

Andreas Broeckmann on Sat, 8 Mar 97 18:24 MET

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nettime: Net.Art, Machines, and Parasites

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Net.Art, Machines, and Parasites

Andreas Broeckmann

1. The electronic networks, most notably the Internet, are creating new artistic spaces which are currently being explored in a multiplicity of ways. Alongside industrialists, designers and stock traders, artists are fascinated by the possibility of almost instantaneously transmitting and receiving data on a world-wide scale - the 'world' in this case obviously being those parts of the globe which have an infrastructure of telephone lines, personal computers, modems and Internet providers. The World Wide Web (WWW) with its hypertextual structure and multi-media possibilities is the most prominent, though not the only domain of the new network art.

There are a variety of network-based art practices that have already existed prior to the popularisation of the Internet in the 1990s and that have used, for instance, the telephone network for live-audio performances, or fax machines for the instant exchange of written and drawn messages. In a similar way, mail art circles have, for more than 25 years, used the postal service which has allowed artists to stay in contact and collaborate in a widely spread network of friends and colleagues.

Time, space, speed, collective creativity and communication are the primary themes of the projects that were realised in these fields. 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.[1]

In the telematic spatial sound installation by the Austrian group x-space, 'Ping - Die Metrik der Zeit' (1994), for instance, sounds made in front of a microphone were delayed by digital signal processors before they were played over a set of loudspeakers in the same room. The time-lag between input and output was determined by the time that it took for a certain data packet to be sent from the installation site in Austria via the Internet to New Zealand and returned from there. This protocol is called Ping and is used regularly in electronic networks to check whether there actually is a connection between two computers, and how fast this connection is. Its speed depends on the amount of data traffic going on in the network, as well as in the server computers at the nodes that the

signal has to pass through. Ping thus becomes a measure of time, distance and speed that is relative to the activity and communication on the network: the acoustically created spatial dimension which can be experienced in the installation room is dependent on an uncontrollable, mechanically induced process.

Such a use of the technological disposition has become typical of some of the art projects realised with digital media. They do not aim at a beautiful or effective artistic expression, or at a convincing representation of an abstract principle, but use the fact of machinic and interpersonal communication across the network, the technological structure and functions of the network dispositive, and amplify, mock or playfully subvert them.

2. A number of artists and groups are currently concentrating on the World Wide Web for this kind of work. The WWW is a protocol on the Internet that allows for an integrated transmission and presentation of textual, visual and audio material, mainly using graphically designed screen 'pages' as the interface. This multi-medial quality, and the fact that the interactive functionality of the interfaces is rapidly expanding through the development of plug-ins, has meant that since its launch as a new mass medium in 1993, the WWW has been embraced by media practitioners of every sort, artists, activists, companies, advertisers and media conglomerates, to communicate with their audience, present their products and entertain WWW users. Connectivity and bandwidth are still too small for the Web to be a serious competitor for television, but there is a possibility that a lot of the mass communication that is currently being conducted via TV will, in the future, be transported via the electronic networks.

Whether this means that the quality of Web content will be as poor and as limited as that of television, will largely depend on the way in which the technological infrastructure of the networks will be developed. The Internet has the potential for being a genuinely open, many-to-many medium where every user can post his or her own contents which can then be accessed by all other users of the network. Practically, however, there is now a real danger that this new public communication space gets squeezed by commercial interests on the one hand (advertisers and broadcasters who want people to consume rather than use the medium), and by government censorship on the other (regulating what content is available to whom). It is important to understand that the development of the electronic networks as media for personal and artistic communication and expression is dependent on the political and technological decisions that are now being taken, and that it is necessary to demand open and flexible infrastructures in which private and non-commercial initiatives can flourish alongside the commercial usages of the networks.

3. This is the context in which a loose group of artists, almost a movement, is currently realising projects under the name Net.Art. They are based in various European countries, team up in real and virtual institutions like CERN, Netlab, the WWW Art Centre, etc., working locally as well as translocally, sometimes remotely and together on the same project, at other times individually or with local collaborators. An important feature of projects realised on the WWW is that they can constantly be updated and changed, so that there is never a ready and fixed creation or 'work'. Net.Art works are temporary (though not necessarily time-based) and as unstable as the networks themselves.

At this moment, Net.Art is certainly in a transitory state, in permanent flux, and it will change and develop as its agents and environment change. The following is therefore a snapshot rather than an historical analysis.

