BEYOND THE CRISIS IN THE HUMANITIES: TRANSDISCIPLINARY TRANSFORMATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES ON ART AND CULTURE

Collection of Papers

Edited by Žarko Cvejić, Andrija Filipović and Ana Petrov

FMK

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Internet Art and the Dispersed Public Body: Question of "User" as Audience

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Introduction

The question of subject interaction (in the sense of looking, listening or just being there) with any object or form of art is, as we know, one of those questions Miško Šuvaković once defined as those one would lose a job in answering. To these questions every discipline has been trying to give answers. What is a gaze? What is an affect of the body? What is time in a photograph and what is it in a film? How do we relate to a narrative? Or even in the widest context, how we react to technology, how are the mechanization processes of the everyday work, leisure, travel, etc., framing our thoughts and actions? Internet, being a hypermedia environment, with some new twists, certainly does bring a fresh arena for these important insights into human condition, but to even begin to set such an analysis demands an interdisciplinary research of a much wider scope, one that will not be attempted here. Instead what interests me is how discourses of "art audience", intersects with what we are, in how we relate to the Internet, or at least how we've come to be called in this interaction - *users*. How is the user defined, and how traditional, albeit even before the Internet, fragmented roles of artists and their audience fit in this new subject position?

Manuel Castells in his research found that there can be observed two kinds of internet users. One who is an "ordinary" person, with no special technological skills, who interacts with the Web following the guidelines of already developed structures, a *user-consumer*, and the other, who is a "specialized" user, a programmer, hacker, who participates in creating the content and form of the Web – *user-producer* (Castells 2001). Both

are rightly called internet users. If we only follow the short history of the technology it is clear that both kinds of users had a prevailing say in how the Internet looked both then and now. When thinking about any human interaction with the Internet, the signifier we employ is that of the "user". I will not go deeper into analysis of how this term came to be, or how it relates to ideologies of the past, for its usage has become almost colloquial in a sense that it primarily signifies the difference from forms of interaction with physically inanimate objects. Whence interacting with the World Wide Web, either as "specialized" or "ordinary" users, we are always performing certain tasks allowed by the medium, choosing various paths and modes of interaction. So, how does the role of art audience "fit in" this discourse? For we are no longer talking about groomed public body of a Western concert hall or museum space. There are several important points I wish to highlight, as well as try in addition to illuminate some other important issues revolving around the subject of Internet art.

Internet art is a form of artistic production that came about with the advance of internet technology through Tim Barners Lee's invention of the World Wide Web. Group of artists gathered around common interest of experimenting with the formalist and communication aspects of internet technology and interface began formulating a specific aesthetical approach to both creating content on the Web, as well as using it for a new form of artistic production. What was then dubbed by the pioneer's *net.art*, continued until today to be an important and pervasive form of contemporary art. All though, as we will see, defining the exact framework of this production is not without difficulties, one can call Internet art all forms of artistic production that uses as it's medium internet and web technology. No matter whether we are talking about communication platforms, hactivism, formalist aesthetic of the medium or a carnivelesque critique of the same, Internet art is both a constitutive part of the Internet, as well as a unique form of contemporary art with its producers, exhibitions, festivals and aesthetic.

The Question of Interface, or: What is the Internet?

One of the important questions when discussing users in context of Internet art is the issue of interface, or media environment we encounter. Where the *user* of World Wide Web in general and Internet art user differ is in what kind of interface they are interacting with as well as producing. As Rachel Greene, author of book about Internet art writes, quote: "One would experience the web with a commercial browser such as Netscape Navigator that had been designed according to corporate interest,

not educational and aesthetic ones" (Greene 2004, 32). This is important because, we are primarily ordinary internet users before ever becoming viewing public for Internet art, always affected by that "technological unconsciousness", so our experiences dictate in many ways how we perceive and interact with any technology. We cannot speak about Internet Art the same way we would, for example, of Digital Art in some general sense. For considering that the WWW became primarily what we think of when we say "The Internet", these Internet art creations contributively constitute the very structure of the Web. We can, of course single out some reoccurring forms found on the Web, such as browsers or message boards, but what enchants us with the Internet is the fact that each of those different elements are significant parts of that gigantic "whole".

