis for collective enterprise.

### Being *in* common and relationality as essence

In her discussion of virtual communities, Michele Willson turns to the theory of Jean-Luc Nancy to provide her with a model for how a non-essentialist definition of identity can be reconciled with the concept of community. For Nancy, the idea that community is based around a fixed essence or identity fails to address its ongoing, open-ended, relational development and leads to the understanding of community 'as communion'. In the absence of any stable definitions of the identity of individuals or cultures, Nancy settles upon the 'incomplete' sharing of the relation between subjects as providing the key to community. "For him" Willson explains, "being is not common because it differs with each experience of existence, but being is *in* common: it is the *in* where community 'resides'".<sup>152</sup> Although on the surface of it Nancy's non-essentialist position would seem to chime with virtual communitarians' reading of identity (here Willson refers to Sherry Turkle, Mark Poster and Howard Rheingold) as multiple, self-selecting and fluid, in fact, as she points out, there is a fundamental difference. Virtual communitarians have a tendency to privilege the freedoms of the (multiple) self, underwritten by technology, at the expense of the

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<sup>152</sup> Willson, 'Community in the Abstract', p.651

Other. Where Nancy emphasises the ontological necessity of the relational, virtual communitarians have a tendency to ignore this in favour of a "compartmentalization and totalization of the individual" whose increased freedoms and capacities are celebrated at the expense of defining their shared condition and relational formation.<sup>153</sup> In effect this variant of the 'control revolution' converts the Other into an exchangeable fantasy support for the unfettered liberation of the subject's multiple selves.

Willson's discussion of relationality versus the demise of the Other gives us a useful set of references with which to approach some of the earliest artistic explorations of virtual topography and its impact on the self. Unlike the self-contained online spaces such as Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), Multi-User Domains (MUDs) and Multi-User Object Oriented Domains (MOOs) to which Willson and the virtual communitarians refer, these artworks tended to look for a more recursive and split relationship between physical and virtual worlds in which the new 'liberties' of the self are offset against the exploration of a new, global order of social relations. In this respect they are not indicative of the extropian will to dissolve the bonds of the flesh and liberate the (multiple) selves in the data streams of the Net. Rather they seem to share Nancy's conviction that in the absence of fixed markers of community or identity its basis must be sought in the constantly shifting network of relations which sustain them. In the first project we will look at – Philip Pocock and Felix Huber's <<*Arctic Circle*>> ,1995 – these relations are understood as entailing the global dimensions of the Net, the split between on- and offline worlds and the incommensurability between the natural and technological sublims. (figs 5a. & b.)

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, p.653

Indeed Pocock and Huber coined the term 'double travel' to express the extreme relationality and ontological splitting that their project addressed.

<<*Arctic Circle*>> pivots on a journey, begun on July 30<sup>th</sup> 1995, from Vancouver, passing up the Alaska, Klondike and Dempster Highways, across the arctic circle (the 67th parallel) “to the edge of the Arctic sea”.<sup>154</sup> The journey, which lasted until late December of the same year, was made largely in a van and then by foot at the crucial points such as the Arctic Circle itself. The artists took the minimal technology required to allow them to keep an online diary during their journey. Using laptops, a digital video camera and a sound recording device they posted audio and video clips as well as written accounts of their experiences to their website. The online audience could follow their progress virtually, day by day, (as Pocock and Huber sent information from the available telephone jacks), either by visiting their website or by joining the <<Arctic Circle>> mailing list which delivered mail to subscribers as and when they were sent. As they explain the expedition:

"Via one of the worlds most northern Internet nodes, the Inukshuk machine at the Inuvik Research Center (Thank you, Alan Fehr and Les Kutny!) and with accounts on Yukon Net, Compuserve and The Thing, we shall construct a virtual presence there from here, as we eat up 8000 kilometers of pavement and gravel, and chew even greater distances on the Internet *at one and the same time*."<sup>155</sup>

Pocock and Huber carefully selected this route because it passes through one of the earth's last wilderness regions, but also because it runs through the Yukon Territory,

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<sup>154</sup> Philip Pocock and Felix Huber, 'Arctic Circle – Double Travel', [www.dom.de/acircle/acircle.htm](http://www.dom.de/acircle/acircle.htm)

<sup>155</sup> <http://www2.dom.de/acircle/acircle.htm>

site of the last and greatest gold rush at Klondike in 1897; a prospecting frenzy and associated population explosion which formed a parallel to the 'dot.com fever' developing apace on the Internet.<sup>156</sup> In this respect they were linking capitalist and technological expansionism to wanderlust; the need to discover new sources of wealth which gives rise to the exploration of what Conrad called the "dark places of the earth". The vast numbers of people flocking to the Yukon Territory can be understood in direct proportion to the immense speed with which technologies such as railways, steamships and newsprint were capable of spreading the news of the Klondike gold deposits. In other words, the movement of huge numbers of people occurred in direct relation to the distributive capacity of certain technologies, and the gold diggers' perilous confrontation with the natural sublime of the Mackenzie Mountain range was contingent on the spatio-temporal conquests of what could collectively be understood as the newly emerging sublime of industrial power. Pocock and Huber are concerned with the incommensurable relationship between massive technological connectivity and the presiding and awesome loneliness of nature. If the relation between these two phenomena somehow defies understanding, it does however possess the capacity to reveal a common loneliness. Before setting off Pocock, speaking at the Medienlabor lecture on 14 July, 1995, in Munich, commented:

“We have only two preconceptions that we'll be packing along with us. One is, we don't know where we are going, but we'll know where we've been. And the other, that travelling through one of the last, remote wilderness regions on the planet, isolated for days in a wide-open treeless landscape, and then in

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<sup>156</sup> As Pocock points out, "the World Wide Web grew 341,000% in 1993, 700 times the population growth seen during the greatest gold rush of all times...", <http://www2.dom.de/acircle/medialab.htm>

front of a computer screen trying not to look out of the tent flap or the van window will be very difficult; trying to conjure up an image of a world on the other side of the screen, while nature looms endlessly all around us will be techno-stress for sure. We imagine both worlds will evoke one and the same feeling of loneliness.”<sup>157</sup>

Pocock is referring to the sensation of relative insignificance or the threat of self-annihilation experienced by a person's confrontation with the gigantic expanse of the Canadian wilderness on the one hand and the immense, globally distributed population of Net users on the other. On the project website, the artists refer to this sensation as "picturing oneself as an ant, a smudge on a map."<sup>158</sup> In contrast to the virtual communitarians' reduction of the Other to a mere fantasy support for the narcissistic play of the self, Pocock's comparison between natural and technological sublimates evokes the Other in its most overpowering and self-annihilating incarnation. In the case of the Internet however, the experience of what Jameson, in a shift of emphasis, refers to as the postmodern sublime – that mass of technical *and* social relations which compose the productive network of late capitalism – is always only ever cognitively mapped as an abstraction; its ability to overwhelm can never occur with the same total, sensual immediacy as the natural sublime. In a certain respect then, the postmodern sublime reveals itself metonymically, abstractly and imaginatively.

It seems that this understanding informs the artists' interest in maintaining contact with an absent, largely unknown audience from a part of the earth known by most solely as an abstract measurement of latitude. The journey itself is motivated, in part, by the abstractions of geographical measurement which come together with

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<sup>157</sup> Philip Pocock, *ibid*

<sup>158</sup> *ibid*

the abstractions of virtual community, but which unfold phenomenologically in the contingent lives of the artists. In their online diary, Pocock and Huber describe the dialectic between abstraction and experience:

“The circle is a line, a plane.  
An inch becomes a step,  
a path becomes a valley.  
A valley opens onto mountains.  
Continents ahead.”<sup>159</sup>

Each step that is taken, each route that is followed can be occupied only in so far as that occupation precipitates a view onto something else, the thing only has identity in so far as it refers to something else. But with this convergence of physical and virtual topographies in which the inherent condition of relationality is highlighted, this phenomenological unfolding oscillates constantly between immediate physical occupation and the ciphered abstractions of virtual occupation. Likewise, the Arctic Circle is physically traversed in relation to its (relational) geographical coordinates (is there any other reason why this particular stretch of earth has significance for the artists?) and its extreme remoteness understood only by contrast to the teaming cities of modernity through which it is reached and imagined. In this respect the phantasmagoric nature of the local context in modernity mentioned above is carried the artists' memories and imaginations. Just as the universal cartographic grid provides direction and even intention for Pocock and Huber, so the virtual bodies of the Internet audience also provide coordinates by which their movements assume meaning and possibly (depending on audience feedback) even concrete direction.

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<sup>159</sup> Pocock and Huber, 'August 11<sup>th</sup> – Arctic Circle Walk', Ibid



Here we should also consider the short video and audio clips (JPEGs and MPEGs) which are put up on the website for the online audience. In one brief video clip entitled *The Crescent*, filmed on the first days of their journey, Huber is filmed as he runs along the side of a curved track from the window of a moving vehicle. At first one has no idea of the relation between the panning camera work and the movement of the camera man and it is not until the camera catches up with the running man and then moves past him that we are sure the camera is not being moved from a stationary position. In this very literal sense, the viewer's understanding of the sequence is overtly controlled and even perhaps momentarily tricked by the decisions of the artists. In another video clip called *Walking Trees* the unidentified camera man films a sequence of pine trees from a moving car. In the background the sound of what seems to be a car radio is audible and after a few moments it becomes clear that someone is singing over the top of it. The singer is improvising the route that the artists have presumably been driving: "All the way up to the Yukon River into Teslin River. All the way up Teslin River into Teslin Lake..." The viewer or listener is privy to a patchwork of elements, all of which arise from a precise coordinate of time and place, but which cannot collectively bind together the disparities between them or designate an actual coordinate for the event itself. Which road are they driving on, who is driving, who is singing, which radio station are they tuned into, what is the song on the radio? The true relations of these spatial and medial parts is both profoundly indeterminate and synchronous. The latter video clip effaces the coherence of its author's identity by splitting the subject position into both that of the camera and that of the voice – we cannot decide if it is the same person singing and filming. One could argue that the subject is fragmented

even further through his occupation of multiple medial, temporal and geographical realities; the van, the forest, the map, the radio, the video clip, the Internet. But it is the Internet itself which acts as the final frame for this layering of spatial/medial occupations.

On the Internet, this fleeting, 'one off' cohesion of space and media designated by Pocock and Huber is endlessly repeatable, even relivable. In our case, the indeterminate centre of the artists' experience is constantly replayed within the space of the Internet (for which it was, in any case, originally enacted); the Internet becomes a centripetal force cohering multiple realities within a fixed, locatable and downloadable file. But the Net is not comparable to the space of a museum for which the video clips might also have been made and then permanently displayed. This, amongst numerous other factors, for the reason that the museum cannot be conjured or summoned by the audience from their multiple subject/access positions and according to the different viewing specifications of their hard- and software. In this respect the Internet inheres with a relationality. It is from the point of view of the Internet user's 'equality' of access to the same thing (the digital file) which is always viewed 'uniquely' (i.e. depending on their bandwidth, hard- and software), that we need to view the video clips in <<*Arctic Circle*>>. <sup>160</sup> As they download onto uncountable terminals, the ambiguous relativity contained within the clips hardens into a (constantly retrievable) centre which now casts the position of the viewer into yet another relation. The digital file of *The Crescent* – or indeed any file accessed

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<sup>160</sup> I do not wish to disregard the highly unequal cultural, economic and technical conditions of access which must, of course, determine any such equality of access to information. There is certainly also a wide variety of institutional and national censorship imposed on certain types of information otherwise available on the Net. Here, I am assuming that the 'non-dangerous' nature of <<*Arctic Circle*>> immunises it from such censorship.

over the Net – can be understood fleetingly as a centre around which globally distributed users cohere.

But in <<*Arctic Circle*>> both the viewers and the artists become the other's avatar, with the site of experience constantly oscillating between the centrality of embodiment and geo-physicality and that of information and the virtual. It is not until I, the viewer, plug into the Net that I feel this expanded relativity of my physical location and experience. But conversely, when I am conscious that my actions are being tracked by hundreds of visitors to my website, I understand my direct occupation of space as perhaps more specific than I otherwise would *because* its relativity has been brought into focus. Perhaps in both cases we can say that fixity has become a condition of an emphatic relativity – the network. In this respect the Internet exaggerates a condition which can equally well be applied to 'actual' space. But in the Internet, this relativity also entails an infinite set of possibilities – the shifting relation of files on servers around the world, the sequence in which the user downloads them, the browser software in which they are viewed, the number and location of people viewing a site at the same time, their geographical relation to each other and so on. This sense of the infinite variability of relations between things is an essential quality of digital media objects (also crucially related to their numerical encoding and modular structure) and one which is translated into the social relations of virtual communities.<sup>161</sup>

### Jamming the Virtual and the Physical

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<sup>161</sup> See Lev Manovich's section on variability in *The Language of New Media*, pp.36 - 45

As already mentioned in Chapter One, McLuhan's optimistic reading of electronic mass media is based in the shift from hot or 'high definition' media such as the book to cool or 'low definition' media such as radio or television in which the potential for feedback, signal manipulation or two-way transmission evokes the participative culture of tribalism. According to McLuhan, modernity was a product of man's ability to extend his actions across space and time resulting in spatial uniformity, the centralisation of power, the creation of specialisations and the promotion of individualism. Crucially implicated in all these developments is man's capacity for "detachment and noninvolvement – the power to act without reacting."<sup>162</sup> For McLuhan, the advent of hot media puts an end to "parochialism and tribalism, psychically and socially both in space and in time."<sup>163</sup> By contrast electronic media converts the fixed, extendable cultural messages or artifacts of modernity into something more closely resembling the mutability of signals. With the possibility of participation, the hot cultures of developed countries, fragmented by specialisation and sped up through mechanisation, have the chance to restore, through participation, some of the lost 'unitary wholeness' of tribal cultures. Writing in the 1990s when all media had become fully digitally encodable, N. Katherine Hayles describes essentially the same phenomenon in terms of information's separateness from its carrier; in contrast to the printed text of a book, the entire text in a word processing document can be altered through the execution of a single software command, e.g. 'italicize'. As information is freed from its material substrate it is no longer defined by presence or absence but rather pattern and randomness; it

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid, p.73

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, p.170

becomes volatile and starts to 'flicker'.<sup>164</sup> It is possible to see the ideas of variability and extreme relationality developed above in terms of the cooling down of media. If our increasing sense of our own geo-physical relativity is occurring in tandem with our virtual integration into a global community, then we can also see this relativity as an important feature of McLuhan's global village or, latterly, the virtual communities. Put differently, media coolness and relativity go hand in hand. But here we also encounter a problem which seems to haunt postmodern culture in general and virtual electronic communities in particular. In the absence of any metaphysical limit or stable set of socio-political coordinates around which relativity can be structured, how is consensus produced or collective will expressed? When does the new ultra-variability of the virtual which conditions Nancy's community relations harden into the specificity of a shared condition which might form the basis of collective action? With this question in mind, the paradox of the global village comes into view; a participative and communicative relation between social actors is established (neo-tribalism?) but in the absence of the shared conditions and hence obligations in which tribal communities cohere.

In Heath Bunting's 1994 project *Kings X Phone In* the free-floating nature of social relations experienced in virtual communities are brought into contact with the particularity of the local context. Here, Bunting applies a cool Internet-based logic – the creation of a communications environments which can accommodate multiple, anonymous participants – to the setting of a bank of telephone booths at Kings Cross Station. In this project, Bunting *detournes* the traditional 'one-to-one' use of

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<sup>164</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, 'Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers', in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey, (London: Aperture, 1996)

telephones, expressed in the individuated design of telephone booths, in order to manifest the collectivising potential of the telephone network brought into focus by the advent of the Internet. Bunting used his website and various BBS and Usenet groups to invite people to participate in the following action: <sup>165</sup>

"During the day of Friday 5th August 1994 the telephone booth area behind the destination board at Kings X British Rail station will be borrowed and used for a temporary cybercafe. It would be good to concentrate activity around 18:00 GMT, but play as you will."<sup>166</sup>

Bunting then listed out the telephone numbers of the booths and invited people to:

- "(1) call no./nos. and let the phone ring a short while and then hang up
- (2) call these nos. in some kind of pattern (the nos. are listed as a floor plan of the booth)
- (3) call and have a chat with an expectant or unexpectant person
- (4) go to Kings X station watch public reaction/answer the phones and chat
- (5) do something different"<sup>167</sup>

Through his designation of a specific bank of phone booths, circulation of the relevant phone numbers and coordination of a time to place calls, Bunting reminds us of the emphatic coextensivity of public telecommunications space and physical space. The phone in, writ large, envisages every public phone booth as capable of engineering random encounters between strangers in the manner of a crowd, party or gathering. Its disturbance of the ordinary functioning of the telephones and, by extension, the local context creates the possibility of engineering face-to-face

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<sup>165</sup> "Announcements were posted to alt.cyberpunk, alt.artcom, artnet and cybercafe bbs to publicise the event", Heath Bunting, <http://www.irational.org/cybercafe/xrep.html>

<sup>166</sup> Heath Bunting, *Kings X Phone In*, <http://www.irational.org/cybercafe/xrel.html>

<sup>167</sup> Ibid

meetings between people as well as conversations between people at either end of a phone line. In its attempt to jam together a virtual community, a local public situation and the individuated social encounters of the telephone, *Kings X Phone In* imagines the possibility of a new kind of public space in which the 'informality' of bygone public spaces is restored to an actual place and the 'thin' anonymity of cyberspace is rooted or 'earthed' in the local context. This is an example of the paradoxical logic touched on above, whereby the self-same instrument of deterritorialisation is employed in a bid at reterritorialisation.

Despite McLuhan's designation of the telephone as a cool medium which couples action with reaction, it is nevertheless also a tool which allows man to distance him/herself from his/her affect and which can essentially only accommodate discussion between two interlocutors. But if the telephone facilitates man's ability to act at a distance, thus helping to obscure the origin of things – the original – and structuring presence through absence, its network structure can also be used to 'cool down' the hot, purposeful use of a highly utilitarian space such a train station by countering our quasi-mechanical behaviour with 'feedback' from elsewhere. But, extending the use of McLuhan's terms a littler further, the cool relationality of the virtual community is also brought into focus by the heat of a space/time coordinate on which it is forced to converge. In other words, the scattered callers are united by nothing other than Bunting's (hot) instructions which motivate them to act simultaneously, thus momentarily centralising them and drawing them into a strict relation. Here the individuated medium of the telephone has become a medium of collectivity both in the imaginations of its participants and in the local context of Kings Cross where the chorus of ringing telephones created a localised disruption by

drawing on an absent and scattered 'community'. By the artist's own account the whole square in front of the booths was filled with an "enormous Techno-Crowd" who danced to the sound of the ringing telephones.<sup>168</sup>

### Public Opinion as Simulacrum

The question is, however, what this redeployment of the instruments of individuation or alienation to collective, anarchic ends actually amounts to? The *detournement* of the telephone system certainly, if momentarily, creates a new kind of participative and libidinal public space shaped by whim, fun, contingency, disturbance and other conventionally repressed forces and effects. As we have seen, it also seeks to mitigate the infinite variability of relations experienced in virtual communities or the global communications scene by creating a physical limit around which actors can cohere. But does the registration of the potential for a virtual/physical gathering or the demonstration of simultaneous action or the revelation of the latent lines of connection which bind us all together amount to a reclamation of public space or speech? Or does it point, more negatively, to the danger inherent in incoherent collectivities or constituencies who, unable to agree on a particular project or set of ideas, must content themselves with hollow displays of simultaneity or togetherness? Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, in complete disagreement with this criticism, have theorised the world's innumerable and multiple subjectivities which defy formal articulation as 'constituent power'. For Negri and Hardt, 'constituent power' is the transhistorical power of the multitude

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<sup>168</sup> Heath Bunting, quoted by Tilman Baumgärtel in *Net.art: Materialien zur Netzkunst*, (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 1999)



which constitutes itself from below but is, by definition, antithetical to the distorting mirror of 'constituted power' (monarchies, governments, bureaucracies etc.) which claims to act in the name of 'the people', itself a category based on a distorting synthesis of singularities into a more wieldy tool of political manipulation.<sup>169</sup> But if, as is arguably the case with *Kings X Phone In*, constituent power can all too often only articulate itself in the form of the cacophony of many voices or a contentless demonstration of the cumulative power of the multitude what becomes of political will and its representation? Although this question might appear to over-burden the scope and intentions of a single work of art, it seems necessary to investigate the democratising tendencies of net art in relation to the wider political landscape and predicament of globalisation in which it finds itself. As we shall see shortly, collective authorship is a central feature of the net art movement, and one which clearly seeks to draw disparate artists into relation while also looking for a collective means to express multiple subjective experiences. This attempt to create collective singularities is also a key concern for Negri and Hardt who admit that, in the absence of internationalising languages such as class struggle or imperialism, global political struggle faces great difficulties:

"Clarifying the nature of the common enemy is thus an essential political task. A second obstacle, which is really corollary to the first, is that there is no common language of struggles that could 'translate' the particular language of each into a cosmopolitan language. Struggles in other parts of the world and even our own struggles seem to be written in an incomprehensible foreign language. This too points toward an important political task: to construct a new common language that facilitates communication, as the languages of anti-imperialism and proletarian internationalism did for the struggles of a previous era. Perhaps this needs to be a new type of

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<sup>169</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2000)

communication that functions not on the basis of resemblances but on the basis of differences: a communication of singularities."<sup>170</sup>

It is the mainstream media's much cruder search for collective representations of individual will using the homogenising language of opinion polls which leads Baudrillard to conclude, far more darkly, that the excess of political feedback in the simulacral age has led to the total destruction of politics as 'will and representation'. In his article 'The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media', Baudrillard attempts to think beyond the more pessimistic position of his earlier essay entitled 'Requiem for the Media'. In this earlier essay he analyses broadcast media as the instrument of a one way exertion of power based on the transmission/reception binary which "renders impossible any process of exchange" and concludes that "power belongs to him who gives and to whom no return can be made"<sup>171</sup>. In the later essay however he interprets the 'silence' of 'the masses' as an "ironic and antagonistic" refusal of an imposed philosophical imperative to have will, to know it, and to attain liberty on the basis of this understanding. For Baudrillard the opinion poll is the result of trying to construct a relationship between two fundamentally heterogeneous systems: the 'simulacral system' and the 'system of meaning'. He suggests that opinion polls cannot be accused of manipulating democracy because there is no authentic will, truth or nature for them to manipulate. The situation is really quite the reverse: the opinion poll does not measure a preexisting mass will or desire but rather aids its disappearance by offering the public a spectacle of opinion or a simulated mirror effect. The masses become the voyeurs of the spectacle of their

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<sup>170</sup> *ibid*, p.57

<sup>171</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media' in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p.208

own opinions as they are submitted to a recursive barrage of information which ultimately constitutes the political 'scene' it is supposed to represent. This, argues Baudrillard, leads to a "radical uncertainty" brought about not by lack of information but by its excess. However, and this is the redemptive moment in the text, this uncertainty effectively turns the tables on the media machine's disingenuous adoption of the system of meaning – a system which it has helped to destroy – because the masses, whose opinion the pollsters seek to divine, does not exist. The opinion poll provides the masses with a spectacle-as-game by which they – the object of analysis – refuse to share the objectives or even the ideology of the game's organisers, namely to possess an opinion and desire its representation. In this way the masses destroy politics as will and representation and "give pleasure to the[ir] ironic unconscious ...and to our individual political unconscious, (if I may use this expression), whose deepest drive remains the symbolic murder of the political class, the symbolic murder of political reality."<sup>172</sup>

Bunting's *Kings X Phone In* would certainly seem to be performing a reversal of this situation. In contrast to the subject of media falling into a voyeuristic stupor in front of the simulation of their 'own' political will, here the subject of media (can we term them 'the masses' in this instance?) are the manufacturers of their own simulation, a simulation of social cohesion. On the surface at least the participants would seem to be crashing the 'simulacral system' (that of telecommunications space) into the 'system of meaning' (that of traditional public space), in which the riotous ringing of a bank of telephones constitutes a real disturbance of the *status quo* in order to break the auto-hypnosis of each realm. But what would happen if a

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid, p.212

member of the public were to answer the telephone? A humorous exchange? An explanation of the artwork? The caller's pretense to be someone else? An irritated exchange in which the respondent demands to have the system returned to normal? In every case an actual response would foreground the inherent individualism of the telephone's functioning; a collapse of a notionally coherent general will into an atomised and unmappable series of exchanges – Negri and Hardt's communication of singularities. But from the point of view of Baudrillard's problematic, one might argue that the non-coherence of this result avoids any simulation of opinion but equally substitutes it with the simulation of collectivity – essentially alien social agents who, solely due to the simultaneity of their actions, appear to share something more fundamental. Surely it is the danger of such a simulation which haunts Negri and Hardt's theory, provoking them to insist on the quasi-paradox of a communication based in difference not resemblance.

However perhaps the positions of Negri and Hardt, and Baudrillard are not as antagonistic as they at first might seem. After all, they both seek the destruction of an imposed simulacrum of collective will – from the more formal modes of constituted power to the opinion poll – and see its end as the basis for a new order of political power; one based on the incommensurability of people's desires and the resistance to the enforced politics of simulated or manipulated consensus. But when it comes to finding ways to give collective articulation to what is inherently conflictual, both positions are, not surprisingly, quite unforthcoming. Indeed finding new forms of political constitution for a global populace is arguably not the responsibility of individual theorists but rather the work of history. Likewise, art itself can only, in the words of Adorno, 'resemble without imitating' the vicissitudes of the world around it.

What is interesting, however, about the exploration of the so-called global village in the works that will be examined beneath is the role that the Internet itself plays in positing a kind of collective language – a new mode of coherent but nonetheless dialogic expression. It is my contention that, after some of the earlier explorations of geo-physical and virtual relativity such as <<*Arctic Circle*>> and *Kings X Phone In* which centred on the paradox of occupying simultaneously real and physical locations, net artists have become increasingly interested in finding shared languages or a shared experience internal to the texture and logic of the Net itself. In other words, technical features such as software, interfaces, desktops, file structures and transmission protocols which crucially shape millions of users' daily experience move to the centre of net artists' exploration of deterritorialised collectivity. Nonetheless, the conclusions, if that is not too glib a word, reached by artists vary greatly from pessimism over the global homogenisation of culture to celebrations of the new participative models that digital culture is throwing up.

#### Virtual Homogeneity as Stylistic Object

For Bakhtin, the definitive characteristic of the novel form is its capacity to contain and essentialise the dialogic nature of all language and discourse. One of the key terms he employs in his remarkable essay 'Discourse in the Novel' when discussing the unavoidably dialogic nature of language is the 'alien word' which signifies the implicit presence in the use of any word of an intricate heteroglossia of other conflicting words which surround and describe its object. Where only the mythical Adam was able to approach "a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified

world with the first word",<sup>173</sup> concrete historical human discourse is confronted by "a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness. Along with the internal contradictions inside the object itself, the prose writer also witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia surrounding the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object".<sup>174</sup> While all literary forms negotiate this condition, and poetic language (almost) manages to perfect the control of the resonances of the 'alien word', the open-ended dialogism of the novel form – largely produced through the divergent mix of voices and personality types it calls forth and on which it depends – is truest to its logic. Furthermore, Bakhtin charts a progression in the novel form whereby dialogics come to form the self-conscious and polemical basis of a certain style of realist writing epitomised by Tolstoy. As Bakhtin explains, Tolstoy uses ideas, references, slang and dialect so current as to almost be considered '*Feuilleton*' and so precise or narrow as to speak not even to a reader of the same epoch but to his direct contemporary. "What follows from this" concludes Bakhtin "is a radical concretisation of dialogisation."<sup>175</sup>

There are many strikingly analogous developments within modernism that likewise create style out of a polemical and/or anti-individualist use of dialogics: the literal inclusion, using collage techniques, of 'alien' fragments into the artwork, the surrealist interest in 'objective chance', the game logic of exquisite corpses and techniques such as frottage, the audience participation in happenings and installation art, and the multiple-authorship of mail art are just some examples of dialogisation's

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<sup>173</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), p.279

<sup>174</sup> *ibid*, p.278

<sup>175</sup> *ibid*, p.283

'radical concretisation' in art. It is this ongoing and unavoidable presence of the 'alien word' in all cultural forms, whether unconsciously or intentionally, that has so often been overlooked in unthinking celebrations of the supposedly innovative 'interactivity' of new media. Indeed it is nearly tempting to argue the reverse; that the uniformity of the human-machine interface or GUI through which computer users are forced to interact produces the opposite of a dialogising effect – the deadening of the 'alien word'. If this reading is slightly hyperbolic, it is certainly obvious to most that the supposed open-endedness of the user's path through an interactive artwork is really just the investigation of a finite number of prescribed routes stored in the work's database. Net artists have usually criticised and avoided what they see as the sort of master-slave relation of interactivity. Alexei Shulgin was moved to remark:

"Looking at very popular media art form[s] such as 'interactive installation' I always wonder how people (viewers) are excited about this new way of manipulation on them [sic]. It seems that manipulation is the only form of communication they know and can appreciate. They are happily following very few options given to them by artists: press [the] left or right button, jump or sit."<sup>176</sup>

But if the banal literalisation of the always-already 'interactive' relationship between the artwork and the viewer or the utterance and the 'alien word' is often critiqued in net art, the inclusion of multiple participants into the creation of the artwork is not viewed with the same skepticism. Perhaps this seeming need to further dialogise the artwork through its multiple authorship comes from the interest found in the enormous number of people who habitually work with and communicate through a handful of standard hardwares and softwares and the interfaces and types of logic

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<sup>176</sup> Alexei Shulgin, 'Art, Power, Communication', Nettime, (October, 1996)

which accompany them. In other words, if communication has been so 'thinned' by the technologies which underpin it, and these technological object-words have become so demonstrably unitary (e.g. the copied piece of software is nearly always identical – unless it gets buggy – whereas multiple painted representations of a single landscape will vary enormously), the discourse surrounding them becomes increasingly important. In other words, the need to reveal the 'alien word' becomes greater. On this score it is interesting to contrast Alexei Shulgin's 1997-8 project *Desktop IS* with collage.(figs 6a. & b.) In Shulgin's work, the participants themselves provide the alien content expressed through their manipulation of the homogeneous and ubiquitous language of the computer desktop. As we shall see, the focus is not on combining alien fragments from different origins a la collage (perhaps impossible now due to the digital reduction of all media to 0s and 1s), but on dialogising the singular language of the non-place. Another important introductory remark is that, once again, the work is created by an extended community of participants executing a set of instructions given to them by the artist. These instructions become a word-trigger revealing other 'alien words' which grow up around the ubiquitous shared object of the desktop.

Using a 'call and response' strategy in which "within stated parameters whatever comes in is in", Shulgin posted a call for contributions onto several mailing lists for art criticism and practice, including 7-11 and Rhizome.<sup>177</sup> The instructions for participation were simple: take a 'snapshot' of your desktop (the key controls were given: Prn Scr for PCs or Apple+Shift+3 for Macs), save it as a JPEG and then send it to the artist's server or, store it on your own server and send the link to the

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<sup>177</sup> To view the archives of these lists, see: <http://www.rhizome.org> and <http://www.7-11.org>.



artist. The names of the participants themselves present a snapshot of the net art scene – its practitioners, critics, curators and satellite members – and the locations of the various JPEGs on globally distributed servers gives a rough picture of their geographical locations. However it is the desktop itself which, above all, is constructed as the shared referent of identity. In an accompanying text, Shulgin provides a small meditation on the role of the desktop:

desktop is the main element of a human - machine interface  
desktop is your window to the digital world  
desktop is your first step into virtual reality  
desktop is a reflection of your individuality  
desktop is your everyday visual environment  
desktop is an extension of your organs  
desktop is the face of your computer  
desktop is your everyday torture and joy  
desktop is your own little masterpiece  
desktop is your castle  
desktop is a seducer  
desktop is a reliever  
desktop is your enemy  
desktop is your friend  
desktop is a psychoanalyst  
desktop is your little helper  
desktop is your link to other people  
desktop is a device for meditation  
desktop is the membrane that mediates transactions between client and server  
desktop is a substitute for so many other things

desktop is a question  
desktop is the answer"<sup>178</sup>

From this sequence of definitions we can see how Shulgin attempts to identify a limit or ground zero to the immense community of computer users not through the relationality of geographical and virtual locations, but by converting the desktop's uniformity into a meaningful common condition; a relation *in* common.

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<sup>178</sup> Alexei Shulgin, *Desktop Is*, <http://www.easylife.org/desktop>

Shulgin created the project's homepage using the image of a desktop against a grey background. For perhaps merely circumstantial reasons, this desktop was created by a German language Macintosh operating system; quite simply this means that the pull-down menus and other features such as the wastepaper basket are all labeled in German. More abstractly, viewing the familiar Macintosh desktop in German not English presents an image of the role played by generic computing in manufacturing a global culture which is locally inflected. At the centre of Shulgin's 'desktop' are two folders, one containing his text about desktops and the other containing a links page to all the participants' JPEGs. These desktops have, in most cases, been manipulated by the participants in a direct response to the project and resist any straight or personal revelation of this intimate topography. The rearranged desktops are filled with conceptual jokes and recursive references to the project's homepage. Rachel Baker renamed and rearranged the files on her desktop so that, when the file names are read in sequence, sentences emerge, such as: "bureaucracy; does; not; allow; disorganised; desktops". Quite frequently participants made use of the project's homepage – itself a desktop image – and worked it into the snapshot given of their own desktops. The most extreme example of this is Natalie Bookchin's JPEG<sup>179</sup> which she constructed by opening the *Desktop IS* website in her Netscape browser software against a (matching) grey desktop background colour, taking a 'snapshot' of it, placing this 'snapshot' on her desktop, taking another 'snapshot' and repeating this procedure until a receding succession of desktops within desktops was constructed. This is one amongst numerous devices used by the participants to provoke the disconcerting feeling of looking into a window on somebody else's

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<sup>179</sup> <http://jupiter.ucsd.edu/~bookchin/Desktop.html>

world through another, nearly identical and equally simulacral window; an idea that triggers a vertiginous sense of infinite repetition and recession teetering on the edge of sublimity.

To interpret this display of the collective occupation of a generic computing environment as a statement about the banal homogeneity of global culture would be to miss the subtlety of its many inflections. If anything, the uncanny feeling it arouses in us, by momentarily allowing us to occupy familiar but nonetheless differently manipulated desktop environments, to walk around in other people's shoes so to speak, produces a fleeting sense of a universal language that can be endlessly varied. A language which, despite being practically opposite to Negri and Hardt's 'communication of singularities', is nonetheless capable of giving acute expression to individual subjectivities. In fact, the very narrowness of its vocabulary attunes the listener/viewer to the slightest individual articulations and ciphers of identity. In this sense, the claustrophobic universality of the language allows the singularities which employ it to sound or resonate more emphatically than they might otherwise do in a totally heteroglot language medium. Shulgin says himself, "desktop is the face of your computer". This statement seems to work in two directions, implying both that it is the face the computer reveals to its user, but also that it is the face of the computer the user constructs to look back at him/herself. This tension between what the user is given and what he/she makes of it illustrates perfectly the tension between the rigidity of an unusually reduced *langue* and the nonetheless rich variations of *parole* that I have tried to describe. Another way of approaching the potential articulateness of the computer environment's impoverished language is to think of the desktop as a stand-in for the body which can never enter

virtual space. In the absence of the body, the ability to view somebody else's psycho-technical imprint in something like the arrangement of their desktop takes on great significance. If people cannot physically come together and affect one another through spoken conversation and other forms of non-verbal communication such as intonation, laughter and the numerous physical gestures and gazes which mobilise and intersect social experience, then the generic furniture itself must be dialogised. Unlike what Bakhtin understood to be Tolstoy's "radical concretisation of dialogisation" however, it is not the excessive locality and specificity of linguistic and social reference which provides the basis for an artistic and polemical style, but rather the extreme homogeneity of the computer's interface.

