

Art was only a substitute for the Internet

Tilman Baumgärtel 26.06.1997

Interview with Vuk Cosic

Vuk Cosic is an internet artist. His current "job" is at [Ljudmila](http://www.ljudmila.org) [1], the Ljubljana Digital Media Lab, providing Web-Sites for the Slovenian art community. Before he worked as political activist, studied archaeologist and cultural manager. The interview was done in the context of the [nettime-meeting](#) [2], which was held recently in Ljubljana and was co-organized by Cosic (see www.ljudmila.org/nettime/ [3]). The interview was conducted by Tilman Baumgärtel.

I read somewhere that the first bible in Slovenian was printed in Wittenberg in Germany. I was wondering if you think there is a similar situation with the internet now, if you have the impression that it was somehow invented elsewhere and therefore suspicious, as many west europeans seem to think?

Vuk Cosic: No, Slovenia is actually very well-connected. There is also a high number of computers in offices and homes. The number of hosts per capita is higher than in many west-european countries, for example in Italy or Spain. At Ljudmilla we have a 256k-line which is the best you can get in Slovenia. So it's not such a bad situation. We have live-stream real audio and video, and the bandwidth is definitely sufficient.

Tell me how you got "on the net"?

Vuk Cosic: I first encountered the WorldWideWeb in the second half of 1994. I thought: "*Wow, this is sexy.*" You know, the moment, when you see words on your computer screen, that somebody else wrote somewhere else, is like a religious experience, very emotional in a way. I still have a photographic memory of what I saw when I went online for the first time, the different websites I looked at. So I said: "This is cool", and I decided to change my career. Before that I worked as an art manager. I did art exchange projects between countries that were in war with each other, like Slovenia and Serbia. So on the 4th of April 1995 was the last day of my career as an art manager. I had finished a good project, and that day I said as myself

Ok, now I'm into the internet, one way or another. I didn't know if I would end up selling modems, or teaching DOS in elementary school. I didn't have a strict goal, only had this gut feeling to go there. It just was the thing for me. Then I was invited to the first nettime meeting in Venice - well, and the rest is history.

Had you worked as an artist before?

Vuk Cosic: I had done collages and other art works before, and really the only thing that had changed was that I had discovered a new platform for my creativity.

I noticed that some of the pieces on your homepage seem very literary. Do you have a background in writing?

Vuk Cosic: I originally came out of writing, but then I developed a very strange attitude about which platform I wanted to use. I first have the idea, then I decide which medium it is going to be this time. I did land art, I did exhibitions. I actually have three different biographies. I was very active in politics, I was a candidate for the nobel peace prize with a few friends, because I was a leader of student

demonstrations in Belgrade. Originally I am a archeologist by training. I am still sort of working on my Ph.D. thesis, but I did not persue my career as an archeologist. I know that your next question will be 'How come that an archeologist is working on the internet?' I think that it is the same apparatus that has just been turned around on the tripod, looking in the other direction...

So you are an archeologist of the future?

Vuk Cosic: Yeah, I am on that tripod.

Back to your career as aspiring net artists. Tell me how you got started in this art form, in case it really is an art form...

Vuk Cosic: For some reason I didn't dare to do HTML for quite some time. I didn't want to dirty my hands, until I eventually understood how fucking simple it is. When I finally started, nothing could stop me. I did the first website that could be called net art in May 1996 for a conference called "Net.art per se" [4] that took place in Trieste in Italy.

There is this one "found footage" page that you designed that looks the homepage of CNN, except that the main headline is "Net.art found possible" and that the hidden hotlinks all lead to other art websites...

Vuk Cosic: That was pretty surprising for a lot of people. And I was very surprised that these guys at this conference appreciated my work. And that's the beauty of all of this that developed out of this conference. It's like me and Heath Bunting and Alexej Shulgin and Olia Lialina and Jodi had studios next to each other, where we could look at what the others were doing.

What do you mean with "having a studio next to each other"?

Vuk Cosic: You know, it's like Picasso and Braque in Paris in 1907...

But they were physically together...

Vuk Cosic: The output of a net artists is net art, which is obviously - because of the qualities of the internet - accessible to everybody. And I can see everything that they do in the moment they do it. It usually goes like this: Jodi do something new - and they are crazy, they are maniacs, they create something new every other day - and they send the URL to me, and ask: What do you think about this? And there are collaborations over the net, too, and group projects. We steal a lot from each other, in the sense that we take some parts of codes, we admire each others tricks.

