WHAT IS (STILL) SO NEW ABOUT NET ART?

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ABSTRACT. A comparison of traditional digital art and newer net art along the examples of Jeffrey Shaw's "Legible City" and `http://www.jodi.org`.

WHAT IS WEW ABOUT NET ART?

Net art could be technically described as the conjunction of two practices, digital art and networked art. Neither of them was new per se.

Digital art has its own tradition since the 1940s when computers were invented and, for example, the John Whitney brothers made abstract films with computer graphics [no pictures available], John Cage and Lejaren Hiller composed algorithmic computer music, and Brion Gysin and Theo Lutz computed algorithmic poems on computers.

Networked art itself has a history independent from computing and computer networks: Futurism, Dada and Surrealism already were international networks; networking also became a topic of art in Fluxus, the New York Correspondence School of Ray Johnson and Mail Art.

images

So what is different then about Net art since the 1990s in comparison to computer art since the 1940s and networked art since the 1920s and 1960s? In comparison to Mail Art, the difference is clear. Mail Art used analog technology, like photocopiers, rubber stamps, newspaper collage and the postal network to copy and distribute itself. That necessarily limited its reproduction. It worked with originals as opposed to copies, material objects as opposed to data streams. And its reproduction and distribution was much more significantly limited (due to having to pay postage and limited analog copy generations). When "Festivals of Plagiarism" were celebrated by mail artists, the plagiarism was rather metaphorical because the technology wasn't

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there yet for large-scale clone reproduction and distribution of work (such as in peer-to-peer file exchange networks).

Examples:

- Lewis Carroll, Innuendo by Xexoxial Endarchy: Limited material quality, no access to same institutions / spaces as plagiarized work
- vs. Yes Men, gatt.org vs. wto.org same symbolic hierarchy/space, equality of technical means, infinite reproduction and collaboration through automated tools: Reamweaver

Difference between Internet-based net art and older analog networked art is clear, what about the difference between previous digital art and Net.art? My examples: Jeffrey Shaw, jodi.

JEFFREY SHAW, THE LEGIBLE CITY

Developed in 1989-1991, permanently installed at ZKM media arts center in Karlsruhe, Germany. Interactive installation, or game: Abstract 3D representations of cities of New York, Amsterdam and Karlsruhe. Spectator sits on a bicycle and cycles through the cities. The cityscapes are made up of letters and words, based on writing by Shaw's artistic collaborator Dirk Groeneveld.

Film.

Description: Alternative reading interface. Immersive / virtual reality 3D space, seemingly intuitive navigation (through bicycle).

Typical for the idea of digital art as interactive, virtual reality simulations, high-tech, installation-based.

"Legible City" has been called, again and again, a seminal work of digital art. I quote from a critical essay on net literature and net poetry by the German philologist and critic Stephan Porombka:

> Nothing that was written for the computer in the 90s could match an installation like Jeffrey Shaw's "Legible City" – neither in its level of technology, nor in its level of concept. After all, Shaw had used a several ten thousand dollar-worth Silicon Graphics Crimson computer to achieve the right effects. Only with such a machine it could be communicated to spectators that their own

activities were equalized to the movement of the digital picture on the screen.[1]

I entirely disagree with this opinion. The "Legible city" is a technology gimmick, at best a design study for alternative user interfaces. Its title brings up associations of Campanella, universally valid depiction of knowledge and science on the walls of the utopian "City of the sun." Just as Campanella's utopia is naive, so is Shaw's if it was intended to be one. It is not, as critics wrote, liberating the letter like concrete poetry. Concrete poetry and Marinetti's "parole in libertà"were about liberating type and language from their previous typographic and grammatical constraints. Shaw's system howere is restraining as it forces letters from their abstract-symbolic space of the page into the artificial anthropomorphic space of the city. It's not taking apart the letter and reinventing it from scratch, but puts letters into a pseudo-interactive human kitsch world, comparable to letters in Victorian children's books:

Images: Alphabet fabric, alphabet locomotive

- Nothing is be criticized in these toys and the children's literature tradition of grotesque alphabets. Shaw's installation however suffers from the fact that it does not think of itself in this tradition, as a grotesque tech toy, takes itself seriously as a hightech "interactive" art work. I quote from Jeffrey Shaw's project page:

> Travelling through these cities of words is consequently a journey of reading; choosing the path one takes is a choice of texts as well as their spontaneous juxtapositions and conjunctions of meaning.