However, despite Shulgin's unusual investigation of the identity of virtual communities not in terms of the subject's limitless freedom but rather in terms of the expressive potential of the software's limitations, and the unexpectedly playful, optimistic reading he elicited from these constraints, two years later his position had hardened into a disaffected rejection of 'global communication' as enacted over the Net. In an ironic tribute to the millennium, Shulgin in collaboration with Natalie Bookchin, and with programming help from Alexander Nikolaev, devised *The Universal Page*.<sup>180</sup> (fig 7.) In the accompanying text whose inflatedness sets up the bathos of the page itself, Shulgin and Bookchin declare it "the consummation of global collectivity".<sup>181</sup> *The Universal Page* is apparently a representation of the mean average of all Net activity which relies on "precise algorithms" that crawl the Web and update the page "continuously ... in real time."<sup>182</sup> The page itself takes the

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<sup>180</sup> <http://universalpage.org>

<sup>181</sup> <http://universalpage.org/about.html>

<sup>182</sup> Ibid

standard features of an average webpage such as the various horizontal and vertical picture boxes, the animated GIFS and banner ads, the paragraphs of text, the use of bolded text, the hyperlinks, the forms that users can fill out and the audio that sometimes accompanies sites, and converts them into an illegible approximation. Set against a listless brown background, the text itself is made up of blocks of random ASCII characters, the picture boxes, coloured in a sickly palette of beiges and browns, are blank, the equally blank GIFS blink away pointlessly, and underneath the sound of static – presumably the mean average of all audio data transmitted on the Web – grinds away. In the sarcastic words of its creators, this drab, generic and illegible concoction should be taken as:

"A proclamation and manifestation of the utopian dream of world unity and the realisation of democratic global communication...[it] articulates the historic and momentous effects of constant flows of creation, communication, exchange, collectivity, connectivity and interactivity where no one with a computer and a modem is excluded, no one with a web server is unheard, and no one with a software client is ignored. This ultimate commemorative living magnum opus utilises the work, play and input of every single participant, human and robotic, of the World Wide Web, and mandates a universal commitment to a unified peaceful new millennium, where subjects of the world will live together in shared harmony."<sup>183</sup>

In sharp contrast to the somewhat quixotic attempts of early net artworks to represent the extreme geo-virtual relationality of the Net's community, *The Universal Page* reduces all relationality into a flattened, nonsignifying singularity. In the five short years between Pocock and Huber's 'double-travel' across the twinned natural and virtual wildernesses, the Net had become a cluttered suburbia or a mushrooming mega-mall as the dot.com explosion reached its peak and then plummeted during

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid

March 2000.<sup>184</sup> Clearly, the proximity of Shulgin and Bookchin's project to the most dramatic rise and fall of the Net's temporary economic miracle – exemplified by the online book retailer amazon.com who, with its 'virtual' business plan and ever-mounting losses, had a higher stock market value than Boeing, with its worldwide dominance and its vast industrial base– cannot be seen as a coincidence.<sup>185</sup> If in 1998 it still seemed possible to read the universalising language of a global computer culture optimistically, by 2000 it had become increasingly hard to view this universality as anything other than a further streamlining of culture and society, through standardisation and the translation of behaviour into data trails, towards the operations of the market.

#### Intellectual Property and the 'Digital Commons'

But if the universalising standards of computer hard- and software, which in some senses provide a *lingua franca* for the global population of computer users, can be said to have aided capital's subsumption of many intimate aspects of social life and social reproduction through the homogenisation of 'cultural interfaces', it is precisely this same subsumption that has also triggered some of the most interesting responses from programmers, artists and political activists.<sup>186</sup> As the legal theorist James Boyle points out in his critical account of the recent extension of intellectual property (IP) rights in 'A Politics of Intellectual Property: Environmentalism for the

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<sup>184</sup> For a description of the dot.com bubble burst, see, amongst numerous other articles, James Fellow's 'Cover Your Basics', *The Industry Standard*, (18 December, 2000, [http://www.ebusinessworld.com/english/crd\\_ebiz\\_320683.html](http://www.ebusinessworld.com/english/crd_ebiz_320683.html))

<sup>185</sup> See *ibid*

<sup>186</sup> I take this term from Lev Manovich

Net?', "the ownership and control of information is one of the most important forms of power in contemporary society". Intellectual property links to the issues of community, globality and technology in multiple ways, all of which are best explained through Boyle's inversion of McLuhan's famous dictum. Arguing that the information age can be summarised as "the homologisation of all forms of information – whether genetic, electronic or demographic", he concludes: "The more one moves to a world in which the message, rather than the medium, is the focus of conceptual, and economic interest, the more central does intellectual property become."<sup>187</sup>

An early and important response to the twin rise of digitality and IP (where, for instance, if you own the patent on a data storage format such as MP3 you can also, to a great extent, control the circulation and consumption of the content stored in that format, or, if a book can be published on the Net as an 'e-book', its copyright can be extended indefinitely since the publisher can claim that it is still in publication) was the free software movement.<sup>188</sup> In 1984, a group of programmers, headed by the American programmer Richard Stallman, started to develop an 'open source' operating system (OS) which would eventually be called GNU/Linux.<sup>189</sup> That is to say, an OS which, unlike Microsoft's DOS, could be opened up, copied, altered and redistributed by anyone who cared to. Beyond the GNU/Linux OS itself, there are a variety of groups producing free software which can be run on this and other

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<sup>187</sup> James Boyle, 'A Politics of Intellectual Property: Environmentalism for the Net?', (1997), <http://www.law.duke.edu/boylesite/intprop.htm>

<sup>188</sup> These were just some of the numerous examples of the convergence of ICT and IP given at the International Conference on Collaboration and Ownership in the Digital Economy (CODE), Queens College, Cambridge, 4-6 April, 2001. For conference details see <http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/CODE/>

<sup>189</sup> For a history and description of GNU/Linux, see <http://www.gnu.org>

open source OSs. On a programming level, the open and collective nature of its authorship together with the ongoing 'peer testing' to which it is subjected makes for a better, less 'buggy', more elegant and versatile kind of software.<sup>190</sup> As The Free Software Foundation (FSF) explains, free software does not necessarily mean non-commercial software, since it can in fact be distributed at a price or used for commercial gain. However, if its source code remains open, if there are no limits on what purposes it can be used for, and if it can be redistributed at will and improved, then it retains its status as 'free software'. Finally, these liberties can now be legally 'copyleft' protected under the GNU General Public License (GNU GPL) or other GPLs.<sup>191</sup>

The shift I have been attempting to describe from an understanding of virtual communities based on choice or elective affinities in an ultra relational geo-virtual setting to one based on an understanding of the common material and socio-political conditions of cyberspace, is exemplified in projects such as the free software movement. Boyle sees the FSF as exemplifying the kind of activity needed to create an 'intellectual commons'; the idea that the increasing value of IP in the burgeoning information age, whose rules have, until now, been "crafted by and for the largest stakeholders" necessitates the development of a politics of intellectual property in a climate where public access to information of all kinds – such as large parts of the human genome – is increasingly proscribed by private ownership. Boyle makes the analogy to the development of environmentalism in the 1950s in which a successful political movement converted a fragmentary and highly local set of struggles over

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<sup>190</sup> For a detailed account of this position, see Eric Raymond's 'The Cathedral and the Bazaar', first completed 1997, <http://tuxedo.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/index.html>

<sup>191</sup> For details on all these aspects of the Free Software movement, see *ibid*



environmental degradation into a unified and easily graspable entity of a shared, global ecology or environmental commons:

"the 'public domain' is disappearing, both conceptually and literally, in an IP system built around the interests of the current stakeholder and the notion of the original author, around an over-deterministic practice of economic analysis and around a 'free speech' community that is under-sensitised to the dangers of private censorship. In one very real sense, the environmental movement invented the environment so that farmers, consumers, hunters and birdwatchers could all discover themselves as environmentalists. Perhaps we need to invent the public domain in order to call into being the coalition that might protect it."<sup>192</sup>

Shulgin and Bookchin's *Universal Page*, despite being a disillusioned reaction to the perceived failure of the Net's potential to accommodate "global democratic communication", does nonetheless point in the direction of a collective cultural condition on the Net. But very recently, in 2001, an 'anonymous' group of Italian net artists called 0100101110101101.org developed a project which directly engages with the idea of an intellectual or 'digital commons', the logic of open source and the identification of information and code as unifying cultural conditions. Previously, as we shall see in more detail in Chapter Four, 0100101110101101.org had drawn attention to the inherent contradictions between digital media's ability to copy information without degradation and the, as they see it, anomalous attempts to protect intellectual property on the Net. Until 2001, 0100101110101101.org's primary strategy was to create clones or pirates of various well known net art sites or, most notoriously the pay-per-view net art site called hell.com, thereby drawing attention to the impossibility of enforcing the private ownership and use of cultural

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<sup>192</sup> Boyle, 'A Politics of Intellectual Property'

artifacts.<sup>193</sup> In their 2001 project, *life\_sharing*, 0100101110101101.org radically extended their anti-authorial stance from the discrete net artwork to the whole computing environment in which it is made. Taking their cue from a technique called 'file sharing' by which computers, usually connected via an Ethernet of intranet, can share the files stored on other computer hard drives, 0100101110101101.org opened their computer's entire hard drive up to the Net. Although it is necessary to access their computer via the membrane of the browser, the viewer can nonetheless access all the files stored on the artists' hard drive simply by visiting their homepage. In a certain sense, this project simply draws attention to how the Internet already functions: when visiting a website, one is in any case downloading a file stored on a server computer's hard drive which is constantly connected, via a phone line, to the Net. 0100101110101101.org's *life-sharing* essentially operates on the same principle except, rather than only making certain files available in the form of HTML documents, here all the files, including their software and their GNU/Linux OS, is accessible.

In some respects *life\_sharing* extends Shulgin's examination of the individually inflected cultural condition of the computing environment. In an interview with I/O/D's Matthew Fuller, 0100101110101101.org comment: "Getting

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<sup>193</sup> On 2 December, 1998 *hell.com* – a 'private parallel web' exhibiting works by 'superstar' net artists such as Zuper!, absurd.org and Fakeshop – hosted a show called *Surface*, a time-limited 'private view' on the Web. Subscribers to the digital art mailing list Rhizome were selected for invitation, provided with details of the 48 hour time window (noon EST Friday 26/2 – noon EST Sunday 28/2), given its secret URL ([www.hell.com/o/no](http://www.hell.com/o/no)) as well as a username and password. The private view itself was a collection of net artworks many of which are, in any case, publicly available on the Net. 0100101110101101.org took the opportunity presented by the 'private view' to download the entire site, *detourne* some of its slogans and statements and put it on their own website (<http://WWW.0100101110101101.ORG/home/hell.com/>).

free access to someone's computer is the same as getting access to his or her culture."<sup>194</sup> But unlike Shulgin's interest in the small modifications made to an essentially homogeneous interface, 0100101110101101.org reject any psychological readings of personal customisation. In response to Fuller's own insistence that we "Stop the Anthropomorphisation of Humans by Computers", in other words, that we refuse to fall for the reductive modes of personalisation prescribed for us by software designers, 0100101110101101.org explain that they too are trying to get beyond the computer's simulacral surface:

"One of the ideas at the roots of *life-sharing* is exactly the abolition of one of the levels of simulation that separate one user from another: the website. A website, except in rare cases, is an interface that simplifies the exchange between users, making the contents 'easier' to use. This trivialisation is called 'user friendliness,' ... *life-sharing* proposes a deeper relation. It's like a 'lower-level language' that abolishes this simulation, allowing the user to directly enter one's computer, to use the data in their own time-space. The abolition of this particular simulation opens many possibilities for using the data contained inside the computer. However, it is naïve to think that it is possible to completely avoid simulation. Any language, for programming or not, is symbolic."<sup>195</sup>

0100101110101101.org are pointing to a more authentic kind of information and therefore culture which lies beneath the simulacra of metaphor-ridden software interfaces, whose functionality opens onto a possibility space of action rather than the stupefying effects the interface's obfuscations. But this concept of 'information' is also rather confusing. On the one hand, 0100101110101101.org are referring to their software and OS source codes, their bank account details, their FTP passwords and all other number of codes which one uses to engage and run informatic processes.

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<sup>194</sup> Matthew Fuller, 'Data-Nudism: An interview with 0100101110101101.org about *life\_sharing*', (2001), <http://www/walkerart.org/gallery9/lifesharing>

<sup>195</sup> Ibid

On the other hand, they are also referring to the contents of their email exchanges, details about their evasion of national service and other personal and biographical material.<sup>196</sup> In short, what they seem to be proposing is that, under the condition of what Boyle calls "the homologisation of all forms of information", instrumental code and one-off, contingent expression as well as the public and private realms merge seamlessly into each other. Information's role as a difference erasing solvent is proposed to be more fundamental than the homogenising language of software. Yet, returning to my earlier questions concerning the constitutive limit of virtual communities and the narcissism of virtual communitarian notions' of the frictionless play of multiple selves, could we not see this position as similarly divesting the self of its consistency? Doesn't the coextensivity of software and personal correspondence as information, or their mutual conversion into an open source available for manipulation by anybody, flatten identity to an intolerable and unbelievable degree? Does the word choice of a love letter really equate to the command sequences of a software programme?

Finding an answer to this charge is not straightforward, but their interview with Fuller once again sheds light on it in two different ways. The first involves their desire to combat the infringement of private interests and state surveillance on individual privacy not through cryptography but the proliferation of open information. Although they admit that being "so 'opened'" has effected the way they use their computer and express themselves through it in general, they explain that secure cryptography is only available to rich corporations and that privacy as we used to understand it has disappeared: "Consider the increasing tendency toward

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<sup>196</sup> For details on the nature of material accessible through *life\_sharing*, see *ibid*

intrusion in the private sphere.....0100101110101101.org believes firmly that privacy is a barrier to demolish. *life\_sharing* must be considered a proof *ad absurdo*. The idea of privacy itself is obsolete."<sup>197</sup> In my opinion, this is no simple celebration, but rather a decision to turn what can otherwise be considered a very threatening state of affairs to the advantage of private individuals. Rather than simply acknowledging that anyone with a minimal degree of technical expertise can access our hard drives whenever we connect to the Net and track our movements in numerous other ways, 0100101110101101.org want to grant this free circulation of knowledge "its fruition".<sup>198</sup> They also believe that the only way to avoid control is through 'data-overflow'. So despite the worrying implications of converting identity into a data set, the *life\_sharing* proposal could also be understood as a tactical and pragmatic strategy to claw back agency within the biased terrain of the information society whose rules are crafted by and for the largest stakeholders.

Within the terms of aesthetic discourse however, 0100101110101101.org's proposal also reveals a desire to radically concretise the dialogic nature of cultural forms. They claim to have "never produced anything" and describe their practice merely in terms of moving packages of information, diverting their flow and then observing any subsequent changes.<sup>199</sup> Far from perfectly controlling the resonances of the 'alien word' in the manner of poetry as described by Bakhtin, 0100101110101101.org are closer to the novel form which, perhaps unavoidably, frees the heteroglot play of meaning from authorial control. Although their claim to merely move preexisting information from one place to another is not strictly true

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid

<sup>198</sup> Ibid

<sup>199</sup> Ibid

(they do, in fact, alter small details and particularly the textual content of websites), they are nevertheless engaged in a radical freeing of meaning through an alteration of context rather than the development of 'content'. In the case of hell.com, by simply removing the necessity of having a password to access its pay-per-view site, its exclusive credentials and 'club' culture were completely undermined. In the case of *life\_sharing*, by moving their own information into the public realm they managed to undermine their own consistently sustained anonymity. These are just two instances of identity's vulnerability to and dependency on its context; an observation we encountered through Nancy's non-essentialist analysis of community and identity. It also seems likely that the parity 0100101110101101.org create between instrumental information and what we would conventionally consider to be the opacity of identity hinges on their mutual sensitivity to context. In other words, information and identity are both mutually affected by the ease with which, in the information age, the specifics of place or medium are wiped away and in which identity must be renegotiated under the conditions of a radical deterritorialisation. However, 0100101110101101.org's position is different from the ultra-relativism of virtual communitarians, and even the baffling geo-virtual relationality conjured by Pocock, Huber and Bunting. For 0100101110101101.org, identity is not only based on the shared experience of relationality (Nancy's point) but that this very relationality itself is defined by specific conditions which, one might say, essentialise it.

In this chapter we have seen how net artists engaged with the near paradox of virtual communities through their investigations of physical and virtual space, the common condition of the interface, the dialogisation of the extremely narrow

expressive range or language and, finally, the movement beyond the interface to the designation of a supposedly more fundamental collective condition – that of information. What emerges from the progression of these ideas is that although an acute sense of relationality continues to define virtual communities, it has nonetheless gained a specificity which is found not merely in the relation between things but in the operational logic which governs them. As we also saw in the case of the FSF and Boyle's call for a politics of intellectual property, when common conditions, no matter how abstract, are identified they start to lay claims on a community which finds itself connected by something more than the fluctuations of desire. In this conclusion we find a different paradox which is that the effect of information's homologisation of all forms, its ability to dissolve the singularity of things and threaten them in the process, is to create a new and far less soluble idea of a new public domain sometimes called the digital commons. This amounts to the characterisation, practice and protection of what is essentially a non-place. In the next chapter we will take a closer look at how the cool non-place of the Net, defined by variability, is effecting the 'strategies' of power and the 'tactics' of counter-power in equal measure and how the site specific work of net artists works within this.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Understanding Virtual Space, Tactically

In Chapter Two I explored the particularity of non-place through the question of community and concluded that information and the shared conditions it gives rise make communities cohere in ways that involve a degree of obligation comparable to that created by shared geography. In this chapter I will continue to explore the paradox of non-place's particularity through the operational logic of 'tactics'. As we shall see in more detail below, for Michel de Certeau as well as Marc Augé, space is defined as practiced place; the dynamisation of the qualities and properties that inhere in a particular context. In a certain sense then, place cannot be experienced except through its practice as space. De Certeau also creates a distinction between the tactical and strategic modes of behavioural, spatial, and discursive practice – tactics being identified with the perpetual, everyday, individual forms of resistance to the totalising techniques of hegemonic power whose operations he defines as strategy. Here I will bring together these two in any case inseparable categories – space/place and strategy/tactics – to ask how cyberspace creates new tactics and conversely how tactics reveal particular qualities of cyberspace. I will consider how net artists' use of tactics, to cut against the prescribed operations of various zones of the Net reveal two things: the techniques of 'post-disciplinary' power operative on the Net which start, uncannily, to resemble the tactical mode, and the heterogeneity of information space and its interruption by other spatial and social systems. Here, in



slight contrast to Boyle's discussion of information's homologisation of the message and sidelining of the medium, I wish to emphasise the importance of information's context and of other factors which limit its powerful capacity to create equivalence. In both instances the mutability of digital information is, again, of central importance since it promotes the combination and bricolage of heterogeneous parts; procedures which are innate to the tactical mode but also reveals the central importance of context. This chapter will investigate how, in a post-disciplinary, recombinant and flexible environment, tactical net art discovers new leverage points – imperfections in its smooth consistency – which disrupt the instrumental running of cyberspace.

#### Self-conscious tactics in an unstable space

In the wake of Michel Foucault's discussions of the discrete, invisible and all pervasive 'microphysics of power' at work within technocratic society, Michel de Certeau was moved to write an alternative account in which the 'network of an antidiscipline' is uncovered; a category of largely invisible, improvised and ephemeral practices which comprise 'everyday life'. This heterogeneous set of practices, de Certeau claims, exists outside discourse and has no proper name, belongs to no ideology, acts heterogeneously and by virtue of its evasiveness comprises an ongoing and ubiquitous resistance to the panoptic regime of power. The externality of practice to discourse is, ironically enough, also seen by Foucault to have characterised the advent of panoptic power, whose emergence remained similarly unarticulated in dominant discourses of power.<sup>200</sup> The panopticon's

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<sup>200</sup> De Certeau is interested in the distinction made by Foucault between a 'political technology of the body' – a set of synchronously developing but nonteleological

articulation in discourse occurred after the decentralised historical growth of a panoply of observational techniques that resulted in a coherent disciplinary regime. The panoptic or disciplinary society, argues de Certeau, is a mode of power almost necessarily in decline because it has ceased to operate at precisely this unconscious level; its very distinctness is an index of its decline. If the panoptic mode of power gained ascendancy in silence, de Certeau speculates, what other silent forms of power are coming into being? In his 1984 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he asks:

"If it is true that the grid of 'discipline' is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also 'miniscule' and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them, and finally, what 'ways of operating' form the counterpart on the consumer's (or 'dominee's') side, of the mute processes that organise the establishment of socioeconomic order."<sup>201</sup>

In what was not only a riposte to Foucault's often dispiriting discussion of the seemingly insuperable mechanisms of disciplinary power, but also an analysis of the phenotypes of technocratic rationality, de Certeau mobilises two modes of operation: strategy and tactics. The former describes force-relationships "that can be circumscribed as proper (*propre*)" and which are brought to bear on distinct and external objects.<sup>202</sup> Strategy is the mode by which legitimated power operates from within a designated field; through language, political structures of representation, the assignation of gender roles, the regulation of space, discourses of the body and so on.

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practices – and the elaboration of a body of doctrine. In the case of the advent of disciplinary society, its techniques preceded any coherent articulation of its principles.

<sup>201</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), p. xiv

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, p.xix

In short, it is the productive mode of hegemonic power. Tactics, by contrast, has no proper site, discourse or language, of its own – it "insinuates itself into the other's place", it adorns itself in the other's garb, speaks through the other's language, and, because it has no fixed address or permanent mode, never consolidates its own achievements or preserves its conquests.<sup>203</sup> Tactics comes out of the encounter with the rigid geometry of urban planning, the grammar and vocabularies of languages, the regulated flows of television, the choreography of the supermarket. In de Certeau's terms, tactics is the practice produced by 'making do' with the oppressive conditions of modernity and common people are "unrecognised producers, poets of their own affairs, trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality."<sup>204</sup> It is a mode of subversive production based in the heart of consumption.

But if Foucault and de Certeau can claim the desublimation of the panopticon, then we can also claim a similar coming to consciousness of tactics. Just as there is a split between the discourses and techniques of the disciplinary society, so is there a split between the unreflected goings on of the everyday and their conscious integration into political and aesthetic discourses. In 1992, the term 'tactical media' – which consciously referenced the theory of de Certeau – was coined by Geert Lovink, David Garcia and Caroline Nevejan, the Amsterdam based organisers of the first Next5Minutes conference.<sup>205</sup> This term soon found its way onto media culture and theory mailing lists such as nettime and the term gained common currency in the virtual communities, working groups and social circles in

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, p.34

<sup>205</sup> "The terms goes back to the discussions we had, as a group organising the first next 5 minutes conference in the summer/fall of 1992. At that time we [were using] the term 'tactical television'... The term 'tactical' also has a pre-history in the media activism context." Geert Lovink, private correspondence, 12 July, 2000.

which net artists participate.<sup>206</sup> By the third Next5Minutes conference in March 1999, tactical had become the organising theme, with activists, media theorists, artists and technologists gathering to debate a new context and mode of political and cultural resistance.<sup>207</sup> In a post-68 political environment in which the notion of a united front of resistance has come to seem as implausible as the *soixante-huitards'* as their target, imperial power, seems impracticably monolithic, the vagrant hybridity of tactics provides an important contemporary model for conceptualising and organising resistance. The structure of the Internet, which mirrors and fuels the decentralisation and hybridity of the global market economy and its geo-political correlates, becomes an obvious and important site for resistance.

The mutability of virtual space alluded to in preceding chapters, defined by the easy deployment of information as against the resistant stubbornness of materiality, presents us with an insight into the dominant mode of power and economic activity in late capitalism (a theme to which we will return in detail in Chapter Four). If the disciplinary society is characterised by the control of bodies in space – the fixing and ordering of mobile physical elements within a panoptic regime, the post-disciplinary society could be defined as the extended control of bodies from a distributed non-place entailing the interplay between informatic mobility and the strictly controlled movement of bodies and things. A powerful example of the latter is the phenomenon of capital flight from one labour force or scene of production to another more affordable one, in which the relative ease of relocation and reinvestment ensured by telecommunications is offset by the often inescapable conditions of economic depredation it leaves behind. What this example

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<sup>206</sup> Geert Lovink is a co-founder of the nettime mailing list.

<sup>207</sup> <http://www.n5m.org>

reveals is the myth of cyberspace or information space's separateness from physical space, but equally the new dynamic that occurs between the relatively frictionless flow of information and the very real barriers to the free movement of people and things. Once de Certeau described the tactical mode through the example of the walker who "lacks a place" and defined the city, animated by walkers, as "an immense social experience of lacking a place".<sup>208</sup> Today this description seems increasingly applicable to the flightiness of a deregulated global market. But despite the acceleration of phenomena such as capital flight and the caution of net activists and critics not to fall for the libertarian rhetoric of dual worlds in which cyberspace offers us an experience of unfettered freedom, others see this disjunctive relationship as filled with a radical potential.<sup>209</sup> Out of the four artworks that will be discussed below, only Heath Bunting's *X Project* addresses the relation of these spatial strata directly but, nonetheless, the ontology of virtual space, its impact on behaviour and the disruption or desublimation of our everyday activity within the Net are the concern of all the other artworks. I will be using the widely diverging theories of the spatial and environmental production of the subject offered by Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, Marc Augé and Slavoj Žižek to think through the practice of everyday life online which the artworks of Jodi, Etoy, Rachel Baker and Heath

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<sup>208</sup> De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, p.103

<sup>209</sup> "Nevertheless, the hype of the Internet is essentially based on the promise that the worldwide dissemination of new technologies might remove all barriers between people. Many critics have unmasked this rhetoric as an escape from real existing capitalism or as promotional campaign for neoliberal barbarism. However, there is a more dangerous mistake made in the popular regard for the net as an 'alternative' territory to the 'real world', or as a place, where free and unfettered communication might become a reality. In this view, borders become something you cannot see or touch, and the net and the various networks become an arena for 'new' border policies." Florian Schneider, '<Border=0> The Art of Campaigning', *Next 5 Minutes 3 Workbook*, eds, David Garcia and Geert Lovink, (Amsterdam: Next Five Minutes Publications, 1999).

Bunting present. In these works, the positing of 'typical' kinds of Internet behaviour by net artists presupposes a definition of virtual space, and vice versa. It is through the exploration of everyday behaviour, which is the concern of tactical net art, that the radical potential and oppressive flattening of cyberspatiality is brought into focus.

In a narrower sense, and as we have seen in Chapter One, artists were drawn to the Internet because it offered them the possibility of eluding the professionalisation of their own practice. In this sense, the Net offered them a 'tactical' space in which to evade the strategies of the art market. But if the Net once seemed to offer such a tactical topology, it also imposed a new set of fixed conditions which can be understood in terms of strategy.<sup>210</sup> The establishment of technical protocols, various programming languages, the domain naming and rooting system and their regulatory bodies impose a technical and legalistic language or architecture from 'above'. But, beyond the elaboration of tactics and strategy along older lines, the Net participates in a broader development of mutual imitation that occurs within both dominant cultural strategy (e.g. the 'Prada Meinhoff' guerilla mode of advertising) and cultural resistance (e.g. the adoption of corporate identities).<sup>211</sup> In this sense as well, strategy and tactics are becoming harder to

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<sup>210</sup> What I mean by 'tactical topology' is the promise of the era of the Internet before 1994 in which the blanket exclusion of commercial practice together with the high level of programming expertise of most users created the sense of a radically alternative space in which the Net's community was relatively free to determine its technical particularities at the same time as 'growing' a new set of social practices and possibilities. As against what de Certeau describes as the 'Concept-city' of rational modernity, the early Net embodied the more anarchic ideals of 'non-plan' in which its users defined the space. For an idealised description of these early days see Howard Rheingold's, *Virtual Communities: Finding Connections in a Computerised World*, (London: Mandarin, 1995)

<sup>211</sup> The group RtMark is an important example of Net based cultural activists adopting the presentation forms of large corporations. This involves a large variety

distinguish or require a new set of conceptual tools with which to decode them. An important aspect of this development for the online environment is the blurring of the production/consumption binary essentialised in the figure of the 'prosumer'.<sup>212</sup> Many dot.com businesses have attempted to annex the spontaneous gift economies of virtual communities in order to convert visitors to a site into the producers of its content in what could be formulated as a new paradigm of consumption *as* production.<sup>213</sup> Digital mutability also makes files very vulnerable to the techniques of tactical media such as plagiarism, parody and the production of fakes. However, this mutability, as we have seen, is also harnessed by the strategic forces of power at work in the Net; we begin to lose the distinction between the proprietary nature of strategy and the vagrancy of tactics. Where de Certeau describes tactical action as a slow, erosive force, comparable to the "overflow and drift over an imposed terrain, like the snowy waves of the sea slipping in among the rocks", in the new media age tactics are operating under more unstable conditions in which strategy no longer

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of tropes from the language and aesthetics of their promotional videos, to their Net-based methods for raising capital for projects, to their temporary 'mergers' with other groups to their registration of URLs, such as <http://www.GWBush.com>, or <http://www.Gatt.org>, intended to be mistaken for the websites of international organisations or politicians. See <http://www.rtmark.com>

<sup>212</sup> "[The term 'prosumer'] was coined in 1980 by the futurist Alvin Toffler - in his book *The Third Wave* - as a blend of *producer* and *consumer*. He used it to describe a possible future type of consumer who would become involved in the design and manufacture of products, so they could be made to individual specification. He argued that we would then no longer be a passive market upon which industry dumped consumer goods but a part of the creative process. Derrick de Kerckhove has called this *mass customisation*, in which everybody is in effect a member of a niche market, something Internet e-commerce is encouraging through cutting out the middleman between maker and buyer." *World Wide Words: Investigating International English from a British Point of View*, Michael Quinion, 1996, <http://www.quinion.com/words/turnsofphrase/tp-pro4.htm>

<sup>213</sup> The invitation on amazon.com for visitors to submit reviews of books and hence build a culture around the product is an example of the 'prosumer' ethos in action.

resembles anything so static as rocks.<sup>214</sup> To grasp this more concretely, we have only to consider the intensification of market research carried out within the Net – based on the increased ease with which individuals' movements and patterns of behaviour can be tracked through inventions such as 'cookies'<sup>215</sup> – to get an idea of how responsive the system has become. The user provides the 'encrypted flesh' or behavioural data-set required by the market to continuously reinvent itself in the putative image of the user-consumer who, in turn, reflects the conditions of consumption – the series of choices on offer – in a recursive loop.

In their influential manifesto, *The ABC of Tactical Media*, written in 1997, David Garcia and Geert Lovink identify this very shifting, mutating and translocatable quality of digital data as 'media hybridity' and discuss the cultural and political mobility it produces. Indeed the first passages of the manifesto acknowledge their debt to de Certeau by synopsising the ideas he sets out in *The Practice of Everyday Life* and explain the relation between the improper mode of tactics and the mutations of the digital. In their text, which was posted on media theoretical mailing lists such as nettime, Garcia and Lovink update de Certeau's tactics for the New Media environment:

"But it is above all mobility that most characterises the tactical practitioner. The desire and capability to combine or jump from one media to another creating a continuous supply of mutants and hybrids. To cross borders, connecting and re-wiring a variety of disciplines and always taking full

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<sup>214</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

<sup>215</sup> An http Cookie is "A packet of information sent by an HTTP server to a World-Wide Web browser and then sent back by the browser each time it accesses that server. Cookies can contain any arbitrary information the server chooses and are used to maintain state between otherwise stateless HTTP transactions. Typically this is used to authenticate or identify a registered user of a web site without requiring them to sign in again every time they access that site. Other uses are, e.g. maintaining a "shopping basket" of goods you have selected to purchase during a session at a site, site personalisation (presenting different pages to different users), tracking a particular user's access to a site." From *FOLDOC Computing Dictionary*, <http://wombat.doc.ic.ac.uk/foldoc/index.html>



advantage of the free spaces in the media that are continually appearing because of the pace of technological change and regulatory uncertainty."<sup>216</sup>

We should not forget that this manifesto was written at a time in which governments were still in a state of relative confusion over how to regulate the Net's content as well as the Net's own technical administration. Although 1996 saw the first serious piece of U.S. Internet legislation in the form of the Communications Decency Act, international governments were still in a state of confusion as to which existing laws could be stretched to deal with the Net, what new legislation was required and how, if at all, it could be enforced.<sup>217</sup> This was a symptom of the Net's awkward transformation from a U.S. government owned and administered research and communications tool, to a commercially open, privately financed space of international exchange. In the period between 1996 and 2001, a flurry of legislation has taken place regarding encryption, public surveillance of private communications, the liability of ISPs for the content stored on their servers, and a 'purely technical' body has been appointed by the U.S. government to regulate and administer the DNS system – the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> David Garcia and Geert Lovink, 'The ABC of Tactical Media', Nettime, (May, 1997) <http://www.nettime.org>

<sup>217</sup> The 1996 Communications Decency Act (CDA), although later overturned, attempted to criminalise the "knowing" transmission of "obscene or indecent" messages to any recipient under 18 years of age. Section 223(d) prohibits the, "knowin[g]" sending or displaying to a person under 18 of any message "that, in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards, sexual or excretory activities or organs." Sited in 'Supreme Court Of The United States Syllabus; Janet Reno, Attorney General of the United States, et al., Appellants V. American Civil Union et al. on Appeal from the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania; No. 96-511', reproduced on the Electronic Frontier Foundation website: [http://www.eff.org/pub/Legal/Cases/EFF\\_ACLU\\_v\\_DoJ/19970626\\_cda.decision](http://www.eff.org/pub/Legal/Cases/EFF_ACLU_v_DoJ/19970626_cda.decision)

<sup>218</sup> For a full explanation of the history and activities of ICANN see JJ King's 'They Came, They Bored, They Conquered', Mute, 20, (July, 2001), pp.48-52. Here King argues that the description of ICANN's activities as purely technical belies their true

These are just some of the areas in which the Internet's once 'wild frontier' is being tamed, and strategy extends itself legislatively and bureaucratically into this formerly disregarded zone.

Returning to the formulation of tactical media, we need to understand it as belonging to a whole cultural turn in which what might be described as the old 'strategies' of art and politics are abandoned in favour of parasitic, fast mutating and non-originary practices. The modernist belief in conceptual and aesthetic originality or the political belief in a singular and unifying basis for action such as class cede to a postmodern refusal of such 'essentialist' individual or collective definitions. Once entities such as authenticity and originality are invalidated by contemporary thought and the belief in class struggle retracts into the plural but more limited struggles of the 'new social movements', the modest contingency of tactical practices come to the fore. This is a form of culture and politics as far beyond metaphysics as the simulacral environment (both on and off the Net) in which they unfold. The predominance of parasitism and vagrancy in net art as such also clearly owes much to the preceding experiments of site specific, minimalist and conceptual art. These movements, along with numerous other cultural forms, usher in the postmodern refusal of authorial authenticity and the desire to reveal the collective, contingent and situated nature of the art work's construction and meaning. As with tactics, and more relevantly, tactical media, this tendency within art eschewed the 'properness' and autonomy of the artwork in favour of the unautonomous and socially determined role of the producer working within the imposed field of the everyday world. Although

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function as a 'policy laundering' arm of the US Department of Commerce in which, for example, famous name brands are systematically favoured over other non-commercial parties in respect to the registration of domain names.

adopting the materials more than the practices of the everyday, the expansion of the artwork's limit beyond its physical 'pretext' in minimalist art offers an important anticipatory development. In 1967, Michael Fried discussed this new development in what he termed 'literalist art':

"There is nothing within [the beholder's] field of vision – nothing that he takes note of in any way – that, as it were, declares its irrelevance to the situation, and therefore to the experience, in question. On the contrary, for something to be perceived at all is for it to be perceived as part of that situation. Everything counts – not as part of the object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partly depends."<sup>219</sup>

This art in which 'everything counts' is a phenomenological conception of the artwork's meaning occurring in a dynamic relationship between work, viewer and situation. In Fredric Jameson's description of the awesome scope of a Hans Haacke artwork, the circumscription of its situation extends far beyond the immediate phenomenology of the white cube to encompass a global situation. This scope is comparable to the scope of the situation articulated by net art:

"in the work of Hans Haacke, for example, [conceptual art] redirects the deconstruction of perceptual categories specifically onto the framing institutions themselves. Here the paralogsms of the 'work' include the museum, by drawing its space back into the material pretext and making a mental circuit through the artistic infrastructure unavoidable. Indeed, in Haacke it is not merely with museum space that we come to rest, but rather the museum itself, as an institution, opens up into its network of trustees, their affiliations with multinational corporations, and finally the global system of late capitalism proper (with all its specific representational contradictions)."<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', first published in *Artforum*, Summer, (1967), reprinted in *Art in Theory: 1900 – 1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.826

<sup>220</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1996), p.158

Here the artwork creates a self-consciousness in the viewer which operates on his/her own unarticulated or unreflexive behaviour in an art context and how this context, and hence his/her behaviour, fits within the distant and remote functionings of the world order. Tactical net art also centres on Net users' behaviour in specific settings, creating a similar link between a space's designation of a particular kind of behaviour and the broader system of the subject's production extended by the Net. However, the provocation of self-consciousness in the viewer by tactical net art can sometimes exceed that possessed of site specific art because its self-reflexivity invites the viewer not only to see their (physical, ideological, economic etc.) relationship to the work and the world as part of the work's circumference and vice versa, but also because it often invites them to participate in its morphology. This invitation, although not unprecedented, has an easiness based in the contiguity of the space of art and the everyday in the Net and the homologising medium of information. Tactical art attempts to arrest the process by which, in the presence of the artwork, 'the practices of everyday life' grind to a halt and a different kind of behavioral logic takes hold. Cultural critic Pierre Levy has optimistically formulated this development as 'the art of involvement' and differentiates it from preceding experiments in interactive art which he terms 'open works'. In contrast to the viewer's role within 'open work', where the viewer is solicited to "fill in the blanks, to choose between possible directions, to confront the differences in their interpretations...[to explore] the possibilities of an unfinished monument", the 'art of involvement' no longer constitutes an anterior work at all.<sup>221</sup> Instead it "causes processes to emerge, it seeks to open up a career to autonomous lives, it invites one to grow and inhabit a

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<sup>221</sup> Pierre Levy, 'The Art of Cyberspace', in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey, (London: Aperture, 1996), p.367

world. It places us in a creative cycle, in a living environment in which we are always already co-authors." <sup>222</sup>

But where does such a programmatic reading leave tactics? Are tactics simply another name for the productive capacity of countless individuals which can be massified into a coherent aesthetico-political project? Are they the behaviours preyed upon by the marketing industry in its search for the true identity of the consumer or are they that which necessarily eludes this form of systematic reincorporation? Do tactics become available to strategists when they reach the level of self-consciousness revealed in the term 'tactical media' and therefore cease to be tactical? In net art, as with the self-consciousness of tactics within tactical media, it is possible to see the elevation of this everyday practice of resistance (for example *la perruque* - the use by factory workers of their employers' resources for their own private ends) to the order of dominant cultural strategy.<sup>223</sup> If tactics no longer solely constitute the unspoken ways of 'making do' under the oppressive conditions of society, but begin to attain the legitimisation of artistic value or political *modus operandi*, do they still remain the 'antidiscipline' to the dominant order? Although this question is as hard to answer as the related question of what subversive content avant-garde culture can be said to possess when its assimilation into the cultural canon is nearly a foregone conclusion and indeed the lifeblood of the culture industry, a differentiating characteristic of tactical media and art is important to note here. In the post-disciplinary situation described above, where strategy starts to

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid

<sup>223</sup> Rachel Baker's 1999 work *Art of Work* demonstrates the exact formalisation of this tactic as an artwork. As part of a bigger project in which artwork and office work are brought into relation, she encourages fellow temps to engage in 'work resource mismanagement' by using their office time and equipment to creative and political ends. [http://www.irational.org/tm/art\\_of\\_work](http://www.irational.org/tm/art_of_work)

mimic tactics and vice versa, the timeliness and shrewdness of an action becomes essential. In a game of escalating imitation, to be the first to perform a tactical gesture which might then well be imitated is crucial. Although this might be understood as equivalent to the pursuit of novelty which preoccupies the commercial world, the subversive tactician is not motivated by the wish to consolidate on a particular idea or intervention, preferring to move on and look for the next untapped opportunity. This compunction, which suggests a significant difference to the commercial tactician, is evident in the often 'unsuccessful', incomplete or inconclusive nature of the projects which will be discussed below.

