NET PIONEERS 1.0

CONTEXTUALIZING EARLY NET-BASED ART

EDITED BY
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Sternberg Press

INTRODUCTION

Dieter Daniels / Gunther Reisinger

Net art is seen as an archaeology of the future, drawing on the past (especially of modernism) and producing a complex interaction of unrealized past potential and Utopian futures...[01] Julian Stallabrass

This is a book about media art history, and against that background it takes a new, interdisciplinary look at the historical, social, and economic dynamics of our contemporary, networked society.

Giving a potted history of Net-based art may seem to present no difficulty: The hype around Net-based art began in the early 1990s, before the Internet had become a commodity. It developed in skeptical parallel to the rise and decline of the new economy. In 1997, documenta X featured Net art. Around the same time, major museums in the US started online art commissions or virtual showcases.[02] The first (and last) retrospective exhibition, "netconditon," was held in 1999.[03] Several books published in the first years of the new millennium give overviews of the practice and theory of this art.[04] But since then, this particular chapter of art history appears to have closed. The final indication that Net-based art was not to become another genre in the contemporary art canon was perhaps the discontinuance of the "Net vision" category in the Prix Ars Electronica 2007.[05]

01 Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 48.

02 See the text by Christiane Paul in this volume.

03 The exhibition "net_condition" was a distributed exhibition in Graz, Barcelona, Tokyo, and Karlsruhe. See *net_condition: art and global media*, ed. Timothey Druckrey and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

04 e.g. Julian Stallabrass, see n. 1; Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004); Tilman Baumgärtel, *[net.art]: Materialien zur Netzkunst* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 1999), and *[net.art 2.0]: Neue Materialien zur Netzkunst* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2001).

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ROBERT ADRIAN X, INTERVIEW BY DIETER DANIELS, LINZ 2009

PART 4: MUSEALIZATION

OUT ON THE EDGE
Barbara London

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My own work with media began as a young curator at The Museum of Modern Art, New York in the early 1970s. Up-to-date information could be gleaned by nosing around makeshift venues and talking with artists. I discovered a dynamic counterculture (offspring of the Beats and Woodstock) flourishing in Manhattan's desolate Soho and in rural upstate communes. Art from this ad-hoc context found itself more on the fringes of prevailing Conceptual and Minimal art. This was the Dark Ages, before fax and home pages. Pioneering media artists shared their clunky portable video cameras (weighing twenty pounds) and the crudest of on-the-fly editing systems for "open-reel" half-inch tape. Denizens like me climbed dank staircases and congregated in dusty lofts for impromptu screenings of the latest black-and-white videos and for interdisciplinary performative experimentations. A joint passed around eased viewers into unhurried events that stretched way into the night. Process took precedence over saleable product. With travel and long-distance phone calls being expensive and therefore infrequent, information from the hardcore reached more out-of-the-way practitioners through alternative publications such as *Radical Software*, a grassroots, sophisticated how-to, and *Avalanche*, an in-depth interview magazine that captured the grit of downtown New York.

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As a bright-eyed young curator from a family of inventors, my interests settled on the "cutting edge" and on how artists harnessed gear in a perpetually shifting state of upgrades. From the start I sought out independent voices, interested in work that expanded boundaries. Video then was sold inexpensively in unlimited editions, closer in spirit to artists' books or zines than to painting or sculpture, which dominated the prevailing art market. At MoMA's Open Circuits conference in 1973, I observed "expanded cinema" practitioners from around the world argue about the distinctions between video and film. The two divided camps eyed each other as competitors for the newly available government arts funding—video-makers as the upstarts and Jonas Mekas, Shirley Clarke, and others as the veterans who had bucked the Hollywood system by founding the Filmmakers Cooperative ten years prior.

Several months later I made my first curatorial research trip abroad. At Project 74, a video installation exhibition organized by the Kölnischer Kunstverein, I witnessed VALIE EXPORT and Vito Acconci make new video installations on the spot. A do-it-yourself spirit was the norm back then. Writers still called Acconci and Bruce Nauman "body artists;" Joan Jonas categorized her performances as events. Definitions are useful handles, which practitioners regularly revise.

Back in New York, I helped launch MoMA's ongoing video exhibition program. By then video equipment had became relatively user friendly; three-quarter-inch video cassettes had just come on the market, opening the way for distribution. My early curated video shows shared a gallery with an old technological favorite, Thomas Wilfred's *Lumia Suite* 1964—one played in the morning, the other in the afternoon. Together with MoMA's projectionists, I learned how to open up playback decks and get jammed cassettes unstuck.

The museum took another important step when we began acquiring artists' videos, after seriously considering the subsequent responsibilities around video preservation. This was the first new medium to be added to MoMA's collection program in more than forty years. Initial titles included *Global Groove* (1972) by Nam June Paik, one of the first artists to discuss the "digital highway." In the video he examined communication, juxtaposing high and low culture of East and West.