The text doesn't reflect that these so-called "spontaneous juxtapositions and conjunctions" are not spontaneous at all, but only exist within the set of possible combinations within the software. There is no possibility, for example, that a word appears that was not pre-inscribed into the software, and no conjunction can be made that falls out of Euclidian space constraints of the visual simulation. So it's an illusion of interactivity which this piece sells, just like most works of

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[1]Nichts, was in den 90ern für den Computer geschrieben wurde, konnte sich mit einer Installation messen lassen, wie sie etwa Jeffrey Shaw mit Legible City realisiert hatte - technologisch nicht und auch nicht konzeptionell. Immerhin hatte Shaw einen mehrere zehntausend Mark teuren Silicon Graphics Crimson Computer eingesetzt, um die richtigen Effekte zu erzielen. Nur mit einem solchen Gerät ließ sich dem Rezipienten vermitteln, dass die eigene Aktivität mit der Bewegung des digitalen Bildes auf der Leinwand gleichgeschaltet war.

so-called interactive art – none of which even remotely match up to the interactivity and spontaneousness of performance art, for example.

Shaw further writers:

> The handlebar and pedals of the interface bicycle give the viewer interactive control over direction and speed of travel. The physical effort of cycling in the real world is gratuitously transposed into the virtual environment, affirming a conjunction of the active body in the virtual domain.

Of course the anthropomorphism of the interface is a fake. It is a trompe-l'oeuil because the work does not present itself as something programmed, as an artificial behavioral system, but really thinks that its restrained, dumbed-down concept of interactivity leads to an interaction of bodies and the "virtual domain". Which, of course, is utter bullshit.

If one compares "The Legible City" to the alphabetic toys, it becomes obvious that the have

- a much richer interactivity, because they don't force their players into a restrained brick world, but on the contrary allow players to integrate their bricks into their own world[
- an infinitly more humble and humorous understanding of their own limitations at the same time, simply by calling themselves toys.

Since "The Legible City" obviously are not aware of their own limitations and contradictions in concept – quite in opposition to what Porombka find in the piece –, they are a naive piece of art. (And one, if this remark is allowed, nobody would take seriously as contemporary art except those in the ghetto of "media art".)

JODI

http://www.jodi.org is the joint project of Dutch-Belgian net artist Joan Hermskerk and Dirk Paesmans, form whom jodi is an acronym. If one opens the site in a web browser, it doesn't present itself as – superficially – accessible as "The Legible City", but makes a hostile takeover of the user's browser:

(Demonstration OSS)

It is a hack, and punk-like aesthetic and technological hijacking. But this simple hack alone provides enough fuel and insight to reflect it as an antithesis to an "interactive art" aesthetics as represented by the "Legible City": There is no simulation of beautiful, anthropomorphic surface, no cozy virtual reality city and no bike, but the pure alien techno aesthetics of software as such. It does not require multi-ten-thousand-dollar high tech, but is low tech running on any computer. The whole source code of the web pages takes up less than 10 Kilobyte, i.e. has the average size of a short E-Mail note and works without problems over a slow modem connection. It promises no false human-machine interactivity, but ultimately shows how interactivity is a scam, a reduction of users to clicking slaves. It does not create pseudo-realistic images and doing so does neither limit the imagination of the viewers, nor force them into a merry prison of an artificially restrained pseudo-world.