#### A Place Made of Space

De Certeau's distinction between place and space – one importantly adopted by the anthropologist of 'supermodernity' Marc Augé – will be helpful when determining the nature of the tactical mode in net art. Place, for de Certeau, describes the coexistence of things determined by their respective occupation of an exclusive location, and conversely, how location is reciprocally defined by a thing's occupation of it. In short, "the law of the 'proper' rules in the place."<sup>224</sup> (This 'properness' is partly responsible for Augé's positing of 'place' as a form of resistance to the deterritorialised disorientation of supermodernity). Space, by contrast, is "composed of intersections of mobile elements" it "occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalise it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs of contractual proximities."<sup>225</sup> De Certeau essentialises this difference by drawing an analogy to the difference between *langue* and *parole*.

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<sup>224</sup> de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p.117

<sup>225</sup> Ibid

Tactics is then, nearly by definition, a spatial mode, and one through which place is practiced and experienced.

But what could be said to constitute a place on the Internet? The word 'site', which in ordinary speech would designate a precise location in space, doubles as the technical term for a particular digital file or 'information object' which is only ever viewed in the form of a reassemblage.<sup>226</sup> That is to say, what we view in our browser window is the software's *interpretation* of a set of instructions, a string of 0s and 1s. On the Internet, although things can be designated a coordinate (an IP number or URL) nothing can ever be said to occupy a unique location. But even if we accept the distinction made by de Certeau and Marc Augé regarding place and space, and even though a website no longer occupies a singular location in the manner of a physical object, it is still possible to see certain equivalences to place. As with place, we know what we have to do to get there, as with place we can compare the experience of having been there with others, as with place our knowledge of it is always existential, dynamised by our passage across it, inflected with our intentions towards it, coloured by our encounters within it. But crucially, unlike place, we cannot build a sense of identity around a site on the Internet, we cannot belong to it and least of all attach foundation narratives to it. We cannot feel within it the echo of what Augé describes as 'anthropological place'.

Quoting from the ethnologist Marcel Mauss, Augé discusses the part-fictional character of anthropological place in terms of the relationship of 'average man' to the territory he inhabits. This man is born into a closed world, founded 'for once and all' and inscribed so deeply upon him that it does not have to be consciously understood.

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<sup>226</sup> This term is used by Jon Ippolito in 'The Museum of the future: A Contradiction in Terms?', (July 1998), [http://www.three.org/variable\\_media/vm\\_concept.html](http://www.three.org/variable_media/vm_concept.html)

The 'total social fact' subsumes within itself any interpretation of it that its indigenous members may have:

"The 'average' man resembles 'almost all men in archaic or backward societies' in the sense that, like them, he displays a vulnerability and permeability to his immediate surroundings that specifically enable him to be defined as 'total'"<sup>227</sup>.

As we shall see, the connection between environmental permeability and a particular kind of identity are important subjects for the tactical practice of net art. The level of imperviousness which characterises the 'average' user's relation to the Net is a point of investigation for these tacticians attempting to create a more bruising encounter between the space of the Net and its subject. In order to become the producer of an idiolect (the personal/tactical mode of enunciation formed within imposed strictures), the subject must become sensible to the particularities of their environment and confident of their ability to find their own passage through it.

In 1996, Etoy, the Swiss net art group-cum-spoof-corporation, tried to provoke just such an awakening by targeting the supposedly neutral zone of the search engine with their artwork *Digital Hijack* (fig 8.)<sup>228</sup> Search engines are some of the most frequently 'visited' sites on the Net with Altavista already drawing 32 million users per day by September 1998.<sup>229</sup> They act as huge centres of traffic convergence in the supposedly decentralised structure of the Net, but notably – similarly to airports – cannot be described as places of gathering. Although visitors

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<sup>227</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, (London: Verso, 1997), p.49

<sup>228</sup> <http://www.hijack.org>

<sup>229</sup> Hartmut Winkler, 'Search Engines: Metamedia on the Internet?', *Readme! ASCII Culture and the Revenge of Knowledge*, eds. Josephine Bosma et al, (The Netherlands: Autonomedia, 1999), p.30



frequently return, it is not in order to find something rooted in a singular location or to meet other visitors, but rather to use a service that spatialises the rest of the Net through the production of a set of URLs. Hartmut Winkler attributes their popularity to their perceived neutrality: "Offering a service as opposed to content, they appear as neutral mediators."<sup>230</sup> It is precisely because the search engine serves as a portal to elsewhere that it becomes a heavily frequented site. For this reason we can see the search engine as the quintessence of the transformation of place into space. The fact that a site's centrality is directly related to its distributive capacity tells us a great deal about the way in which spatial practices on the Net are characterised by passage rather than settlement.<sup>231</sup> Nothing could be further from the permeability of the subject to anthropological place than the indifference of the Net user to the putative neutrality of the search engine website.

It is precisely this neutrality that Etoy singled out for attack in their *Digital Hijack*. In tune with Winkler's criticisms, Etoy created a mechanism for alerting people to their unquestioning acceptance of the search engine's mode of selecting and hierarchising URLs. The actual method of aggregating and organising websites in accordance with the user's keyword is, in reality, anything but exhaustive or disinterested. In the early days of search engines, some companies (such as Yahoo) paid employees to categorise websites 'by hand', thus making available only a tiny proportion of the total number of websites on the Net. Of course what was made available was the final result of a series of subjective choices and corporate

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid

<sup>231</sup> Here I am referring to user behaviour or navigation not the registration of URLs and the production of content which could undoubtedly be likened to settlement. It is important to note however, in the latter case, that settlement does not necessarily relate to time spent in a certain place but rather ownership of the right to be located or to mediate a certain message.

categorisations made by a team of coders.<sup>232</sup> The subsequent automation of this process has not, however, resulted in any fundamental increase in accuracy, comprehensiveness or compatibility between the keyword and the list of URLs displayed in response. Unable to master complex linguistic issues such as syntax, and therefore unable to interpret the meaning of strings of search terms, many search algorithms will simply prioritise URLs according to the number of times the search terms are mentioned.<sup>233</sup>

This is just one example of how the map of the WWW produced by the search engine is deficient and, more importantly for us, how the system is vulnerable to manipulation. Realising this point of leverage, Etoy began to analyse the top 20 sites returned by search engines in response to some of the most popular search terms such as 'porsche, penthouse, madonna...'<sup>234</sup> Essentially, Etoy found a way to manipulate the system by updating an older practice called 'spamdexing'. This is a simple 'hacker's' trick by which a keyword is inserted repeatedly into an HTML document to ensure that a website is featured high up in the search engine display hierarchy.<sup>235</sup> Etoy used their 'Ivana bot' (probably an algorithm) to analyse the

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<sup>232</sup> Yahoo! named its categorisation system 'the ontology', succinctly betraying the contradiction between its purported utility and underlying bias. See Winkler, p.31

<sup>233</sup> "Search engines of this type are wholly insensible to questions of semantics or, to make it more clear: their very point is to exclude semantic problems of the type evident with Yahoo. Yet that is not to say that the problems themselves are eradicated. They are imposed on the users through the burden of having to reduce their questions to unambiguous strings of significant, of having to be satisfied with the mechanically selected result. All questions unable to be reduced to keywords fall through the screen of the feasible. Technical and scientific termini are relatively suitable for such a search, humanistic subjects are less suitable." Ibid, p. 32

<sup>234</sup> For Etoy's explanation of the Digital Hijack see <http://www.hijack.org>

<sup>235</sup> After search engine employees started to spot this trick merely by eye, spamdexers simply made the repeated word the same colour as the background and so rendering it invisible. For a discussion of Etoy and the history of spamdexing see Andrew Leonard's 'Search Me', *Hotwired*, (1996)

<http://hotwired.lycos.com/packet/leonard/96/32/index3a/html>

particular combination of keywords embedded in the top 20 websites returned to a keyword such as 'porsche'. They then generated thousands of 'dummy trap' pages each of which contained combinations of thousands of popular keywords, thus ensuring that the pages would be returned in the top 20 category of numerous word searches. For a short period after March 1996, surfers using search engines were regularly 'hijacked' by dummy trap pages which, far from displaying information about a desirable car or popstar would harass hostages with the message: "Don't fucking move – this is a digital hijack by etoy.com". If the hostage/viewer decided to follow the links through the website, they would first discover what number hostage of the Etoy 'organisation' they were, then view an animated GIF of a shaven-headed Etoy member in dark glasses and ambiguously plugged into a cable at the navel, and finally receive a blunt mission statement:<sup>236</sup>

"It is definitely time to blast action into the Net! Smashing the boring style of established electronic traffic channels.

Welcome to the Internet Underground".

Today, after the search engines succeeded in terminating Etoy's action, the statement posted on a sample site concludes:

"Although officially stopped, we cannot protect you from getting hijacked. We lost control.

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<sup>236</sup> The Etoy team, in all public appearances, dress with complete uniformity. The entirely male group sport shaved heads and favour utility clothing such as municipal-style boiler suits. The picture of the Etoy member mentioned, through the anonymity of the dark glasses and casual connection to the cable – a cipher for the information technosphere – produces its member as replaceable techno-cultural 'foot soldier' (a term later employed by the group). This mode of subject positioning creates a glamorised, possibly ironic surface to a posthumanist understanding of the erstwhile divide between nature and artifice.

Comparing Shock and the Order of Experience in Modernity and the Net

Walter Benjamin's discussion of the relationship between memory and experience is a useful text to draw on at this stage, because it provides an excellent way of thinking about the shock tactics used by Etoy, their role in the practice of place as well as a means of contrasting the space of modernity with Augé's discussion of anthropological place – a crucial way of entering a discussion on non-place in 'supermodernity' and on the Net. In his essay "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", Benjamin uses the two Freudian terms for experience: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. *Erlebnis* means an experience for which we are psychologically prepared and against which we have developed a protective shield to parry the impact of a stimulus. Experiences absorbed in such a way can pass instantly into our conscious experience (*Erlebnis*) because they are anticipated and therefore do not produce traumatic effects – traumatic stimulation being understood here as the basis for (involuntary) memory, a function of the unconscious. *Erfahrung* is the order of experience attributed to a stimulus for which we are unprepared. Our lack of anticipatory shielding means that this experience cannot immediately enter our consciousness, but instead plants a memory trace that will then be worked through retroactively, through the act of involuntary memories or dreams. *Erfahrung*, therefore, is the order of experience which entails a dissolution of shock through the psychological relay of revisitations; the integration of an experience into a deeper level of identity. One that cannot be casually and voluntarily recalled, and equally cannot be so easily shrugged off. Benjamin understands Baudelaire's lyrical relationship to the modern metropolis

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<sup>237</sup> Etoy, <http://www.hijack.org>.

as the paradoxical endeavour of creating a reencounter with a series of habitual shocks in the conscious act of writing and reading poetry. He asks how "lyric poetry can have as its basis an experience for which the shock experience has become the norm."<sup>238</sup> Benjamin, along with other modernist theorists of the metropolis such as Georg Simmel, makes the observation that as we grow accustomed to the battery of shocks afforded by the crush of population density, the chaos of crowds, the assaults of advertising and the din and danger of traffic, so too do our protective shields become more efficient and total. In the modern city, *Erfahrung* diminishes while *Erlebnis* increases. Quoting from Baudelaire, he figures this shift in the disappearance of the daydreamer's unfocused look and the advent of the prostitute's wary and shifting glance:

"Her eyes, like those of a wild animal, are fixed on the distant horizon; they have the restlessness of a wild animal...but sometimes also the animal's sudden tense vigilance."<sup>239</sup>

Let us then compare this condition to the permeability of the 'average man' in anthropological place. Here we can examine how collective social symbolisations work upon the irregular topography of place as an index of *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. In Augé's characterisation of anthropological place, he discusses how, despite the indigenous inhabitants' knowledge of the relativity and contiguity of their home territory, they confer upon it the mythical status of a singular origin. A way of naturalising the contingent. Each new occurrence, such as a birth or death, however well 'known', has to be incorporated into a discourse and thereby naturalised into the mythological syntax. In other words, the universal significance of a particular place

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<sup>238</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, (London: Verso, 1997), p.116

<sup>239</sup> Charles Baudelaire, quoted by Benjamin, *Ibid*, p.151

is constantly reaffirmed through the ritual inscription of the particular into the universal. By contrast, in de Certeau's discussion of the 'concept-city' – the modern city of enlightenment rationality and the urban planner, the city whose origins Baudelaire witnessed and which preempt cyberspace – the specificity of place and its subjects is flattened through the imposition of the universalising, self-constituting and dehistoricising myth of rationality.<sup>240</sup> A myth which excludes those stubborn particularities which cannot be assimilated into its system: "a rejection of everything that is not capable of being dealt with in this way and so constitutes the 'waste products' of a functionalist administration (abnormality, deviance, illness, death, etc.)."<sup>241</sup> Occurring then at the same time as the escalating shocks of the modern city and their concurrent defensive psychological mechanisms is the invalidation of the specificity of places and their inhabitants, their histories and contradictions. We can view the concept-city as a utopian/dystopian fantasy existing in advance of (and at odds with) its actual construction, operating in tandem with the order of experience which Benjamin terms *Erlebnis*.

But what is the order of 'shock' manufactured for Etoy's digital hostages? The search engine itself can certainly be seen as a kind of concept-city imposing the template of universality and rationality – through its promise of categorisation and inclusiveness – onto the specificity of the Net's unmappable expanse. The user's God-like view over this (albeit imperfect) inventory of the Net involves the same fantasy of legibility that transfixes the beholder of a city from above.<sup>242</sup> Perhaps in

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<sup>240</sup> This concept is also encapsulated by Henri Lefebvre in his term 'abstract space'. See, Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1974, republished (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)

<sup>241</sup> de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*., p.94

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid*, p.92

this sense, the production of the dummy trap page causes the user to tumble from their vantage point into the sticky illegibility of the Net's tangled and undecipherable terrain – the tactical point of view. These self-conscious tacticians have wrested the stunned subject from the alienating universality of the spectacle and returned them to the everyday practice of the walker who "write(s) without being able to read".<sup>243</sup> Or rather, who views a list of websites in the knowledge that their selection is, to a great degree, contingent and incomplete. But has this really shocked the viewer? Has the hoax managed to slip in under the guard of the viewer's sensory shield and produce *Erfahrung* in the place of *Erlebnis*? Has the viewer's divestment of the fantasy of legibility and the universalising myth of the Net's inherent rationality produced a bruising encounter with environmental specificity and, in some sense, converted the search engine into an actual place, or better, a non-place replete with particularity? This question contains within it the presumption that the 'view from above', the construction of legibility, is a means by which the subject defends against shock of the unexpected just as the dweller in the modern city guards against the shock of contingent encounters through preempting and thus distancing themselves from their effects.

But perhaps there is an incompatibility between these questions and the Net because here we are dealing with a simulacral system *par excellence*. Within such a system, and in particular one that operates on the principles of its digital mutability, it is harder to perceive the distinction between an actual breakdown and its simulation or the occurrence of the unexpected within a programmatic field of

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid, p.93

novelty production.<sup>244</sup> Furthermore we are also dealing with a zone of naturalised hybridity. The search engine applies the logic of library categorisation to a networked computer file system which, in turn, adopts the imagery of geographical space as evidenced in words such as 'website', 'site map' and 'portal' and the browser softwares' adoption of the terms 'navigator' and 'explorer'. The ease with which these categories can be successfully combined reveals a great deal about the flexibility of the Net's symbolic economy. So long as equivalences can be found between semantic systems and an appropriate representational language assigned, then their combination is permissible. This environment then is neither the originary site of the indigenous fantasy nor the concept-city with its disjuncture between rationalist fantasy and specificity. When Etoy engineer the shock of a dummy trap page, they may educate the viewer as to the workings of the system but they do not create any fundamentally new relationship or fantasy between the viewer and the site. In effect the dummy trap page is just a further augmentation of the constantly shifting simulatory panorama that is the Net. In this respect the Net does not possess the metaphysics of place where things reside in an exclusive location and around which or against which systems of meaning operate. It is, rather, a differential system without limit. Self-conscious tactics, if they do not disrupt the simulacral equivalence of the Web, or sufficiently draw attention to its operative logic and remain instead within the play of difference, are unlikely to produce the experience of *Erfahrung* or a deeper understanding of the mechanisms which underpin the Net's non-place. In this next section we will address some tactical artworks which attempt

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<sup>244</sup> It has, for example, become a common feature of both commercial and artistic websites to deploy error messages to startle the viewer into concentration – most typically these do not presage an imminent computer crash but merely introduce a new part of the site.



to cut through this simulacral equivalence through the imbrication of physical and virtual territories.

### X marks the Spot: Portals to Place

When Josephine Bosma entitled her 1997 interview with Heath Bunting "Street Artist, Political Net Artist or Playful Trickster?"<sup>245</sup> she linked together some of the key issues at work in Bunting's tactical use of the Net. Were the word 'or' to be replaced with 'and', dispensing with the false problem of choosing between three not incommensurate identity types, we would have a description of the artist which hits upon the crucial attribute of his art: the creation of friction between physical and virtual space through the indeterminacy of play.

In the same interview Bunting discusses a work that he would later title *CCTV – World Wide Watch*, completed in 1997. (figs 9a. & b.) His deadpan tone perfectly conveys the essence of the tactical mode; at once ironic, throw-away and serious:

"At the moment I am working on a closed circuit television camera project across the Internet whereby you can watch various city centres in various countries of the world, for instance Tokyo, Dublin, LA and London. Each of these cameras is linked to a webpage and on that webpage you are encouraged to watch these street locations for various crimes. If you see anything, you can type the details into the text box, click a button and this information will be sent directly via fax to the local police station, for instance at Leicester Square. So it's somehow encouraging people to police themselves and save the police some labour, so they don't have to watch other people."<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Josephine Bosma, 'Heath Bunting: Street Artist, Political Net Artist or Playful Trickster?' Telepolis, (August, 1997) <http://www.heise.de/tp>

<sup>246</sup> Ibid

In the final version of the project, Bunting confronts the viewer with a sequence of near-aerial CCTV views of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, New York; Broadgate, Coventry; the Marktplatz, Guetersloh, Germany and a street in Oviedo, Spain. (One presumes that Bunting developed this list fairly contingently within the compass of his travels). The viewer's giddy sense of voyeuristic power, derived from the ability to view four city scenes simultaneously, unknowingly laid out for our voyeuristic gratification, is augmented by the invitation to intervene. The viewer is confronted with the choice of converting the implicit power of the gaze into its explicit enactment (I am choosing to believe that the fax numbers are what Bunting says they are). The viewer can travel the Jamesonian mental circuit between their own occupation of the legible space of strategy and the tactical and partial space of everyday life occupied by the subject of the CCTV camera and, ordinarily, themselves. The contradictory nature of the spaces conflated in this work (both God-like and on-the-ground) becomes quite uncomfortable when the viewer's potential power looms into view. In contrast to the *Digital Hijack* where the hoped for moment of awakening is instantaneously neutralised by virtue of its inability to step outside the play of simulacral equivalence, Bunting shocks the viewer awake with the unsettling prospect of cutting through this field of equivalences and triggering events in the albeit completely mediated spectacle of an actual place and the lives of its inhabitants. To the extent that this intervention could only ever be consumed spectacularly and the hypothetical criminal could never return the gaze of the viewer, the view from above is only ever departed from imaginatively. What seems to be happening here is that the viewer who is used to the presence of CCTV cameras tracking his or her movements in shops and many urban areas, suddenly finds him/herself on the other

end of the power relationship. He/she is viewing other ordinary people walking in the streets nearly as if he/she were viewing him/herself. In this tactical reversal, the panopticon is converted into a game – in much the same way as the military theming of many computer games – for the entertainment of the viewer. A gesture that deflates its remote power and also suggests ways in which its techniques can be turned against 'the system' itself. In short, the shock delivered here is the shock of occupying the position of power where legibility and agency are combined. This dual position of distance *and* involvement is not dissimilar from that occupied by the flâneur, as explored by Benjamin in his discussion of Baudelaire and the Paris of the Second Empire, who is at once enthralled by the crowd but aloof, whose fascination with this fleeting, polymorphous spectacle is an analytical one, whose style it is "to go botanizing on the asphalt"<sup>247</sup>.

So if *CCTV – World Wide Watch* playfully and critically insinuates the look of power, it also implies the reciprocal gaze of its subject. Next to the form on the website which, in its generic simplicity, invites the viewer to reflexively dash off a note to the ever attentive forces of law and order, are set the words:

"Improve self policing  
with further absented  
police force."

This exhortation to internalise the burden of policing and thus further atomise and virtualise the forces of discipline until no external display of power remains, ironically articulates the ultimate Foucauldian nightmare against which de Certeau's antiscipline of tactics is practiced. Here the viewer, who can perhaps be cast as

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<sup>247</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', *Charles Baudelaire*, p.36

unconsciously assisting the spread and perfection of Foucault's 'political technologies of the body' by incorporating them seamlessly into the fabric of his/her life, is confronted not merely with those technologies but their articulated discourse. As with the conflation of spaces and gazes, *CCTV* also conflates the normally silent functioning of the technology with an explicit enunciation of its disciplinary role. In the tactical mode described by de Certeau, disciplinary techniques are mitigated or temporarily overridden by the spontaneous activities of their subjects which are then nearly instantly lost in the flux of everyday life. But here we have a concise example of the self-consciously subversive adoption of tactics in which the action of the artist serves as a sort of blueprint for the propagation of a wider rebelliousness.

This self-consciousness certainly parallels the deeply paradoxical nature of de Certeau's undertaking which was to articulate, through the formal terms of academic discourse, a set of 'polytheist' practices whose silence or existence outside discourse endows them with the potential to "produce a fundamental diversion within the institutions of order and knowledge."<sup>248</sup> There is certainly something rather confusing about his attempt to articulate a practice of resistance whose very status as such, not to mention efficacy, relies on its muteness. But for de Certeau, it seems, the guarantor of their survival is their imbrication in the very heart of regulatory disciplines such as consumption. They constitute the ineradicable indices of alternative techniques and practices which return, like the repressed, in the disciplinary regime which attempts to dispel them. In this respect perhaps one could see tactics in the same light as Negri and Hardt's constituent power which transhistorically and by definition defies its assimilation into its opposite –

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid, p.49

constituted power – or, in this case, strategy. In light of this inherent resistance, tactical art or media would appear to operate as a third term, one which neither threatens the ongoing and infinitely adaptive nature of tactics proper nor mirrors the adaptation of tactical reactivity for purely instrumental ends. Tactical art and media try to harness a power resident in tactics but precisely in order to allow a coherent but unpredictable picture to emerge *from below* that challenges the power of strategy. In this respect, the ideals of tactical media and art also come close to Negri and Hardt's communication of singularities discussed in Chapter Two.

A project by Bunting that seems to exemplify this interpretation of tactics is his *X Project* begun in 1996. (fig 10.)<sup>249</sup> Combining his predilection for wandering about city streets and the semi-legal practice of tagging in chalk with his interest in the emergent social space of the Net, Bunting began a systematic programme of tagging the URL 'www.irational.org/x' in strategic places, primarily in London but also in other sites such as Bath, Amsterdam and Berlin (one presumes he simply tagged in the cities he happened to visit).<sup>250</sup> A passer by who, on observing the URL, felt inclined to look it up on the Net would find a white page with minimal information on it. Underneath a JPEG image derived from the chalked tag are the following three questions: "Where did you see this chalked? (Please include city and country)"; "Why do you think it was done?"; and "Who do you think did it?" On filling out and submitting the questionnaire, a page which collates all the answers is downloaded. Today there are several hundred entries. The specific sites that the artist chose to tag were by no means random. In London Bunting primarily chose bridges

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<sup>249</sup> <http://www.irational.org/x>

<sup>250</sup> "I like playing. Yesterday I was walking around climbing on things, drawing little drawings with chalk...I spent many years just walking around the streets." In Bosma, 'Heath Bunting: Street Artist'

(Hungerford and Waterloo) as well as international sites of significance to new media culture such as Clink Street. (the site of an independent media laboratory Backspace where Bunting and Rachel Baker often worked), The Hub in Bath and De Waag in Amsterdam. It is likely that the bridges indicate the notion of crossing between zones – the central activity of *X Project* – and that the media centres also intimate concerted initiatives to depart local geography and enter into series of remote collaborations.

By means of the chalk tag, Bunting has created a semiotic and functional portal between virtual and physical space. In contrast to *Digital Hijack*, *X Project* taps into the contingencies of wandering. Rather than manufacturing a shock for the viewer, caught unawares in the midst of their somnambulant passage through the regularised space of the search engine, Bunting positions his tags to be caught by the corner of the eye in the midst of an awkward climb up the steep steps of a bridge or in the nooks and crannies of back streets – a mode in which awareness of place is heightened. The chalked tag catches the walker in the midst of a tactical traversal and the project's completion relies upon the viewer's alertness and curiosity to pursue this index of virtual space in the midst of physical place. Rather than reinforcing the sense of the homogeneous order of virtual space, Bunting hybridises physical and virtual space and creates a tear not only in the latter but also in the former.<sup>251</sup>

Importantly, it is by making this incision in the self-containment of each – or rather making explicit the impossibility of such self-containment – that the plural and self-

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<sup>251</sup> Since the advent of *X Project* the URL's appearance in public space has become ubiquitous through its use in advertising. However the chalked tag's lack of any other identifying feature makes Bunting's use of the URL more ambiguous than its usual association with a commercial product. It's dubious legal status also aligns it with the tactical appropriation of public space or spectacle for ends which ultimately militate against its regulatory administration.

erasing nature of wandering can be mapped, recorded and co-ordinated. This suggests the potential to view from above what is created from below and a reversal of the power implied in this collective inscription. Rather than the fantasy of legibility implying a disengagement from the everyday, here an aggregative map is created by and for the walker, the subject of discipline. Perhaps this text is written blind, but it promises the eventual possibility of being read somewhere else and by someone else. The series of correspondences which 'emerge' on the website brings into being the consciousness of the cumulative potential of individual wandering. Tactical media art is here shown to be not only the coming to self-consciousness of those silently resistant ways of operating, but to reveal the power resident in this coming to consciousness. A recognition that precipitates an aggregation, and hence the realisation of the power which these multiple movements compose. The first in a long series of answers to the question "Why do you think it was done?" encapsulates this notion very well: "to collide the known with the emergent."<sup>252</sup>

#### Has VR really killed desire? Tactics and 'Post-Oedipal' Space

Bunting's interplay of 'real' space and 'virtual space', their ability to interrupt each other, poses an interesting question to a recurrent formulation of Slavoj Žižek's touched on in Chapter One. In a series of writings on cyberspace and the functioning of desire, Žižek proposes that virtualisation reveals the always-already virtual nature of reality – the role of the symbolic order – at the same time as bringing about a

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<sup>252</sup> <http://www.irational.org/x>

'psychotic' suspension of the symbolic order that structures this same reality.<sup>253</sup> In the beginning of his essay "Quantum Physics with Lacan", Zizek illustrates this point by referencing Lacan's discussion of courtly love.<sup>254</sup> For Lacan, courtly love is not a means of intensifying desire by creating more obstacles between its subject and object, but rather of concealing the fact that the possibility of satisfying desire *per se* does not exist; an impossibility that is concealed by its very prohibition. In Lacan's own formulation courtly love is: "A very refined manner of supplanting the absence of the sexual relationship by feigning that it is us who put the obstacle in its way."<sup>255</sup> Desire, explains Zizek, is a short circuiting between the 'primordially lost Thing' (i.e. the child's pre-oedipal and blissful fusion with its mother) and an empirical object which is elevated to the order of the former: "this object thus fills out the 'transcendental' void of the Thing, it becomes prohibited and thereby starts to function as the cause of desire."<sup>256</sup> In cyberspace, however, (and for Zizek, it is important to remember, his depiction of cyberspace hangs somewhere between its actual and fictional forms in the absence of specific, concrete examples), when 'every' empirical object can be immediately obtained without the ordinary frustrations such as the need to cross physical space or the scarcity of the desired item, "the absence of the prohibition necessarily gives rise to anxiety."<sup>257</sup> The question that is posed here is how desire can be sustained let alone function when its paradoxical nature – "the fact that desire is sustained by lack and therefore shuns its

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<sup>253</sup> See 'Quantum Physics with Lacan' in *The Indivisible Remainder*, 'Cyberspace, Or, The Unbearable Closure of Being' in *The Plague of Fantasies* and 'Is it Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace?' in *The Zizek Reader*.

<sup>254</sup> In Slavoj Zizek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, (London: Verso, 1996)

<sup>255</sup> Sited in *Ibid*, p.189

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid*, p.190

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*



satisfaction, that is, the very thing for which it officially strives"<sup>258</sup> – is lain bare. Zizek answers this by describing a trend in which the computer generation becomes increasingly unable to tolerate the look of desire in others, and are wont to forget about a possible sexual liaison because, for example, they are too engrossed in playing computer games or interacting in chatrooms. As prohibition is lifted and desire declines, last ditch attempts to preserve the dignity of the sexual object are mounted such as PC and religious fundamentalism. But the real effect of these prohibitive discourses is a phobic reaction to 'normal' sexual enjoyment which is everywhere cast as perverted. This, argues Zizek, develops the subject as pathological Narcissus who prefers 'interaction' with the computer to sexual engagement or the look of desire in the eyes of another. Both VR and 'interactivity' are in Zizek's terms 'Orwellian misnomers', covering up in the former the demise of the already virtual structuring of reality and in the latter the increasing isolation of the individual who no longer interacts properly with others.

At the root of the individual's primordial envelopment in virtual space or cyberspace is "the dream of a language which no longer acts upon the subject merely through the intermediate sphere of meaning, but has direct effects in the real."<sup>259</sup> Yoked to this dream of profound involvement, is the radical disengagement of the post-oedipal subject. The psychotic's relation to the symbolic (one which Zizek compares to the subject of cyberspace) is defined both by externality and over-proximity. On the one hand he/she is not interpellated into the symbolic order (the signifying chain is 'inert') and remains outside it, and on the other the gap between 'things' and 'words' is collapsed and he/she starts to treat words as things or things

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid

<sup>259</sup> Ibid, p.196

start to speak themselves. In cyberspace, the space between word and thing which sustains sense is collapsed, as is 'symbolic engagement' which operates in this space, resulting in radical disengagement: "I can pour out all my dirty dreams, precisely because *my word no longer obliges me*, is not 'subjectivised'."<sup>260</sup> Interestingly, however, Zizek shies away from describing a total collapse of the symbolic economy in cyberspace or virtual reality. Instead, he sees the agreement between users to suspend the usual performativity of the symbolic order as analogous to the agreement between analyst and analysand in which the normal performativity of speech is also suspended: the analysand can hurl verbal abuse at the analyst and it won't be taken personally. Likewise, in cyberspace, the participant consents to 'play the game' in which, despite words having little or no performative value, they are nonetheless bound by the symbolic pact of the 'act of faith' in which intersubjective relations in cyberspace are contained.

One of the main difficulties with Zizek's analysis is his characterisation of cyberspace itself as the context in which this new order of subjecthood finds its perfect conditions. Although Zizek does not imply that the disappearance of prohibition is a consequence of cyberspace itself, he certainly does see cyberspace as producing no internal resistance to its unbridled advance. His homogeneous description of the typical cyber subject and *his* mode of activity betrays the limitation of Zizek's model; he seems invariably to be talking about a cliché of the anti-social, well-healed, masculine, avidly consuming and games-playing computer geek. Cyberspace itself is cast as the ultimate consumption machine whose success lies in its ability to collapse the sign into the thing; the immateriality of the

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid, p.196

commodity. However, as we have seen above in the example of Bunting's work, although information entails this radical mutability that undoubtedly vehiculates Zizek's collapse of the word into the thing, or by which the word becomes the thing, and the thing thereby becomes as malleable as words, the collision of virtual and real spaces can and does occur revealing that the Net's consistency is far from simple. That is to say, the leakage between these two spheres reveals not only a resistance to the psychotic collapse that Zizek himself ultimately denies through his recourse to the symbolic pact, but also the possibility of using virtual space to engage in speech acts which might well entail a great deal of performativity. There are numerous mundane examples in which individuals feel obliged to be as good as the word they give via the Internet, but here we are also interested in the opportunity cyberspace gives for co-ordinating the confused multiplicity of individual idiolects, of converting tactics into something close to strategies. An exceptional example of this were the protests against the WTO which occurred in Seattle in late November/early December 1999 which serve as an example of this transformative potential of cyberspace. Here a multiplicity of political ideologies and actors were coordinated largely via the Net into a formidably *performative* display of resistance against a powerful agent of globalisation.

But, exceptional political insurgencies aside and excluding the dimension of physical space and 'atom-based' things, is Zizek's notion of our unimpeded access to the object of desire in cyberspace quite accurate? Does the potential immediacy of its technical delivery really translate into frictionless, if not ultimately satisfying, consumption? And, relatedly, do digital objects really become as malleable as words? At this point we will turn to Rachel Baker's 1997 work, *Dot2Dot*, which

reveals the very skillful capacity of the Net to frustrate desire. (fig 11.)<sup>261</sup> In this work, Baker takes her cue from the Net porn industry which typically lures the viewer/consumer deeper and deeper into a site with free 'thumbnail' GIFs promising the full scale image but which ultimately delivers the image either at a price or, if free, only at an illegibly small size.<sup>262</sup> Far from the theoretical end of scarcity online which the digital promises and Zizek assumes to have been achieved, artificial scarcity is imposed in order to intensify desire and thus increase the monetary value of the digital object. In *Dot2Dot*, Baker picks up on this Net porn technique and exaggerates its manipulations to reveal the enduring power of (pornographic) commodity fetishism in the Net. The art website's homepage is a dot-to-dot drawing of a copulating man and woman against a deep blue background whose subject matter, although largely composed of dots and numbers, is not hard to make out. As is usual in children's drawing books, certain areas of the final image are already filled in. In *Dot2Dot*, these parts are the woman's eye, hands and vagina and the man's mouth and fingers. Here the peek-a-boo suggestiveness of certain pornographic images is undercut by the delineation rather than concealment of the sexually or sensually 'significant' parts. Each dot in the drawing also doubles as a link to another page on the site where a predictably salacious GIF is offered (e.g. "fist inserted fully into pussy") but only on condition that the viewer/consumer enters personal details such as their name and company details. Having submitted these, the viewer is brought straight to the irrational.org homepage and the promise is never honoured.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> <http://www.irrational.org/tm/dot2dot>

<sup>262</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between the free or 'gift' and commercial porn economy, see Frédéric Madre's 'Porn Free', *Mute*, 14, (September, 1999), pp.17-21

<sup>263</sup> irrational.org is the server name and group working title for Rachel Baker, Heath Bunting and others

Through this frustrated libidinal circuit, Baker not only intimates how the traditional commodity's never-honoured 'promissory note' is still operative, but also how the consumer is willing to submit more and more personal data in its pursuit. The exchange of one real data body for the unkept promise of another.