Informal networks formed among artists, curators, and the new non-profit distributors in order to link the independent video world. Ever on the prowl for the next wave, I made several trips to Japan and Latin America, where video was emerging as an underground art activity. Around this time mayors and tourism bureaucrats realized they could create a buzz and attract audiences to their city by promoting the latest artists' video. Cassettes could be sent via parcel post and screened at cultural centers for a lot less than crating and importing recent paintings and sculptures for special shows. I benefited by making regular stops at lively video festivals sprouting up in Los Angeles, Tokyo, Locarno, Montbéliard, and Sao Paulo. Looking back on this period now, I realize that these were the early days of the globalization of contemporary art.

Technology kept changing and had two tiers: consumer and professional. In the 1980s, such videomakers as Jane Veeder in Chicago and Steina and Woody Vasulka in Buffalo were working with early analog computers; meanwhile production houses connected to the broadcast industry used computers for newly frame-accurate editing. At this upper tier, video became highly polished. Commercial television, which artists had initially considered the enemy, was now looked upon as the ideal standard. For many, including Bill Viola, "high-end" production values were considered imperative, which meant that the cost of making a video skyrocketed.

Stubbornly contrarian artists like Tony Oursler found creative possibilities at the "low end" for raw, performative narratives. For downtown artists like Oursler, Laurie Anderson, and Perry Hoberman, the personal computer initiated a wide range of new interactive work that soon morphed into media art, absorbing video.

In the late 1980s, as baby boomers reached adulthood and media art and the art market exploded, museums developed larger contemporary shows that routinely included video installations. Everywhere one turned, there were more artists, and more museums purchasing contemporary art and producing larger international survey shows. Meanwhile, private collectors built bigger homes to display loft-scale paintings and video projections.

To keep up with technical developments—as I had done for years—I visited Bell Labs in New Jersey, MIT's Media Lab in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Xerox Park in Silicon Valley, California, to see what was happening with this new art medium with unlimited possibilities. (These were the early days of artists working with MUDs [multi-user dungeons] and MOOs [MUDs object oriented], text-based online virtual reality systems to which multiple users could connect at the same time.) As a means of surveying all of the change, I organized MoMA's lecture series *Technology in the 1990s*. David Blair, with his *History Among the Bees*, discussed his idiosyncratic work that had two versions—one Net-based, the other linear and screened in cinemas.

Ever curious about the cutting edge of technology, I visited artist Wolfgang Staehle in his small TriBeCa basement office. I clambered down a metal staircase, under a sidewalk grating. Wolfgang had just launched THE THING, the first international art community online. He demoed his bulletin board system (BBS). Within a few years, THE THING had grown into a successful online community with raging debates, and host of many artists' websites.

I regularly visited THE THING's sprawling Chelsea office, where a diverse group of media artists from around the world congregated to converse, collaborate, and critique the latest work. Whereas the image of Net artists might be of solitary, nocturnal geeks possessed by their computers, THE THING flourished as a social space. These face-to-face meetings and impromptu encounters raised the level of discourse and contributed to Net art's development.

Around 1995, museums contemplated how to create a Web presence. Together with my colleagues Paola Antonelli and Sheryl Conkelton, we encouraged MoMA to launch a pilot Web site, which outlined my exhibition *Video Spaces,* and their concurrent *Mutant Materials* and *Annette Messager* exhibitions. *Video Spaces* featured eight video installations, including recent work by two computer prodigies—the revered film master Chris Marker's random-access *Silent Movie* (1997), and the Kyoto-based, mixed-media genius Teiji Furuhashi's interactive installation, *Lovers* (1995). After debating and obtaining the URL for moma.org, for expediency we were restricted to well designed, descriptive text and images of work in the exhibitions. The museum's administration knew that should the site flop, we could simply take it down and chalk it up to experience. (This didn't happen.)

Net hubs sprouted as the dot-com industry started to bubble. In 1994 Benjamin Weil launched äda'web as a research and development platform based in the Silicon Alley of Manhattan. Set up as a digital foundry, the small nonprofit invited non-media artists to experiment with and reflect upon the Web as a medium, pairing artists with specialists who had the technical expertise of dot-com producers.

Before I headed off to China on a research trip in 1996, I met with äda'web. I thought about all of the artists' biographies, interviews, and photos I

accumulated every time I visited a studio. "Enough of this squirreling away of information in folders stuffed into file cabinets!" I decided to put my research on the Web, using the Internet to make my file folders public. The informal conversation at äda'web turned into *Stir-fry*, a curator's Web journal from China, which uncovered the thirty-five media artists in the Middle Kingdom at www.moma.org/stirfry. (Designed by äda'web's Vivian Selbo, *Stir-fry* documents the early careers of major artists still active today.)