At the same time, it is much closer to a true concept of interactivity because it forces computer users to quit their point-and-click interactions and think up a solution outside the box – shutting down computer for example, or perhaps even throwing it out the window. It is, for the first time, a computer art whether the machine is not conceived of as a transparent tool, a black box existing outside the perceivable work itself, but where the computer, its contingency of codes and crashing operating system software themselves make up the aesthetics. Needless to mention how ironic and humorous this understanding of the computer is. For the first time, the computer and its software is being treated as material itself, not as a device that processes material (like computer-generated music or computer-rendered graphics).

If Shaw's work is naive, jodi's work could be called, in a terminology borrowed from Friedrich Schiller, "sentimentalist". What Schiller described in his late 18th century essay on "Naive and Sentimentalist Poetry" was an aesthetic clash of classical and modern art: Classical artworks, Greek tragedies for example, rested in themselves, had a unity and smoothness of form, whereas modern art had lost its unity, and in the desperate attempt of regaining it, ended up internally broken, reflecting, ironic, like Shakespeare's Hamlet.

The "OSS" start page of jodi.org alone brings up these issues. The rest of the web site has to be found via World Wide Web search engines, or critical writing about jodi.org which in turn pointed to its

sections hidden from the front page. It is another refusal of presenting a smooth, pseudo-simple interface. It also locates jodi's art in the net, since visitors of the site have do their own investigative networking to find the site in the first place, thus becoming true interactors with the art. With the piece `http://map.jodi.org`, the site refuses to stand only for itself, but identifies itself as part of a larger artistic and cultural network. Consequently, this idea has been adopted, plagiarized and transformed by other net art workers:

- `http://www.thething.it/netart/net_map.htm`
- `http://www.ecn.org/aha/map.htm`

More peripheral in jodis work are their poetry-like code writings which they typically post to mailing lists and set off a whole net art genre of "codeworks".:

[Projection untitled game / war.c]

Code becomes a ready-made artwork here. It is no longer something hidden from the actual artwork, like in the "Legible City", but being pulled out from inside. What previously was a hidden and unresolved contradiction between textual programming and an illusionist surface is now becoming the center of a new aesthetics. Software and code for the first time in the history of electronic arts become an artistic material. Unlike in earlier computer arts, artists do not construct it from scratch in a laboratory work approach, but they take the abundance of code "out there" on any personal computer and floating in the Internet, and treat it like Dadaist and Pop art painters treated the found objects in their collages.

The aesthetic effects of course are similar, disruption, anarchy and noise. But how is jodi's noise different from the noise and randomness in previous avant-garde arts? The difference lies in the media and in the rhetoric. In Dada poetry, Hans Arp's chance painting and John Cage's random music, randomness occurs structurally within a work, not in its transmission. Even where www.jodi.org doesn't randomize its own transmission by unstable addressing schemes, it reads and behaves as if it contained intact data disturbed only by faulty net transmission or computer crashes; but in reality, the line noise is mocked up within the data itself. Unlike Nam June Paik's visual noise manipulations of TV sets in the 1960s, jodi's disturbance is not done in hardware with only partly predictable results, but is a clever simulation of unpredictability done in software.

ANd while the chance poetics of Cage and Fluxus conceived of disturbance and randomness as means of radical freedom, their implication is much more ambivalent in jodi's work. They inspire and liberate the viewers' imagination all the while locking it into deception, mazes and dead-ends. The naive Cagean ontology of chance is replaced with a tricky rhetoric of simultaneous anarchy and entrapment, a neo-baroque conceit and discordia concors of surface chaos with inscribed discipline and vice versa.

CONCLUSION

I hope to have made a point why net art as it was co-invented by jodi was different and more sophisticated than previous computer art. Digital net art also differs from the pre-digital net art like Mail Art because I think it has simply produced better art. Mail Art was largely a harmless rehash of Fluxus collage aesthetics, without the edge and radical implications of the former. [...]

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Older digital art vs. net art

installation          |   performance
high tech             |   low tech
constructivism        |   eclecticism
artistic naivite      |   artistic sophistication

Net art vs. Mail Art:

aesthetic rehash      |   aesthetic experimentation
appeasing             |   confrontational
only community-oriented |   artistic + community-
                          oriented
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