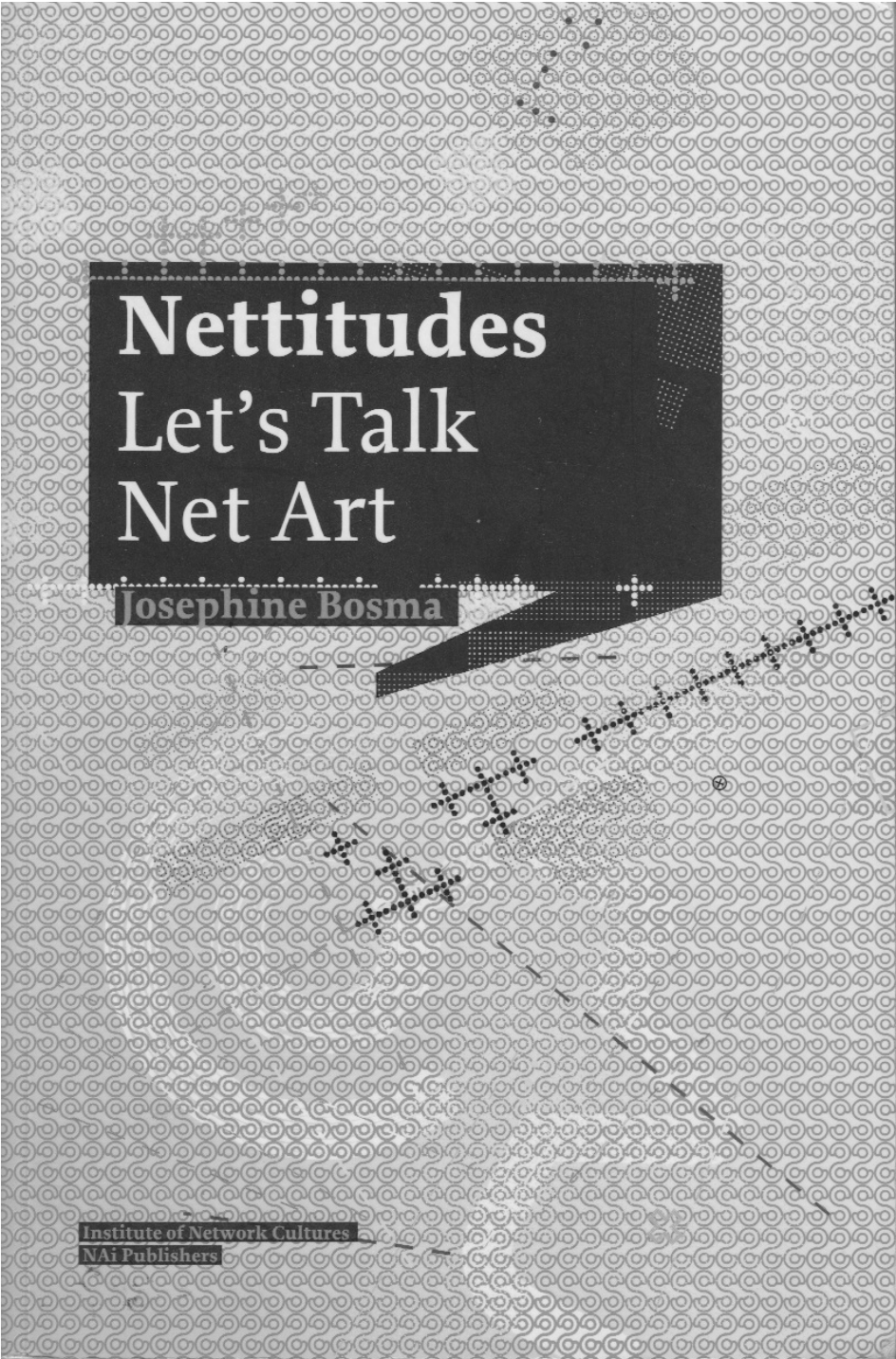




Nettitudes Let's Talk Net Art

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with someone else. Special thanks also go to the café crew at De Balie, who supplied me with free cups of coffee every now and then when I was working there after my office at home became impossible to work in. More special thanks go to the Netherlands Institute for Media Art (NIMk) for offering me sanctuary in the form of a steady workplace after that. I am most grateful for the patience and support of bart plantenga, editor and friend. Last but not least, I would like to thank my father Piet Bosma for the endless conversations regarding the mysteries of the world, and I thank my daughter Jasmijn for her patience and support while I was writing this book. Her smarts, warmth and love brighten my days.