On the trip I visited Beijing-based Feng Mengbo, the first artist in China to have a computer and the first to gain access to the Internet. For him the Web functioned as a font of otherwise inaccessible information; however, video games were a passion. In his tiny home studio, he demonstrated how he had been hacking for years. As a gamer without the means to travel, he used what was accessible: he appropriated film versions of the didactic (propagandistic) Beijing-style operas, which during the Cultural Revolution valorized the life of Mao. As a subtle critique, Mengbo wittily adapted the proverbial content to the style and cultural implications of games. His latest project, *Long March Restart* (2008), is an inspired, ballroom-scale upgrade, now entering the MoMA collection.

As part of my curatorial practice, I produced several additional Web projects. *Interynet* covered my research in Russia (and Siberia) and Ukraine at www.moma.org/internyet in 1998, when I caught up with early Net pioneers Alexej Shulgin in St. Petersburg and Olia Lialina in Moscow. Lialina produced a Net artwork in the form of a compelling narrative, *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War* (1996). But it was her online gallery that was more impressive, as she was the first to address the challenging issue of what ownership of a Web site meant—context and provenance as indicated by a URL.

Contemporary art museums are handling the not-so-simple issues of Net art in different ways. Since 1995 the Dia Art Center has commissioned and maintained thirty Web pieces by artists. The Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco has archived Web sites based on design, and has commissioned artists' Web projects. Recently it shifted several of their commissions from the realm of exhibition to acquisition and into collection, not a trivial move. The New Museum in New York recently absorbed Rhizome, the small non-profit founded in 1996 dedicated to the creation, presentation, preservation, and critique of emerging artistic practices that engage technology, now with a comprehensive digital art archive. MoMA got its feet wet with several Net art commissions, which for practical purposes were treated in the manner of exhibitions—presented for a period of time without commitment to future maintenance. Tony Oursler's *TimeStream* (2001), an online project commission, explored the magic and mysticism that surrounds new mimetic devices. Oursler looked back a century when vaudeville and magic shows morphed into silent cinema, while the spirit world loomed large. The other project, Allan McCollum's witty *Registration of an Artwork* (1999), resides now with the artist.

Exhibition and acquisition have separate but related functions. The former is the starting point—the exploratory, scholarly, educational phase. Adding a work of media art to a museum collection requires determining the artists' intentions and the inherent aesthetics of their technology-based work right now, so that later the best decisions can be made around preserving it for future generations. The perennial issue is functionality—how to keep Net and media art working. As commissioner of the first MediaCitySeoul in 2000, I invited Lynn Hershman to present her telerobotic sculpture *CybeRoberta* (1970–98), which incorporated Internet interactivity. While Hershman brilliantly continued her exploration of the roles of spectator and subject in the context of a feminist critique of communication, the doll required a commitment to

nonstop maintenance. Hershman's engineer regularly teleported repairs and upgrades, as the doll in Seoul connected with online viewers.

The Net pioneer Mark Amerika began pushing the envelope of media at Brown University ten years ago when he worked with hypertext (along with Robert Cover, Michael Joyce, Jay Boulter, and George Landow, who founded the Electronic Literature Organization, a nonprofit organization "established in 1999 to promote and facilitate the writing, publishing, and reading of electronic literature.") Amerika recently released "the first feature-length mobile phone art film." Shown as an installation at the Chelsea Art Museum, *Immobilité* fuses the language of "foreign films" with landscape painting and literary metafiction. Intentionally shot in a do-it-yourself style related to the evolving forms of video distributed in social-media environments such as YouTube, he is still experimenting outside the art market, in the same manner as independent video and cinema-makers were doing thirty years ago. However, Amerika's potential audiences for the web version of *Immobilité* are vast, unlike the handfuls who would have tuned into local public access television and seen artists' videos.

Today media artists work with the latest technologies as readily as they sip water. Their tools are affordable and in the economic downturn collectives are active again. Audiences are ready for content that goes beyond reality TV and the most up-to-date iteration of what, as a young curator, I discovered in underground art venues scattered along the periphery. Now the new setting is the unfolding Internet.

The youngest generation of media art pioneers is poised to reinvent the avant-garde. Hackers, programmers, and tinkerer-revisionists draw upon their local culture and upon more international sources. They will forge new methodologies. I remain resolutely curious and optimistic, certain that

breakthrough Net art forms will appear out of the blue and affect everything around—in particular that uncontrollable, loosely defined field of media art. Museums have put good procedures in place, after decades of experience in collecting and archiving video and installations. Matters in Media Art is an online resource developed by a consortium—MoMA, SFMOMA, the Tate, and the New Art Trust—at http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/mediamatters/. As we face the future together only one thing is certain: media will always change.