Jodi are very interesting in their exploration of technology, but Heath is magnificent in his social awareness and his glorious egotism, or Alexej with his russian temperament. Cyber-Majakowski, someone once called him. I have the feeling that I know the greatest people that are alive in my time, while they are still good. Now we have this communication system that reminds me of the communication between the futurists or later the dadaists.

There were two guys in Berlin, four in guys in Paris, two in Russia, and they all knew each other, and there were all 25 years old. How did they get in touch? It was because of the strength of their believes and the good communication channels, because there were a few guys traveling. What we have now is the same: We have some strengths, we have some qualities - even though that's really up to others to say - and most of all we have a good communication system.

Which is the internet?

Vuk Cosic: 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.

When I look at your work, but also at the works of Shulgin or Jodi, one aspect of net art that catches one's attention, is that it is very self-referential.

Vuk Cosic: The usual analogy is video art, which was also very self-referential in the sixties when it started. I am not talking about video art today, which has developed in a sort of funny direction. But if you think about pieces by people like Weibel, they were very much about monitors, about 100 Hertz, about all kinds of noise. They were all about this video option you had suddenly as an artist.

Then again there are not such easy generalisations. None of us has really done net art that has references to historic avantgardes. There is no real dada lover among us, even though I manically collect the books from this period. But there is no dada web site, which to my mind would be a total mistake. That's for boring people to do. That's why I am doing CNN. That's self-referential in a certain way. We like to think about the net, and how it's made, because we want to understand it. And our process of understanding it is immediately transformed into some form of expression.

What is a very striking parallel between net art and video art is that the first that artists did when they discovered television or video was to take these media apart and attempted to destroy them. Now the same thing seems to happen on the net.

Vuk Cosic: Exactly! I did a lot of HTML-documents that crashed your browsers. I noticed that there was a mistake somewhere in my programming. And then I asked myself

is this a minus or a plus? So then I was looking how to get to that. It was not enough just to avoid this mistake, I was trying to really understand that particular mistake, with frames, or with GIFs which used to crash old browsers, or later Java Script, that does beautiful things to your computer in general.

So why is it the first reflex of artists to deconstruct a new medium?

Vuk Cosic: In what we are doing, there aren't any laws. It is like any other art form, it's totally individual. I think, that every new medium is only a materialisation of previous generations' dreams. This sounds like a conspiracy theory now, but if you look at many conceptual tools, that were invented by Marcel Duchamp or by Joseph Beuys or the early conceptualists, they have become a normal everyday routine today with every email you send. With every time you open Netscape and press a random URL at Yahoo! 80 years ago this action, that is now totally normal everyday life, would have been absolutely the most advanced art gesture imaginable, understandable only to Duchamp and his two best friends. This very idea to have randomness in whatever area, form, shape, would have been so bizarre in those days. Or to do something that makes artistic sense here and somewhere else at the same time! You recall these art projects where there was one guy in Tokyo and one New York, and they agree over the telephone to do the same thing at the same time, to look at the sun or something - we do it with the internet all the time, with web cameras! I see this deletion of remoteness as something very intriguing, and maybe that's one little proof of this weird thesis that the internet is only the materialisations of earlier generations' dreams. I will give a lecture in Finland in September in which I will argue that art was only a substitute for the internet. That is of course a joke. I know very few people who have so much esteem for what artists did in the past.

There is a lot of reflection going on about net art right now. That is very different from other art movements where the artist-genius put some paint on the canvas and it was up to us, the audience, to wonder what this meant...

Vuk Cosic: Yeah, in a way we are Duchamp's ideal children. You and I and all the people in this conference, we have all read a lot. Let's not be modest about this, because we are proud of that. We

read a lot, we work a lot, and we are at the same time creative, because the medium internet is enabling us to be this way.

There is a piece on your website where you encourage people to put footnotes on academic texts. That's another thing I noticed about net art, that it is a lot about theory.

Vuk Cosic: Yeah, that's what nettime does to otherwise normal people. Unfortunately I didn't find enough strength in me to pursue this project. Now it is only an invitation for collaboration that never found an echo. There were a few, by Heiko Idensen and Heath Bunting and Pit Schultz, but it wasn't enough. I have them in my mail box though...