Baker's hoax can in some ways be compared with Etoy's *Digital Hijack* in that, as with the hijack, Baker is playing on the notional conformity of the viewer. Here, the cooperativeness of the user and their willingness to exchange valuable personal data on the vague promise of some form of libidinal gratification is at issue. But unlike the hijack, the viewer has sought out this confrontation by keying in the work's URL, finding it through a search engine or entering it through the irrational.org homepage. In most cases, we can surmise, the viewer's acquiescence is unusually self-conscious because it is given within the differently signifying context of an artwork. This might for instance result in the input of totally false information which, unlike with other commercial websites, would not effect the user's further passage in any adverse way. A more important difference, however, is that where Etoy attempts to alert viewers to the compromised nature of the search engine's 'neutrality' through hacking or disrupting its system, *Dot 2 Dot* merely replicates the porn industry's production, manipulation and frustration of desire. Furthermore, the conventionality of online pornography's basis in the economy of deferred delivery is flagged through the inclusion of the dot-to-dot drawing which could be seen as an older version of the same idea. Both commodity forms also share a comparable life-span: once the drawing is filled out its value is spent just as once the pornographic image has been viewed, it no longer exerts the same allure. Here, no radical alternative to the commodity's conventional behaviour is even mooted. In contrast to

Etoy who create an interruption and in so doing point to the manipulability of the status quo, Baker foregrounds the extra-technical limitations to digital malleability exerted by the intersection of libidinal and economic forces. This difference is interesting since it suggests that the viewer's stark confrontation with a set of conventions can be as provocative as an artwork's direct challenge to convention. If Baker and Bunting's works both challenge Zizek's reading of cyberspace by pointing to the limits of a supposedly merely differential and simulacral field of play in which words and things threaten to become equivalent, Zizek's primary discussion of prohibition and desire are confirmed rather than challenged by their work. The revelation of stoppages, tears, leaks and limits to the virtual sphere is a central part of their work which can be seen as a way of maintaining the function of desire which in turn produces action.

So far I have questioned what has been described as the homologising tendency of information or, in Baudrillard's terms, the total disappearance of limit in the simulacral economy where use value is subsumed by exchange value, through examining certain forces that interrupt or belie the smooth neutrality of virtual space. Whether by pointing to the imperfections of the supposedly neutral map of the search engine, or the possibility of connecting actions across virtual and physical spaces, or by exploring how the imposition of artificial scarcity is perfectly able to override the inherent logic of digital information, tactical net art centres on the points at which friction can be applied to the dream of a perfectly fluid and compliant information space. Even, or especially, when, as in the case of *Dot-2-Dot*, this friction is identified as a central strategy of e-commerce (i.e. the artificial production of scarcity) its emphasis or exposure is seen as a prerequisite to various forms of

resistance because a rift is identified between its technical logic and social or economic use. This rift can be the marker of a possibility space for action which often, as with de Certeau's description of tactics, is revealed at the heart of certain disciplines such as consumption, technical regulations and protocols, or spatial mapping. As with the walker in the concept-city of modernity, the existence of an imposed grammar is a prerequisite for the invention of a countervailing tactic or idiolect. In many senses, this is no more complex than simply reiterating Foucault's insight that repressive power is productive of its deviant or resistant excess.

However, what complicates this idea somewhat is the increasing flexibility and vagrancy of strategy's techniques. As post-disciplinary power slips into the most intimate areas of social reproduction (a theme to which we will return in the next chapter) and, for instance, is able to map the movements of its subjects through human-machine interfaces like cash-dispensers, computers or telephones, its invisibility makes it harder to resist. In response to this, the self-conscious tactician must first expose rather than directly react to strategy's hidden operations, its evasive nuts and bolts, as well as its inconsistencies and imperfections in order to dispel the illusion of its infallible operation. Where the technocratic discipline of modernity is everywhere emblematised in the monuments of industrialisation, the info-technocratic systems of postmodernity are harder to pin down, hidden as they are behind the computer's many interfaces and software's inscrutable functionings.

Hence, as we have seen, the need to become sensitised to these non-places as we are sensitised to actual places, in order that they can be understood and then acted within. To somewhat overstate the case, the techniques of power must first be invented in order to be resisted. This can be seen at work in something the Napster phenomenon,

when the possibility of freely swapping MP3 files was identified as a blind-spot in the music industry's strategy for controlling the distribution of music and which, once revealed, was then assimilated into the industry's own more antiquated distribution system. Such occurrences suggest that the 'discourse' or conscious strategy of post-disciplinary power has not yet caught up with its own techniques which are often discovered and exploited by tacticians who, as with tactics proper, tend not to consolidate their findings preferring to identify the next opportunity instead. Unlike de Certeau's discussion of the tactical mode however, these discoveries do sometimes receive a great deal of publicity – as demonstrated by coverage of the Recording Industry Association of America's (RIAA) lawsuit against Napster – which succeeds in popularising a tactical consciousness.<sup>264</sup>

If until now the examples I have given have usually dealt with the friction exerted by extra-technical forces and systems such as desire and consumption on ICT, the last example I will consider exploits one of software's internal and fundamental limits as a device for sensitising the viewer to the virtual terrain. Jodi's piece whose title, as is usual for them, is also its URL, <http://sod.jodi.org>, made in 2000, is based on the source code of a 'shoot 'em up' style computer game called Wolfenstein. (figs 12 a., b. & 13.) In another exemplification of the increasingly tactical inflection of the new economy, the games company Id Software published the Wolfenstein 3D source code in 2000, in a gesture which cleverly combines the pragmatic aim of improving the game's design through the collective efforts of its

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<sup>264</sup> The RIAA's lawsuit against Napster began in December 1999 and concluded in February 2001 when the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in Seattle ruled in the RIAA's favour. See, 'Statement on Napster Court Ruling From Rob Glaser, Chairman and CEO, RealNetworks', [realnetworks.com](http://www.realnetworks.com), (12 February, 2001) [http://www.realnetworks.com/company/pressroom/pr/2001/napster\\_statement.html?src=noref,nosrc](http://www.realnetworks.com/company/pressroom/pr/2001/napster_statement.html?src=noref,nosrc)



fan-base with the benefit of being seen to take part in the free-wheeling spirit of the movement. This cult, multi-player game has subsequently become the raw material of several Jodi artworks.<sup>265</sup> In <http://sod.jodi.org>, Wolfenstein's C++ programming shell confronts the viewer with a garishly coloured field of text boxes which also recall early or lower level computer interfaces. This interface has the nostalgic quality of a once 'transparent' computing age in which the apparent legibility of the computer's operating system and file structures found its analogue in the rudimentary visual range (for example, pixel size and colour range). Jodi have broken down the Wolfenstein source code's various sequences into a series of web pages which are then hyperlinked together, with command sequences now doubling as clickable links buttons. This repurposing of its code makes no attempt to reference the visual or audio elements of the original game preferring to evoke it uncannily through the unfamiliar contents of what lies beneath. This conversion of a functioning code into the image content of HTML pages, also means that the utility of the original code has been rendered not only the obsolete object of aesthetic contemplation but has also been endowed with new technical functions such as hyperlinks. This would be analogous to using an old wagon wheel as the support for a coffee table or decorating a coffee cup with the photographic image of a handwritten musical score by Mozart. This repurposing of code is one example of the displacement and estrangement at work in <http://sod.jodi.org>; as with a shard from an absent lifeworld preserved in a museum, Jodi's autopsy of code and its transposition to the different programming

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<sup>265</sup> They have also created a CD-ROM based work, *SOD*, 1999, which converts the interactive 3D game space of Wolfenstein into a series of black and white, patterned and entirely abstract spaces. The geometry of the original game space and the first-person view point is stripped of its illusory effects and revealed as a sequence of basic, albeit animated, Euclidean spaces. The preservation of the game's original sound effects, however, renders its Brechtian act of desublimation even more potent.

environment of the WWW endows it with a ghostly quality. The context from which it has been severed clings to it in negative form but, divorced of its functionality, the programming language's basis in a natural language – English – starts to become legible and inadvertently poignant.

On actually reading the code, one notices that the coincidence of death – the classic theme of computer games – and the instrumental nature of programming language begin to produce a macabre and amusing quasi-poetry. For example, one sequence runs:

```
    "// Test if death sequence is done
        if (death sequence is done)
            {
                // change state to death
                player-state = DEAD
            } //end if death is done
        } // end if dying
    else // player must be death
        {
            // the player is dead, so clean up the mess"266
```

The lines 'change state to death' and 'player must be death' certainly resonate with the notion of the 'post-oedipal' state gestured to by Žižek which would, in its unimaginable realisation, entail a passing out of the symbolic order into a beyond no longer ordered by the collective fictions and meanings into which social reality coheres. It would be a place in which the signifying chain has become 'inert' and comparable only to psychosis or death. Should we see the non-functionality of this code, accordingly, as equivalent to the Žižekian non-performativity of words in cyberspace or does it, conversely, have to do with the significant performativity of

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<sup>266</sup> <http://sod.jodi.org>

context? If anything, it seems that the extreme sensitivity of code to its environment which, compared to natural languages, is rendered totally meaningless or functionless through relocation suggests the latter. The importation of one programming language into another programming environment and its subsequent obsolescence provides us with another example of a 'limit' which again reinforces how words and things are not commensurate in information space even if those things are made up of words. It also demonstrates how words or code can guarantee a certain set of operations in one environment which do not translate to another. Through this deconstruction into an inert object of contemplation, Wolfenstein can be read again as a commentary on its own casual instrumentalisation of death: "the player is dead, so clean up the mess". An inversion occurs which allows programming's normally buried linguistic and ideological content to speak over the pleasurable spectacle of the game which it engenders; an appearance which reveals the equivalently game-like or derealised callousness of true military attitudes towards its own expendable avatars and those of its enemy. This then would appear to be an example of how the mutability of the digital object and the object's limit can be seen operating at the same time but not univocally. The repurposed data object carries with it its former signifying context which is opened up afresh through displacement; a conclusion which casts into doubt the degree to which Baudrillard's radical equivalence of things can really be said to exist. The locus of exchange has not completely subsumed the loci of meaning, exchange value has not completely eclipsed use value (even in cyberspace), nor have words necessarily lost their performativity, especially if we allow that the instrumentality of programming language constitutes a new kind of performative utterance.

Even though data objects on the Net, or in virtual space, may not reside in their own exclusive locations in the same way that they do in real places, we have seen that they are nonetheless capable of being displaced. This displacement, conversely, suggests a more appropriate or natural placement which here I have considered through functionality. The location of information objects, as with things in 'real' places to a degree, cannot be read simply from their co-existence with other things as de Certeau has suggested, but also through their functionality which might or might not be transplantable. In this respect, what we might tentatively term 'place' on the Internet, is much closer to a practice than an occupation, which is in fact de Certeau's definition of space: "space is a place practiced"<sup>267</sup>. Indeed virtual space, as with physical place, can only ever be experienced through practice. When the possibility of certain practices is rendered obsolete (the transference of a piece of code), the sense of being out of place draws our attention to its very existence in the computer network. The recognition of this heterogeneous consistency of the Net provokes, in turn, the consideration that virtual space itself might well be another 'Orwellian misnomer'. Not only does the Net span the real space of its sprawling infrastructure and the representational space of the screen image (spatial categories hardly without precedent before the advent of the Net), but its totality is also filled with the material and symbolic limits common to real space evidenced, for example, in malfunctions or thwarted desires. However where this space is radically different from either physical or older representational forms of space is the immense capacity of the digital to combine heterogeneous parts and thus to create mutations; a capacity which becomes the leverage point of tactical net art and media.

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<sup>267</sup> de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p.117

What makes the medium of the Net so interesting to net artists is the ease with which discrete functions (search engines, source codes, networked CCTV cameras etc.) can be repurposed and re-embedded into separate contexts or operations. Far from making these functionalities all equivalent, their susceptibility to hybridisation contains the possibility of a clash of new and old contexts or utilities. In this sense the tactics displayed in net art or tactical media differ from the tactics displayed by the walker in the city in which the environment is relatively fixed, and come closer to the tactics at work within language. As with language there are rules of syntax, but the mobility of its constituent parts is far greater than within the built environment. It is somewhere between the resistance of syntax and the hybridity and mobility of the online world that the tactics of net art are situated. In this respect, their work can be said to occur in an indeterminate stage between the recession of certain limits (here read in both a material and symbolic sense) and the creation of new ones. Without wishing to ignore the very real sense in which the Net courts the deadening quality of equivalence, the flattened experiential order of *Erlebnis*, it seems that an important realisation of tactical net art is the potential to interrupt equivalence with hybridity. Not all spaces in the Net reflect the same degree of deterritorialisation, for example, or effect the same non-performativity of language. But conversely, the deterritorialisation of the Net and its capacity for the infinite reproduction of data has been seen to provide the basis upon which the scattered multiplicity of 'walkers' and idiolects can be formed into a totality which hints at the paradox of a heterogeneous yet coherent form of power emerging within the (now post?) disciplinary society.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Re-dematerialisation of the Art Object in Biopower

In Chapters Two and Three I have tried to explore the contradictory nature of siting art in the non-place of the Internet. So far this discussion has focused on artistic engagements with the questions of social commonality, community and tactical action under the disembodied, globalised and informatic conditions of cyberspace. Implicit in these discussions is the acknowledgement of art's expanded activity from a distanced representation of the social and natural world into a more engaged, less autonomous social and cultural agent. However, the question of how art continues to verify itself as art when the lines between itself and non-art are blurred by art's own internal development, has not been adequately considered in relation to the new conditions produced by cyberspace. Although in Chapter One the expansion of art's activity was discussed in terms of the recession of aura and digital reproducibility/mutability, the artwork's dematerialisation was not highlighted as one of its central features. The above formulation of art's expansion – a movement from disengaged reflection to a near activist, social coextensivity – is certainly crude since it fails to convey the equivocal nature of art's erstwhile 'autonomy' and the fact that 'autonomous art' derived an inestimable potency from its separateness from life. This difference allowed it freedoms which its opposite, an art indistinguishable from non-art, (if such a thing could actually exist), could no longer command. But this crude formulation is useful for dramatising a transformation of art which has

animated its avant-garde and neo-avant-garde histories and which animates its current informatic manifestations. It turns on what Thierry de Duve, referencing Kant, describes as a collapsing together of the previously distinct categories of rare, creative Genius and the general faculty of aesthetic judgement.<sup>268</sup> This collapse is exemplified by Duchamp's nomination of a prosaic, readymade object as art. His act of creation is quite simply nothing more than an act of judgement (traditionally the viewer's role) and placement and this radical gesture, when taken to its logical conclusion, raises the potential that everyone and anyone is not just able to judge but therefore also able to create art. Another important consequence of this gesture is to relegate the physical creation of the artwork, what might reductively be described as its element of craft or technical skill, to a secondary role, and by so doing, clearing the way to the artwork's dematerialisation.

The elements that this chapter will attempt to draw together are the relationship between art's so-called democratisation (the recession of aura, the act of nomination as art), its related dematerialisation and its expanded role in the social field. This expanded role will here be explored within the context of the dematerialisation of the commodity and the elaboration of social relations and control through the communicative networks of information technology – an aspect of the mode of social (re)production that I have, after Foucault, Negri and Hardt, been terming 'biopower'. In a comparable way to the mutual imitation of tactics and strategy discussed in Chapter Three, the dematerialised artwork and the dematerialised commodity – e.g. Nike's transformation of their commodity, sneakers, into the *idea* of heroic self-mastery – come to resemble and threaten each other in

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<sup>268</sup> Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, (London: MIT, 1996), pp.301-320

new ways. Below, I will investigate the ongoing erosion of the distinction between life and art in relation to the transmutation of the commodity into its concept within an ultra mediated age of technological communication. This will entail the question of how art's contemplation of its own end – its assimilation into the wider field of social relations – both rejuvenates art and, conversely, poses the terms of its ending anew. Key to this double movement of reinvention and dissolution is, once again, the ease with which digital data can be copied and manipulated, a capability that reposes old questions of originality, authorship and plagiarism.

This chapter begins with a comparison between the characteristics and objectives of dematerialised Conceptual Art and those of dematerialised net art in the age of biopower and e-commerce. I then focus on series of projects which play on the horizontal structure of the Net to test the boundaries between art and non-art, and commercial and artistic symbolic property (Shulgin, Baker and Detkina's *WWWart Award* and Bunting's *Own, Be Owned or Remain Invisible*). (fig 14.) These projects all flirt with the disappearance of art within the data streams of the Net. I then examine a sequence of projects which – far from bearing out these early gestures towards art's supercession or disappearance – entail the increasingly threatening relationship between art and copyrighted intellectual property (Bakers's *TM Clubcard*, Etoy's *Toywar*) and the disagreements amongst net artists over the commodity status of the digital artworks (Lialina's online gallery *Art.Teleportacia* and 0100101110101101.ORG's plagiarism of classic net artworks).

Re-dematerialisation – a simple ‘revival’?



Questions of the artwork's originality – to which authorship, appropriation and plagiarism are subordinate – relate, as we saw through Benjamin's analysis of aura in Chapter One, to the artwork's elusive distance. The 'authority of the object', its aura, which for Benjamin is predicated on the uniqueness of its historical experience or ritual function, increasingly came to require the individuality of the artist to act as guarantor. In this sense, questions of originality and authorship directly relate to the proximity or distance of the artwork. A mass produced image is both more proximate and hence less able to convey a sense of the object's (authorial) authority. Following this line of reasoning, questions of the artwork's placement and its authority are intimately related, and net artists' decision to position their work 'outside' the conventional art context in the undifferentiated medium of the Net almost necessarily problematises the question of authorship and by extension commodity value. In one of the first overviews of net art by a critic outside the dedicated techno-cultural press, entitled “Man sieht, was man sieht: Anmerkungen zur Netzkunst” (“What you see is what you get: remarks on net art”), written in 1998 by Isabelle Graw, artists' use of the Net to evade the conventional art context was criticised for the following reasons.<sup>269</sup> The first, and ultimately less serious criticism is that Net artists are merely recapitulating key concepts from the 1970s and 1980s – the ‘Fake’, the ‘appropriation’, ‘institutional critique’ and ‘dematerialisation’.<sup>270</sup> In Graw's eyes, the radical unfamiliarity of the Net and its far remove from the art context disguise the fact that these artists – who she perceives as deeply hostile to the art world – are repetitiously posing old questions which pivot on the above stated

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<sup>269</sup> Isabelle Graw, 'Man sieht, was man sieht. Anmerkungen zur Netzkunst', Texte zur Kunst, Vol. 32, (December 1998), pp.18-31

<sup>270</sup> Ibid, p.18

relationship between art's expanded role and the attack on its originality and autonomy. The second criticism is related, but more serious and will hopefully serve as an introduction to the issues presented below. For Graw, art made on the Net suffers from a fundamental and, as she sees it, nearly unavoidable disadvantage: the fact that the art medium and its context are one and the same thing.<sup>271</sup> For Graw, the collapse of the production and exhibition contexts into each other, and into the very medium of the artwork, robs art of its 'double marking' or identity as both autonomous and socially engaged. In other words, for Graw it is necessary to maintain a degree of distance in order that the boundaries between art and 'life praxis' can be continually explored and reinvented, itself a key function of art. Even when the context itself is used as the art medium, she argues whilst referencing Dan Graham's magazine works, some distinctness can be maintained. But when the artwork strays from the traditional viewing context and its identity as art is challenged, the ability to maintain a distinction suffers and hence its autonomy is sacrificed. She concludes:

"For precisely these reasons, net art appears as the place in which the demands of the classic avant-garde are realised: the demand for the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the opposition between art and, what Peter Bürger named 'life praxis'. In the case of net art what is revealed is that with this sublation less is won than with the adherence to the idea of art as a distinct discipline."<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid, p.29

<sup>272</sup> "Genau aus diesem Grund scheint nun die Netzkunst der Ort zu sein, wo sich die alte Forderung der klassischen Avantgarde umsetzt: die Forderung nach einer Aufhebung des Gegensatzes zwischen Kunst und dem, was Peter Bürger, "Lebenspraxis" nannte. Anhand der Netzkunst läßt sich zeigen, daß mit dieser Aufhebung weniger gewonnen ist als mit dem Festhalten an einer Vorstellung von Kunst als einem spezifischen Bereich." Ibid, p.31

Interestingly, what seems to underlie Graw's critique is the idea that art's 'distinctness' needs to be maintained materially, through some nominal distance or difference between the art and its context. What this position ignores is precisely the Duchampian gesture outlined above in which the work of artistic production is conflated with the work of artistic judgement, after which 'everything and anything' can become art.<sup>273</sup> After this realisation – one whose enormous impact was in many ways postponed until the experiments of conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s – the delineation of a division between art and life became entirely arbitrary, based solely on the act of nomination. Not only does Graw's understanding of the distinction between art and life appear, therefore, to be quite limited, but so too does her treatment of art's autonomy. Furthermore, it might be easier to sympathise with her misgivings over the dismantling of art's autonomy were it not for the fact that she singles out net art so emphatically whilst neglecting to observe that, since Duchamp's readymades, all art has laboured under the same double bind. In other words, once art's autonomy is reduced to the act of nomination ("it's art if I say it is") and tracked down to a series of supporting institutional conditions, it has become even harder, if impossible, to define art's ontology. In this respect, art's autonomy is far from self-evident. But likewise its ability to simply give up its autonomy, to 'liquidate' in Graw's words "the difference between artwork and context" is also far from easy. It is therefore not possible to say that art, or net art, can simply choose to give up its autonomy when the philosophical, social and political conditions which produce art's autonomy have been so persistently and widely interrogated that this very problematic has come to function as a central condition of art's survival.

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<sup>273</sup> 'Anything and Everything' is the title of a chapter in Thierry de Duve's *Kant after Duchamp*.

Despite the impossibility of agreeing with Graw's thesis over net art's loss of autonomy as a result of the elision of artwork and context, her criticism does nonetheless point to something very crucial: the renewal of the old triangulation between an extra-institutional context for art, a problematisation of art's autonomy and the question of its social involvement, this time within the informatic context of the Net. As with the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, the attempt to negotiate the limits of art's autonomy, and by extension its expanded social involvement, is coupled with the critique of its commodity status through the trope of dematerialisation. In the mid-60s 'conceptual or idea or information art' had seemed to promise art's necessary liberation from "the tyranny of a commodity status and market-orientation"<sup>274</sup> because any material expression could be understood as a 'by-product' of the idea rather than as a formal aesthetic expression, thereby separating the art-as-idea from its 'perfunctory' and hence valueless materialisation.<sup>275</sup> As we shall see shortly, net art was initially also seen to elude the control of the market and its official histories through the real-time flow of information. The constantly shifting, collectively authored stream of communication taking place across the Net came to replace the more Platonic conceptualist 'idea' to which the artwork's material realisation was only secondary. But just as net artists would later discover in the case of art's virtual status, the dematerialised art that preceded it soon discovered the limitations of its strategy. As Lucy Lippard concluded early on in 1973,

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<sup>274</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966-1972*, (California: University of California Press, 1973), republished 1997, p.263

<sup>275</sup> 'By-product' is a term used by Terry Atkinson in his reply to Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's original formulation of the dematerialisation thesis in *Art Forum*. See 'Concerning the article "The Dematerialization of Art"', *Conceptual Art: A critical anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro & Blake Stimson', (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 1999), p.55

dematerialisation, in as far as it was conceived as an attack on art's commodity value, was a failure since collectors and institutions had begun to find value in the 'ephemera' which recorded or manifested the art idea.<sup>276</sup> In essence, neither the production of a non-aesthetic or as Daniel Buren would have it 'neutralised' art, in which the work's materiality would either provide a mere second-order record of a preceding event or idea, or an assault on the very possibility of artistic expression, intention or judgement, could evade the market mechanism.<sup>277</sup> It was perhaps the market's response to conceptual experiments with dematerialisation in the 1960s and '70s which first revealed the extraordinary extent of the artist's capacity to convert the valueless into the valuable based on their minimal intercession. Ironically it was this exceptional power of the artist to transfigure the prosaic which had stood directly behind some of the conceptualists' attacks on 'retinal art', and their wish to avoid presenting an aesthetic synthesis of the world to the viewer. Daniel Buren's 1968 invective, although aimed at retinal artists such as Turner and Cézanne can, with hindsight, be equally well applied to the alchemical transformations of the everyday rendered by conceptual artists:

“When you believe in art, certain things are seen in relation to it – if not, they don't exist, which seems absurd to me. Art is, as they say, a truth that, by symbolisation, development and organisation, shows that the exterior world exists and is beautiful and wouldn't be so if art were not. This is actually what art is and what we must revolt against. Thinking and saying that “there was no London fog before Turner” is very pretty and poetic, but it is *outrageous*. It's an attack on the mind of the individual. It forces him to have the same dream as you. After seeing Cézanne, that is how I became one of these mental prisoners who believed they saw Sainte-Victoire Mountain as he

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<sup>276</sup> Lippard, *Six Years*, p.263

<sup>277</sup> Daniel Buren in, 'Interview with Daniel Buren: Art is no longer justifiable or setting the record straight', by Georges Boudaille, in *Conceptual Art*

represented it. *I believed “in” art. When I lost the faith, I noticed that the mountain had disappeared. At last I saw Sainte-Victoire Mountain.*”<sup>278</sup>

Though perhaps obvious, it is important to emphasise that the intention of political conceptual artists such as Buren was to attack and dismantle art’s ownership of these transformative powers and the inequities implied in such ownership, and not to outlaw them as such. At times when witnessing the attacks on *artistic* expression mounted by conceptual artists it is possible to mistake the artworks’ aesthetic refusals as a statement about the bankruptcy of ‘creativity’ *per se*. While attacking the regressive ciphers of the privileged artistic subject, the intention was also to stimulate a more active kind of looking on the part of the viewer and hence a devolution of that activity of perception, synthesis, articulation and imagination – *poesis* – that belongs, traditionally, to the artist. As Lippard and John Chandler understood it in 1968, the artwork’s ‘apparent hostility’ is better understood as ‘aloofness and self-containment’ which demand a greater effort of interpretation by the viewer:

“More time must be spent in experience of a detail-less work, for the viewer is used to focusing on details and absorbing an impression of the piece with the help of these details.”<sup>279</sup>

If we take the concept of dematerialisation to be as much about the decentering of the site of art’s production and reception away from the singularities of its subject and object as it is about an (intimately related) attack on art’s commodity status, we can find strong echoes of conceptual art practice in net art. As Graw has identified and the testimony of certain net artists confirms, the Net itself initially seemed to

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid, pp.72-3

<sup>279</sup> Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', Ibid, p.48

offer an autonomous context, a parallel world distinct from the art world. Graw is certainly right to identify that, in keeping with the politicised conceptual art of the past, the push beyond the contextual and disciplinary boundaries of art in the Net was intimately involved with the avant-garde dream of dissolving art into 'life praxis'. In 1997, Vuk Cosic, half jokingly described art as only ever having been "a substitute for the Internet".<sup>280</sup> And in a key manifesto entitled "Art, Power and Communication", posted on nettime, October 7 1996, Shulgin argued that art is essentially the "will for communication", a will that the real-time flow of communication in the Net is now satisfying on a large scale.<sup>281</sup> Shulgin also identifies 'representation' as providing the means by which the forces of history gain control over the present, eclipsing it with images of the past and teleologies of the future. He blames this form of tyranny on the historical monopoly of communications tools by the few, a situation which renders people susceptible to an imposed picture of the past and the future. The art produced under such circumstances can only be an "art based on the idea of representation", presumably one that emerges from and returns to the policed pen of art's official discourse. Dismissing what he terms 'media art' – the computer based but offline precursor to net art – for converting its communicative potential into a form of manipulation ameliorated by 'nice words' such as 'interaction', Shulgin posits 'net.art' as holding the radical potential to dissolve art into communication. Intriguingly, given net art's own subsequent institutional assimilation and the celebration of its individual producers, Shulgin cautions that net.art's greatest problems are "deeply rooted in a social determination

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<sup>280</sup> Vuk Cosic, 'Art Was Only a Substitute for the Internet', interview with Tilman Baumgärtel, Telepolis, (June 1997), <http://www.heise.de/tp>

<sup>281</sup> 'Art, Power, and Communication', Alexei Shulgin, Nettime, 07/10/96, [www.nettime.org/archive](http://www.nettime.org/archive)

of the notions ‘art’ and ‘artist’”. In the concept of communication he therefore locates the potential to combat the tyranny of historical representation and, to borrow a term from Ian Burn, its ‘pre-alienation’ of creativity as well as the power to resist the imposed framework of ‘art’ – “a suppressive system [sic] [which artists were] obliged to refer [their] creative activity to.”<sup>282</sup> Here both Cosic and Shulgin appear to be suggesting that the participative communications environment of the Net, which washes away the separateness of the artwork and the art context, realises the avant-garde dream of art's dissolution. A realisation which they attribute not so much to art's escape from the white cube, but to the fulfilment of post-Duchampian art's most utopian promise – the end of art's monopoly over human creativity. What I am terming *re*-dematerialisation of art on the Net therefore designates not only a return to an artistic interest in the qualities and potentials of a non-material art reminiscent of conceptualism but one that, in contrast, does not see the artwork's immaterial digital realisation as secondary to the Idea, but rather as a realisation of the artwork which often escapes or exceeds the intentionality of the artist. Where conceptual art could often be seen to court the platonic realm of the Idea, in that it maintains the Idea of the artwork as distinct from its imperfect, material realisation, Net art understands the artwork's realisation to occur definitively within an immaterial *and* experiential realm. And this realm is defined, perhaps most significantly, by the mutability of the digital sign and its collective inscription/development outside the intentions or control of its originating author.

Whilst deferring for now any conclusions about what should most accurately be understood as the early hopes rather than outright claims of net artists, the

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid



connection between the idea of the Net as art and the concept of biopower is worth drawing attention to here. Indeed, this connection goes some way to pointing out how re-dematerialisation is no simple revival of the earlier experiments into dematerialisation. As Howard Slater has pointed out in his essay on political conceptual art, in the worst instances conceptual art functioned “as the vanguard of a capitalism that was slowly getting to grips with monetizing ideas”.<sup>283</sup> This remark is interesting for two reasons. The first is that it draws attention to information technology's profound transformation of society, culture and economics which, although only slowly entering popular consciousness at this time, was registered by certain conceptual artists.<sup>284</sup> However, conceptual artists' early insistence on the dematerialisation of the artwork reveals a lack of awareness about the changing nature of economics; an oversight which in part explains Slater's criticism. Rather than immateriality holding the key to avoiding commodity value, what they were not aware of is the fact that immateriality was fast becoming the key to a whole new chapter of economic history in which information, thanks to its digitisation, has subsequently become the ultimate commodity form: a commodity as abstract as the symbolic exchange system of money upon which it depends. The early recognition of the art market's ability to cope with what Lippard called 'ephemera' certainly does pre-empt the widespread economic developments that would ensue. Slater's remark is also interesting because it reveals the equivocal nature of art's dematerialisation

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<sup>283</sup> Howard Slater, 'The Spoiled Ideals of Lost Situations: Some notes on political conceptual art', *Infopool* No.2 (London: July 2000), p.5

<sup>284</sup> Kynaston McShine's 1971 show 'Information' at MOMA in New York, artists such as Stephen Willat's interest in cybernetics and information theory, and the curator Seth Siegelaub's belief that the phone call could replace the physical work of art, are just a few instances of a burgeoning interest in how information technology and telecommunications were transforming the world.

which on the one hand promises to elude commodification and on the other to serve as an economic vanguard. This precise equivocation is to be found at the heart of Negri and Hardt's discussion of biopower in their book *Empire*, and also relates to the equivocations surrounding the idea of art's supercession in the Net.

For Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, elaborating on Foucault's concept, the term biopower refers to the 'postmodernisation' of global economic and social relations after the completion of the project of modernity. What Negri and Hardt mean by this term is that where once, in the 'disciplinary society' (to which the conceptual artists still belonged), the bulk of economic labour was occupied with the mass production of commodities in discrete and specialised spaces such as factories, and in which the accumulation and realisation of capital required an outside, now the capitalist economy has lost its outside, turned inward and began a 'real subsumption' of the social *bios* itself. The proletariat – no longer understood as a hegemonic category of workers, but as anyone who is exploited by the labour relations of capitalism – is now occupied with "the production of life itself".<sup>285</sup> Although there is not space here to outline the enormous scope of Negri and Hardt's discussion of the new postmodern, centreless and globalised constellation of power which they term 'Empire', the concept of biopower is very useful to our present discussion. For them, biopower or 'biopolitical production' is more than a recognition of the collapse of the gap between base and superstructure or the increasingly social nature of capitalist (re)production as one might crudely describe Foucault's discussion of it, but also the intensification of a 'general intellect' (a term they borrow from Marx) or 'mass intellectuality'. By this they mean that the increasingly immaterial, communicative,

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<sup>285</sup> Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000),p.27

co-operative and/or affective nature of labour has produced a newly integrated and reactive social body or ‘multitude’. So the flipside of capitalism’s penetration into the very ‘ganglia’ of social life under biopolitical production is the huge potential unleashed by a newly communicative multitude. A double-edged sword that reflects the double-edged nature of art’s own concomitant social expansion and banalisation in its history after Duchamp. Negri and Hardt sum up what they call the omni-crisis of Empire, its invasions and liberations, thus:

“The immediately social dimension of the exploitation of living immaterial labour immerses labour in all the relational elements that define the social but also at the same time activates the critical elements that develop the potential of insubordination and revolt through the entire set of labouring practices. After a new theory of value, then, a new theory of subjectivity must be formulated that operates primarily through knowledge, communication, and language.”<sup>286</sup>

It is also important to note that although Negri and Hardt see ICT as central to this process, they do not understand biopower operating exclusively within the horizon of language and communication. They counter that one of the most serious shortcomings of recent contributions to this discussion is the tendency “to treat the new labouring practices in biopolitical society only in their intellectual and incorporeal aspects. The productivity of bodies and the value of affect, however, are absolutely central in this context.”<sup>287</sup>

I would like to propose that net art, as we shall see from the case studies below, entails a bitter-sweet, equivocal understanding of its immaterial and communicative context similar to that displayed by Negri and Hardt in their analysis of biopower. What can be directly compared here is the penetration of capitalist

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid, p.29

<sup>287</sup> Ibid, pp.29-30

production into the most intimate areas of the social *bios*, and the penetration of art into areas of social and economic (re)production also traditionally more separate from art. In as much as this expansion, this symbolic promiscuity, entails risks for capitalism in the form of a newly communicative multitude with a huge potential for insubordination, art's expanded field entails its own risks. When art slips the confines of its specific context and starts infringing on spheres such as corporate symbolic property, not only are its erstwhile freedoms directly imperilled but its resemblance of its other – spectacularised capitalism – can at times become all too convincing. Quite simply, art that attempts to dissolve itself into its other risks total banality. However, and in disagreement with Graw's argument, the net art projects presented below entail a constant negotiation between art's expansion and disappearance far more fraught, even indecisive, than any purported renunciation of autonomy and the plunge into banality that this might imply.

### Maintaining Art Status in the Gift Economy

“Yeah, but imagine everybody being online and creating webpages, it would become overwhelming. Who would search for the grains of gold in all this shit?”