The main tool of Net.Art is the hyperlink through which one WWW document can be linked to another, no matter where on the Internet that

second document is located. This means that (if we disregard the documents that allow only restricted access) all the millions of documents on the WWW are potentially linkable, they belong to the same horizontal surface of material, a felt of singularised objects, on which artists and designers can draw. The WWW Art Medal project, for instance, consists of links to WWW pages that are not meant to be 'art', but that have an 'arty' feeling to them. These pages, often accidentally found, are awarded the WWW Art Medal and are complemented by pirated art critical quotations which describe what may be seen as artistically valuable in the individual pages. The project creates a distributed artistic space and exhibits 'objets trouvés' from the networks, diluting the boundary between intention, gesture, collection/presentation, and object. The artistic practice, 'project' in the literal sense of the word, is a sliding across the surface of the webbed documents.

In another project, Net.Art.Per.Se, the designs and images of existing WWW sites of major media companies, search engines, etc., are used to contextualise a series of speculative statements about Net.Art. Net.Art presents itself as a hypothetical thread, as a possible trajectory through the mediatic space. It incorporates and structures found material, and it inscribes itself into the expanses of the Web, tilting some of its smooth surfaces, creating little channels in which the digital material can change the direction of its flow.

For the Refresh project, more than twenty WWW pages located on so many different servers all across Europe and the US were linked together in a loop through which the visitor would be 'zapped' automatically, one page following the next after ten seconds. The project made use of the 'Refresh' meta-tag, a command within HTML, the language that is used to design WWW pages. The command tells the WWW browser software on the personal computer of the user to automatically go to a particular page after a certain time. By making sure that all these links created a loop, Refresh would take you through all the pages over and over again. The project was exciting for those immediately involved as they could experience how the loop grew page by page, while they were simultaneously communicating and negotiating via an IRC chat channel how to solve certain problems. More generally, the Refresh loop was designed to employ the interconnectivity of the computers and the software infrastructure to create one project that was simultaneously happening at more than twenty different locations, a genuinely distributed artwork whose experiential effect both depended on and transgressed the physical distance between the participants.

4. The aesthetics of such projects is dependent not so much on the intention of a single or collective author, but on the process initiated by and within the complex machine of people, the network infrastructure, desires, technical hardware, design tools, interfaces, behaviours. Machines in the sense in which I am using the word here are not only technical apparatuses, they are assemblages of heterogeneous parts, aggregations which transform forces, articulate and propel their elements, and force them into a continuous state of transformation and becoming. Machinic assemblages are made up of singularities which dynamically transform the environment by which they are being transformed and recomposed. And the machinic assemblage as a whole has an aesthetic effect. The artistic explorations of the machinic are attempts at formulating an understanding of production, of transformation and of becoming that is no longer dependent on a humanist notion of intentional agency. Its place is taken by an ethics and an aesthetics of becoming machine.

5. The media theoretician Toshiya Ueno has claimed that the key aspect of network art is the creation of a relational field in which people who are physically far apart can collectively maintain a strong ideological, ethical, or spiritual relationship amongst each other. Interestingly, Ueno

directly relates this to the situation of people living in a diaspora, suggesting a function of network art that aims at recreating broken or weakened ties within a particular community. For Ueno, networked relationality is based not only on the technology which makes the contact and communication possible, but also on travelling and physical mobility. Translocality means that, in order to create a forceful relational field, technically supported interconnectivity is not sufficient: network art that is based on and aims at translocal communication needs the fluid movement of people, objects and ideas. More than anything, Net.Art is a dynamic felt of relations constituted by movement.

Ueno also points out that the social practice associated with Net.Art, in which the sharing of food and data is central, resembles the principles of Immediatism described by Hakim Bey, who writes that the gathering and the potlatch are crucial levels of the immediatist organisation, where friends meet and exchange gifts and food. Collaborating on specific projects (the Bee) and the creation of temporary autonomous zones (TAZ) are further levels that are deployed to achieve the goals of the Immediatist organisation, i.e. conviviality, creation and destruction.

6. I would like to add some reflections about the parasitic activity, based on Michel Serres' book *Le Parasite* (1980), implicitly suggesting that its parameters and attitudes might be useful for a description and further development of the economy, ethics and aesthetics of Net.Art. The connection drawn in the following between Net.Art and parasitism is a hypothetical one; it attempts to describe an artistic practice that aims neither at representation nor at interactivity, but at a tilting of, and sliding across, the technological dispositive.