WOLFGANG ERNST

is professor of media theories at Humboldt-University, Berlin. He studied history, classics, and archaeology, and wrote his Ph.D. thesis in 1989 on historicism and museology. He has teaching experience and guest professorships in culture and media studies at several universities (Leipzig, Cologne, Weimar, Bochum, Paderborn, Berlin). Publications include *M.edium F.oucault* (Weimar 2000), *Das Rumoren der Archive* (Berlin 2002), *Im Namen von Geschichte* (Munich 2003), and *Das Gesetz des Gedächtnisses* (Berlin 2007). His current research fields include time-based and time-critical media, and the "sonic" dimension of techno-mathematics.

VERENA KUNI

is a scholar in the field of history and theory of art and media cultures, and Professor for Visual Culture at Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main. Since 1996 she has been lecturing, researching, and teaching at universities and art academies in Europe and beyond. From 1995 to 1999, she co-curated the video section of *Kasseler Dokumentarfilm and Video Festival*, where since 1999 she has been director of the yearly *interfiction* conference for art, media, and network cultures (www.interfiction.org). Since 1989, she has written for international publications (print and online), and has published widely on modern and contemporary art, electronic arts, and the history and theory of media. Her research interests in transfers between material and media cultures and in DIY are mirrored by her recent book publication, *Home Made Electronic Arts* (with Dominik Landwehr) (Basel 2009). More at www.kuniver.se.

BARBARA LONDON

is curator and founder of The Museum of Modern Art's video exhibition program, and has guided it over a long pioneering career. She helped assemble the Museum's premiere media collection of over 1,000 works.

Her recent activity at MoMA includes *Looking at Music: Sides 1 & 2* (2007, 2009); *Automatic Update* (2007); *River of Crime* (2006), a community online project with the Residents; *Stillness*: Michael Snow and Sam Taylor-Wood (2005); *Anime!!* (2005); *Masters of Animation: Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata* (2005); and a series of Web projects undertaken in China (*Stir-fry*), Russia (*InterNyet*), and Japan (*dot.jp*). She has written and lectured widely.

CHRISTIANE PAUL
is Director of the Media Studies Graduate Programs and Associate Professor of Media Studies at The New School, NY, and Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She has written extensively on new media arts and has lectured internationally on art and technology. An expanded new edition of her book *Digital Art* (London 2003) came out in spring 2008, and her edited anthology *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond—Curatorial Models for Digital Art* (Berkeley 2008) was also released that year. Paul has previously taught at the MFA computer arts department at the School of Visual Arts in New York (1999–2008), at the Digital+Media Department of the Rhode Island School of Design (2005–08), at the San Francisco Art Institute, and at the Center of New Media at the University of California at Berkeley (2008).

GUNTHER REISINGER
is Assistant Professor for Art History at the Institute for Art History at the Karl-Franzens Universität Graz, and headed a research project concerning archiving, restoring, and contextualizing Net-based art at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute Media.Art.Research in Linz (netpioneers 1.0). From 2002–05 he was curator and project director at *Kunstverein Medienturm Graz* (with a main focus on Net art), and from 2003–05 he researched in Karlsruhe at ZKM and HFG Karlsruhe and was member of the editorial staff of *MediaArtNet* (www.mediartnet.org), edited by Dieter Daniels and

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The research project netpioneers 1.0 was realized at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute Media.Art.Research. in Linz, Austria (2006–2009). It includes online contextualizations and restorations of early Net-based projects like THE THING New York, THE THING Vienna, t0 - Public Netbase and selected works by Holger Friese and jodi.org.

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The project will be continued at the Karl-Franzens Universität Graz, Institute for Art History and the Center for Information Modelling in the Humanities.
www.netpioneers.info

Early Net-based art (also known as Internet art, Net art, net.art, or web-based art) is presented in this book as evidence of a pivotal moment in digital culture. As documentation of a paradigm shift in media society at large, its importance goes far beyond art history. Yet, the framework of art history alone can provide a basis for understanding the context, ideas, and concepts behind the works. Created in response to the art world of the early 1990s, these works necessitate a historical perspective, while also maintaining significance in their testimony to the development of socio-technical media:

- Theory of the Avant-Garde in the Age of the Internet
- Contextualization of Net-Based Art
- Digital Source Criticism and Archive Theory
- Methodological Analysis

Contributions by Anna Bentkowska-Kafel, Dieter Daniels, Wolfgang Ernst, Verena Kuni, Barbara London, Christiane Paul, Gunther Reisinger, Marc Ries, Robert Sakrowski, and Julian Stallabrass.

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