Alexei Shulgin<sup>288</sup>

In 1995, Alexei Shulgin, Rachel Baker and Tania Detkina initiated the *WWWart Award* – a project that treads a fine line between a celebration of art's potential dissolution in the Web and an anxiety over the loss of a framework of recognition and appreciation. In this project, Shulgin, Baker and Detkina, searched

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<sup>288</sup> Alexei Shulgin, 'I Don't Believe in Self-Expression: An interview with Alexei Shulgin', Tilman Baumgärtel, *Intelligent Agent*, (1997), [http://www.intelligent-agent.com/fall\\_shulgin.html](http://www.intelligent-agent.com/fall_shulgin.html),

the Web for “web-pages that were created not as artworks but gave us [a] definite ‘art’ feeling.”<sup>289</sup> In effect the *Award* is an extension of the Duchampian practice of nomination, one that converts everyday (digital) objects into art not by relocating them in a gallery, but simply by the artist’s act of selection. In a limited respect, art’s transformative power is set loose in the social field of the Web in the form of a series of judgements. The project combines instances of ‘found art’ with ‘found criticism’ also collected on the artists’ travels through the Web and organised, as a list of URLs, in no particular order. Rather than agreeing a list of criteria at the outset against which websites should be judged, the awards were created subjectively in response to a particular quality possessed by a website. Accordingly, the list of ‘awards’ reads more like a series of incidental and appreciative observations:

“For leaving us a nice message; for revealing structures; for practice in defining beauty; for creating a better philosophy; for sincerity; for expression of true love; for respect to history; for moderation; for flashing; for helping us understand what net art is and what it is not; for research into touristic semiotics; for correct usage of pink colours; for usage of the homepage concept that transcends traditional notions of subjectivity and authorship; for honest confronting [of] an identity crisis;... for valiant psychedelics”<sup>290</sup>

On clicking a website link, a new window is thrown open and each found website is displayed inside a ‘clip art’ drawing of a frame.<sup>291</sup> On closer inspection we notice that the framed representation of the original website does not entail a duplication of the doctored webpage file on Shulgin’s own ‘easylife.org’ server (the location of the project’s homepage) as one might expect, but rather the award givers have convinced

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<sup>289</sup> <http://www.easylife.org/award>

<sup>290</sup> Ibid

<sup>291</sup> Clip art is the name given to a stock of generic images, usually designed with a particular function in mind, supplied with various softwares such as Microsoft Word. There are also many online clip art catalogues online.

each webpage author to store the framed version of their original file on their own server. This decision to alter the original found site, not merely through its nomination as art but also through the imposition of a jokey frame around it contrasts – and one might say contradicts – the statement made by the artists on the project homepage. Here the artists state that the ‘open space’ of the Internet is blurring the difference between ‘art’ and ‘not art’ “as never before”, and add in neutral tones:

“there is [the] possibility of misinterpretation and loss of ‘artistic’ identity here. This might be welcome. There are no familiar art institutions and infrastructures here. Internet art is not well paid so far...”<sup>292</sup>

At the time *WWWart Award* was begun in 1995, net art was barely known beyond a small group of initiates and there was no ‘context’ for its reception.<sup>293</sup> We should certainly recognise the deliberate irony in these unknown artists assuming the inflated and judgmental role of the professional art world in an area of which it was either ignorant or dismissive. It was, in part, the perceived absence of art and its aficionados on the Net that afforded net artists the space to ridicule its conventions. The work is also parodic in the degree to which the awards’ potential specialness is undercut by the unremarkable nature of some of the chosen websites and the sometimes flippant attribution of merit, such as for the “correct usage of pink colours”. But, taken as a whole, we can also see the serious intention behind the *Awards’* salute to the diffuse and heterogeneous creativity in this pioneering phase of the WWW – a kind of weak Beuysian identification of the artist in everyone. This is not only revealed through the gesture alone, but also through the way the artists draw

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<sup>292</sup> <http://www.easylife.org/award>

<sup>293</sup> Alexei Shulgin, in Baumgärtel, 'I Don't Believe'

attention to both technical and semiotic finesse, unpretentious pathos, and accidental beauty. The *Awards* is filled with ambiguity, comprising both an attack on art's elitist practices (their parody of its competitive structures, the imposition of frames, the identification of diffuse creativity beyond its confines) and an attempt to reaffirm its practices in an alien context (the imposition of frames, the imposition of aesthetic judgements). One might say that the work raises the spectre of art's dissolution but from the safety of its discursive parameters. The jokey frame starts to function as a safety net, guaranteeing, no matter how self-reflexively, the survival of art and its 'grains of gold' in the threatening context of widespread creative communication. Ultimately, we have to see the *Awards* as perpetuating the special power of art that Daniel Buren condemns as 'outrageous'.

Until their elevation into high status, international art events which began with the Documenta X in 1997, the relative anonymity of net artists and what seemed like the real possibility of their disappearance seemed to express itself in conflicting directions: the attempt to maintain visibility, recognition and group coherence on the one hand and, on the other, the investigation of the conditions of art's disappearance in a technological communications environment characterised by decentralised media production and the subsumption of communicative action into capitalism. The virtual meeting points such as Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and mailing lists set up by net artists or enthusiasts can be read in terms of both tendencies. The first of these permanent forums was The Thing's BBS, established by Wolfgang Staehle in New York in 1991, and was followed some years later by the Rhizome mailing list which was founded in 1996 by Mark Tribe and also run from New York, and the 7-11 mailing list established quite late by Vuk Cosic and

Luka Frelj in 1998 and based at the Ljudmila media centre in Ljubljana.<sup>294</sup> These spaces, although giving visibility to net artists and other Net-based cultural workers, were also initially envisaged as private, somewhat reclusive spaces. In Staehle's words, The Thing's BBS was "a forum making a direct exchange of ideas and positions between a closed community possible. Promotional material was not approved. The main focus was to exchange opinions and ideas."<sup>295</sup> The motto underpinning the prolific textual exchanges occurring in these spaces was: 'you own your own words'. In the first few years at least these lists, although preserving the separate status of art as a specialist practice, did indeed present certain challenges to the commodification of intellectual and artistic labour through a system of free and moneyless exchange sometimes termed the 'gift economy'. The 'gift economy' has been celebrated, perhaps most notoriously by the Marxist historian Richard Barbrook, as posing a real challenge to money-commodity relations. Both Barbrook and economist Rishab Aiyer Ghosh relate their theories of the gift economy to the anthropologist Marcel Mauss's discussion of the primitive Polynesian practice of creating social ties through the circulation of gifts known as the potlach.<sup>296</sup> The theory of the gift economy or cooking pot market, as Ghosh terms it, posits a system of asymmetrical exchanges in which participants freely contribute gifts to a forum (e.g. a piece of perl script, an argument, a list of recommendations) and, due to the number of participants, receive a disproportionately greater amount in return.<sup>297</sup> For Barbrook, the often unconscious exchange of intellectual gifts on the Net which

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid

<sup>295</sup> Ibid

<sup>296</sup> See Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, 'Cooking Pot Markets: An Economic Model for the Trade in Free Goods and services on the Internet', (1998), <http://www.dxm.org/tcok/cookingpot/>

<sup>297</sup> See Richard Barbrook, 'The Holy Fools', *Mute* 11, (September, 1998), p.62



takes place without the co-ordination of the market or politics, poses a real challenge not only to the law of the market (based on competition) but also the elitism of the avant-garde:

"From writing emails through making web sites to developing software, people do things for themselves without the direct mediation of the market and the state. As net access spreads, the majority of the population are beginning to participate within cultural production. Unlike *Fréquence Libre* [a community radio station run by Felix Guattari in Paris in the 1980s], the avant-garde can no longer decide who can – and cannot – join the hi-tech gift economy. The Net is too large for Microsoft to monopolise, let alone a small elite of radical intellectuals. Art can therefore cease being the symbol of moral superiority. When working people finally have enough time and resources, they can then concentrate upon 'art, love, play, etc., etc., etc.; in short, every thing which makes Man [and Woman] *happy*.'"<sup>298</sup>

So, strangely enough, the small and initially rather elite artistic virtual communities, seemed to function both for and against the preservation of art's survival. The free exchange of intellectual gifts which occurred within them (although obviously not in these lists alone) seemed to promise the wider release of the non-alienated creativity of the multitude, whilst at the same time helping to maintain the self-identity of artists and art in the alien context of the Net. Muddying the issue further still, Barbrook's belief in the economically unmotivated nature of these exchanges has been challenged by the observation, made by Ghosh, that reputations made online can be converted into job contracts made offline. In other words, the free exchange of gifts is not untainted by a wider sense of careerism or competitiveness. Added to this insight, we must also consider how discursive communities, built up through the free and often anonymous exchange of ideas, are increasingly seen as the ideal advertising spaces for cultural producers to post press material to. Furthermore the

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid, p.65

databases built up over time by certain lists have started to accrue a value. In the days before online culture had developed its present caché, the agreement that words, although owned by their authors, could also be circulated and re-used on a non-commercial basis, seemed to produce little controversy. However, increasingly art mailing lists such as Rhizome (run by Rhizome Communications Inc., a not-for-profit private company) in step with non-art mailing lists such as nettime, with their largely university educated participants, have come to view such specialist debates as a valuable commodity.<sup>299</sup> In the absence of any other such in-depth documentation of Net culture, the texts generated by these mailing lists act as crucial historical sources. Rhizome's founder Mark Tribe comments: "I agree that nettime and Rhizome are, in effect, writing histories of this moment, and that our editorial practices thus have long-range consequences."<sup>300</sup> In 1999 nettime brought out its first book *Read Me: ASCII Culture and the Revenge of Knowledge*, an edited anthology of posts, and The Thing attempted to auction off its old interface and content through the online auction house E-bay. Subscribers to Rhizome are now required to comply with terms and conditions which grant Rhizome Communications Inc. "the non-exclusive, worldwide, perpetual, royalty-free right to reproduce, modify, edit, publish....[etc.etc.]"<sup>301</sup> Although the re-publication of most of this material is done by small and committed publishers for whom profits are at best negligible, it is the recognition of the value of these textual exchanges – which in many instances resemble the ephemeral nature of conversation – that we are concerned with here. What we again see is the double movement of biopower, whereby new social

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<sup>299</sup> See Rhizome's 'Readership Statistics', Rhizome, <http://www.rhizome.org>

<sup>300</sup> Mark Tribe, 'Art Site Takes the Reins', Rhizome, (1998)

<sup>301</sup> 'Subscribers Submissions', *ibid*

formations are created through ICT and immaterial labour which threaten the status quo, but similarly those communicative networks provide and service a whole new economy – one which commodifies the communicative activity of societies.

### "Own, Be Owned or Remain Invisible"

It is through the question of the ownership of words themselves that we can approach the seemingly antithetical tendency, noted above, of net artists to court their own dissolution in the Net. If we accept that “the instrumental action of economic production has been united with the communicative action of human relations” under biopower, then we should also recognise art, literature and music as early models of this communicative production of value.<sup>302</sup> But, notwithstanding the deconstruction of the author’s singularity in poststructuralist theory, the copyrighting of a book is still a very different matter to Microsoft’s copyrighting of the phrase “where do you want to go today?” The point here being that there has been a far more radical opening up of “the communicative action of human relations” to economic penetration – from after school clubs, to the aggregation of people’s cash-point use or phone activity into marketing databases, to commonly used phrases and expressions – than at any previous time. Accompanying the various 20th century avant-garde attempts to unleash the immanent creativity of the social field is the economic attempt to commodify social (re)productive behaviour and hence specify and channel it in self-serving ways. It is interesting then, that there are numerous works of net art which court the former by parodying the latter. Heath Bunting’s

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<sup>302</sup> Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p.293

1998 work *Own, Be Owned, Or Remain Invisible* reveals this coupling exactly. (fig 15.)

In this work, Bunting uses an article written about him for *The Daily Telegraph's* 'Connected' section by the journalist James Flint as the basis of a set of links that continuously throw the viewer out into the Web-at-large almost at random.<sup>303</sup> Here the media construction of the artist provides the basis for the artwork's dissolution in the Net. In Flint's exemplary piece of 'style journalism', the author converts Bunting's somewhat subversive and 'edgy' credentials as a computer hacker, flyposterer, graffiti artist, activist, and net artist into the sensationalised personification of "90s sub-culture". The article also includes Bunting's wide ranging remarks on the following subjects: net art's imminent 'absorption' into the electronic art sector; his hectic travel schedule created by his popular demand on the electronic arts conference circuit; his 'artivism' against multinational corporations; the mono-culture produced by capitalism; the increasing censorship of the Net; his plans to sabotage marketing databases and create systemic disruptions through the production of 'disbelief'. In *Own, Be Owned*, Bunting links all the words in the text – itself a contradictory collision of his own radical intentions and simultaneous compliance with the media-fame mechanism– to a '.com' website.<sup>304</sup> Accordingly, the sentence: "The potential for different possibilities is being diminished by money", becomes a

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<sup>303</sup> James Flint, 'The Power of Disbelief', *The Daily Telegraph*, (April 8, 1997)

<sup>304</sup> By 'compliance' I am referring specifically to Bunting's agreement to give this interview with James Flint, but also generally to the exceptional amount of press coverage that exists on him. For someone holding his views on the mono-culture produced by capitalism, it is surprising that he would participate in the general commodification of his persona. For the full extent of press coverage on Bunting, see: <http://www.irational.org/cgi-bin/cv/cv.pl?member=heath>

sequence of URLs thus: [www.the.com](http://www.the.com); [www.potential.com](http://www.potential.com); [www.for.com](http://www.for.com),  
[www.different.com](http://www.different.com); [www.possibilities.com](http://www.possibilities.com) ' etc.

On the actual content of the above cited quote a great deal could be said, here, however I would like to confine my remarks to the observation made by Negri and Hardt on the combination of a heterogeneity of methods but singularity of tendency in the world market, by way of a preface to the artwork in hand. In their discussion of the shift to the new global paradigm of 'Empire' from de-colonisation onwards, they discuss how the model of modern sovereignty failed to become the expected unanimous rejoinder to imperialism's demise. Instead, the world's 'massified subjects' began to transform and 'go beyond' modernisation at the very moment they entered it. Pertinent to Bunting's comment is Negri and Hardt's explanation of what this movement beyond modernisation entails. Although the global market becomes the central structuring device of all territories, the different speeds and styles of integration create a deeply heterogeneous production landscape.

"What might have seemed like a coherent central axis of restructuring of global production was shattered into a thousand particular fragments and the unifying process was experienced everywhere singularly. Far from being unidimensional, the process of restructuring and unifying command over production was actually an explosion of innumerable different productive systems. The processes of the unification of the world market operated paradoxically through diversity and diversification, but its tendency was nonetheless real."<sup>305</sup>

One can also argue that while the Net enables the development of an unprecedented global dialogism, this communicative heterogeneity is nonetheless annexed to the homogenising activities of the market. *Own, Be Owned* 's combination of a post-structuralist methodology of textual analysis— by which a singular methodology

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<sup>305</sup> Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, p.251

reveals the multiplicity of authorship – with the common denominator of the ‘dot com’ strongly evokes this logic.<sup>306</sup> On the one hand Bunting explodes the text and its putatively individual authorship by demonstrating the collective use and ownership of language, whilst on the other he closes down the multiplicity of the text and the dialogism of words by reducing every single one to the suffix ‘.com’. The fecundity of language is reduced to the unidimensionality of private ownership. Although it is not clear (to me at least) whether Bunting’s title implies that invisibility remains an option, the work certainly creates a sequence (reminiscent of Shulgin’s manifesto) by which representation is emphatically linked to ownership; a coupling which seems to leave little hope of a space beyond market relations. Bunting’s apparent refusal of an external position, one outside the mutuality of art and the market, is also confirmed by his willing participation in the media’s manufacture of stars.<sup>307</sup> Returning to the earlier discussion of the dissolution of art and artist, *Own, Be Owned*, can be said to pursue this conclusion, both through its critique of representation and ownership and its repeated ejection of the viewer out of the artwork into the wider Web. Each time we follow one of the work’s many links we leave the material-symbolic perimeter of the artwork; an effect which designates the radical co-extensivity of art with the wider social field of the Net. Although this is also the case with *WWWart award*, here there is no jokey frame or exportation of an artistic sensibility to accompany our departure. What we are confronted with is, more often than not, the irredeemable

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<sup>306</sup> Roland Barthes’ use of the five starred text in *S/Z* provides a precursor, albeit incomparably more attentive to the specifics of literature, to Bunting’s textual fragmentation.

<sup>307</sup> We can understand the production of stars as a mobilisation of ‘exceptional’ individualism which undermines the validity and potential for the ‘multitude’s’ own exceptional experience, whilst hypnotising it with the spectacle of elite exceptionality.

banality of a corporate website. This might at first glance seem like anything but the utopian catalysis or cathexis of desire in the social field, however I would argue that this work suggests the potential reversibility of social conditions from the starting point of its articulation of the claustrophobic invasion of the market into all fissures of social experience. As noted above, Negri and Hardt have argued that with the immediately social dimension of biopower's exploitation, also comes the activation of, "the critical elements that develop the potential of insubordination and revolt through the entire set of labouring practices". Bunting's work, albeit an infinitely small act of insubordination, suggests both the representational equivalence of the individual (artist) to corporations (his website, to a great extent, has the same representational force as theirs), as well as the ease with which ownership structures can be reversed or levelled in the Web. The fact that these usually commercial websites are entered through the artwork and therefore temporarily subordinated to its logic demonstrates the immense vulnerability of representational (intellectual) property in the Net. However, it also shows the vulnerability of the artwork to the new spectacular extensions of the market.

#### Art for Free and the Price of Art's Freedom

*"Property in relation to abstract signs as opposed to physical objects and borders throws up a whole new contest, particularly in the digital realms of the Net. Shoplifting products from Tesco's is much less of a threat than shoplifting their signs and symbols."*

Rachel Baker, 1997<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> Rachel Baker, 'TM Clubcard. Remember: Language is not Free', Telepolis, (1997) <http://www.heise.de/tp>

Net artists' experiments in combating the corporate take-over of the everyday have sometimes led to corporate retaliation. Ironically, these acts of retaliation – by no means the last word on any dispute – relieve the artist of the lone task of affirming art's co-extensivity with everyday life. In this respect Graw is perhaps right to observe that in levelling the distinctions between art and life, art loses important freedoms. However in a world that has been 'branded to the bone' where, as Naomi Klein has recently pointed out, "if you want to be successful you have to produce a brand not a product [and]...once you decide that you're about an idea and not a product, then your product is incidental" artists, whose main trade is in ideas, increasingly risk being sued for copyright or trademark infringement.<sup>309</sup> When corporations start to battle artists over the use of symbolic or intellectual property, the idea that art's autonomy, lost or otherwise, is solely in the hands of artists misses half the story. It also contradicts any presiding idea that a dematerialised art is somehow more free of market relations. The many skirmishes between net artists and corporations, for example, says a great deal about the more generalised conditions of art practice, especially when compared to the relative ease with which pop artists were able to appropriate brand identities in the 1960s. Not only are net artists operating on a threateningly level representational field to corporations, but

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<sup>309</sup> Naomi Klein, in 'No Logo: a conversation with Naomi Klein', Sheri Herndon, Independent Media Center, (2000), [http://www.indymedia.org/print.php3?article\\_id=3954](http://www.indymedia.org/print.php3?article_id=3954). The quote continues: "That in a sense, products, sneakers, coffee, computers are incidental to the true product of any successful international company, which is the production of ideas, the production of meaning within our culture. So for instance, Starbucks will say, 'we're not about coffee. Yes, we sell coffee, but we're about the idea of community. That's our brand meaning'. And you get all kinds of silly rhetoric like this. 'Were not about sneakers, we're about transcendence through sports'. And there's a lot of people getting paid tremendous amounts of money to go into these corporate sweat lodges and figure out 'what's our meaning'."



also in the context of biopower where symbolic and intellectual property have attained a previously unimaginable value.

Rachel Baker's 1997 project *TM Clubcard* is both an exemplary piece of *detournement* and an early case of corporate backlash against net artists. (fig 16a. & b.) For this project, Baker selected as her target the then recent phenomenon of supermarket loyalty cards which were first introduced to Britain by Tesco's in 1995. Clubcards reveal the immense value of the consumer's data to companies as well as their 'something for nothing' sales tactics by which people are convinced to undervalue their personal data and co-operate with such schemes. In an article written by Baker on this project she singles out another insidious aspect of the scheme which her own 'disloyalty cards' address, namely the corporate simulation of the social club:

“..the Clubcard encourages the idea that customers are joining a ‘club’... However, the members of this club exist in separate datafields and remain, to all intents and purposes, alienated from each other. The ‘club’ only defines a relationship between the individual Clubcard holder and Tesco's superstore, with little contact encouraged between other members. Some club!”<sup>310</sup>

With Baker's initial *Clubcard* project, we see another instance of biopower's potential for insubordination in action. If Tesco's fabricates a more intimate relationship to its customers along its own individuating lines, it also provides the opportunity to release the data aggregations it produces in monogamous relation to its brand, into the heterogeneous relations of a newly formulated social field.

*TM Clubcard* also applies the 'earn points as you shop' system to surfing. Encouraging a number of 'partisan' sites to display the pirated Tesco's clubcard logo,

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<sup>310</sup> Baker, 'TM Clubcard'

Baker then assigned anyone who clicked on the logo and filled out a questionnaire with an immediate PIN number derived from real Clubcards acquired from Tesco stores. These cards were later sent on to the subscriber in the post. Subscribers were then rewarded with loyalty points every time they visited one of the sites in the *TM Clubcard* catalogue, but the points no longer related to a money-off reward. Instead, using the database of email addresses collected through the questionnaire, Baker would send “erroneous junk mail” to the card holders. This included sending communications addressed to other people or a print out of the database’s own faulty programme. Baker explains: “This strategy ensures that recipients know that they are on a database, that it is dysfunctional, and, more importantly, that there are other members of the club with whom potential contact is possible.”<sup>311</sup> Out of “the machinery of a monstrous incorporated presence” Baker seeks to build a truly sociable club. The project was quickly spotted by Tesco, however, and its author tracked down via a search made with the INTERNIC domain name registrars which provided Tesco with the address of Irrational Gallery Limited (the organisation name used by Rachel Baker and Heath Bunting to register the Irrational.org domain).<sup>312</sup> On 21 April 1997, Irrational.org received a letter from Tesco’s solicitors Willoughby & Partners<sup>313</sup> accusing them of copyright and trademark infringement as well as the more serious crime of passing off which referred to Baker’s use of the Tesco brand identity to extract personal data from Web users.<sup>314</sup> As a result of Tesco’s threat of

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid

<sup>312</sup> Ibid

<sup>313</sup> In fact the letter is addressed to a “Dear Sir”. See <http://www.irrational.org/tm/archived/tesco/>

<sup>314</sup> In her own defence, Baker claims to have contacted the database’s 45 members out of which all but 3 claimed to know her site had nothing to do with the real Tesco site. See Baker, 'TM Clubcard'

civil action Baker decided, rather than simply taking down the site as the Tesco lawyers had demanded or transferring the site to another domain hosted by a foreign server, to simply switch the branding to Sainsburys. This was largely due to the fact that the site was dependent on the various catalogue sites and was consequently not a discrete, easily transferable data object. At this point Baker foresaw what the project would indeed become: “The project’s trajectory could be a series of solicitors letters each telling a story of a different loyalty card hijack and trademark transference.”<sup>315</sup> Today, the site no longer functions as it was originally intended but is instead a collection of disassembled components serving as a record of the project, its participants, some of the data collected, and the legal correspondence generated by it.

If the forced termination of the project meant that its original intention to create a sort of counter-club failed, it nevertheless produced some interesting exposures and conclusions. Firstly, perhaps, that art is no guarantee of legal immunity especially under the intensification of symbolic/intellectual property value within biopower. As a result, both artwork and artist are thrown into more immediate and sometimes conflictual relations with extra-art systems such as corporate interest which, in turn, help reveal the extent to which art’s so-called autonomy was also its gilded cage. In other words, so long as art knew its place and remained there, or rather artists did, its autonomy would remain uncontested since it would harm no one and no one would harm it. Indeed, so powerful is the unqualified idea of art’s autonomy in certain circles that it is transformed into a veritable icon of freedom. Ironically enough, the art *qua* freedom icon is valued very highly by the business

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<sup>315</sup> Baker, *Ibid*

community and seen as an excellent way of enhancing the value of their own brands. In an article on business sponsorship of the arts since the 1980s, Chin-tao Wu takes the analysis of how the idea of artistic freedom relates to business a step further. Wu illustrates how the art/freedom icon becomes an important weapon in the fight for the deregulation of the market itself with a quote by Winton Blount, (CEO of Blount Inc. and former chairman of the Business Committee for the Arts in the US), made at a Blount Inc. annual meeting in 1984:

“That environment [of freedom] is being persistently eroded everywhere by ill-advised and ill-conceived regulation, taxation, and other forms of government control. So we are engaged in an important work in furthering the arts. We are not merely meeting a civic obligation which we can accept or reject as we wish. We are helping keep open those avenues of freedom along which art and commerce both travel.”<sup>316</sup>

In other words, a society in which art is free is one in which business is also free and vice versa, hence, according to Blount’s uncanny logic, art is an activity that inherently and unavoidably protects and promotes free market capitalism. Although many critics and historians of art on the Left would certainly agree that art as we know it today is a fundamentally bourgeois construction, I believe in many cases they would stop short of painting it as so straightforwardly and congenitally wedded to this latter stage in capitalist development. Nonetheless, Blount’s remark reveals a deep truth about art’s usefulness to business when conceived of primarily in terms of its autonomy. A relationship which writer, critic and cultural agitator Stewart Home in his “Demolish Serious Culture” manifesto defines in the following stark terms:

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<sup>316</sup> Cited in 'Embracing the Enterprise Culture: Art Institutions Since the 1980s', Chin-tao Wu, New Left Review, 230, (1998), p. 30

“The ruling class uses art as a ‘transcendental’ activity in the same way it once used religion to justify the arbitrariness of its enormous privilege. Art creates the illusion that, through activities which are actually waste, this civilisation is in touch with ‘higher sensibilities’ that redeem it from accusations of exploitation and mass murder.”<sup>317</sup>

As *TM Clubcard* demonstrates, this usefulness is impaired when art’s autonomy is put into question and when symbolic or intellectual property interests are at stake. If there is a radical potential in the avant-garde attack on art's autonomy within the current situation, perhaps it lies primarily in the ability, witnessed here, to reveal the limits of such an autonomy rather than in its exchange for any greater freedom.

#### Disputes Over Net Art's Commodity Status

As should be clear by now, net art’s short history is anything but a unified movement towards art's supercession and dissolution in the Net. Even amongst the small group of artists associated with the net.art epithet, there is a wide range of positions on this issue as well as solutions to the establishment or refusal of net art's conversion into an art market commodity. Much as with the market's ability to convert conceptual 'ephemera' into commodities from the 1960s on, institutions have also not been undeterred from following art into the Net despite the difficulties in maintaining control over digital data and the flattened hierarchies that it fosters. Net art's inclusion in the 1997 Documenta marks the beginning of a widespread art institutional interest in this elusive and, from the point of view of its conventions, often confounding area. After this event, the strategies for coping with net art’s

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<sup>317</sup> In 'Demolish Serious Culture', *Neoism, Plagiarism and Praxis*, Stewart Home, (Edinburgh: AK Press), 1995, p.12

inevitable institutionalisation began to proliferate as did artworks displaying a high degree of self-reflexivity over this process. Indeed, the Documenta itself provided Vuk Cosic with the occasion for an important piece of institutional critique when, after the exhibition closed, the event's organisers decided to take the whole website offline in order to re-package and sell it as a CD-Rom. Cosic considered this decision indicative of the curators' fundamental misconception and even mistreatment of net art and artists; after all the net art on display was freely available on the Web already.<sup>318</sup> The night before the site was going to be taken down, Cosic downloaded it in its entirety and then relocated the files to [ljudmila.org](http://www.ljudmila.org) – the domain on which he stored all of his work at the time.<sup>319</sup> The ease of transportation, the disregard for copyright issues and the perhaps unsettling effect of collapsing an entire institutional site stored on its own domain into a sub-directory of another domain conspire to destabilise traditional institutional authority in the Net, casting it as a stranger in a strange land. But despite the ridicule poked specifically at the Documenta and, by extension, at art institutions in general hinging on their inability to maintain control of original artefacts in the digital age, Cosic is also sanguine about net art's institutional incorporation. Believing that net art was already pre-corporated, so to

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<sup>318</sup> Criticisms of the Documenta's treatment of net art were shared by many exhibiting artists. In an interview given during the show, the art duo Jodi described how net art's existence in computer space afforded it low status in the physical space of the gallery. Net artworks were stored on local hard-drives thus robbing them of their proper Internet-specific status, and set in a space insultingly reminiscent of an office: "All the different works disappear in the set-up by one guy who deals with the real space. The real space is of course much more powerful than all these networks. When you are viewing the work you are in the real space. If you only do your work on the Net, you become a fragment of the local situation and you can easily become manipulated in any direction." Jodi also spoke disparagingly of their artists' fee: "In total we got DM 1200. It is a clear example of exploitation. Which artist would move his ass for this amount of money?" In, 'Interview with Jodi', Tilman Baumgärtel, *Telepolis*, (1997), <http://www.heise.de/tp>

<sup>319</sup> <http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/dx/>

speak, he states: “Before me or Alexei [Shulgin] moved a single tag in HTML we were already part of that movement, or group or era.”<sup>320</sup> But far from construing net artists as victims, he sees them as actively working with museumification in mind:

“I think that it’s not the massive desire of museums to maintain prestige that’s going to draw net art into the collections successfully. It’s more the conformism on the side of the artists, who are going to create technically commodifiable pieces or a model for the accommodation of net art within the museum situation.”<sup>321</sup>

Both Cosic and Shulgin, consider the need for net art’s recognition to override any worries over its ‘loss of virginity’, with Cosic asking: “But how do you think you got your first Sex Pistols record? Because they didn’t want to sell it to you?” and Shulgin commenting with some degree of amnesia:

“..some people say that we should get rid of the very notion of art and that we have to do something that is not related to the art system, etc. I think it's not possible at all, especially on the net because of the hyperlink system. Whatever you do it can be put into an art context and can be linked to art institutions, sites related to art. And if we get rid of that word 'art', what shall we have then? How shall we identify ourselves and how shall we find contacts and how shall we create a context?”<sup>322</sup>

If Cosic and Shulgin’s acceptance of net art’s ‘inevitable’ incorporation could be said to form one polarity, while at the other Bunting publicly announced his retirement from net art practice at London’s Cybersalon in April 1998 (a pledge he, in fact, failed to fulfil) and Baker has increasingly shifted her practice towards net radio production, Olia Lialina provides a sort of ‘third way’ approach to this vexed

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<sup>320</sup> Vuk Cosic, 'Art is Useless', Josephine Berry, Mute, 13, (June 1999), p.56

<sup>321</sup> Ibid

<sup>322</sup> Alexei Shulgin, 'Interview with Alexej E. Shulgin', Armin Medosch, Telepolis, (July 97),

issue.<sup>323</sup> In 1998 she set up Art.Teleportacia, “The First Real Net.Art Gallery”<sup>324</sup>, in order to avoid what she considers a dichotomous deadlock between, on the one hand, the belief that 'net art should not be sold' and, on the other, the institutional will to simply annex net art to established systems of archiving and ownership – “a heritage to forget” as Lialina puts it.<sup>325</sup> Instead, she formulated a model of buying and owning net art designed specifically for the Web environment (where control of a unique object is impossible) which employs the logic of copyright. Through its provision of a “unique proprietary system”, Art.Teleportacia provides the buyer with a set of possible ownership models.<sup>326</sup> These hinge on two factors: location and accessibility. Arguing that a file can be copied but a URL or location cannot, Lialina posits this as a guarantor of digital originality, while the absence of an original object is compensated for by the purchaser’s ability to choose what degree of accessibility should be granted to the artwork. This results in the net art buyer’s ability to behave like the collector of actual objects who has the freedom to decide, Lialina remarks, whether the artwork is “hidden in the cellar” or on view to all. Despite, or rather in spite of Lialina's often cavalier tone, Art.Teleportacia undoubtedly pastiches the efficient and bloodless nature of online sales environments. A strategy most clearly revealed by the ‘Office’ section of the site which provides the potential buyer with a series of drop-menus and multiple-choice clickable options in which serious decisions such as whether or not the art will be freely accessible to all, are decided with a mouse click. Both reminiscent of the

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<sup>323</sup><http://www.heise.de/tp/english>

<sup>324</sup> See 'What is Art.Teleportacia', <http://art.teleportacia.org/office/faq.html>

<sup>325</sup> Olia Lialina, 'Cheap Art', in *Readme!: ASCII Culture and the Revenge of Knowledge*, p.267

<sup>326</sup> <http://art.teleportacia.org/office/customer.html>



clerical aesthetics of conceptualism and the ongoing desublimation of art's commodity value such as the Situationist Pinot Gallizio's sale of 'Industrial Painting' by the yard, this overt conflation of information art with its perfected online sales procedure also emphasises the highly instrumental nature of information space, and by so doing, challenges the ultra utopian ideas surrounding immaterial digital art. This playful approach to the refinement of net art's commodification is also evident in Lialiana's work *Will-n-Testament* in which she specifies the beneficiaries of her online oeuvre after her death.<sup>327</sup> As the will is updated and her affections alter, certain names are callously struck through and new ones added. Although gestures such as these, which ridicule the high-handed and manipulative powers inherent in ownership, muddy the straightforwardness of any defence of the commodification of net art, the decisiveness of Lialiana's position should not be mistaken. Her polemic entails a synthesis of her work's content (aside from *Will-n-Testament*, we should also consider the gallery an artwork) and the practicality of her solution to the ownership of net art. Lialiana's willingness to defend this position in interviews and articles is further confirmation of her conviction.<sup>328</sup> Although by no means the only net artist to reject the 'net art should not be sold' maxim, Lialiana's online gallery was one of the first works to convert the debate into the subject of a work thus positioning her as one of the chief defendants of net art's commodification as well as targets of attack. So, in three short years net art's history has travelled a long way from its romantic origins expressed in Shulgin's concept of communication which imagined the dissolution of art and the artist into a historyless, multiply-authored and

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<sup>327</sup> <http://will.teleportacia.org>

<sup>328</sup> See for example Olia Lialiana's article 'Cheap Art', *Readme*, p.266

non-consensual present. By 1998, the hairline fractures in this field had grown into trenches dividing artists over the terms of net art's survival.

Multiplication as Tactic: property, plagiarism and multiple names

Lialina's online gallery converts the artist into the gallerist, and the website-as-art into its own sales room, thus attempting to open up market control to artists whilst also maintaining the separate status of art. This pragmatic position converts the radical promise of art's digital dissolution into life or the everyday into the more modest attempt to democratise the control of sales and thereby also reformulating the originality and uniqueness of the artwork for a context of digital reproducibility. At the other end of the political spectrum sits the anonymous group 0100101110101101.ORG, who understand the digital environment as the ideal space in which to realise the radical promise of post-Duchampian art. For them, creativity's liberation from the tyranny of artistic originality and the truth of art's imitative and collective ontology inhere within the technics of digital information. The group's earliest works involved making illegal copies of 'famous' art sites in a move that both attempts to subvert the hermeticism of the art world from within but also gestures to the viral spread of creativity – via the culture of the digital copy – beyond the boundaries of art's sanctuary. 0100101110101101.ORG's illegal copies could be said to act as a dual record of the advancement and resistance of the movement's 'commercialisation'. As we saw in Chapter Two, the private Web space hell.com's time-limited private view 'Surface' provided 0100101110101101.ORG with the subject of their first act of intellectual property theft. Hell.com clashed with the

radical copyleft 'art.hacktivists' over their creation of a private space in the Net and plans to launch a pay-per-view art site. Although accused by hell.com's spokesman Kenneth Aronson of "simple theft" and attempting to "steal and package [hell.com] as their own"<sup>329</sup>, 0100101110101101.org's intention was to attack intellectual (artistic) property protection through a multiplication of the original and the multiple occupancy of an identity.<sup>330</sup> As they state in their nettime post entitled 'art.hacktivism':

"We wish to see hundreds of 0100101110101101.ORG repeating sites of net.artists endlessly, so that nobody realises which was the 'original' one, we would like to see hundreds of jodi and hell.com, all different, all original, and nobody filing lawsuits for copyright infringement, there would be no more originals to preserve."<sup>331</sup>

This contradictory call for the end of the 'original' via duplication *and* the creation of many different originals can perhaps best be clarified through an examination of 0100101110101101.ORG's so-called clones of site. When, in June 1999 they decided to hijack the obvious victim, Art.Teleportacia, (thus placing it in the pantheon of net art villains alongside hell.com) they did not stop at a simple duplication. Instead, they scrambled many of the phrases and images incorporated in the site, and inserted Java scripts to produce a spasmodic movement of the interface

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<sup>329</sup> Cited in 'An Attack on the Commercialisation of Web Art', Matthew Mirapaul, The New York Times, (July 8, 1999)

<sup>330</sup> In public statements and interviews, 0100101110101101.ORG have used either their URL or the multiple name Luther Blissett as an identity 'tag'. Until 1/1/01 when it was decided to kill off the identity, Luther Blissett was used by net activists and other individuals influenced by Neoism and the Workerist communists – an Italian movement based around anti-disciplinary insubordination in the workplace which acted outside the disciplinary structures of the unions and orthodox Communist Party in the late 1960s and early 1970s. See 'Songs from the Woods: Net-Culture, Autonomous Mythology and the Luther Blissett Project', F.P. Belletati, <http://www.lutherblissett.net/primer/waldgang.html>

<sup>331</sup> 'art.hacktivism', nettime, (July 9, 1999)

which repels ordinary interaction. Where Lialiana had created an exhibition of “Miniatures of the heroic period” on her site, 0100101110101101.ORG converted it into “Hybrids of the heroic period” and replaced many of the original works with ‘hybrids’ which polluted canonical net artworks with “some trash of the Web.”<sup>332</sup> Where these acts of defacement differ from the gesture of, for instance, drawing a moustache on a face in an advertising image is the fact that the surface of the ‘original’ and the markers of derision become continuous and cannot be distinguished. Due to digital reproducibility and mutability, the purloined website becomes materially continuous with the alterations made to it. Perhaps this gives us a clue to understanding what 0100101110101101.ORG mean by the production of originals without origin. If we were to imagine a scenario in which this same website passed through many different hands, and at each stage alterations were made to the duplicated files, a developmental chain would emerge in which the hermeneutic work of a ‘general intellect’ comes to efface both the original and the individual identity of its authors. In other words, plagiarism in 0100101110101101.ORG’s terms, does not stifle difference but rather encourages it through a freeing of ideas from the stagnant realm of individual ownership. Although this idea is by no means necessarily dependent on digital media, and is arguably always already occurring no matter how hard copyright laws try to prevent it, the Net is a fertile ground for the accelerated proliferation of such developments. Despite Lialiana’s protestations that location acts as a guarantor of originality, our experience of any digital object is inherently non-original because of the role played by binary code. What we see on our computer screens can only ever be a representation of a non-original, endlessly

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid

transferable set of 0s and 1s. For these reasons, 0100101110101101.ORG sees the Web as “the paradise of no-copyright, plagiarism, confusion and exchange” and understand all attempts to impose traditional ownership mechanisms onto it as a fundamental misreading of its most crucial characteristics as well as the failure to realise its most radical potential.