The relationship between network art and parasitism was earlier suggested by Erik Hobijn who introduced a concept for Techno-Parasites: "Parasites live and feed on other plants and animals. Techno-Parasites use whatever technical systems or apparatuses they can find as hosts, drawing on their output, their energy supplies and cycles to procreate and grow. A Techno-Parasite can be a simple or a complex system which is attentive and adapts to its host's structure where its inventive struggle for survival causes technical disruptions. Techno-Parasites suck other machines empty, disrupt their circuits, effect power cuts, disable them, destroy them." [2]

Hobijn insists that the parasite is not alien and exterior to technological systems, but that each system, whether natural or technological, brings forth its own counter-forces which will disrupt its stability and continuity. The techno-parasite, Hobijn claims, is an integral part of the technological ecology, it helps to make the technological system viable. (It should be noted that Net.Art, in its current form, is much more benign than the TPs.)

7. "To be a parasite means: to eat at somebody else's table." (Serres, p.17) To be a parasite means to divert food, money, energy, anything material, from its destined path. But the parasite is neither thief nor villain: the host creates the conditions for the parasite to come and welcomes it, explicitly or implicitly. The host is not the victim, but the home of the parasite. In its host's house, the parasite must be humble and quiet; being too visible can be fatal. Similarly, the parasite must know when to eat, and it must know when to go.

8. The parasite is not fixed and it is not attached to the source of its nourishment directly. It "has a relation not with a station, but with another relation." (55) The mouse eats the bread crumbs that fell to the ground when its host was eating the bread. The mouse does not go to the bread box, which is locked, but to the crumbs that result from an instability in the relation between host and bread. Similarly, the leech will not enter the body where it would drown in the blood, but it makes a hole in the skin and consumes the blood that wells from it.

"The parasite is 'next to', it is 'with', it is detached from, it is not sitting on the thing itself, but on the relation. It has relations, as one says, and turns them into a system. It is always mediate and never immediate. It has a relation to the relation, it is related to the related, it sits on the channel." (64-5)

It is important to remember that the parasite is always dependent on a host. It can leave and search for new hosts, and it can flee from danger, but it will have to return to a host, "its outside is always the inside of something else." (300) The pact that the parasite has to make is to convince the host, again explicitly or implicitly, that the inequality of exchanged goods is for the mutual benefit.

The parasitological economy and ethics are not based on an exchange of equal values, but on presents, offers, and on gratitude. "The logic of debt and credit is ruled by exchange, it relies on the accounts and calculates the balances; in the logic and the economy of thanking, of gratitude, exchange does not exist. One collective is ruled by demands while in another, gratitude circulates. Two societies which are not comparable. In the second system there is a lot of eating, lots of invitations for festive meals and dinners." (51)

9. Just as white noise plays a constitutive role in acoustics, parasitism is constitutive for relations. "The background noise is the basic space, and the parasite is the basis of the channel that leads through this space. Parasitism is nothing but a linear form of white noise." (83)

There is a direct correlation between the intensity of activity on the channel and the communication of the message, between white noise and communication, between parasitism and functionality. Heating up the cable's fibres, for instance, will increase the white noise. "This agitation prevents the message from passing through. However, sometimes it only makes the communication of the message possible, which would not be able to pass through a channel that is not agitated or energised. The background noise is the precondition of transmission (of meaning, of the sound, and even of the noise itself), and the noise is its interruption or disruption. In turn, the noise - the parasite in information-theoretical terms - is at all three corners of the triangle simultaneously, it is sender, receiver and channel. Heat it up a little, and I receive, send, I collate; heat it up a little more and everything breaks down. A minimal increase in one direction or the other can transform the communication system as a whole." (298-9)

10. The parasite is a strategist and an ecologist, it knows its environment and, like a nomad, it is good at 'passing through' and at conquering through movement, rather than at occupying, settling, and conquering by force. "The strategist we are looking for is not a dynamicist, he laughs at physical strength, he is a topologist, he knows his ways, the channels, the terrain. In short, he is a geographer. May the enemy come with a hundred divisions, heavy tanks and artillery, I will let him walk through the swamps and drown in them. The parasite of the networks does not go into battle; no message has any meaning any more, it gets lost in the noise. The white noise is distributed where meaning is scarce, chaotic long waves from which the message emerges, short and sharp. Nothing can be produced more easily than these little waves, nothing can be maintained more stable." (301)