Also, as the Web evolved and changed, so did our user habits. In 1997 a web camera as well as a corresponding piece in Internet art circle (this was a popular form of expression in this period) was a pinnacle of public net experience. In 2007, YouTube has existed for two years, Facebook for 3, and the Internet became a very different environment then it was a decade before. Being an amorphous space, one that constantly shifts our attention, actually finding an opportunity to become an audience of Internet art is quite challenging. Greene also speaks of this issue when explaining how difficult it is, using ordinary browsers to dig up these Internet art pieces (ibid., 13). Even though Internet created a space where artists can present their works and interact with public without the mediation of Art institutions, and in some cases reached audiences up to 200,000 viewers, this form of creative technological practice was for most users completely unknown. For this reason, from the very beginnings of their practice, internet artists strived for negotiation with art institutions, in search of financial support, promotion and recognition. But being both within and outside of traditional art frameworks this proved to be difficult both for the artists and institutions.

Production and Reception of Art in the Audience of King *User*

Internet artists could be defined as a kind of "specialized" user who creates the online environment. Some of these individuals really were creative pioneers of the Web in a similar way as were builders of one Google, or Wikipedia. Others were, in a manner that became characteristic of contemporary art forms, putting to question and pushing the borders of our use this new technology. Yet, besides putting that *.art* at the end of an address, all this doesn't differentiate many of their works from what various "ordinary" users do with applications of internet technology they

encounter. We have seen such example in the piece by David Horvitz, a DIY project titled *241543903*. This American artist decided in 2006 to use one popular form of internet culture to create his „artwork"– a *meme*. Using his *Flickr* profile „SanPedroFlueSticks" he posted online a playful invitation to his fellow internet users: „Take a photograph of your head inside a freezer. Upload this photo to the Internet (like Flickr). Tag the file with: 24154903. The idea is if you search for this cryptic tag, all the photos of heads in freezers will appear. I just did one". The meme became incredibly popular, especially in Brazil and Japan, so much so, that in 2008 a website was created in dedication to it. Now, what particularly interests us is what it said in introduction to the meme: "Nobody knows when and where 24154903 started".[1] This is interesting because in 2013, Black Dog Publishing in UK gave us one of the few monographs of Internet art starring this very piece (*Art and the Internet* 2013). Not only David Horovitz created something that exists as a typical form of internet culture, its art status for most of participants was never known. And why would it? YouTube enabled countless ordinary people to create content and distribute it. Blogs became widespread publishing mechanisms. There are just countless examples of whim and creativity that happens on the Web without it being called Art. Yet, it is an important word. Where this categorization of artists as "specialized" users and audience as "ordinary" also gets problematic are examples of Internet art which are ever-growing pieces constantly updated by those everyday users. One important case is the work titled *World First Collaborative Sentence* made by Douglas Davies in 1994. Celebrated as one of the earliest internet artworks it is one of the largest collaborative artistic projects until this day. Davies together with his team created a webpage to be a home of the largest sentence ever written, because it was never meant to be completed by the artist himself, or to stand in any particular frame of reference, but to be constantly updated by the users. Creating that very first page Davies wrote: "[..]credit for THE WORLD'S FIRST COLLABORATIVE SENTENCE goes to You, as you will see...".[2] The piece was bought and then transferred to the care of *Whitney Museum of American Art* in 1995 and has been kept alive by the institution since then. The first version was operative until 2005 when the museum confronted with issues of technological obsolescence created a second version of the piece live till today. Anybody can participate in creating an online artwork, and many examples stress this creation by the multitude. The clearly set boundary between artists as internet users as well as users as Art audience corrodes. As Rachel Greene writes: "Net art's audience is a social medley: geographically dispersed, varying in background, these art enthusiasts are able to morph their involvement constantly, drawing from roles as artist, critic, collaborator or 'lurker' (one who just watches or reads, without