In her reply to 0100101110101101.ORG on nettime, Lialina revealingly argued that any attempt to copy a site such as Art.Teleportacia would be doomed to inaccuracy:

“You can make hundreds of Art.Teleportacia galleries, but next day they will be only hundreds of outdated pages with not [sic] actual information and broken links, because I will update only <http://art.teleportacia.org> ... What is done on the net is not a book or cd or tape kind of product. It is not complete, not frozen, but can be changed every [sic] moment. And this moment is the difference between copies and originals.”<sup>333</sup>

Lialina no longer locates the artwork's originality in its inimitable singularity, but in the ongoing dialogue between the open-ended work and the individual producer. In the inverted, non-utopian form of Shulgin's concept of communication, Lialina seeks to unite the unstoppable flow of data in which the artwork's singularity is dissolved with a new definition of singular artistic aura. Here it also seems that Lialina has completely missed a vital dimension of 0100101110101101.ORG's work which seeks not to exactly copy the 'original' but rather to *detourne* it, and to loosen it from the ties of individual control and open it up to the unknowable horizon of multiple authorship. Where Lialina appears to locate the well-spring of artistic development in the individual artist, 0100101110101101.ORG locate it in the potential of the many hands of the multitude. Lialina's emphasis on the impossibility of an exact

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<sup>333</sup> Olia Lialina, 'Re.art.hackivism', nettime, (July 9, 1999)

reproduction of the original, whilst valorising originality, can nonetheless be identified with appropriation art as defined by Stewart Home, in contrast to plagiarised cultural forms. He argues:

“Plagiarism enriches human language. It is a collective undertaking far removed from the post-modern ‘theories’ of appropriation. Plagiarism implies a sense of history and leads to progressive social transformation. In contrast, the ‘appropriations’ of post-modern ideologists are individualistic and alienated. Plagiarism is for life, post-modernism is fixated on death”.<sup>334</sup>

Extrapolating from Home, we can surmise that postmodernism’s preoccupation with demonstrating the inertia of the signifying chain in a hyperreal world should not be mistaken as an attack on the possibility of art. Postmodern art moves such as appropriation, whilst concerned to point out the waning affect of images within a spectacular society, do not amount to a call for the radical transformation of those conditions. This observation is confirmed by the paradoxical fact that artists are able to convert the programmatic neutering of images into a token of artistic insight and genius. In brutal terms, the possibility of creativity *per se* is shown to have perished in a strategy which aids the survival of the artist. Given the indebtedness of anonymous, plagiarist, and multiple name using groups such as 0100101110101101.org to the post-Fluxus antics of Mail Art, it is no coincidence to find that mail artist Tony Lowes has passionately articulated this Faustian postmodern pact in his manifesto “Give Up Art/ Save the Starving:

“Fictions occupy our minds and art has become a product because we believe ourselves and our world to be impervious to fundamental change. So we escape into art. It is our ability to transform this world, to control our consciousness, that withers on the vine.”<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Stewart Home, 'Plagiarism' in *Neoism, Plagiarism and Praxis*, p.51

In the light of these comments, it is possible to conclude that the postmodern refusal of originality resides closer to its supposed antithesis – the idea of artistic originality – than the idea of plagiarism's creative fertility based on the mutation and development of pre-existing, non-original forms and ideas. In contrast to Lialina's idea of artistic originality, then, 0100101110101101.org hold out for the idea of creativity's far wider transformative power.

But this notion of art as anathema to widespread, popular creative activity has, in certain respects, been contradicted by the net art's brief history to date. Although we see in 0100101110101101.org's 'clones' the fully articulated desire to go beyond art through an attack on its originality and the equation of copyleft with the explosive potential of the multitude's creative powers, it is worth noting that their activities have not extended much beyond the discursive confines of the art world. Conversely and ironically, an incredibly successful work of net art activism or artivism which drew widespread popular support and involvement surrounded the defence of a piece of *art property*: Etoy's URL which is arguably its most valuable piece of digital property and the guarantor of its identity and presence online. Etoy's 'Toywar' began when in November 1999 a suit was brought against it by the US online retailer eToys.com blocking the "surreal [art] corporation" from using their site. (fig 18) The powerful retailers used accusations of unfair competition, trademark infringement, security fraud, illegal stockmarket operations, pornographic content, offensive behaviour and terrorist activities to try and force Etoy to hand over their domain name which is uncomfortably close to their own.<sup>336</sup> Having rejected the

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<sup>335</sup> Cited in *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War*, Stewart Home, (Stirling: AK Press, 1991), p.77

<sup>336</sup> See <http://www.etoys.com>

retailer's offer of \$516,000 for the domain and consequentially barred from using their website, Etoy mounted a media war against the predatory company. Initially they used mailing lists to bring the dispute to the attention of an interested community of 'netizens' who were already alarmed by the Domain Name System's (DNS) new management under ICANN which had replaced the former 'first come first served' basis of domain allocation with the prioritisation of 'famous names'. This is widely held to be a policy which, although officially claiming to undermine cyber squatters, effectively endangers the rights of all private individuals and financially weak parties on the Net.<sup>337</sup> Etoy used a combination of argument and ludic enticement to persuade, by their figures, 1798 activists between November 1999 and February 2000 to get involved in the Toywar. Campaigners became 'Toysoldiers' and were issued with loyalty points corresponding to 'etoy.SHARES' in the art 'corporation' for their media tactical interventions. The combination of prescribed and improvised tactics took the following forms: spreading disinformation about eToys in consumer group and investor chatrooms and news groups, 'flooding' the eToys website, filing counter suits, setting up resistance sites and writing condemnatory articles about the affair in the US national and international press.<sup>338</sup> Etoy claim responsibility for the undeniable drop in eToys's share price from \$67 to \$15 during the dispute, making the Toywar, "the most expensive performance in art history: \$4.5 billion in damage!"<sup>339</sup> This dramatic drop in share prices has also been more conservatively attributed to "the cost of [eToys]

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<sup>337</sup> See JJ King's 'They Came, They Bored, They Conquered', Mute 20, (July, 2001), pp.48-52

<sup>338</sup> More than 300 reports of the dispute appeared in places such as The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Le Monde and CNN. <http://www.etoys.com>

<sup>339</sup> Ibid



tripling its customer base over the Christmas holidays” by the *Financial Times*.<sup>340</sup> No matter what financial damage can or cannot be attributed to the Toywar the corporation was certainly embarrassed enough to drop their suit and pay Etoy’s court costs of \$40,000.

Etoy’s homepage now carries a quote which articulates a sort of third position to the opposition, made by Home, between plagiarism and appropriation:

“Following Joseph Beuys, who, it should be noted, used all the media available in his day for the creation of social sculptures, Etoy, with its shares concept and the TOYWAR platform, develops new formats for participation in art which, making full use of the networking potential of the Internet, enliven a virtual space for information, communication and transaction, an ensemble of tools for action for ‘interventions in the symbolic reproduction process of society’ and an institutionalising self-articulation organ for virtuality. So Etoy's efforts seem aimed at carrying the concept of the social sculpture over to a digital format.”<sup>341</sup>

In place of the plagiarist concept of a radical transformation of society’s ‘symbolic reproduction process’ based on the redistribution, circulation, mutation and proliferation of signs, Etoy harness the creative powers of the social field to promote and augment the artistic practice of a singular group/conceptual identity. It is also no accident that Etoy promote their comparison with Joseph Beuys whose social sculptures nearly always effected a similar collapse of multiple agencies into the singular gesture or identity of the artist himself. As Home has pointed out in his discussions of multiple names, plagiarism and mail art, ‘open situations’ which eschew the coherence of authorial and conceptual identities are both unattractive and impractical to art world incorporation:

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<sup>340</sup> See 'Do as they Do, Not as they Do: Etoy and the art of simulacral warfare', Josephine Berry, *Mute* 16 (March 2000)

<sup>341</sup> Dr. Reinhold Grether, cited on <http://www.etoym.com>

“The democratic nature of the mail art network clearly situates it in opposition to the elitism of art (if art is defined as the culture of the ruling class). The sheer numbers of people involved in mail art preclude the movement from being ‘officially’ recognised as a manifestation of high culture for at least as long as it continues to be practised on such a wide scale. Most *art movements* (Pre-Raphaelites, Impressionists, Cubists, &c.) would seem to number between five and fifty members; mail *art* by comparison numbers thousands.”<sup>342</sup>

Where the Toywar does, by contrast, open up onto the horizon of a more radical and direct encounter between art and the social field is in its adoption of financial markets and corporate identity as its conceptual and literal material. Although, as previously noted, the precise role that Etoy played in the eToys share dip is uncertain, what they powerfully mooted was the connection between market volatility and the rumour mill effects of the Net. Returning to my earlier discussion of the increasingly bruising nature of the encounter between art and non-art, and in particular business, one can see how the capitalist encroachment into (digital) symbolic territories (e.g. the name space) also makes it more vulnerable to the actions of artists – those professional manipulators of semiotics whose talents, when not directly subsumable into brand identity and free market propaganda, pose a potentially quite serious threat. Recognition of this most radical aspect of Etoy’s practice makes their relationship to art simultaneously more legible and more opaque. Although we can see how the Toywar is easily recuperable as Etoy’s private art capital, it also begs as many questions of their persistence in identifying their practice as art. While the ‘surreal’ friction they produce between art’s notional ‘autonomy’ and an instrumentalised corporate identity forces open the symbolic conflict zone in question, that zone and the important new formations it reveals is

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<sup>342</sup> Home, *The Assault on Culture*, pp.72-3

virtually obscured again by the hasty re-division of its agents and symbolic properties as soon as the 'job' is done. Simply put, the Toywar became a legal victory for Etoy and a canonical moment in net art history for which the group claims credit and authorship. In a talk at London's LUX gallery during the Tech\_Nicks programme in June 2000 the pranksterish activist group RTMark, who had awarded the Toywar 'sabotage project funding', expressed their disappointment at Etoy's inability to translate their victory over eToys into anything other than a chapter in their private group history.<sup>343</sup> They also reproached them for their unwillingness to share their experience with other groups engaged in similar struggles – an unwillingness they defend on the basis of the artistic nature of their practice. On this score, it is important to add that no matter how impeccably executed, the Toywar campaign is far from the first or most important or original campaign of this kind fought over the Net. The gravity of its cause and the dedication of its participants, although of some magnitude, pale into insignificance when one compares them to the online campaigns fought by Zapatista activists throughout the 1990s. In other words, it is at times hard to distinguish between the use of political tactics by artistic and non-artistic groups against repressive systems. But notwithstanding this quibble, the Toywar does demonstrate the immense proximity between art and commerce on the Net as well as the dangerous connotations of that proximity for both art's notional autonomy and the representational hegemony of commerce. This danger, for corporations, is located in the vulnerability of material production to the symbolic pranks and tactics of its

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<sup>343</sup> Pauline van Mourik Broekman in discussion with RTMark, Tech\_Nicks, LUX Gallery, London, June 25, 2000. See [http://www.noaltgirls.org/tech\\_nicks/](http://www.noaltgirls.org/tech_nicks/) for details of this event.

adversaries, and especially the speed with which a campaign can gain support and the virtual ease and anonymity with which people can act to destabilise symbolic property. The danger for art might be seen as the increasing difficulties artists face when attempting to manipulate signs and codes of practice (e.g. assuming the identity of a corporation or simulating supermarket loyalty cards) borrowed, but nonetheless distinct from their original function. But, as the examples given here have hopefully shown, this increasingly 'dangerous' proximity is also the potentially explosive site of art's dissolution into the wider and anonymous creative practices of the wired multitude and beyond – the intensification through articulation of the 'general intellect'.

#### Anything Goes, Art Presides

In connection to the anxious history produced by the net.artists' exploration of art's dissolution in the Net, it is interesting to reintroduce Zizek's formulation of the demise of the Master signifier. As discussed in Chapters One and Three, Zizek locates the danger inherent in cyberspace not as being the loss of flesh and blood existence through virtualisation, but rather the loss of the always already virtual dimension of reality – the dimension of the symbolic. Extending his critique beyond cyberspace alone, Zizek identifies the opening up of the Master signifier in postmodernity to manipulation as responsible for its waning effect. He gives the example of canonical texts which are increasingly opened up to revision such that their unspoken implications, as well as their aporias, are explicitly spelled out and explored. For instance, Kafka's *The Castle* is converted into a computer game in

which the traumatic experience of its hero K.'s attempts to enter the impenetrable bureaucratic fortress become the source of pleasure for the game's player as s/he attempts to crack the maze.<sup>344</sup> For Zizek, when the gaps, holes or aporias of the Master signifier are filled out, its efficiency wanes in direct relation to its comprehensive sensibility. It is of course possible to read 'art', both taken as a whole and in its individual manifestations, in terms of the Master signifier, and to ask of it the same question that Zizek poses of cyberspace. Once, as he argues is the case with the 'frictionless' immediacy of information in cyberspace, the symbolic becomes subject to the narcissistic manipulations of the subject, the exact opposite from what one expects to happen happens: "it is when there is no one there to tell you what you really want, when all the burden of the choice is on you, that the big Other dominates you completely, and the choice effectively disappears – is replaced by mere semblance."<sup>345</sup> Returning to the spectre of art's supercession, one might ask whether certain net artists felt the same anxiety expressed by Zizek concerning cyberspace? Once the oppressive Master signifier of art threatens to recede does the opposite of the conceptualist dream of an ignition of creativity throughout the social field then follow? It is tempting to answer that without a wider transformation in which the preconditions of art as we now know it are swept away, the dissolution of the Master signifier of the artist/ artwork is bound to give rise to a Zizekian terrorisation by the big Other. Arguably, when confronted by the choice between the entry of stupefying banality into the place once held open by art (the listlessness resulting from the responsibility to choose/ to be creative) or the threat of art's transformation into

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<sup>344</sup> See Slavoj Zizek, 'Cyberspace, or, the Unbearable Closure of Being', *The Plague of Fantasies*, (London: Verso, 1997)

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid*, p.153

political praxis, most net artists decide to hold onto the symbolic authority of art. But this argument does not go far enough, because it fails to acknowledge that the authority of the Master signifier (of the transcendent Idea of art) has already undergone a great deal of dismantling in the post-Duchampian era. As with the integrally related question of autonomy raised at the outset of this chapter, it is not possible for artists to simply choose whether or not to believe in the continued symbolic power or efficiency of art. Although this efficiency may be individually endorsed or debunked, it continues to function as an albeit susceptible and protean, but crucially extra-individual and supersensible power. Art is more than the sum of its moments. It is the changing state of art's symbolic efficiency in historical time, and the fact of its survival in an albeit conflicted form, that overdetermines the attempts to renew or revolutionise it either through its extension or dissolution in the new space of the Net. In the absence of any evident end, the question that we must ask is the terms of art's ongoing symbolic potency, and the role of its politicisation or democratisation therein. The predicament of the net.artists is to be between two deaths so to speak: being cut adrift from art's unquestioned symbolic power after modernism with the discovery that art can be 'whatever', and yet unable to renounce this power due to the threat of the banalised co-extensivity of art and everything

else.<sup>346</sup> Clearly artists do not have the freedom to simply accept or reject the symbolic power of art.

But perhaps this overemphasis on banalisation and the terrorisation of the big Other misses the advent of a new power which emerges with the intensification of the general intellect under (digital) biopolitical production. In other words, and without wishing to detract from the undeniable truth of Žižek's observations about the tyranny of the injunction to choose or express oneself in a postmodern culture obsessed with expressions of individual identity – with discovering the 'true you' – the communicative intensity of biopower also affords the possibility of identifying and articulating *collective* desires. In other words, biopower's communicative culture breaks with the individuating control of commercial advertising and state propaganda to produce something quite different from the nightmare of undifferentiated mass stupefaction. The speed with which messages move across the Net, the exchange of intellectual 'gifts', the formulation of political demands, the increased ability to co-ordinate ideas with actions, and the collective mutation of symbols and intellectual property are all examples of the digital environment's development of collective creativity and a general intellect. These developments,

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<sup>346</sup> "The whatever' or the 'N'importe quoi!' is a formulation used by Thierry de Duve to describe art's loss of all fixed criteria, after Duchamp, bar the injunction that the artwork should 'be whatever' and that the artist should 'do whatever'. "After all," writes de Duve, "the history that goes from the *Stone Breakers* to the readymade, from Courbet to Duchamp, from the represented anything-whatever to the anything-whatever plain and simple, is brief and well known. It is inseparable from the devaluation of the precious, the finished, the noble, of all the values that gave art a precise function in the system of aristocratic power, and from the correlative rise of new egalitarian values – or anti-values – themselves in bourgeois consciousness often bearing the mark of the vulgar, of the unfinished, of the ignoble. All this, which is well known, means that the whatever still carries the stamp of its plebeian origins, pointing, depending on one's viewpoint, to the spectre or to the utopia of an art made by the passer-by." Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, pp.327-328

which fly in the face of the vicarious articulation of popular desire by our democratically elected leaders or media spokespersons or the 'outrageous' autonomy of art, are highly suggestive of the potential for insubordination resident in Negri and Hardt's theory of biopower. The anonymity of groups such as 0100101110101101.org and their belief in the cultural precipitateness of plagiarism certainly acknowledges and seeks to hasten these tendencies within technocratic globalisation. Here, as against the 60s and 70s idea of dematerialisation, re-dematerialisation stands not for the unpollutable, platonic realm of the Idea, but for the collective mutation of cultural forms through the forces of digital production. Interestingly however, although expressions of the general intellect of collective desire do sometimes intersect with art practice – as in the case of Etoy's Toywar – it is still not possible to claim that they are proof that now 'everyone is an artist'. Of course art and what we could call non-artistic cultural practice are locked within a mimetic relationship, however what significantly divide the two is the artist's consciousness that they are making art. This holds even if the artist is working to dismantle the selfsame concept. This seemingly tautological distinction is, however, crucial since, in the post-Duchampian era, there are no consensual rules by which we can judge art to be art other than the intention/judgement of the artist. This of course also explains how it has become increasingly difficult to tell art and non-art apart, and why gallerists – themselves perhaps assuming the role of the artist – can be found, for instance, exhibiting fashion photography instead of works made as art.<sup>347</sup> However, and in sharp distinction to the argument made by Graw, the artist's intention can create an art context wherever he/she nominates and here we are

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<sup>347</sup> Here I am referring to 'Four Days in LA: The Versace Pictures', an exhibition of Steven Meisel's fashion photography at the White Cube2, London, July 2001.



interested in cyberspace as context. As has been noted in this chapter, this informatic space is defined both by the symbolic encroachment and protectionism of the corporate world and the communicativeness of its many users. Re-dematerialised art is jostled from both sides by its increased proximity to corporate and collective cultural production. Its double-edged anxiety and desire over its potential assimilation, made poignant by digitality, continues to question and redefine the terms of its difference. Although, as we have seen here, the inherent characteristics of cyberspace promote the destruction of aura or, in Zizekian terms, symbolic efficiency, it is precisely within this flattened and threatening ontological landscape that art's autonomy continues to redefine itself. If aura – as defined by Benjamin – is no longer a sufficient qualification for the symbolic power of the artwork and the individual identity of the artist is not necessarily required as its guarantor, art's continued functioning becomes ever more inscrutable on the one hand and, on the other, reducible to its continued social requirement.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Automatism, Autonomy and the Virtual Unconscious

*"With human means art wants to realise the language of what is not human"*  
Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*<sup>348</sup>

In the last chapter the question of artistic autonomy was examined in terms of the demise of the authority of the object, as defined by Benjamin, under the conditions of digital reproducibility and in conjunction with the new meaning of dematerialisation in biopower. I concluded that art's autonomy has managed to survive the technological attack on its aura, the excavation of its ontology through its institutional critique, the attempt to dissolve it into political praxis, and its threatening proximity to economic symbolic production within biopower – but not unscathed. In this last chapter I will attempt to push the question of autonomy one step further by examining it in relation to psychoanalytic models of the subject in modernity and postmodernity. Although the issue of art's autonomy does not neatly intersect with psychoanalytic theories of the subject, and in particular the unconscious and related discussions of its repressive or liberatory potential, they are mutually implicated within avant-garde history. As with avant-garde efforts to determine a political basis for art through the democratisation or redistribution of

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<sup>348</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1970, republished (London: Athlone Press, 1999) p.78

creativity, the liberation of the unconscious has been mobilised by artists seeking to challenge the reign of rationality and effect a wider social transformation.

Within Bretonian Surrealism, the agency of the unconscious was solicited as a means of exposing the repressed inconsistencies of reality as part of a wider project of political revolution. It is possible to see parallels between this formulation of derepression and the attempts to reveal the repressed preconditions of art (e.g. its contextual and institutional dependency) advanced by Duchamp and his conceptual legacy. However, in contrast to modernity and modernist art practice, here I will be arguing that, for various epistemological and technological reasons, postmodern society can be said to have undergone a phase shift in which a sort of general 'derepression' has occurred. This derepression is in part driven by the power of information technology to track and model systems whose complexity is greater than our ability to make sense of them. Where irrationality might once have been seen to reside in the obscured interior of the Freudian unconscious, it can now be found all around us in our everyday descriptions of the chaos of physical, social and economic systems.

Reminiscent of the Surrealists use of automatist techniques to explore and explode the techno-rationality of the industrial age, net artists have employed automatist techniques to explore the chaotic zeitgeist of the computer age. However, this later variant of automatism relies upon the highly regulated automatic functions of computation to circumvent conscious control and reveal what I will here be calling the 'virtual unconscious'. In contrast to the automation of Fordist/Taylorist production which preoccupied the Surrealists, digital computation reveals a world, arguably, as 'non-rational' and unpredictable as the unconscious mobilised by

Surrealists to combat the technocratic status quo. As we shall see below, this unpredictability, defined by the inability to detect recurrent patterns, is often *experienced* not as the absence of order but the reign of disorder. If non-rationality or irrationality, once associated with the unconscious and deployed to wage war on the hegemony of Enlightenment rationality, has subsequently become a kind of meta-narrative in itself in the form of 'chaos', what is its significance and attraction for net artists? Should it be understood exclusively as the ruling and instrumentalised epistemology of our times or can we see within it something more disruptive and antithetical to such a role?

In this chapter I will discuss the artificial language called Kroperom developed by the anonymous artist Antiorp, together with Vuk Cosic's video *Deep Ascii* and Olia Lialina's hyperlinked narrative *Agatha Appears*. In all three cases automatic software functions and the automatic agency of computers are either directly employed or explored as the work's central concern.

### Derepression and its Discontents

'The unconscious' is not a concept often touched upon either by net artists or writers on digital culture. Importantly, however, the term is occasionally raised in connection with Benjamin's theory of the 'optical unconscious'; the notion of an unconscious visual dimension to the material world which is ordinarily screened out by social consciousness but which is opened up to us by the invention of mechanical recording techniques, specifically photography.<sup>349</sup> This important hidden realm of

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<sup>349</sup> See Walter Benjamin's 'A Small History of Photography', *One-Way Street*, (London: Verso, 2000)

signification is revealed by catching reality 'off guard', much in the same way that a slip of the tongue reveals the existence of an obscured psychological dimension ordinarily repressed from conscious experience. Benjamin's concept of the optical unconscious is important for this enquiry in that it points toward the possibility of a depersonalised, depsychologised unconscious; one which could be understood as a material sedimentation of social and cultural history. Nonetheless Benjamin's concept crucially coincides with the Freudian model of the individual unconscious in that it provides us with a depth model in which the 'truth' is partially obscured, or rather one in which the truth of a psychological or social economy hinges on an obscured but unifying logic.<sup>350</sup> For Freud, the unconscious consists of a heteronomy of primal, quasi-biological drives either repressed or sublimated by the workings of the Ego. For Benjamin, the photograph reveals the socio-historical repressed which resides in the visual field; one which the automatic, regulative operations of social consciousness sift out. Latterly the terms 'digital' or 'virtual unconscious' have been coined to describe the visual dimension opened up by the non-chemical techniques of 'post-photography' (digital photography and computer simulation) which, without the image's indexical relation to its subject or indeed the need for a referent in material reality, casts the metaphysics of Benjamin's model into doubt.<sup>351</sup> Kevin Robins stresses the potential autonomy of the post-photographic image:

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<sup>350</sup> It is important to emphasise that if there is something like a unified logic to the unconscious, its effects should in no way be understood as tending towards unification or resolution. The action of the death drive, the most potent of the unconscious drives described by Freud, is understood as both compulsively repetitious and ultimately disaggregative, tending towards inanimacy.

<sup>351</sup> For a discussion of the virtual unconscious, see 'The Virtual Unconscious in Postphotography', *Electronic Culture: Technology and visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey, (London: Aperture, 1996)

"By superseding any indexical or referential relation to reality, the new image space assumes increasing autonomy...What we perceive as a photographic duplication exists in fact as a mathematical algorithm simulating or modeling the geometrical form of the image it generates. This dislocation of image and referent 'reinforces its perception as an object in its own right...It presents itself as a new source of knowledge'. In the factitious space of the computer memory it becomes possible to simulate a surrogate reality, a synthetic hyperreality that is difficult to differentiate from our conventional reality, and that, indeed, now threatens to eclipse it...Modern life appears to be increasingly a matter of interaction and negotiation with images and simulations which no longer serve to mediate reality. The simulation culture promises to open up whole new dimensions of existence and experience."<sup>352</sup>

In the case of the virtual unconscious we approach a flatter hermeneutic model than the depth models of Freudian modernity, in which, in a manner of speaking, a 'derepression' has occurred, in which to borrow a borrowing of Zizek's, 'the truth is out there' not hidden underneath. What the term 'virtual unconscious' points to is how, if the Real is not necessarily captured off guard, if it is no longer behind the surface of appearance, then it is at the level of the simulation that we must look for it. In this respect, there is no category of information which can be discounted as secondary or non-meaningful – there is no such thing as noise.

For the sake of this discussion, we will be stretching the term 'virtual unconscious' beyond its more narrow technology-bound application (post-photography) to indicate the passage from a hidden, Benjaminian optical and social unconscious whose strict mediation is simultaneously repressive and productive of a consistent identity, to a generalised 'depression' in which external reality becomes increasingly complex and indeterminate.<sup>353</sup> This indeterminacy can be summarised as

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid, pp. 156-7

<sup>353</sup> In other words, as with Freud's discussion of the repression of the unconscious by the Ego and the Superego, which he attributes with the production of the subject's consistent identity, the 'repression' of what N. Katherine Hayles calls the 'non-order' of the physical world by Western science and the Enlightenment in general created a feeling of stability and agency. When 'derepression' occurs and the universe is cast as

the shift from systems of knowledge and behaviour based in the linear dynamics of Enlightenment rationality, to the nonlinear dynamics of the risk society. In this chapter the concept of 'systemised indeterminacy' or 'deterministic chaos', derived from writing on chaos theory, will serve as a description for the postmodern epistemological crisis reached through a complexification in our modeling of physical, economic, and social phenomena.<sup>354</sup> Increased knowledge paradoxically produces a realisation, perhaps epitomised in chaos theory, that we are unable to define the causality of events and thus also to predict or control them. In this respect, the unitary universe of the Enlightenment cedes to one which increasingly resembles the threatening, disaggregative functioning of the unconscious. What I will here be calling the virtual unconscious refers to this loss of control, partially produced by computer driven representations of complexity and the associated proliferation of information, which is variously celebrated (e.g. Donna Haraway's cyborg, the multidimensional logic of Deleuzian strata), and feared, as in the potentially massive threats to mankind which cannot be unequivocally predicted let alone prevented (e.g. global warming, nuclear disaster, market crashes, CJD and species jumps from GM life forms). Deeply implicated in this reordering are digital technologies and the semi-automatic, self-generating processes they set into train.<sup>355</sup> The term 'virtual'

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chaotic, it starts to appear as unmanageable and hence threatening. See Sigmund Freud, 'The Unconscious' in *On Metapsychology*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Pelican, 1984)

<sup>354</sup> 'Systemised indeterminacy' is used by Jean Baudrillard in *Illusions of the End*, and 'determinate chaos' is used by N. Katherine Hayles in her various books on chaos theory and culture. For a lengthy discussion of the cultural adoption of chaos theory in which these terms are discussed, see Brian Ward's *The Literary Appropriation of Chaos Theory*, Ph.D thesis, (Dept. of English, University of Australia, 1998), <http://www.obs.curtin.cdu.au/acc/staff/wardb/phd>

<sup>355</sup> See especially Kevin Kelly's *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems and the Economic World*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus, 1995)

itself, when applied to any substantive, produces an ontological uncertainty – as in 'virtual reality'. In this chapter then the destabilising effects of virtuality will be brought together with the concept of the unconscious to produce a reading of the increased externalisation of disaggregated and automatic drives, by turns both liberatory and deathly.

This chapter will attempt to ascertain how net artists' investigation of the semi-autonomous agency of computers opens up onto questions of social and aesthetic agency and related freedoms. As touched on above, Surrealism will provide a significant point of comparison due to its far more overt conceptual concatenation of the unconscious, the automatic and social liberation. In contrast to the net artists' own more ambivalent stance, the concept of category confusion (between intention and automation, consciousness and dreams, sound and image, different signifying systems etc.) provided the recipe for an explosive liberation, a euphoric derepression, which Benjamin describes in his short essay on Surrealism:

"Life only seemed worth living where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away in everyone as by the steps of multitudinous images flooding back and forth, language only seemed itself where sound and image, image and sound interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called 'meaning'. Image and language take precedence. Saint-Pol Roux, retiring to bed about daybreak, fixes a notice on his door: 'Poet at work.' Breton notes: 'Quietly. I want to pass where no one yet has passed, quietly! – After you, dearest language.' Language takes precedence."<sup>356</sup>

Benjamin's rather elliptical reference to 'meaning' could be taken to mean the semi-conscious act of its construction, an act comparable to the Ego's semi-automatic mediation between the unconscious drives of the Id and the societal demands

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<sup>356</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism', in *One-Way Street*, p. 226



imposed by the Superego. Leaving no space for the "penny-in-the-slot called 'meaning'", and bidding language to take precedence are both gestures towards the freeing of that which the Ego filters out; the semi-automatic momentum of language, the power resident in the world to signify itself, and the automatic drives of the unmediated Id. Surrealist interest in wearing away a threshold between the conscious and unconscious relates to the insight, derived from Freud, that the development and preservation of civilisation is predicated on the repression of 'natural' instincts and desires, and that the derepression of this alienated content would also entail the liberation of society as a whole, the repression of the two being mutually implicated. This conflict between the Id and the Superego, between the fulfillment of basic desires and the development of civilisation was regarded by Freud to be an irresolvable historical constant.<sup>357</sup> This question of the relationship between the repressed psychic content and the social condition will be fundamental to our enquiry into the net artists' investigation of the virtual unconscious. In an age in which what Lyotard terms the 'paralogy' of postmodern knowledge systems presents us with a picture of the world that is impregnably contradictory and experientially irrational, how does this question of derepression relate to net artists working with highly complex computer networks?<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Zizek sees this as the reason for the inherently contradictory nature of psychoanalytic practice: "There is thus a radical and constitutive *indecision* which pertains to the fundamental intention of psychoanalytic theory and practice: it is split between the 'liberating' gesture of setting free repressed libidinal potential and the 'resigned conservatism' of accepting repression as the necessary price for the progress of civilisation." In "The Deadlock of 'Repressive Desublimation' in *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, Slavoy Zizek, (London: Verso, 1995), p.12

<sup>358</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1979, republished (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997)

It is precisely surrounding the question of the deadlock raised by Freud's predication of civilisation on psychic repression that the Frankfurt School made an important contribution. In contrast to certain Marxo-Freudian revisionists who wanted to rid the psychoanalytic model of the unconscious of its a-historical, biological character, the Frankfurt School's insight preserves its biological character but in the revised form of a 'second nature'.<sup>359</sup> Russell Jacoby summarises their historicising of the Freudian Id thus:

"The 'sub-individual' and 'pre-individual factors' that define the individual belong to the realm of the archaic and biological; but it is not a question of pure nature. Rather it is *second nature*: history that has hardened into nature. The distinction between nature and second nature, if unfamiliar to most social thought, is vital to critical theory. What is second nature to the individual is accumulated and sedimented history. It is history so long unliberated – history so long monotonously oppressive – that it congeals. Second nature is not simply nature or history, but frozen history that surfaces as nature."<sup>360</sup>

Through this concept of second nature we also come closer to an understanding of how social history and the individual unconscious are by no means separable (hence the idea of a social unconscious) and, further, how their mutual repression and/or derepression exists within a circuit of causation.

Unlike the Surrealists, however, the Frankfurt School did not view the derepression of this 'alienated psychic content' as necessarily leading to social liberation. Instead, they considered 'post-liberal', totalitarian societies as having brought about a kind of short-circuit between the Id and the Superego, wherein the

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<sup>359</sup> For a discussion on the debate between Freudian revisionists and the Frankfurt School see Zizek's 'The Deadlock of 'Repressive Desublimation'

<sup>360</sup> Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing*, (Brighton: Harvester, 1977), p.31, cited in Slavoy Zizek, *ibid*, p.10

unthinkable happens: "the triumphant archaic urges, the victory of the Id over the Ego, live in harmony with the triumph of the society over the individual".<sup>361</sup> In their terms, this dissolution of the subject's relative autonomy provided by the Ego's mediation between the life-substance of the drives and the social repression exerted by the Superego gives way to an immediate enlistment of regressive, compulsive, blind, automatic behaviour by society. This they termed 'repressive desublimation' which they saw exemplified in the slavish adherence to the leader and the imitative behaviour of the crowd in fascist societies.

But, both the Frankfurt School and the Surrealists recognised a consonance between the social relations of industrial capitalism and the 'alienated psychic substance' of the unconscious.<sup>362</sup> Adorno read the 'autonomy' of the liberal bourgeois subject as an ideological lure from the 'opaqueness of alienated objectivity.'<sup>363</sup> In other words, as Enlightenment rationality creates an ever more objectified and instrumentalised world, the alienation of the subject is accordingly inverted into the glorification of his/her autonomy. But for net artists working in what has been discussed as the biopolitical age – a time in which capitalism is described by Negri and Hardt as having 'no outside anymore', when social reproduction is entirely assimilated as a productive force, when the externalities of nationhood and the binary structures of colonisation and decolonisation have been flattened into the internalised omnicrisis of Empire – in short where information and interconnectivity come to overdetermine social relations, a very different mass psychological subject

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<sup>361</sup> Theodor Adorno, 'Zum Verhältnis von Soziologie und Psychologie', in *Gesellschaftstheorie und Kulturkritik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1975, p.122, cited in Zizek, *ibid*, p.16

<sup>362</sup> See Hal Foster's 'Exquisite Corpses' in *Compulsive Beauty*, (London: October Books, MIT Press, 1993)

<sup>363</sup> Adorno, cited in Zizek, 'The Deadlock of 'Repressive Desublimation'', p.14

should be imagined. Given that the promise derepression and desublimation once held for the Surrealists has been parodied by advertising's adoption of its forms, in which 'repressed' libidinal desires are decoded as the drive to consume commodities, and that a primary mode of ideological interpellation occurs under the rubric of 'enjoyment', large-scale social derepression/desublimation must certainly be viewed today with some suspicion.<sup>364</sup> And yet, as we shall see, cyborg theorists and Deleuzian techno-Marxists (whose discourse of networks, rhizomes and cybernetic systems importantly inform the politico-cultural environment of the Net) see within this break-down of the myth of the autonomous subject the potential to overcome the oppressive metanarratives of the Enlightenment and its legacy of instrumental rationality.

