

Interview with Jodi

Tilman Baumgärtel 06.10.1997

"We love your computer"

The Aesthetics of Crashing Browsers

The following interview with Dirk Paesmans und Joan Heemskerk, the two artists behind the notorious Jodi-site [1], was conducted at the Hacking in Progress [2] gathering in the Netherlands. In this interview I put a special emphasis on the presentation of their work on the documenta [3], because I think that the institutionalization, representation and curating of net-based art is going to be an important topic in the future.

At the documenta, the net art pieces are shown in an office-like space hidden behind a cafeteria, that has only one entrance. The decoration of the work is not by a designer, as Jodi claim in this interview, but by the artists Franz West (an uncomfortable bed and chairs) and Heimo Zobernig (who painted the walls blue as an subtle hint to IBM as one of the major sponsors of the show). The computers that show net art are not connected to the internet.

"We love your computer"

Was doing art on the internet a way to get around the art system, the galleries, museums, curators etc?

Jodi: I don't think you really avoid the art world by doing things on the internet. It was more that we were already working with computers. And I found that the best way to view works that were made with a computer was to keep it in a computer. And the internet is a very good system to spread this kind of work...

The computer is not only a tool to create art, but also the medium to show it within the network. And since the network doesn't have any labels, maybe what little Stevie is doing is art. It's the same with our work: There is also no "art"-label on it. In the medium, in which it is perceived, people don't care about this label. But if we show our work in a gallery space, the label "art" is on what we do. And we have to find "art ways" to show our work.

How do you feel about the way our material is shown at the documenta?

Jodi: In Kassel, the interface for showing net art is the office. This metaphor is too much of a clichée. It's meant to be some kind of joke, but it is not funny. It is vulgar, it's too easy. It doesn't work. And now it will be repeated over and over again.

They did the same thing with video in the beginning. When video came out of a critique of television, there were experiments with video art on local American TV stations. Early Nam June Paik tapes were produced by american cable stations. When museums or galleries showed it, they set up little living rooms where you could watch those tapes. They thought: "It's TV, we can't present it just with the U-Matic player next to the television set, we need a home decor."

Jodi: So what is the alternative to the way net art is presented at documenta? Just leave it on the net?

Jodi: I personally think that if you have a space and decide to show net works, you can also present it to people who are not used to computers. And you could also give the artists the opportunity to add things to their installation. I think it is very important for net artists to deal with the presentation, or they will be re-presented by other people; for example, designers who are asked to design to exhibition space. That's

the worst. One should avoid that at all costs. All the different works disappear in the set up by the 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.

Where you approached by the documenta people at all about the presentation of your work in the show?

Jodi: No. At first we heard that the net art works would be upstairs in the documenta Halle (the exhibition space "documenta hall"). They changed this plan one and a half weeks before the opening. Now the room with the net art is downstairs behind a cafe, and they asked some designers to make blue walls and strange furniture. There was never any contact with the artists about this.

Other artists also didn't like the way the internet room is cornered, next to the cafe, next to the bookshop, next to the lecture hall. This way you have one gigantic recreation area, basically. When you enter this cave, you really have to be curious about net art. The room is not inviting, it looks like an IBM show room. We talked to many people standing in the entrance. When they saw the set-up, they said: That's not for us, that's some computer world.

In reality we don't work in a office. A lot of people have their computers next to their beds. The idea that computers are only in offices is from twenty years ago. Now it is fairly common that computers are on the dinner table. An office space creates a distance. I don't like to enter an office.

I understand that you had to take links out of your work for the presentation at the documenta. Which links were those?

Jodi: Recently we made this map of the internet, where we took a diagram with all the big back-bones and the names of the major providers. We replaced the names of technical providers with alternative and art sites on the net, with links to these sites. We put this piece on the site of the documenta. Every time somebody at the documenta Halle comes to this map and tries to click on one of these links, the computer will crash.

Do you think that this presentation damaged your work?

Jodi: No. We left this link page in the work, even though it would have been wiser to take it out. But we didn't make a concession to the documenta, which feels good. You cannot look at our site very well, but that's not only the case with our piece. If you want to see the works well, you have to look at them on the net. In a way it is only a symbolic representation in Kassel.

The slower, the better

But if there is only one page with links to other sites on your work, in what sense is it net specific? Couldn't it also be on a CD-Rom?

Jodi: The internet is the environment where it has to be shown. We work with the speed of transmission on the internet, or rather the slowness of transmission. That would get lost, if it was on a CD-Rom. None of the pages of our site has more than 30 kilobytes to make it accessible. Yet we think: The slower, the better. We also change our site a lot. CD-Rom is a static medium. We probably did 150 changes of our site, since we set it up.

Do you also have to keep it up to date when new browsers come out?

Jodi: Not that much. We once had a problem when Netscape 3.0 came out. We used these background

layers that kept flipping back and forth under Netscape 2.0, and that didn't work with the new browser.