participating). Finally, 'viewers' have a direct relationship with net art: they can log on from any computer with net access and the right software, see an artwork, download it, share it or copy it" (Greene 2004, 32). This is where the heritage of Dada, conceptual art and performances in the 20th century, with their experimentation of blurring the firmly set borders between artists, artwork and the audience comes to fruition. These are, after all, legitimate forefathers of Internet art. The Web provides, perhaps, that ideal space where both production and reception are part of the same discourse – that of the User. There is, of course, the question of agency. Is it not the artist who creates the framework for any further interaction to be possible? Yet, today very popular theoretical platform of one Bruno Latour, the Actor-Network theory calls for new perspective, one that closely relates to that which Manuel Castells unequivocally flags Network society, a con-sidering all of the elements of an event as active and crucial parts of the undividable system. Everybody and everything is an actor in a network. This is exactly how Olga Goriunova defines Internet Art in one of the rare studies about the artistic practices on the Web, calling them Art Platforms - an inseparable mixing of elements of different agencies. She writes: "As a self-organized institution, an art platform is flexible; it is informed and co developed by users and the aesthetic work that it propels. An art platform can also take the form of a crossroads at the intersection of several systems or actors of different scales[..]" (Goriunova 2012, 2). Also, most of these pieces are as ephemeral as the rest of the medium. Their survival directly depends on the overall usage trends dictated by the multitude of Internet users, as well as by technological obsolescence. Vinston Cerf, one of the fathers of the Internet, recently on BBC warned about the dangers of what he called "Digital dark ages", a soon to come moment when we will have lost the technology needed to read and understand digital legacy we leave behind.[3] One of the important changes that came about since the first days of Internet art is that now tools for being a creator, a "specialized" user are available to most people who can afford the technology. Of course in a much simpler manner, since with evolution of technology the specialized users evolved as well. Still the border between the ordinary and special-ized user is eroding further, and the opportunity is there. In the beginning Internet artists were few "specialized" (in this case artistically) explorers of the seemingly endless opportunities within the new medium. But being themselves artists in various fields before accepting these new tools, they have remained part of art's institutions even though they developed fur-ther as well as transformed many of them. There is still the Art with capital „a", with its artists, its spaces (we need only look closer to an ever growing interest of rethinking curating in light of new media art as well as need to preserve it), then festivals, and its audience in the very old sense of the

word, in this new media art discourse where Internet art dwells. I would say that there certainly are users in Internet art, as well as an audience of art, a dispersed public body.

Just another niche? Art of/on the Internet

As we have seen there is crisscrossing of agency when we speak of either Internet artists, or the viewing audience in the word "user" itself. What is interesting is that we can observe another typical "user behaviour" in these Internet artists which separates and disperses further the relation between these two types of users as well as brings into focus transformations of the art world today. Internet artists have been forming from the very beginning their own communities. They would create mailing lists, meet privately, travel together as well as participate in the many new media art festivals year round. All these elements could be found in any example of online, virtual communities such as *Nettime*, *Sydicate*, *SPECTRE* etc.. One such community event has just recently ended his held for several years here in Belgrade - *Resonate festival*.[4] Being primarily focused on music and sound technology art production it did offer a rich and satisfying clubbing program for both residents of Belgrade and the tourists in the city, but the core of lectures and workshops was a highly specialized meeting place for these new media art enthusiasts. We find consequences and dissemination of internet forms in the very fact such an event was organized in Belgrade. Neither the price nor the program was intended for its residents. These heavily equipped savvy art practitioners could have picked any place, as they often do, travelling around, sharing their ideas and presenting their works. Belgrade is just scenery set for a highly networked art community. From the perspective of the all seeing eye of the Web, Internet art could be just another niche.

I'm curious to how all these different agencies we talked about will adopt to the profound shift from Web (which as you might be familiar with, is only an application layer build on top the great network of networks we call the Internet) to mobile internet. What happens when the screen separating and connecting these various forms of users stops being part of the static home, office or even gallery machines and becomes not just something that with advance of mobile internet we carry in our pockets, but also with fast development of what is being called "Internet of Things" - meaning implementation of internet technology and its various applications in inanimate everyday objects, becomes something that is truly all around us? Will such context for contemporary Internet art finally blur beyond recognition the old institutionalized roles of Art and

its audience making us all users in a very new sense? For, as we said, all of those different kinds of users, be they programmers, hackers, artists or everyday internet subscribers have been changing with the technology itself, adapting their habits to the message of the medium.

Notes

[1] http://241543903.com/about-241543903, ac. 8. 9. 2015, 10:21AM.
[2] http://artport.whitney.org/collection/DouglasDavis/historic/, ac. 8. 9. 2015, 10:32AM.
[3] http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-31458902, ac. 8. 9. 2015, 10:55AM.
[4] http://resonate.io/2015/, ac. 28. 8. 2015, 18:56.

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