M @ z k ! n 3 n . k u n z t . m2cht . fr3!: Antiorp and the Meaning of Noise

A useful way of figuring the shift from the Freudian subject of modernity to the subject of biopower is to compare the Surrealist emblem of the automaton with the post-human body of the cyborg. If the former speaks of the uncanny shock at the innervation of machines and the automation of man within a Fordist/Taylorist production paradigm, the cyborg is a somewhat more ambivalent figure. As Donna Haraway explains in her foundational text 'A Cyborg Manifesto'<sup>365</sup> the (factitious figure of) the cyborg is the illegitimate child of "militarism and patriarchal-

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<sup>364</sup> For a discussion of the Superego's injunction to enjoy, see Slavoy Zizek's 'Whither Oedipus' in *The Ticklish Subject: the Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, (London: Verso, 1999)

<sup>365</sup> Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', 1985, reproduced in *The Cybercultures Reader*, eds. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, (London: Routledge, 2000)

capitalism" who far from falling prey to the "border wars" over identity (crucially between human and animal, organism and machine and the physical and non-physical), takes pleasure in their confusion.<sup>366</sup> No longer troubled by the melancholy of a lost "originary wholeness", the cyborg is "outside salvation history" and committed to "partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity"<sup>367</sup> In her manifesto, Haraway, who states at the outset that the cyborg is an 'ironic dream', fantasises a scenario in which the cyborg subverts the apocalyptic tendency of Enlightenment rationality and converts the destruction wrought by its categorical determinations into a post-Enlightenment utopia. Like Negri and Hardt who openly acknowledge the influence of her thinking, Haraway recognises that the 'binary thinking', against which postmodernists have long struggled, has ceded to a hegemonic mode of interconnectivity (i.e. Empire), and likewise predicates the possibility for social transformation on these flattened social networks. Tellingly, although somewhat evasively, Haraway poses the multiple, hybrid, centreless figure of the cyborg in psychoanalytic terms, equivocating that:

"the most terrible and perhaps the most promising monsters in cyborg worlds are embodied in non-oedipal narratives with a different logic of repression, which we need to understand for our survival."<sup>368</sup>

Here, what Haraway describes as non-oedipal relates to what, in other places, she terms 'non-originary'. The cyborg, perhaps comparable to the Frankfurt School's notion of second nature, is not the result of any purely 'natural', biological genealogy or uniquely individual psychological development. If anything, its non-oedipal

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid, p.292

<sup>367</sup> Ibid, p.292

<sup>368</sup> Ibid, p.292

development refers to the explicitly historical (social/political/technical) conditions out of which it arises; conditions which cannot be reduced to the quintessential matrix of the family and its inescapable psycho-sexual repetitions. Haraway's suggestion of a 'different logic of repression' must lie closer to Benjamin's idea of an optical unconscious whose derepression can be similarly effected through technological developments.

Haraway's combination of the cyborg and the non-oedipal narrative finds an important parallel in the recursive logic of computer programmes as well as the development of computer technology itself. The media theorist Friedrich Kittler has illustrated this principle through the transformation in the production process of microprocessors in the early 1970s. In order to design the architecture for the first silicon integrated microprocessor, Intel engineers had to hand draw the blueprint on 64 square meters of paper. This manual layout of two thousand transistors was then miniaturised to the same size as the chip and written into the silicon layers using electro-optical machines. After this momentous event, the hardware complexity of all ensuing microprocessors demanded that manual design techniques be dispensed with. Engineers thenceforth used computer aided design tools (CAD), relying on their "geometrical or auto-routing powers" to produce the blueprints.<sup>369</sup> This instance of the self-transformation of the means of production – a relationship of recursive or iterative development – goes some way to illustrating what Haraway might mean by non-oedipal narratives in the context of technoculture. In distinct contrast to the Oedipal moment in which the father intercedes within the blissful diad of mother/child to usher the child ineluctably into the socio-symbolic order, this

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<sup>369</sup> Friedrich Kittler, 'There is No Software', *Electronic Culture*, p.331

postmodern non-oedipal 'child' totally recasts the socio-symbolic field as it enters it from a constantly mutating point of origin.

This indeterminacy of origins or causality and, by consequence, the unpredictability of the future is a central aspect of chaos theory and one whose principles have spread into a wider postmodern social and cultural logic experienced as the destabilisation of epistemological, hermeneutic and socio-political systems.<sup>370</sup> It is important to emphasise straight away that chaos theory proper does not replace the order of determinist linear systems with the model of 'anti-order' but instead, as N. Katherine Hayles explains, with the concept of 'non-order'.<sup>371</sup> That is to say that chaos theory, although certainly producing a break with the determinism of traditional Western science, actually posits a 'deterministic chaos': "Whereas chaos or random disorder simply negates determinism, deterministic chaos destabilises determinism without rejecting it."<sup>372</sup> In other words, although the subject of this chaotic episteme is no longer able to determine the causality of any event with any certainty, a determining structure can nonetheless be said to exist. It is this precise paralogy that the anonymous net artist, usually identifiable by the name Antiorp, Netochka Nezvanova or Integer, is attracted to, and which it approaches particularly through its play with natural languages and computer programming languages as well as its disruptive interventions in the text-based social environments of mailing lists.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> See Ward's *The Literary Appropriation of Chaos Theory*

<sup>371</sup> See *ibid*

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid*, p.7

<sup>373</sup> Antiorp's failure to appear in person at public events such as The Third International Browser Day Competition, Amsterdam, May 2000, or the Transmediale festival, Berlin, February 2001, and provision of friends or colleagues to appear in his/her absence make it conceivable that 'Antiorp' is a multiple name. Signature domain names such as such as [www.m9ndfukc.com](http://www.m9ndfukc.com), [www.tezcat.com](http://www.tezcat.com) and

In 1998, Antiorp started a campaign of 'spamming'<sup>374</sup> on a wide variety of mailing lists ranging from nettime and 7-11, and those set up to discuss technical matters such as the MAX programming list.<sup>375</sup> Antiorp has, since this time, posted to these lists extensively in a specially developed language termed 'Kroperom' or 'KROP3ROM|A9FF'. This language, in part, relies on a logic of substitution to reformulate the Roman alphabet's phonetic system by including all the 256 different characters comprising the American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII), the *lingua franca* of computing. For instance, in the case of a Kroperom word like 'm9nd', the number '9' is incorporated into the word 'mind' such that the 'ine' in 'nine' takes on a phonetic role. But Antiorp's system also extends beyond purely phonetic substitutions. We can see the broader system of substitutions more clearly in Antiorp's conversion of the term 'Maschinen Kunst' into 'm@zk!n3n kuzt' (the term it uses to describe its oeuvre). Here, for example, the 'a' is substituted for the '@' character, the 'i' for the exclamation point, the 'sch' or 'shh' sound for a 'zk', the 'e' for a '3' and so on. Some of these substitutions, which remain fairly constant within Kroperom, involve finding a key which approximates the inverse of the original character, so that the 'i' becomes an '!' and the '3' replaces the 'e' or 'E'. In some cases these substitutions not only involve finding a close or

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[www.god-emil.dk](http://www.god-emil.dk) are also used as a means of identification.

<sup>374</sup> *The Foldoc Free Online Dictionary of Computing* gives the following as the primary definition of 'spam': "1. <[messaging](#)> (From the Monty Python 'Spam' song) To post irrelevant or inappropriate messages to one or more [Usenet newsgroups](#) or [mailing lists](#) in deliberate or accidental violation of [netiquette](#)." ([www.foldoc.org](http://www.foldoc.org)). Spamming, as *Foldoc* also informs us, can entail the cross-posting (i.e. to multiple newsgroups) of the same message such that it is received on multiple occasions by people belonging to more than one. The term is also applied to the posting of irrelevant or commercial messages, or junk mail, on newsgroups.

<sup>375</sup> See Michael Kieslinger's 'Who murdered Antiorp?', 1999, [www.crd.rca.ac.uk/~michaelk/crd/essay/essay.html](http://www.crd.rca.ac.uk/~michaelk/crd/essay/essay.html)



inverted visual equivalent (e.g. '!' or '@') but combine phonetic and visual substitutions in one (e.g. using '3' in place of 'E'). In these instances we can see how the naturalness of the – in this case – German language is infiltrated by ciphers and metaphors of computer code.<sup>376</sup> The exclamation point – which in its new role as the ubiquitous 'i' can dominate whole lines of text – lends Kroperom an emphatic quality and transvalues the whole logic of programming's executable command structure into the oppressive, if comical, tone of the spoken injunction: "do this! do that!". In the example 'm@zk!n3n kunzt m2cht . fr3!' not only do numerals and ASCII characters mix with alphabetic characters within the space of a word, but the unity of the phonetic system is broken by the logic of different character systems so that the reader is forced to employ a combination of strategies to decode the script. This heterogeneous style of encryption and language use not only destabilises the reading process, but triggers multiple lines of cultural, semiotic, and computational association. The act of reading becomes a pointedly self-reflexive and, in the terms of chaos theory, nonlinear experience with each word representing a junction of multiple systems. This point about self-reflexivity can doubtless be made of all textual production and consumption to a greater or lesser extent, but it is important here to emphasize that through, for example, the substitution of letters for numerals, the script starts to mimic the functional potential of a programme. In other words, textual self-reflexivity refers here especially to the computational environment. The idea that, in a different part of the computer, currently dormant elements of

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<sup>376</sup> Kroperom's underlying language is English, but is mixed together with words and phrases from other European languages such as German, French and Italian. Often a non-English word is used if it is consonant with the English word.

Kroperom might indeed perform a utilitarian function emerges, and with it the important question of redundancy or noise.

If we define noise as the elements within a given system deemed non-significative (i.e. the opposite of information), then we can see Antiorp introducing noise into linguistic and social environments in various ways. In a strategy strongly reminiscent of Jodi's work, Antiorp includes literal fragments of programming languages into their numerous and lengthy mails, as well as adapting certain programming conventions and applying them to natural language settings. A mail might include the line numbering employed in programming to ensure that it can be easily located and executed in the correct sequence. Including the line numbers in a piece of written text then is, in one sense, superfluous and noisy because it does not convey any additional information which further elucidates the explicit content of the text. But obviously such an inclusion can be very evocative and, by creating friction against which the reader has to struggle to extract the meaning of the text, produces a heightened awareness of the conventions by which 'meaning' is produced and absorbed. If imagination, understanding and the mediation of ideas is based, in part, on the exclusion of certain things and the isolation of others – a violent act of separation or fragmentation of things which might otherwise be continuous – then the disaggregations of code can be said to bear a fundamental resemblance to this psychic activity.<sup>377</sup> In the case of Antiorp's inclusion of programming gobbledygook in email, not only is the (machinic) dismembering action of thought exposed through the pollution of what would normally be artificially presented as pure and self-

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<sup>377</sup> Hegel understood imagination and understanding to have a negative aspect – its 'activity of dissolution', by which they separate what once belonged to an organic whole into fragments. See Slavoy Zizek's discussion of Hegel in *The Ticklish Subject*, pp.28-31

consistent, but it also refers to the significance of what is excluded. (fig 19) In short, noise is only perceived as noise when the definition of information is kept narrow.

In the following excerpt from a mail posted on nettime on 11th August 1998, a piece of BASIC code was enciphered such that neither the logic of the code nor the conventions of prose are kept pure: commands such as 'NEXT SIDE', 'PRINT' and 'POKE', instead of being paired with numerical or other programming values are answered, even contradicted by phrases such as 'aesthetic prejudice' or the simple inversion of the command itself:

```

100 NEXT SIDE          %%%%%%%%%%|_____|||EDIS|
TXEN=001
110 PRINT "_ "        %%%%%%%%%%|_____|||"_ "|
TNIRP_011
120 POKE 36879,57     %%%%%%%%%%|_____|||75,97863|
EKOP_021
130 FOR X = 1 TO 1000 %%%%%%%%%%|_____0001|OT|1|
=X|ROF|0=
31
140 PRINT "Sdds MANIFESTO" %%%%%%%%%%|
_____ "OT$EFINAM|Sdds"|TNIRP|041
150 NEXT X            %%%%%%%%%%|_____|||X|
TXEN_051
200 DATA "NO IMPORTANCE OF ME%%%%%%%%%
%,"GNINAEM_FO_ECNATROPMI|ON"|ATAD_002
,"NOISNETERP "MEANING IS%%%%%%%%%ECUDORP|
OT_SI_GNINAEM"|||__===
==
"AESTHE,"ECIDUJERP%A%ERA%SCITEHTSEA"|||__===
====
"Societ DileD%enoizuliD%iD||teicoS"|||__====
=====
Segnale__[sDDs]" |_____|||]"sDDs[__elangeS
300 DATA "Non c' Deve DellI|aznatropmI_'nusseN|alleD|
eveD|'c=noN"=ATAD=
=003
SigniDiacitetsESignificat$$$$|_____ 'L|errudorP|otacifingiS"=,"otacifingiS
PretensiDnoigileR $$$$$|_____|__anU=>"=,"noisnete=
rP
PrejudEHT ROFnYTEICOS", $$$$$_|_____|,"xirtaM=nU=>=ecidu=

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jerP  
DILUTION OF "LANGIS|||||||||||||||\_=====  
===FO=NOITULID<sup>378</sup>

This quasi-mirroring of the command prompts, while preserving the form of a sequence of code, subverts its efficacy and parodies the 'dumbness' of computers – the fact that computers, lacking consciousness and scrupulously rule-abiding, will automatically attempt to run even the most absurd sequences of data. However, the more significant effect here is produced by Antiorp's use of mirroring which collides semantic systems together through their mutual illegibility. Whilst the 'average' reader is only partially able to understand the albeit imperfect code, unlike the computer he/she *is* able to identify its inversion on the right hand side of the equation. Were the code to be run in a programme instead of existing within an email, the inverted values would be interpreted as pure nonsense. This complexification of the concept of noise or, rather, exposure of information's context dependency, is deepened by the discursive setting in which Antiorp's mail was received. As we can see at the beginning of the mail, the specific event to which it addresses itself is the following statement made by the French net artist Frédéric Madre on his own website Pleine Peau:<sup>379</sup>

- "1) hypermedia critics must do it the hypermedia way, or die.
- 2) forget 2.0: 0.0 is the right direction
- 3) moderation has to go"

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<sup>378</sup> Antiorp: '[madre, (someone), antiorp, madre]', Nettime (August 12, 1998), <http://www.nettime.org>

<sup>379</sup> <http://pleine-peau.com>

Madre's three proclamations can themselves be seen as a 'call to noise'. In the first, the demand is made for critics to include hyperlinks in their texts published online and thereby interrupt the singularity of the text – and by extension author – through their multiple indexing to other, alien texts. In the second, the call to preserve the prototype of a software design (implicit in the use of the numbering system 0.0, 1.0, 2.0 etc) with its inevitable 'bugs' or imperfections is a plea for the preservation of noise or a statement on the impossibility of excluding imperfections from any piece of programming. In the third, Madre's condemnation of moderation – the term applied to the act of filtering out 'irrelevant' or disruptive messages sent to a mailing list – is again a demand for another form of noise. Reposting these demands onto the stringently moderated environment of nettime (a list which Madre himself left due to his opposition to the principle of moderation) could not in and of itself be considered an instance of noise.<sup>380</sup> After all, the question of moderation had been an ongoing one on the list. However, the enormous length of the mail, its often inscrutable encodings, the use of Kroperom, programming fragments such as BASIC and HTML, as well as long sections of figurative ASCII design, both theorises and produces noise. The above excerpt from the mail includes an explicit statement about noise:

```
"200 DATA "NO IMPORTANCE OF ME%%%%%%%%%%,
"GNINAEM_FO_ECNATROPMI|ON"|ATAD_002,"NOISNETERP  "MEANING
IS%%%%%%ECUDORP|OT_SI_GNINAEM"|||||||||__==="
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<sup>380</sup> Madre left Nettime due to the censorship of certain posts he had sent during the war in Kosovo. Private correspondence with the author, August 14, 2001

When converted into plain English and 'cleansed' of noisy additional characters, these lines include the statements: "data: no importance of meaning"; "meaning is to produce meaning"; "meaning is produce"; and the slightly anomalous word "Pretension". When considered alongside an article by Antiorp, also included in the mail, entitled 'The Science of Noise', his/her conscious exploration of the principles of chaos theory become explicit.

According to these principles, since it is impossible to discover the precise sequence of factors which cause an event (say, the extinction of the dinosaurs), no contingent factor can be excluded as insignificant. Baudrillard takes up this point in *The Transparency of Evil* when, referencing chaos theory, he states that "we have substituted, for the reign of intelligible causes, no true chance but a more mysterious mechanism of interconnections."<sup>381</sup> This different order is ruled by 'esoteric affinities' or what chaologists call 'strange attractors' which initiate change in the behaviour of complex nonlinear systems. In light of these observations it is possible to understand the claim that data or information does not entail any 'importance of meaning' since it excludes the contingencies or noise which chaos theory holds as vital to the understanding of any event. In 'The Science of Noise' Antiorp makes several references to his/her negotiation of a path through the highly instrumental nature of computer science on the one hand, and to the nonlinear dynamics associated with chaos theory on the other. Defining the 'theory of computerisation' as "the system of control that equates contingency with noise" and whose ideal is "to eliminate contingency and maximize control by the system" he/she understands the role of Kroperom as "redefin[ing] noise structure as a locus of contingency, absence of

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<sup>381</sup> Cited in Ward, *The Literary Appropriation of Chaos*, p.65

subject and linguistic uncertainty".<sup>382</sup> In his/her concluding remarks, Antiorp, in contrast to Haraway, Negri and Hardt, characterises the logic of the current system as binary, and proclaims his/her own nonlinear stance to be 'anti-authoritarian', adding:

"Clearly acknowledging the intertextuality that constitutes social and musical structures as a proliferation of linguistic instability giving rise to increasingly unintelligible tendencies, Korp3rom|A955 is a radical non-centred work mitigating the suspect notion of freedom as the flux of desire."<sup>383</sup>

In this last sentence we encounter the very nub of Antiorp's project, and are perhaps equipped to solve the conundrum of his/her aversion to linear or binary thinking on the one hand, and ambivalent play with ciphers of fascist ideology on the other. By this I mean that Antiorp uses the term "M@zk!n3n.kunzt.m2cht.fr3!" (Maschinen Kunst Macht Frei!) to trumpet his/her own project but also uses the term 'korporat fasc!zt' pejoratively, to describe fellow mailing list members – especially when they are deemed to be monetising their creative or intellectual labour. We are left with the question of whether the alternative to the repressiveness of binary thinking – nonlinear dynamics; noise; the 'flux of desire' – is really so liberatory after all. If the 'suspect notion of freedom' is rejected, presumably on the basis that it depends upon the legibility of history and/or the positing of a political telos, what alternative is offered? This quandary, which arises out of the rejection of Enlightenment thinking, has long been debated by postmodern theorists. Indeed, in 'The Science of Noise', Antiorp makes a tacit reference to Lyotard by admitting that Korp3rom is a language game which "is incapable, like science, of legitimising other

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<sup>382</sup> Antiorp, '[madre, (someone), antiorp, madre]'

<sup>383</sup> Ibid

language games".<sup>384</sup> At the end of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard, demonstrates how knowledge systems or language games are unable to prove their own validity through recourse to any other language game but their own, and have thus fallen into a legitimation crisis. He concludes that any general, overarching consensus between language games depends upon an illusion whose price in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has been 'terror'. In defiance of the false totalisation of reality under repressive concepts, Lyotard advocates that social justice is far better served by a constant renegotiation of the rules of all the various language games:

"A recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games is a first step in that direction [the practice of justice]. . . . The second step is the principle that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the 'moves' playable within it must be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation. The orientation then favours a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments, by which I mean argumentation that concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in space and time."<sup>385</sup>

Antiorp, picking up where traditional science leaves off, has taken this 'crisis' as his/her truth moment – one that is darkly enjoyed. Unlike Lyotard, Antiorp does not appear to be optimistic about the ability of the contemporary epistemological crisis to provide us with a model of freedom or, at the very least, a guarantor of relative social justice. Hence his/her rejection of the 'suspect notion of freedom'.

In Antiorp's play with linguistic and systemic instabilities, we can identify something similar to the short-circuiting between Id and Superego described by the Frankfurt School as the mechanism of repressive desublimation. Antiorp's disruption of social contexts and languages through the introduction of noise, the production

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid

<sup>385</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.66



and seeding of a rationale in which nothing can be excluded as non-significative, works to undermine the authority and closure of any system – and ultimately, the consistency of the Lacanian big Other. This sense of polysemic unraveling evoked by Krokerom can be compared to the increasing sense of social, scientific and political uncertainty encapsulated in Ulrich Beck's definition of the 'risk society', which is characterised by our increasing inability to make decisions based in common sense. The complexity and specialism of knowledge fields in this 'second Enlightenment' combined with the logic of deterministic chaos means that it is impossible to know for certain whether, for example, we really are undergoing global warming and if indeed we are what we should do to prevent it.<sup>386</sup> In his discussion of risk society, Zizek describes how it is impossible to gauge an adequate response to such threatening possibilities – either a government or expert body is seen as scaremongering or covering up.<sup>387</sup> In this scenario we feel terrorised by the impenetrability, or possible absence, of the big Other:

"the new opaqueness and impenetrability (the radical uncertainty as to the ultimate consequences of our actions) is not due to the fact that we are puppets in the hands of some transcendent global Power (Fate, Historical Necessity, the Market); on the contrary, it is due to the fact that 'nobody is in charge', that there is no such power, no 'Other of the Other' pulling the strings – opaqueness is grounded in the very fact that today's society is thoroughly 'reflexive', that there is no Nature or Tradition providing a firm foundation on which one can rely."<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> In contrast to the 'first Enlightenment' which sought to bring about a society in which the fundamental decisions ceased to be irrational and were grounded on reason, the 'second Enlightenment' demands that we make crucial decisions which may affect our continued survival without any proper basis in knowledge.

<sup>387</sup> Slavoy Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, pp.334-47

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid*, p.336

Set adrift from Enlightenment rationality, we are now truly 'free' to make decisions without any external confirmation of what the right choice really is; a situation in which we are paradoxically not able to choose at all. In this climate, argues Žižek, choice becomes like an obscene gamble and destiny is no longer operative. When it becomes impossible to know what to do, one might as well do anything or nothing. Here we arrive again at the concept of the virtual unconscious in which the universe *appears* as some opaque set of discontinuous, semi-autonomous functions divested of any unitary, underlying causality or logic. Commenting upon the same condition of indeterminacy in which "destiny is absent", Baudrillard discusses how "we know only the signs of catastrophe now; we no longer know the signs of destiny."<sup>389</sup> In connection to the same idea he has also remarked that we "find ourselves in a paradoxical world where what is accidental takes on more meaning, more charm, than intelligible sequences."<sup>390</sup> In the absence of clear patterns or order, the universe's dynamics and the unconscious drives become uncannily consonant, the one ruled by a descent into disorder (the second rule of thermodynamics is that entropy never decreases) and the other by the death drive ("the aim of all life is death").<sup>391</sup> Where the Surrealists wished to free the drives of the Id – the alienated social content – in a bid to loosen society from its stays of repressive rationality, Antiorp are enthralled by the idea of a nonlinearity but reject the idea of freedom in favour of the flux of desire. In other words, although pitted against the repression of linear rationality, the experience of a big Other that seems increasingly to mirror the Id (also characterisable as deterministic chaos) appears to

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<sup>389</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, p.92, cited in Ward, p.69

<sup>390</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Fatality of Reversible Imminence*, p.277, cited in *ibid*, p.69

<sup>391</sup> Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, cited in Hal Foster's *Compulsive Beauty*, p.10

lead Antiorp to reject any actual possibility of freedom resident in the release of repressed desires.

### Convulsive Beauty Then and Now

In 1924 Louis Aragon wrote: "If 'reality' is the apparent absence of contradiction...the marvelous is the eruption of contradiction in the real."<sup>392</sup> Contrasting this statement to the positions of Antiorp, Žižek and Baudrillard makes clear that the prevailing picture of 'reality' at the turn of the 20th century is something very different. Since our reality today is dominated by 'truths' such as the 'irrational exuberance' of the market or the unquantifiable probability of an epidemic outbreak of CJD, a radical aesthetics can no longer tenably be premised on revealing the false illusion of consistency.<sup>393</sup> But conversely, as Hal Foster has persuasively argued, the Bretonian Surrealists' interest in uncovering repressed psychic and social content to reveal its marvelous contradictions, was not aimed at the radical disaggregation of the subject or society that this might imply. Foster makes a case for the uncanny being, paradoxically, the repressed content of Bretonian Surrealism but one that is 'everywhere treated'. In other words, the Surrealists were drawn to the uncanny – the repressed material which returns to disrupt unitary identity, aesthetic norms and social order – but resistant to its truly disruptive, compulsively repetitive and deathly force. In the *Second manifesto du Surréalisme*, Breton explains that the primary urge of Surrealism is to 'fix[] the point' at which core opposites such as life

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<sup>392</sup> Louis Aragon, *La Révolution Surréaliste 3* (April 15, 1925), cited in *ibid*, p.20

<sup>393</sup> One is tempted to argue that the opposite is true – that in fact to reveal the consistency with which inconsistency is proffered as a descriptive model of the postmodern world might prove to be a far more disruptive gesture.

and death, the real and the imagined, the past and the future, "cease to be perceived as contradictions".<sup>394</sup> For Foster, this wish to reconcile what cannot be reconciled reveals that:

"[t]he paradox of surrealism, the ambivalence of its most important practitioners, is this: even as they work to find this point they do not want to be pierced by it, for the real and the imagined, the past and the future only come together in the experience of the uncanny, and its stake is death."<sup>395</sup>

From what could be exaggerated as the safety of the Bretonian Surrealist position, the uncanny provided the opportunity for the aesthetic concept of the 'marvelous' whose key components were 'convulsive beauty' and 'objective chance'. In the discussion that follows here, we will be mostly concerned with the formulation of convulsive beauty because of its ability to grasp in images the interpenetration of the conflicting impulses operative in the unconscious: the life drive (Eros) and the death drive (Thanatos). Through a consideration of the ASCII movie *Deep Ascii* by Vuk Cosic (1998) and Olia Lialina's online narrative *Agatha Appears* (1997), I will discuss the net artists' similar interest in the interpenetration of the binaries order and disorder, and animate and inanimate, but show how here the 'repressed' of Bretonian Surrealism – the threat of disaggregation without reconciliation – comes to its conscious articulation.

In the *Manifesto*, Breton gives several examples of the marvelous: romantic ruins, a train trapped amidst vines in the jungle and shop mannequins. All these emblems, cherished by Surrealists, involve a coincidence of opposites; the ruin and

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<sup>394</sup> André Breton, *Second manifesto du Surréalisme* cited in Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, p.xviii

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid*, xix

the train suggest the forces of culture in conflict with those of nature, the submission of history and 'progress' to entropy, and the mannequin encapsulates the inhuman or inanimate in the human – an emblem of capitalist reification. Breton's ability to conceive as convulsively beautiful these revelations of the immanence of death in life is for Foster evidence of Breton's own resistance to the 'grim connection' which betokens the uncanny. Breton elaborates on the beauty of the marvelous in *L'Amour fou*, declaring: "Convulsive Beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magical-circumstantial or will not be"<sup>396</sup> Particularly pertinent to a reading of Cosic's *Deep Ascii* are the images Breton offers of the veiled-erotic which entail reality convulsed into writing: "a limestone deposit shaped like an egg; a quartz wall formed like a sculpted mantle; a rubber object and a mandrake root that resemble statuettes; a coral reef that appears like an underwater garden; and finally crystals deemed by Breton a paradigm of automatist creation." (fig 20)<sup>397</sup> Foster interprets these images of 'natural mimicry' as exemplifying the uncanny because what alerts us to its presence is the return of something familiar in the guise of something alien and threatening. In psychoanalytic terms, the uncanny is characterised by the return of a familiar phenomenon made strange by repression and transformed into a "ghostly harbinger of death". In *The Uncanny*, written in 1919, Freud argues that there is an instinctual compulsion to repeat, to return to a prior state, i.e. of inanimation, and that whatever reminds us of this repetition compulsion is uncanny. Later, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud finally formulates the uncanny as the manifestation of the struggle between life and death drives, or between Eros and Thanatos.<sup>398</sup> For Freud, it is

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<sup>396</sup> Breton, in *Ibid*, p.23

<sup>397</sup> Foster, *Ibid*, p.23

<sup>398</sup> See *Ibid*, p.9

Thanatos that ultimately dominates Eros, but for Breton the possibility of the drives' resolution is preserved. His inventory of the beautiful involves precisely this 'fixed-explosive' balance; the shock by which entropy is arrested to reveal something significant and self-positing. As Foster stresses, however, the coincidence of order and disorder, and/or sign and referent, also point towards the underlying presence of disorder or the *'informe'* within what appears to be highly organised and meaningful. In this sense the experience of the marvelous is less that of beauty than of "the 'negative pleasure' of the sublime".<sup>399</sup>

If the Surrealist concept of convulsive beauty can be said to involve the usurpation of the thing by the word (nature convulsed into writing), then Vuk Cosic's 1998 'ASCII movie' *Deep Ascii* would seem to present an inversion of this relationship.<sup>400</sup> Cosic has taken the 1972 classic pornographic movie *Deep Throat* as a highly schematic erotic 'sign' and engineered its semiotic subversion and partial erasure through a purely technical conversion. Crudely speaking, what Cosic, with programming assistance from Luka Frelj, has done is to translate a sequence of film images into a sequence of moving ASCII characters.<sup>401</sup> This process effectively updates an old technique used to print images from computers in the days before the widespread availability of printers capable of outputting raster digital images. Using a UNIX programme called 'toascii' the computer was able to "print[] textual characters that represent the black and white image used as input."<sup>402</sup> Cosic and

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid, p.28

<sup>400</sup> <http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/ascii/deep.htm>

<sup>401</sup> At the time, Luka Frelj was a colleague of Cosic's at the Ljudmila Digital Media Lab in Ljubljana

<sup>402</sup> The UNIX manual, cited in Lev Manovich's 'Cinema by Numbers: ASCII films by Vuk Cosic', *Vuk Cosic: Contemporary ASCII*, (Zaloznik: Galerija S.O.U. Kapelica, Ljubljana, 2000), pp.9-10

Frelih used an equivalent process called 'ttyvideo' by which a video image can be converted into its equivalent ASCII output. They then made a Java applet to play the video in a Web browser.<sup>403</sup> As Lev Manovich argues, where films such as George Lucas's *The Phantom Menace* ("the first feature-length commercial abstract film: two hours worth of frames made up of numbers") hide the digital nature of the image under the appearance of traditional film, Cosic's ASCII movies "'perform' the new status of media as digital data."<sup>404</sup> In actual fact, what we view is no less a mediated representation of the underlying processes than *The Phantom Menace* in that the figurative play of ASCII characters on the computer screen is by no means a direct encounter with the binary functions which underlie the Java script and HTML functions which produce the image. Nonetheless, the translation of the fixed and indexical nature of film into a shimmering display of discrete and shifting characters *is* the result of the images' conversion into binary digital code and it is this process which the ASCII characters signify or 'perform'.

The struggle produced by *Deep AsciiI* between legibility and chaos, or information and noise, is a struggle for signification conditioned by the 'compulsive' activity of the software's automatic processes. Cosic has set up the terms of the image translation, after which all number of variables beyond his control decide upon whether the film sequence suddenly becomes legible or remains obscure. This is ultimately quite different to the Surrealists' use of automatist processes such as hypnosis, frottage or objective chance which were understood as a dissociative means capable of producing a synthetic end; an asymmetrical means/end relation of causality in which something irregular, undetermined or serendipitous brings forth a

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<sup>403</sup> Vuk Cosic, private correspondence with the author, February 10, 2001

<sup>404</sup> Manovich, *Vuk Cosic*, p.8

deep, underlying unity (the liberated unconscious). With *Deep Ascii* by contrast, the automatic-automatist process of the 'asciimator' converts what was already often a hypnotically repetitive sequence into a densely intricate scramble of green characters and numerals in which a recognisable image is constantly lost and found. The viewer's struggle to decipher the video could also be said to hypnotise him/her into a kind of automatist state, a suggestible frame of mind, triggered by the swirl of indistinct images and dancing green characters, condensing into recognisable scenes and then exploding into total abstraction. One is often uncertain if one is looking at, say, a woman crossing the road or a couple engaged in fellatio. The regularity of the software's procedure reveals the underlying irregular, mutating tendency of Informatic behaviour and the instability of visual perception. Although this regularity is certainly at odds with the dissociative strategies of Surrealism, the attempt to bypass the conscious control of the image's production and to reveal an underlying chaos does create parallels between the two moments.

Hal Foster's reading of the outcomes of these processes is helpful in reading Cosic's much later variant of automatism. Foster sees the logic unleashed by automatism, contrary to the Surrealists' intentions, as forcing the same conclusions as those reached by Freud in his late theory of the primal struggle between the life and death drives:

"Of course, Breton and company framed the question of automatism very differently. For them the problem was one of authenticity, i.e., of the threat posed by calculation and correction to the pure presence of the automatist psyche. But this formulation missed the more fundamental problem – that automatism might not be liberatory at all, not because it voided the controls of the (super)ego (such was its express purpose) but because it decentered the subject too radically in relation to the unconscious. In short, the question of



the constraints of the conscious mind obscured the more important question of the constraints of the unconscious mind."<sup>405</sup>

In light of these remarks, it is interesting that Cosic – who has converted many shorter classic film clips into ASCII movies– chose a pornographic film for conversion into the only movie that approaches full length.<sup>406</sup> Cosic, passing over the sexual content of the film, has explained that the choice of *Deep Throat* was a result of its ubiquitous use of close-ups which provide a bolder image when converted into moving ASCII: "ASCII rendering of an image does not allow you to use a lot of noise. You can use an image with a lot of detail, but it will not render well in ASCII."<sup>407</sup> In this explanation, Cosic somewhat repurposes the term 'noise' to imply the less bold elements of an image, rather than meaning that details are non-meaningful *per se*. Although it is clear that Cosic is using this idea of noise to make a quite technical point, his choice of words also illuminates something essential in his selection of pornographic material which he does not mention. Pornography makes use of film and the conventions of cinema in a highly efficient and schematic way. For example, a pornographic film typically dispenses with the necessity of a narrative plot as soon as the basic erotic conceit has been established. Similarly, the introduction of contextualising or mood setting shots is kept to a minimum in order to reserve the majority of the film for the undisturbed display of sexual acts. These acts themselves typically illustrate the inherent instrumentality of the genre as erotic pleasure is whittled down to the mechanics of stimulation and penetration in its full permutative range. Metaphorically speaking then, pornography is a filmic genre that

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<sup>405</sup> Foster, p.5

<sup>406</sup> See *History of Moving Images*, [www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/ascii/film](http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/ascii/film)

<sup>407</sup> Vuk Cosic cited in, 'The Ascii Art Ensemble', Josephine Bosma', Telepolis, (September 1998), <http://www.heise.de/tp/english/inhalt/sa/2458/1.html>

attempts to keep 'noise' to a minimum in the interest of keeping the potential for erotic 'information' at a maximum.

Ironically, the mechanistic logic of pornography is reminiscent of the compulsive repetitions associated with the death drive and yet it is difficult not to associate pornography's erasure of 'noise' with a repression of the very violence and deathliness which underpin eroticism. In this sense, pornography, like Bretonian Surrealism, courts the deathly void of the unconscious – by way of repetitive, mechanical techniques – whilst eschewing an encounter with its 'deathly stake'. Georges Bataille – who, it is worth remarking, was a dissident from Breton's Surrealist circle – wrote extensively about the intimate connection between eroticism and death.<sup>408</sup> As Bataille noted, in most societies both sexuality and death are the sites of extensive prohibitions and taboos, and it is the danger of our attraction/repulsion to this pullulating complex of life and death forces that the prohibitions seek to control. For Bataille the precondition of life is an excessive, non-conservative and luxurious expenditure premised on death, and conversely the putrefaction of death is also productive of the fecundity of life. Eroticism, which itself partakes in this economy of excess, is shot through with a desire for annihilation:

"Just as the crime, which horrifies her, secretly raises and fuels Phaedra's ardour, sexuality's fragrance of death ensures all its power. This is the meaning of anguish, without which sexuality would be only an animal activity, and would not be erotic. If we wish to clearly represent this extraordinary effect, we have to compare it to vertigo, where fear does not paralyse but increases an involuntary desire to fall; and to uncontrollable laughter, where the laughter increases in proportion to our anguish if some

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<sup>408</sup> See the section 'Eroticism' in *The Bataille Reader*, eds Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997)

dangerous element supervenes and if we laugh even though at all costs we should stop laughing.