Does it matter if this project gets finished or not?

Vuk Cosic: No, there is this state of final incompleteness, as Duchamp once said about his Big Glass. I can open this document whenever I want - I call them documents, not art pieces - and do whatever I want to it. It's cool. I don't want it to be finished. I'm not interested in this project very much anymore, though.

Is your homepage a complete collection of all the art project you did on the net?

Vuk Cosic: No, my homepage is not a catalogue of my works, because there are a lot of things that I am doing when I go to other places, which I never put them on my homepage. A lot of net artists are trying hard to get as many links as possible from important web sites like "ars electronica" or "Telepolis", in order to get many hits on their sites, to get recognized. But to me this protocol is also subject to artistic reflexion. That's why there are a lot of my works missing on my site. I sometimes give fake URL's. I used to print fake business cards, and now I do the same thing on the net, just for the fun you can have with misinformation.

One of the most conceptual pieces on your website is called "A day in the life of an internet artist", which records your daily activities. Other people call this a homepage, but in your case it is a work of art. Why?

Vuk Cosic: That was the first time that I noticed that there is a million ways of classifying what you are doing on the internet. The reason is that on the internet it is so beautifully undefined which platform you are going to use: text, video, graphics, audio, whatever. You certainly have a problem there, and you really have to go down to the basics. When you go down to the basics, art is really about subjectivity, even if you attempt to do something else. And even the worst formalist experiments in the heroic age of video art are a reflexion of the individual quality of the maker. And I am trying to play/work with that.

So it is dealing with the historic art genre of the self-portrait?

Vuk Cosic: Yeah, sort of. In this particular site I tried to give a vivisection of my everyday communication with the internet environment. So there is one part that deals with my net art projects, one that deals with writing, one that is called "job art"...

Why is it art to have a job?

Vuk Cosic: I am a little bit puzzled with the term "art". Not because I decline the epithet artist - it's a nice hat to wear and the girls like it, too. But actually it is a little bit worrying how it 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* I do.

Like Yves Klein said: "Everything is art"...

Vuk Cosic: Yes, but I try to do it in a very practical, everyday way, without too much talk about it. This web site is not accompanied by an essay or anything. Actually there **is** an essay with the same title, but it has nothing to do with the web site. That was another thing I did to mislead the audience.

There is one piece on Nicholas Negroponte on your website too. What is that about?

Vuk Cosic: When Negroponte came to Ljubljana, I had a big fight with him, and we interrupted his speech. Luka Frelih and I went around the city spraying graffiti: "Wired = Pravda". I made it look like a secret internet terrorist organisation. On the website we compare him to Tito. But we did it without fanaticism.

Today at the conference you proposed a project called "Ljudmila West". Can you say something about this?

Vuk Cosic: Ljudmila West is a foundation that is set up to help west european artists to communicate, to learn about new multimedia technologies and to contribute to the european integration, because there is an obvious lack of information in this area. So we can not sit with our arms crossed. We should do something about this. Because this is definitely the last moment for the West Europeans to catch on, otherwise they will remain in their closed systems or their closed societies, to quote Popper and Soros.

Is this a parody of the rethoric used at events like the V 2 festival in Rotterdam? The west europeans are helping the poor east europeans out of their mess, only reversed?

Vuk Cosic: I have been to so many art events in the west, where the direction of teaching was not the expected one. It was actually the guys from Belgrade and Moscow teaching those french, british, german fellows things about life. Of course this virtual Ljudmila West project is just a cute little joke, but there is a very serious point to it. And it comes out of very serious frustration. I am not a frustratable fellow, but I noticed this growing frustration among east europeans. So I as an artist react and offer an art project, which is this story about Ljudmila West. Sounds like the name of a film actress, by the way.

Interview: Tilman Baumgärtel

Links

- [1] <http://www.ljudmila.org>
- [2] http://www.heise.de/tp/english/pop/event_1/4071/1.html
- [3] <http://www.ljudmila.org/nettime/>
- [4] <http://www.ljudmila.org/naps/>

Telepolis Artikel-URL: <http://www.telepolis.de/english/special/ku/6158/1.html>