11. The irritation caused in the host system comes from the parasite's ability to swap places, to be channel and disruption, to force the system into oscillation. "The parasite is an infectant. Far from actually transforming a system's nature, its form, elements, relations and paths, the parasite makes the system change its condition in small steps. It introduces a tilt. It brings the system's balance or the distribution of energy into fluctuation. It irritates it. It infects it. Often this tilt has no effect. It can bring forth effects - even massive ones, through

chain reactions or reproduction. (...) The parasites brings us close to the simplest and most general agents of change in systems. It causes the infinitesimal diversions to fluctuate. It makes them immune or blocks them, it forces them to adapt or kills them, it selects and destroys them. Should we generalise what Claude Bernard said about poisons and call the parasites 'the real reagents of life'? This is the case because the parasite brings us close to the subtle balances of living systems, close to their energetic balances. It is their fluctuation, their concussion, their test, their shift." (293-4)

12. The hypothesis put forward here is that the parasitological aesthetics described by Michel Serres is, at least in part, applicable to the net.artistic practice. The latter's cheerful dependence on and exploitation of the technological dispositive, the mild irritation that it causes at the cost of the apparent functionality and rationality of the network system, and the transgression of its symbolic system of sites and homes, suggest that the parasitic might be a useful metaphor with which to describe the gestures and interventions of Net.Art.

A final example to underpin this hypothesis. As we saw earlier, the host has a home, it is a home. The parasite, on the contrary, has no home of its own, it chooses temporary homes, it is always a lodger. If one goes to the websites of the WWW Art Centre or of irrational.org, the first page offers links to a whole list of homepages for these sites, made by different net.artists. These websites do not have an individual face, a homepage and logo that would make it possible to identify them, but they have multiple entrances and multiple faces. Deleuze and Guattari, in their monumental study *Milles Plateaux* (1980), introduce the concept of 'facialisation' (fr. visagēitē) to describe the process of subjectification 'in the image of' a face. In short, the subject emerges from the abstract machine of the facial surface which reterritorialises a multiplicity of diverse forces around a 'facial' pattern and brings forth a recognisable and self-recognising individual. The multiplication of entrances, the multiplication of homepages and 'faces' of the Net.Art websites, then, produces a multiplication of selves, an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of the technological subject. Like the parasites, net.artists are never one. The net.artist is a collective that becomes stronger and more beautiful the further distributed and discretely interconnected it is.

The gesture means neither: this is my home, this is my face, this is me, nor: be my Doppelgänger, but it means: be my triplegänger, quadruplegänger, my septuplegänger, and then: visitor, guest, parasite, be welcomed, enter the machine through the passages of our multiple selves. What we witness is not a dissolution of borders, but a distribution and interconnection of potentialities. Friends inviting each other to their homes, getting together in conviviality for festive meals and the distribution of gifts, forgetting who is the host and who is the guest.

Footnotes

1. For a more extensive discussion of these aesthetic parameters, cf. my 'Art in the Electronic Networks', in: SCCA Quarterly, Autumn 1996, and Nettime ZKP 3.2.1, Ljubljana 1996 (cf. below).
2. The concept of the Techno-Parasites has been elaborated in a text by Erik Hobijn and Andreas Broeckmann, 'Techno-Parasites: Bringing the Machinic Unconscious to Life', in: BE 4, Berlin, October 1996, p.91-7, and <http://www.telefonica.es/fat/5cyberconf>

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 Michel Serres: Le Parasit. Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1980 (quoted after
 the German edition, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1987)
 Nettime ZKP 3.2.1. (Ed. by Vuk Cosic & Heath Bunting) Ljubljana: Ljudmila, 1996
 Toshiya Ueno: 'A Preliminary Thesis (...).' In: Nettime ZKP 3.2.1, p.21-3

Hyperlinks

Rachel Baker - <http://www.irational.org/rachel/>
 Cybercafe (Heath Bunting a.o.) - <http://www.irational.org>
 E-L@b (Rasa Smite, Raitis Smits, Jaanis Garanc, a.o.) -
<http://www.parks.lv/home/E-Lab/>
 Jodi (Jodi) - <http://www.jodi.org>
 Olia Lialina - <http://www.cityline.ru/~olialia>
 Ljudmila (Vuk Cosic, Luka Frelih, a.o.; incl. NAPS) - <http://www.ljudmila.org>
 Moscow WWWart Centre (Alexei Shulgin, a.o.) - <http://sunsite.cs.msu.su/wwwart>
 NetLab (Pit Schultz a.o.) - <http://cocoa.is.in-berlin.de/~netlab/>
 Techno-Parasites (Erik Hobijn) - <http://www.kombinat.de/~Parasites>

Net.Art conference - <http://www.irational.org/cybercafe/backspace/>
 Nettime - <http://www.desk.nl/~nettime>
 Refresh - (multiple entrances; a.o.): <http://www.v2.nl/east/fresh.html>

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