In each of these situations, a feeling of danger – yet not so pressing as to preclude any delay – places us before a nauseating void. A void in the face of which our being is a plenum, threatened with losing its plenitude, both desiring and fearing to lose it. As if the consciousness of plenitude demanded a state of uncertainty, of suspension. As if being itself were this exploration of all possibility, always going to the extreme and always hazardous. And so, to such a stubborn defiance of impossibility, to such a full desire for emptiness, there is no end but the definitive emptiness of death.<sup>409</sup>

Curiously perhaps, Cosic's insistence on a minimum of noise in his original material, although on one level merely a straightforward requirement for achieving any degree of legibility at all, is also the precondition for producing a newly 'noisy' erotica. This is an erotica, if that is in any way an adequate word, in which the image is constantly threatened with disaggregation and the compact delivery of erotic information is constantly undermined by the interference of the *informe*. Taking the highly Apollonian material of *Deep Throat*, in which the destructive stake of eroticism is bound and stabilised, Cosic releases a Dionysian disorder which, in my opinion, reintroduces the 'nauseating void' of death into the erotic spectacle. In this sense, *Deep Ascii* evidences what here has been termed the virtual unconscious – an externalised and societal derepression in which the repressive mechanisms which undergird the consistency of identity are destabilised and wherein the subject is not spared a nauseating confrontation with the void of self-cancelling chaos. In the shift from the fixity of analogue film (whose frames can be spliced together but which, in themselves, cannot be altered) to the mutability of the discrete units of information (its binary code) this movement from a system premised on order (Enlightenment rationality) to one based in deterministic chaos (the 'second Enlightenment') is

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<sup>409</sup> Georges Bataille, 'The Phaedra Complex', *ibid*, p.257

concisely apprehensible. Relatedly, the material instability of information, its 'flickering' state as N. Katherine Hayles has described it, provides a rather different kind of automatic process. Unlike the industrial machines of the pre-information age whose output was, and still is, regular and repetitive, the output of the automatic processes of computation is mutagenic and unpredictable. Its capacities to iterate or parse and thus transvalue information, although orderly procedures in themselves, are key to its more unruly potential. In this respect, the automatic functions of computers produce unexpected effects with surprising parallels to those automatist techniques of Surrealism such as frottage, hypnosis, and objective chance. In other words, the result of an algorithm more closely approximates the creative output of the human psyche than the holes punched by, say, an automated steel cutter. This uncanny aspect of computers – neither dumbly, mechanically repetitive nor possessed of a psychology – entails the same 'fixed-explosive' contradictoriness as the surrealist notion of the marvelous. Strangely, the tools of the information age have come to resemble the vying forces of the life and death drives, the action of the Freudian unconscious. Computation then is not only productive of a derepression, an exteriorised, virtual unconscious, it is also emblematic of it. However, what a work such as *Deep Ascii* reveals is that, in contrast to the Bretonian faith in the resolution of opposites achieved by such a derepression, these tools tend to reveal the disaggregated chaos before which the viewer swoons in the same attraction-repulsion dynamic as we experience in the face of sex and putrefaction. Noise opens up a vertiginous void before which we often feel dazzled and powerless.

Agatha Appears (Disgusted): the Informatic Dissolution of the Autonomous Subject

So far we have encountered Antiorp's experiments with nonlinear dynamics and deterministic chaos which present a view of an illegible but meaningful universe whilst contemplating our ethical suspension therein, 'beyond good and evil'. The nonlinear dynamics articulated and celebrated in the work of Antiorp are, however, constantly indexed to a variety of relatively orderly, rule-bound systems such as natural and programming languages or the social codes developed in mailing lists. We have also encountered Cosic's *Deep Ascii* which is one in a series of works that translate stable forms (analogue films or physical buildings) into their unstable Informatic equivalents.<sup>410</sup> In these translations, however, the initial referent is always perceivable in some residual form, be it in the intermittently recognisable sequences of a film or a building glimpsed beneath its projected ASCII overlay. It is the tension maintained between order and disorder, or stable referent and unstable Informatic sign – perhaps an image of non-order – which triggers a sense of convulsive beauty reminiscent of Bretonian Surrealism. But Antiorp and Cosic also both display something reminiscent of a Bataillan erotic exhilaration that pivots between disgust at the dissipative chaos of information systems and an attraction to their complex, negentropic fecundity.

At the outset of this chapter we encountered Adorno's concept of repressive desublimation and the associated impact on the bourgeois autonomous subject.

Adorno argued that in liberal bourgeois society, the repressed Id also provided an

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<sup>410</sup> In 2000 Cosic was commissioned by the Video Positive Festival in Liverpool to create a site-specific work in the city. Cosic photographed the St. George's Hall and translated its proportions into a series of ASCII images which he then projected back onto the building at night which appeared as a large three dimensional ASCII sculpture with the building remaining visible underneath the projection. See <http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/ascii/architecture/>

unreachable psychic repository which both prevented the unmediated expression of drives but also protected the unconscious from direct Superego manipulation.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we encounter the idea of the 'non-oedipal' subject or cyborg for whom a key attribute, as theorised by Haraway, is "a different logic of repression", a logic which is evidenced in the work of Antiorp and Cosic. In contrast to the fascist co-optation of the Id by a repressive Superego embodied in the singular figure of the Führer, today the big Other terrorises through its infinite complexity – the metanarrative of chaos. A derepression of the Id, as epitomised by the counter-cultural revolutions of the 1960s, coincides with an immense complexification of the big Other in the form of epistemological crises and the exponential growth of ICT. In other words, the widespread social injunction to express one's desires and live out one's dreams is accompanied by the inability to settle on the nature or mandate of authority. As Western societies become increasingly atheist, the power vacuum left by religion and unsuccessfully occupied by money, leads to a questioning of authority or, in Zizekian terms, an attempt to fill out the consistency of the symbolic order. This derepression is sometimes experienced, and celebrated in culture as a release from individuality, a radical interconnectedness with people, ideas, cultures, information, technology, interdisciplinarity and so on, but as often it is experienced as a dangerous destabilisation of subjectivity. If Antiorp's and Cosic's work seems to operate ambivalently along this line of tension which runs between the fear of complete disintegration and the delight in the marvelous "eruption of contradiction in the real", Olia Lialina's work articulates a more concrete and horrified sense of subjective decentrement within the non-linearity of the Net's dynamic.

Lialina investigates this sense of instability through her hypertext narratives which use the hyperlinked and decentralised structures of the Net to create a literal and metaphorical sense of our inability to cognitively map. In her 1997 work *Agatha Appears* – as with her 1996 work *My boyfriend came back from war. After dinner they left us alone* discussed in Chapter One – Lialina collides the sequential frame logic of film narrative together with what Lev Manovich has termed the 'database logic' which subtends computer narratives. (figs 21 & 22) For Manovich, narrative is just one amongst numerous options for the sequencing of data in computer databases.<sup>411</sup> Unlike film whose frame by frame sequentiality inherently lends itself to narrative, from the point of view of the computer's data storage and retrieval systems, it is irrelevant whether data is arranged according to chronology, alphabetical sequence, keyword or any available criterion. For Manovich, this underlying logic is best expressed in the medium of the Net:

“Where the database form really flourished, however, is on the Internet. As defined by original HTML, a Web page is a sequential list of separate elements: text blocks, images, digital video clips, and links to other pages. It is always possible to add a new element to the list – all you have to do is to open a file and add a new line.”<sup>412</sup>

From this particular perspective we re-encounter the same nonlinearity and multidimensionality that Antiorp explore in its work on the question of hypertext

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<sup>411</sup> Commenting on the by now commonplace archiving of museums on CD-Roms, Manovich explains: “Although such CD-Roms often simulate the traditional museum experience of moving from room to room in a continuous trajectory, this “narrative” method of access does not have any special status in comparison to other access methods offered by a CD-Rom. Thus the narrative becomes just one method of accessing data among others.” Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, op. cit., p.220

<sup>412</sup> Ibid

narratives. Indeed the Internet in its entirety can be seen, and often is, as a gigantic symbol and concrete example of a nonlinear system. However, what is interesting in the work of Lialina, is her sensitivity to the fact that the movement through a website entails a sequential logic strongly reminiscent of film:

"Hypertext is the best way to tell stories, hundreds of stories simultaneously. And interaction is merely a field for experiment, the same as stage, film, brain. Net language is closer to film than video. Video doesn't think by frame. Web does. Not only. It gives a chance to operate with such ideas as line, parallel, associative (digital, wow) montage. Its a fascinating experience."<sup>413</sup>

Although in this quote, Lialina makes clear that frame logic is only one amongst multiple narrative dimensions offered by the Net, her online narratives are intentionally reminiscent of film. As with the tensions between order and disorder in the work of Antiorp and Cosic outlined above, Lialina's work engages in an equivalent formal struggle between linear and nonlinear sequence. We might say that, for her, film is the writing which the Net threatens to convulse into a kind of nonsignificative 'nature', and the characters in her narratives are directly under threat.

*Agatha Appears* can, in a limited respect, be described purely in terms of its plot which follows a system administrator recently fired "because some important files disappeared from his network". In a disgruntled and perplexed state he meets Agatha, a 'lost country girl'. He asks her "Baby, have you heard about the Internet?", to which she replies in the negative, whereupon he invites her to his apartment and offers to 'teleport' her, or upload her into the Net. Although they encounter some difficulties due to her 'long legs', she eventually experiences a kind of dissolution in

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<sup>413</sup> Cited in 'Olga's Artists Statement: NETFILM', Telepolis, date not given, <http://www.heise.de/tp/english/kunst/nk/3040/2.html>



the universe of "millions of zeros laughing and screaming". This experience, which she finds both 'disgusting' and exhilarating, eventually separate her from her system administrator beau and she is left to wander the lattice of connections, from server to server, *ad infinitum*. The story is brought to an end not through a resolution of the plot's inherent conflicts but by a kind of apathetic or entropic resignation in which "Agatha los[es] interest".

The plot itself is mirrored through an ingenious use of browser functionalities as well as the system for storing the work's digital files on the Net. As touched upon in Chapter Four, Lialina is highly conscious of the location and names of digital files, seeing them as the only index of originality available. In the plagiaristic environment of the Net, where anyone can clone any website, the artist's URL is the only guarantor that one is viewing the 'original', most up to date and uncompromised version of the work. Her work also repeatedly reveals an interest in how the name of a file *is* its location and that, in this respect, language very literally controls the movement and behaviour of digital information – an example of the new performativity of words in the Net. In this piece Lialina's files are distributed across various servers and, as we shall see, the names of the servers and files play an increasingly central role in the narrative. *Agatha Appears* commences at <http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha>, a file in the collection of the Hungarian mediacentre C3's archive. After the initial scene in which the flat cut-out figure of the system administrator appears alone, the suffixes appended to the file names begin to set the various and typically noirish scenes that unfold between the two characters. In the second scene in which the equally flat and wooden figure of Agatha makes her

first appearance, the location bar reads,

[http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/big\\_city\\_night\\_street.html](http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/big_city_night_street.html) and thereafter:

[http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/next\\_night\\_sysadms\\_apartment.html](http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/next_night_sysadms_apartment.html)  
[http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/late\\_evening\\_railway\\_station\\_heavy\\_rain.html](http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/late_evening_railway_station_heavy_rain.html)  
<http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/there1.html>  
<http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/here1.html>  
<http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/alone1.html>  
<http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/alone.html>  
[http://www.here.ru/agatha/cant\\_stay\\_anymore.htm](http://www.here.ru/agatha/cant_stay_anymore.htm)  
[http://www.altx.com/agatha/starts\\_new\\_life.html](http://www.altx.com/agatha/starts_new_life.html)  
<http://www.distopia.com/agatha/travels.html>  
[http://www2.arnes.si/~ljintima3/agatha/travels\\_a\\_lot.html](http://www2.arnes.si/~ljintima3/agatha/travels_a_lot.html)  
[http://www.zuper.com/agatha/wants\\_home.html](http://www.zuper.com/agatha/wants_home.html)  
[http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/agatha/goes\\_on.html](http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/agatha/goes_on.html)  
[http://www.easylife.org./agatha/already\\_tied.html](http://www.easylife.org./agatha/already_tied.html)  
[http://www.irational.org/agatha/wants\\_to\\_teleport.html](http://www.irational.org/agatha/wants_to_teleport.html)  
[http://www.tema.ru/agatha/has\\_no\\_idea.html](http://www.tema.ru/agatha/has_no_idea.html)  
[http://www.thing.at/agatha/teleports\\_and\\_teleports.htm](http://www.thing.at/agatha/teleports_and_teleports.htm)  
[http://www.superbad.com/agatha/lost\\_the\\_interest.html](http://www.superbad.com/agatha/lost_the_interest.html)

Agatha is introduced as a 'country girl' whose first appearance is accompanied by an audio file of a folksy guitar song sung by a woman and accompanied by children in which the line "goodbye Jack and Sue" is simply repeated.<sup>414</sup> No doubt the song is intended to signify generically Agatha's humble country origins. However from the outset the static, montaged figures of the systems administrator and Agatha both sport clothing made from textual fragments taken from the computer's interface. The systems administrator's body is made up of the line: "EndUser – Doc\_Catalogue" and Agatha, in the first scene, wears a dress whose 'pattern' is the line "B-Dir 22-97". In both cases it seems likely that these records of data indexing relate to the production of the artwork itself. A physical equivalent to this might be the artist's

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<sup>414</sup> This song is played several times throughout *Agatha Appears* acting as a deliberately crude soundtrack.

inclusion of her paint palette in the final painting. The explicitly informatic surface of both characters implies that Agatha was always already determined by a proximity to information and that her movement from Internet *naif* to fully 'teleported' or uploaded digital entity is the inevitable movement from the ontological in-itself to the for-itself of the information age.

However, the implied inevitability of this movement does not inure Agatha to the shock of her own disintegration into information and subsequent sentence to helplessly wander the lattice of networked computers. Until the moment of teleportation, the dialogue which passes between Agatha and her systems administrator occurs in the status bar at the bottom of the browser where, ordinarily, information is displayed about the connection to and download rate of a particular digital file. As the two characters approach the bed in the systems administrator's apartment (the symbolic launch pad of teleportation), the dialogue suddenly switches from the status bar to a Script Alert window which pops up on the screen. This box is usually only displayed when a compatibility error occurs between the browser and the file being viewed (for example, it might require a plug-in which the browser does not have), and its redeployment as the vehicle for dialogue, not urgent technical messages, inflects the dialogue with a sense of alarm. The dialogue in the Script Alert window reads as follows, with each line accompanied by an 'ok' button which the viewer is compelled to click before moving onto the next line and a 'cancel' button which s/he must click to exit the sequence:

"No, definitely, your legs are too long"  
"but what can I do?"  
"Just a moment, I'll make a shortcut"  
"U tried it before?"

"Many time[s]"  
"What is error 19? Maybe better tomorrow?"  
"No, no. It's ok. Careful! Ok"  
"Shoulder! Shoulder!"  
"Sorry, can I take my lipstick with me?"  
"Red?"  
"A-a-a-a-aaaa!!!"  
"What?"  
"A-a-a-a-aaaa!!!"  
"What is there?"  
"A-a-a-a-aaaa!!!"  
"Agatha, dear, what?"  
"Millions of zeros, laughing and screaming"  
"Strange"  
"Disgusting"  
"I'm sorry, it always worked"

It is this blunt use of the word 'disgusting' to describe a disaggregation of the subject within the digital rhizome that distinguishes Lialina's work from that of Antiorp and Cosic. And it is the Baudrillardian overproximity or 'obscenity of information', the point at which the autonomous subject and the symbolic order are exploded into 'millions of zeros, laughing and screaming' to which, in my opinion, the word 'disgusting' refers. Despite Lialiana's obvious fascination with computer networks – which is here figured as the romantic frisson between Agatha and the systems administrator – there is an open admission of the disgust of digital 'noise' never made by Antiorp or Cosic.

After this scene, and before embarking on her diasporic Net journey, Agatha meets the systems administrator, quite anachronistically, at a railway station, late in the evening and in the rain. Lialina evokes the railway station atmosphere by situating the characters next to a time-table and setting the dialogue in the status bar into motion. The text and ASCII symbols move from right to left, and the dialogue itself is interspersed between long bracketed sets of hyphens and characters designed

to look like train carriages. Part of this dialogue includes the system administrator's conviction that the Internet is not merely a matter of applications, scripts or the sum of its technological parts, but a "new world, new philosophy, new way of thinking" with the conclusion that to understand the Net "you must be inside". Importantly, Agatha's individual departure into the digital dimension uses the historical springboard of industrialised and bureaucratised travel and romantic film and fiction (one needs only think of *Anna Karenina* as a reference here). The linear and modular sequence of passing railway carriages appears to provide the techno-historical counterpart to the sequence of frames passing through a projector at speed. Agatha's departure into the 'new world' of the Net is thus also accompanied by a shift from linear narrative (although nominally preserved by the choreographed movement through the piece's set of hyperlinked webpages) to the database logic of the underlying computer network. Several 'clicks' into her journey, as can be seen in the series of URLs listed above, Agatha has left the original C3 server behind her and is moving through a sequence of servers most of which are owned and run by members of the net art 'community', and the first of which is tellingly named 'distopia.com'. Her movement from one node of the Net to another is only represented through the alteration of the URLs displayed in the location bar, as each new downloaded page retains the same static image of Agatha against a black background. Finally we arrive at the homepage of a net art site called 'superbad.com' and the URL's suffix informs us that Agatha "lost\_the\_interest.html". *Agatha Appears* does not, therefore, possess a clear ending but instead involves a segue from one artwork into another suggesting the non-discrete nature of any single artwork and, as the last URL seems

to underline, an entropic slide from ordered narrative into the distraction of information play.

The three key narrative moments in *Agatha Appears*, I would suggest, are her first experience of teleportation involving her 'disgust' at the chaotic spectacle of "millions of zeros screaming and laughing", her departure from the unitary location (and associated narrative logic) of the c3 server into a diasporic journey through the network and finally the entropic slide of the discrete artwork (and with it Agatha's own narrative) into the distraction of nonlinear information play across the network. Ironically given the subject of the narrative which centres on the entropic pull towards Bataille's 'nauseating void', the very fact that this work can be described in terms of three pivotal moments demonstrates its inherent resistance to this selfsame destitution. In this sense, the very existence of a coherent narrative cuts against the overt meaning of the narrative and reserves a space for the possibility of meaning or order within the riotous reign of noise. It is perhaps the fact that *Agatha Appears*, in contrast to the works of Antiorp and Cosic discussed above, ventures a coherent articulation of what is inherently incoherent – the paralogy of postmodern language games amidst an overabundance of information – that she is also able to articulate something as concrete as disgust. Here it is pertinent to remark that *Agatha Appears* does not make use of automatism in the way that Cosic does in *Deep Ascii*, that is to say, she does not harness any single procedure in order to overcome the repressive controls of the Ego or Superego to release the obscured dimension of the unconscious. Instead, her hypertext narrative consciously controls the distributed network logic of the Internet and narrativises its atomising effects (e.g. binary code, hyperlinks, data packets, packet switching). For instance, she uses the distributed

storage system of the Net's many servers to produce the unusual spectacle of the same page downloading time and again from different locations and, although the Net's automatic procedures are relied upon to produce this, the spectacle itself is nonetheless thoroughly determined. In this instance, the Net's distributed structure produces a metaphor of Agatha's own sense of deterritorialisation within the information age. Automatic processes are therefore viewed both in their own right and as metaphors for subjective experience, but never as autonomous agents of creativity. Lialina's resistance to the technological *autopoiesis* solicited to a certain degree by Antiorp and to a much greater degree by Cosic suggests her recognition and mistrust of the 'deathly stake' with which such derepressions flirt. The voiding of egotistical and superegotistical controls and the heteronomous reign of non-order that this augurs risks, in social and subjective terms, a terrorisation by illegible and nonlocatable forces which threaten an irreversible entropic slide; the drive of Thanatos. In its aesthetic constellation or presentation of Informatic chaos, *Agatha Appears* comes extremely close to Breton's category of the fixed-explosive wherein the entropic drive of nature is momentarily frozen into a highly organised cultural sign and conversely, where the sign is interrupted by the chaotic force of nature. However, in so creating this fixed-explosive image of Informatic chaos, Lialina reflects the movement beyond a faith in derepression's promise of liberation and automatism's guarantee of an insight into a unified but hidden other.

The instrumentalisation of chaos versus the indeterminateness of art and natural beauty

On the subject of the threat inherent in the increasingly chaotic models of economic, social and natural phenomena both Hayles and Zizek seem to agree on an important point, and one that has not been concretely posed by my discussion of these artworks. The point has to do with the instrumentalisation of chaos to certain ends – an instrumentalisation which I cannot simply extend to these artworks, especially when considering them in line with some of Adorno's formulations of natural and art beauty which we will briefly examine here. For Hayles, chaos theory and nonlinear science do not ultimately constitute a radical break with modern science and a move into the postmodern, but instead represent an intensification of the former. Hayles has discussed how, in fact, chaologists often use the principles of deterministic chaos to negate its effects through, for instance, the conversion of nonlinear behaviour into linear behaviour.<sup>415</sup> In contrast to Lyotard's optimistic reading of the paralogy of postmodern science (which ensures the never ending renegotiation of game rules), Hayles together with the chaos theorist Stephen Kellert argue that the aim of chaos theory is largely teleological. Kellert suggests that to "see chaos theory as a revolutionary new science that is radically discontinuous with the Western tradition of objectifying and controlling nature falsifies both the character of chaos theory and the history of science."<sup>416</sup> It is on this point that the poststructuralist adoption of chaos both differs and converges with its scientific one. As Hayles explains, "for deconstructionists, chaos repudiates order; for scientists, chaos makes order possible", i.e. scientists use chaos theory to perceive further forms of order in the world whereas poststructuralists use chaos theory to deny that order exists.<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Ward, *The Literary Appropriation of Chaos Theory*, p.58

<sup>416</sup> Kellert, *Wake of Chaos*, pp. 115-16, cited in *ibid*, p.59

<sup>417</sup> Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, pp.22-3, cited in *ibid*, p.56



Hayles views the poststructuralist transformation of the non-order of chaos into anti-order or disorder as a way of attacking traditional ideas of order which are held to be coercive. But for this reason, and here is where its scientific and cultural adoptions reconverge, Hayles perceives the poststructuralist celebration of disorder as another kind of instrumentalisation of chaos theory and one that contributes to, rather than subverting, the production of master narratives. Zizek, however, in contrast to Hayles' insistence that master narratives continue, is convinced that the so-called post-Oedipal society or, in other terminology, the reflexivity of the risk society has a profound impact on the subject as a result of the loosening of societal ties to tradition and nature. For Zizek, this *Unbehagen* (uneasiness) of the risk society comes down to the decline of symbolic trust as, due to the extreme reflexivity of contemporary life, the big Other recedes and symbolic efficiency wanes:

"The disintegration of the big Other is the direct result of universalised reflexivity: notions like 'trust' all rely on a minimum of non-reflected acceptance of the symbolic Institution – ultimately, trust always involves a leap of faith: when I trust somebody, I trust him because I simply take him at his word, not for rational reasons which tell me to trust him."<sup>418</sup>

But, whilst recognising that master narratives or the symbolic institution are destabilised by the reflexivity or recursiveness of the risk society, Zizek also acknowledges that many master narratives are subsumed under one inalienable narrative: the naturalisation of the market. Zizek historicises this by reference to Marx's observation that, under market relations, "all that is solid melts into air" – a reference to the unprecedented dissolution of traditional forms under capitalism. Instead of this dissolution guaranteeing new freedoms, Marx saw the 'invisible hand

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<sup>418</sup> Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p.342

of the market' ironing out the multiplicity of small risks involved in market speculation into a single global welfare. This, in short, is the ideology of the free market. Marx's idea is that this one market-driven fate could be superseded and social life brought under the control of humanity's 'collective intellect'. It is, argues Zizek, this self-transparent ideal that the theory of the risk society abandons but in so doing naturalises and depoliticises the global market:

"Theorists of the risk society often evoke the need to counteract the reign of the 'depoliticised' global market with a move towards radical *repoliticisation*, which will take crucial decisions away from state planners and experts and put them into the hands of the individuals and groups concerned themselves (through the revitalisation of active citizenship, broad public debate, and so on) – however, they stop short of putting in question the very basics of the anonymous logic of market relations and global capitalism, which imposes itself today more and more as the 'neutral' Real accepted by all parties and, as such, more and more depoliticised."<sup>419</sup>

How do these instances of the instrumentalisation of non-order relate to our discussion of net art's preoccupation with complex information systems and the associated unraveling of subjective and objective stability? Does net art participate in a similar naturalisation and obfuscation of the ideology and instrumentality of the virtual unconscious? Does its exploration of a chaotic, informatic world determine the subject as impotent and without agency? Here I would resist any too easy comparison between artistic, and scientific, economic and theoretical applications of nonlinearity. Although, as Adorno persuasively argues, art cannot but participate in the domination of nature to which its own development belongs, it is its way of "resembling without imitating" the world, of consciously positing itself, which at once distinguishes it from "the arbitrariness of what simply exists" and at the same

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<sup>419</sup> Zizek, *ibid*, p.351

time allows empirical reality to become eloquent.<sup>420</sup> Adorno's discussion of the mutual reflectedness of art beauty and natural beauty also opens up the way to discussing the relationship of art to the complex second nature manifested by technological and informatic systems. In his discussion of art beauty and natural beauty he locates the dimension of appearance as a crucial basis of their correspondence. Natural beauty (a historically determined quality and distinct from any totalising concept of nature as such) lies in its elusiveness, the fact that it is never perceived voluntarily. The elusiveness of its appearance, argues Adorno in line with Hegel, is due to the fact that it is not created *for* or *out* of itself, but that it takes form only *through* its external perception. Natural beauty, experienced as always in this state of becoming, always on the verge of revealing itself, therefore eschews any categorisation of what does and does not constitute it:

"According to the canon of universal concepts it is undefinable precisely because its own concept has its substance in what withdraws from universal conceptuality. Its essential indeterminateness is manifest in the fact that every part of nature, as well as everything made by man that has congealed into nature, is able to become beautiful, luminous from within."<sup>421</sup>

Adorno finds this resistance to determination also evidenced in the greatest works of art and their close resemblance to nature. "The more perfect the artwork" he writes, "the more it forsakes intentions...if the language of nature is mute, art makes this muteness eloquent".<sup>422</sup> But this articulation is always haunted by its impossibility which stems from the insurmountable contradiction between the conscious attempt

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<sup>420</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.78

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid*, p.70

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid*, p.78

to make the mute eloquent and the revelation of that part of nature which "cannot in any way be willed."<sup>423</sup>

It is in this respect that, unlike the various instrumentalizations of the virtual unconscious exposed by Žižek and Hayles in poststructuralism, science and economics, we should consider these artworks as evidencing the indeterminateness of art and natural beauty. It is possible to see in all the works discussed in this chapter the struggle both to articulate the second nature created by information systems and to solicit it to articulate itself. Where Surrealists engaged dissociative processes to dislodge the grip of rationality and consciousness over experience, net artists engage computational processes and rationale to destabilise the instrumentality that those self-same technologies epitomise. In a sense then, net artists engage technocratic rationality to reveal its opposite – an inability to map the concept onto the thing. Although net artists, like Surrealists, are attracted to automatism and the suspension of conscious control, they do not invest the same confidence in the rupture of inconsistency in the fabric of reality. What is important here is that, as Žižek and Hayles point out and the artworks exemplify, chaos or the uncertainties of the second Enlightenment have become the order of the day, threatening human agency and promoting the naturalness of the market by turns. But identifying the instrumentalisation of what I have been calling the virtual unconscious does not exhaust its potential. Returning to Adorno's identification of nature's resistance to 'universal conceptuality', it seems that net artists are equally drawn to the unpredictable mutations, the constant state of becoming that information systems unleash. This state of becoming refers not only to the purely technical behaviour of

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid

digital information but its social relations as well, both of which are capable of resisting any totalistic instrumentalisation. If information's deterritorialising atomisations are sometimes experienced as 'disgusting', it also brings into being formations which counter this lost sense of control. The technologically accelerated exchange of information between people around the world reveals an equally unpredictable social agency which is always-in-becoming. Antiorp's interruption of the smooth running of mailing lists through the introduction of noise can here be seen as test running the noisy interruption of global techno-bureaucratic business as usual by the noise of dissent. The disobedient dance of Cosic's ASCII characters points to a potential explosion of the spectacle from within (one need only think about the ongoing challenge of media monopolies by the multiple agencies on the Net). The threatening darkness of Agatha's aimless wonderings might even be suggestive of a real world dissolution of national boundaries and the creation of global citizenship. Although I could reasonably be accused of falsely imposing such readings on these works, it is their shifting, mutagenic forms which allows such things to be glimpsed – as with the sudden revelations of beauty in nature. If automatist processes have ceased to promise the divulgence in art of a universal truth, they nonetheless provide a key which unlocks the dual character of the virtual unconscious; a force which by turns threatens the deathly entropy of chaos and the salutary hope of a second nature whose unfathomable state of becoming can resist the total penetration of instrumental rationality. It is this muteness which certain net artworks make intermittently eloquent.

## CONCLUSION

The idea of the mutability or variability of digital information has been an recurrent motif of this thesis. Although I have already attempted to formulate this aspect of digital media in various ways, I would like to turn finally to mathematician Gregory Bateson's succinct definition. Bateson explains the fine grained nature of digital media – a precondition of its mutability – by comparing it to analogue media: where analogue measures in quantities, he explains, digital technology measures in numbers – it counts:

"Between *two* and *three* there is a jump. In the case of quantity, there is no such jump and because the jump is missing in the world of quantity it is impossible for any quantity to be exact. You can have exactly three tomatoes. You can never have exactly three gallons of water."<sup>424</sup>

The result is the explosion of any informatic referent into the micro-units of zeros and ones, its continuous surfaces are granulated into infinitely small and recombinant parts – a granulation which extends well beyond the limits of this technological process to provoke a wider cultural mutation. How then does this impact on the question of site-specificity under which the art discussed here has been organised?

Following in the steps of Benjamin, I identified technological reproducibility as one of the most significant characteristics of the Internet – in effect what I was arguing is that technological reproducibility is one of the defining characteristics by

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<sup>424</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), cited in Tiziana Terranova, *Linkwork*, p.13, unpublished manuscript, 2001

which net art must define its specific relation to its site. By extension, the question of aura becomes a central one. However, the Benjaminian concept of reproducibility clearly refers to analogue media and does not, for instance, take on board the issue of informatic mutability. In other words, the degree to which information cannot only be duplicated but also mutated becomes of central importance to this discussion. Site-specific art and Benjamin's theory of technologically reproducible art share an important tendency. For Benjamin, the loss of the artwork's uniqueness and related recession of aura, opens up a deep field of potential action as the artwork loses its hieratic separateness and enters into a relationship of equivalence with other things. Likewise, site-specific art courts a dissolution of the artwork's hermeticism by embedding it, quite literally, into the prosaic fabric of the its framing institutions or the everyday world. In this sense site-specificity and technological reproducibility both relate to the activity of testing, if not actively seeking to dissolve, the boundaries between art and 'life praxis'. What I have tried to understand in this thesis is the way in which, despite these dissolutions of art's erstwhile boundaries – here read through the prisms of technology and site-specificity – its aura nonetheless prevails, and how this combines with questions of informatic mutability. Put another way, how the diverging tendencies of its dissolution into 'life praxis' and its continued status as art work both involve the kind of informatic mutability or granulation described above.

What has become apparent through researching and writing this thesis is how the presiding aura of art on the Net can be directly experienced in the technical, cultural and social granulation of information. What I have attempted to reveal is how the technical processes which Benjamin understood as assuring us of "an

immense and unexpected field of action" combine, in the age of digital technology, with a complexification and destabilisation of our ability to understand, map, and control phenomena. In the last chapter I reached the conclusion that the automatic functions of software and the chaotic world which information technologies help to reveal work both to confound the subject and produce a non-instrumental second nature in which art participates. The evasiveness and potentiality of this second nature into which the relations between the social and the technical harden, surfaces in art as a new form of auratic distance. Benjamin's notion that the art object's aura is in part produced by its absence of use value enables us to understand this point more clearly. What it alerts us to is how the nature of art's aura always reveals its obverse – the nature of instrumentality. In the case of net art, this obverse could be understood as the multiple ways in which 'cybernetic communication', the recursive feedback loops of information that it enables, are employed to reformulate capitalist production and consumption. In what has been discussed here as the biopolitical mode of production, the discrete sites of production and consumption, of public and private, are knitted together by a communicative network across which information flows, refines itself and is monetised. Where for instance advertisers once had to deal with a largely undifferentiated audience, now, thanks to information technology, databases on individuals can be easily compiled and updated. When one clicks on amazon.com, for instance, one is now greeted by name and treated to a personalised list of recommended books and CDs. The communicative basis of late capitalism, which has been extensively explored by writers such as Naomi Klein, entails the a dissolution of boundaries comparable to those experienced by art, which are similarly produced by the advent of the information age. A concise example of this is



the transformation of the product into the idea – the brand. However, where the relations produced by capitalism can be described as tending towards atomisation and equivalence, artists amongst numerous others, are often concerned to harness the recursive powers of ITC to reveal the unpredictable inventiveness of a general intellect. In this sense the long standing deconstruction of the singularities of art's subject and object meets with communication technology's power to unleash emergent, collectivised forms of knowledge and creativity.

The classical concerns of avant-garde art – the nature of authorship, the space of art, the social role of art, the political role of art, the ontology of art – all of which tend towards dissolution of old boundaries and categories, are radically and necessarily dialogised by their positioning within the Net. This process, it could be argued, is essential to coping with a new mode of hegemonic power based around a set of similar boundary dissolutions encapsulated by Negri and Hardt's idea of Empire. In the case of tactical art for example, the variability of information is absorbed into a project which eschews the consolidations of 'the proper' in the name of opening art up to the unexpected, or of creating a highly responsive and agile culture able to cope with lightning fast developments of a media saturated society. Equally the escalating ownership and control of information that, as James Boyle argues, depends on its homologisation (i.e. the medium becomes secondary to the message), is also productive of the open source or free software movement. This collective authorship of software, enabled by the compatibility and reproducibility of information on the Net, forms a parallel to the collective production of artworks such as *Desktop IS* or 'artist' actions such as Etoy's *Toywar*. The reproducibility and mutability of information also makes the Net a natural home for plagiarism –

something that threatens traditional structures of ownership and definitions of creativity alike. These and numerous other such examples make it possible to surmise that when Vuk Cosic commented, "art was only ever a substitute for the Internet", he was referring to the ways in which the Net exhibits and 'hard wires' a great deal of the ideas and possibilities historically developed by the cultural avant-garde.

Bearing this in mind, it is possible to conclude that the Internet – notwithstanding its immense facilitation of capitalist and state bureaucratic interests – realises some of the utopian dreams of 20<sup>th</sup> century art: a newly participative culture which reflects the multiplicity of its agents in the rich variety of its forms. However, one might also state that this widespread cultural participation does not understand itself to be art. One might also add that artists are intrigued by this new form of cultural communicativeness and seek to involve their own creative practice in its wider activity. But does this mean that, with the Net, an avant-garde utopia has finally been realised and art superseded? I would vigorously deny this suggestion, but point out that at times artistic and non-artistic activity can become nearly indistinguishable – as in the case of Etoy's *Toywar*. But, as we also saw with the *Toywar*, the popular creative activity that it ignited was eventually subsumed under the term 'art' and the identity of the art group – and the categorical distinctness regained. What should be concluded however is that if we are going to acknowledge that art's aura remains in tact, if we can still differentiate between art and not-art, then we need to update our understanding of where its aura might reside within the technical conditions of digital reproducibility. On this point I would suggest that it is within the activity of informatic mutation which explodes categories such as the

author, human and machine agencies, the singularity of the object, and the singularity and functionality of a site, that we must look. Paradoxically, the informatic dissolution of categories or singularities is both the basis of art's extension into "an immense and unexpected field of action", its adoption of a social and political role, *and* the condition of its continued existence – its auratic elusiveness.

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