

## Art and Internet

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Translator: Charles Penwarden

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## REFERENCES

Fourmentraux, Jean-Paul. *Art et Internet : les nouvelles figures de la création*, Paris : CNRS, 2005, (CNRS Communication)

Greene, Rachel. *L'Art Internet*, Paris : Thames & Hudson, 2005, (L'Univers de l'art)

- 1 With the appearance of digitised images and the spreading use of Internet at the turn of the 1990s, societies in the West experienced a radical shift in the norms of storing, processing and transforming data, but also in accessibility, thanks to the downloading, exchange and sharing of files (Peer to Peer). The debate over Google Print in 2005<sup>1</sup> was indeed highly instructive in this respect, and showed Europe trying to react to the imminent danger of digitisation becoming the exclusive decision of the USA. The stakes, whether economic or cultural, are certainly high. The ideological clash on the subject of Internet and its implications for civilisation is definitely not over, as can be seen from the question of authorial rights, pitting the advocates of free access to information against those who argue for its privatisation.<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the artistic practices on the Web over the last fifteen years have seen artists taking up strong positions with regard to a mass culture dominated by the logic of the multimedia industries.
- 2 When, in around 1992-93, artists began exploring the implications of this emerging culture, and started to open and maintain artistic spaces on Internet, discussion lists like Nettime.nl, 7-11.org and Rhizome.org enabled the creation of communities that facilitated access to the works and to theoretical debates. Rachel Greene's book, *Internet Art*, published in 2004 (and in 2005, as *L'Art Internet*), is linked to the history of the information that was put out on those discussion lists. With an abundantly illustrated text, plus a chronology, an index of artists' projects as well as a selected list of exhibitions

and festivals, mailing lists and a bibliography, the book represents the first real cartography of online art in the 1990s. Precursors such as Vuk Cosic, Alexei Shulgin, Olia Lialina, Jodi.org, Heath Bunting, \*TMark, etoy, Annie Abrahams, 0100101110101101.org, Mouchette, Mongrel and Rachel Baker are all well represented here, the downside being that other figures who also contributed significantly to the development of such practices—notably, Antoni Muntadas with *The File Room* (1994) and Komar & Melamid with *The Most Wanted Paintings* (1995)—don't get a mention.

- 3 In spite of its Anglo-Saxon purview, Greene's approach allows us to re-situate what was originally known as "net art", which corresponded to small group of European artists who rallied to that name and developed a graphic aesthetics that made use of all the characteristics of the html programming language (links, pop-ups, applets, login, banners, GIF animations, forms, identifiers). This initial formal phase evolved markedly towards the end of the 1990s, when growing commercialisation combined with legal regulation led many artists to adopt activist positions. One example is the battle between the Swiss group etoy and the American firm eToys over the rights to their shared domain name in 1999. Another is the anonymous members of the \*TMark group appropriating, pirating and injecting viruses into the neo-liberal world of business and culture. And there were many other projects that appropriated, simulated or subverted political and commercial sites. In this second period the emphasis was thus on themes such as tactical media, the exploitation and visualization of data, "artistic software", cyber-surveillance, identity, the subversion of video games and e-business.<sup>3</sup>
- 4 The focus in *Art et Internet: les nouvelles figures de la création* is more on the French scene. Originally a report commissioned by the Ministry of Culture from sociologist Jean-Paul Fourmentraux (*Culture visuelle et art collectif sur le Web*, 1999), the book is organised into three parts ("Conception", "Disposition", "Exhibition"), and takes a socio-technological look at the determinants of art and technology. The author develops an analysis of the interface between artist, machine and spectator, consisting of programme, image and protocol. Fourmentraux discusses the different kinds of interactivity (exploration, contribution, alteration, alternative action) and puts forward a typology of works (mediological, algorithmic, interactive). He also mentions a number of exhibitions organised in the 1990s and analyses the way in which these projects were mediated socially, as well as their actual relevance. But if *Art et Internet* does contribute to the debate from its strictly technical, functional viewpoint, the author also passes over those contextual, semantic and ontological dimensions that remain vital to a proper understanding of these practices.
- 5 To isolate Internet art from the rest of contemporary art is inevitably to raise the question of context. Certainly, given our lack of perspective, these first cartographic surveys make it possible to index the references and to start writing a history that has only just begun. The continuing difficulty of accessing Internet work by artists from Africa or Latin America indicates that globalisation is rather a one-way process here, favouring a technological contemporaneousness that serves the universalisation of the Western model of civilisation. It would no doubt be a good thing if the next critical research into Internet art and its technologies were to get to the heart of issues such as these.

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## NOTES

1. Jeanneney, J.-N. *Quand Google défie l'Europe: Plaidoyer pour un sursaut*. Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2005.
2. I am thinking of the amendment passed by the French National Assembly on the night of 21 December, “legalising” downloading of musical and video files, notably via the peer-to-peer system, on the grounds that this is private copying.
3. This theme was explored by Julian Stallabrass in *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*. London: Tate Publishing, 2003.