Aren't you afraid that your work will disappear at one point because of technological paradigm changes? For example, that it can't be viewed anymore because browsers change overnight?

Jodi: Fear is not a good condition for work. We have no fear. Like it says on these T-Shirts: "No fear!" We make these things because we are angry. People perceive this anger when they are on the other end, at the receiving computer...

We are honored to be in somebody's computer

Why are you angry?

Jodi: Because of the seriousness of technology, for example. It is obvious that our work fights against high tech. We also battle with the computer on a graphical level. The computer presents itself as a desktop, with a trash can on the right and pull down menus and all the system icons. We explore the computer from inside, and mirror this on the net.

When a viewer looks at our work, we are inside his computer. There is this hacker slogan: "We love your computer." We also get inside people's computers. And we are honored to be in somebody's computer. You are very close to a person when you are on his desktop. I think the computer is a device to get into someone's mind. We replace this mythological notion of a virtual society on the net or whatever with our own work. We put our own personality there.

There is this rumor that your site causes people's browsers to crash. Is this true?

Jodi: No. That is not a challenge. You could shut down anybody's computer with one line of code. That's not interesting.

My impression is that a lot of people look at your site briefly, and then go somewhere else, without ever exploring the details of it: "Oh, there is this site that looks like your computer is broken", and then it's back to CNN or Yahoo or whatever. Does that bother you?

Jodi: No. Media art is always on the surface. You have to get people very quickly. You need to give them a karate punch in the neck as soon as possible. And then - of course - they don't get to the details, and the site will just sit there for the next five years or ten years, or maybe 100 years. And maybe their children will have the time to explore the details... (laughs)

Do you trace how people move through your site?

Jodi: We once had a counter installed, but we lost track of it. We were checking it every day, and it became this obsession. It was ridiculous: "Oh, only 50 people today." And then we checked again an hour later: "Oh, now it's 65 people!" We don't have the counter installed anymore. Most net artists log everything that happens on their sites though. Not that they make use of it, but the artist's ego wants to know how the public looks at their works.

That's one of the specific properties of the internet: that the public can react to net art works in a very easy fashion. Do you get any reactions from your audience? And what are they like?

Jodi: We get a lot of email. In the first couple of weeks after we put up the site we got a lot of complaints. People were seriously thinking that we made mistakes. So they wanted to teach us. They sent us emails saying: You have to put this tag in front of this code. Or: I am sorry to tell you that you forgot this or that

command on your page. For example the first page of our Site is unformatted ASCII. We discovered by accident that it looked very good. But we still get complaints from people about this.

But are you only getting complaints?

Jodi: No, a lot of people from universities send us emails like: "Hey, cool, man" ...

Also, people sometimes send us helpful code. For example, somebody sent us a java applet that we actually used for our site. We are really grateful for that. Some people really encourage us, too. They say: "Go, Jodi, go. Make more chaos. Make my computer crash more often."

When one looks at your site, there is no hint who is behind this: Is it a company? Is it an organisation? Is it a gang? Is this a comment on the possible anonymity of the internet?

Jodi: We decided to put the work immediately on the screen, without our press releases and without our bio. We don't use our site to present information. We present screens and things that are happening in these screens. We avoid explanations. Look at any exhibition: People are sniffing on the information plates next to the art works, before they look at the work itself. They want to know who did a piece, before they have an opinion about it. As long as we can we try to avoid that.

"Our work comes from inside the computer, not from a country."

Is there any hint to your identity at all?

Jodi: No, just our email adress. It makes the work stronger that people don't know who's behind it. Many people try to dissect our site, and look into the code. Because of the anonymity of our site they can't judge us according to our national culture or anything like this. In fact, Jodi is not part of a culture in a national, geographical sense. I know it sounds romantic, but there *is* a cyberspace citizenship. More and more URL's contain a country code. We don't like this. Our work comes from inside the computer, not from a country.

You have no art to sell at this point, only dematerialized objects on some server computer. What is your "business model" as artists?

Jodi: There are the festivals, which always pay a fee. We haven't been thinking about this too much, but there is always the so-called "service fee" that you can ask for as an artist, if you do a workshop or give a talk.

What do you get for the participation in the documenta?

Jodi: We get a fee for the expenses we have when we put our files on their server. In total we got 1200 Marks. It is a clear example of exploitation. Which artist would move his ass for this amount of money? But net art is a victim of its b-status. It is treated as group phenomenon, as a technically defined new art form. That is something that we have to leave behind as soon as possible, because that is the standard way to do these things: A group creates a hype. They call it mail art or video art, and it's doomed to die after five years. I think we are looking for another way, because we are not typical artists and we also won't play the role of the net artists forever.

Tilman Baumgaertel is a freelance journalist living in Berlin.

Links

- [1] <http://www.jodi.org>
- [2] <http://www.hip97.nl>
- [3] <http://www.documenta.de>

Telepolis Artikel-URL: <http://www.telepolis.de/english/special/ku/6187/1.html>

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