A book about net art has no function without a network context. I am very grateful to Juan Martín Prada and Marcus Bastos of Medialab Prado for inviting me to the energetic 3rd Inclusiva-net meeting in Buenos Aires. Moreover, working with Kees de Groot and Viola van Alphen at Gogbot in Enschede has also been a very inspiring experience, as was being invited to Stockholm by Dan Karlhom for the symposium 'Whatever happened to net art?' I hope this book will provide a unique answer to that question.

Josephine Bosma

Net Art Back to Square One

Florian Cramer

Net art never really fit into the innovation-focused discourse on media art, in which specific forms of technological development and skill seem to have priority over cultural relevance. For me, this is a key sentence in this book. The fact that it states needs to be stressed all the more in a time where most early net art is no longer accessible on the Internet and is, instead, preserved on paper, in publications like this one. The 'high velocity decay' of digitally stored information did not only affect this art as such, but also public awareness of the difference it has made since the mid- and late 1990s: a subversively imaginative, non-institutional, activist countermovement to institutional high-tech media arts on the one hand, and a radically 'relational' art outside of the white cubes and without works of art as commodities on the other. The previous major books on net art, from Tilman Baumgärtel's *Net.art* (1999) and *Net.art 2.0* (2001) via Rachel Greene's *Internet Art* (2004), Mark Tribe's and Reena Jana's *New Media Art* (2006) to Edward Shanken's *Art and Electronic Media* (2009) tell, as we can see simply by reading the titles and their publication dates, a history of a gradual loss of differentiation, with net art being ultimately lumped together with institutional 'media art' of the dreadful, techno-affirmative, artistically uninteresting kind that continues to dominate the respective festivals and institutions worldwide.

I hope that I won't do this book injustice by calling it a timely revisionism of revisionism, and clarification of differences that still make a difference. At the time of this writing, the early net art that spelled itself with a dot in between is unknown to most people except those who witnessed it in the 1990s. There's some poetic justice in the fact that Josephine Bosma was among the very first writers and critics covering net.art – as a very close participant observer – and now the latest to publish a book on the subject. The chapter 'Net.art – From Non-Movement to Anti-History' provides a first, useful historical account that should be mandatory reading for anyone studying this particular 'international group of artists', as Josephine calls it.

For me personally, precursors to net art (with or without the dot) were not always identifiable by their similar use of media, such as

computers and telecommunication systems, but by a particular social dynamic of practicing art as, and within, certain historical moments of transformations of media, communication, culture and society; moments that could be called, using Heidegger's term, *Ereignis* in the double sense of incidence and appropriation, or, to twist Carl Schmitt, a perceived revolutionary state of exception – with all of the interesting perversity involved. Similar momentums existed in the experimental film co-ops of the 1960s, early activist radio art, early activist-artistic video and television, and the beginnings of mail art. If one watches, for example, Claudia von Alemann's 1967 TV documentary on the Danish film festival *EXPMNTL Knokke*, one gets a good idea of how avant-garde filmmakers of that time did not simply consider themselves fine artists working with moving images, but were focused on redefining what was the most powerful mass medium of that time, of course with the ultimate aim of rethinking culture and society.

Likewise, the early 1970s' issues of the magazine *Radical Software* give first-hand insight into how early video and television art was linked to media activism and the hopes of achieving a lasting change in the broadcast media and, consequently, mass culture. The same is true for artistic radio activism, and – if one reads, for example, early issues of General Idea's magazine *FILE* – the beginnings of mail art with its pre-World Wide Web drive to forge an 'eternal network' that was not so much about art in the narrow sense, but the networking of diverse subcultural fringes. What links, in other words, all these movements is an *Ereignis* of a mass communication medium, for purposes not only of aesthetic experimentation and breaking out of established art systems, but also shaping the medium itself and indirectly the culture and society influenced by it.

This is what Josephine describes as the implicit politics of net.art. At the same time, she insists that net.art was not a political movement – like many of the currents previously described (and never mind the fact that it involved political activist work like that of Heath Bunting, Rachel Baker and Cornelia Sollfrank) – early net art was rooted in a notion of being directly involved in a new 'net culture' and the global issues attached to it. In the mid-1990s, these artists still had the opportunity to shape the Web as their own medium. A recognition gap between jodi.org, for example, and Yahoo.com existed but was not dramatic, and

allowed Jodi to win the industry's 'Webby Awards'. The fact that artists now had mass communication tools equal to those of the big players, and could also create websites that were as believable as corporate or governmental media, was a crucial prerequisite for the spectacular social interventionism of groups like the Yes Men, 0100101110101101.org and ubermorgen.com. In this sense, I read Josephine's statement that net artists 'internalized the net' as being neither about technological craftsmanship nor some cyberpunk fusion of bodies and machines, but an artistic understanding of the Internet as a cultural apparatus rather than merely a new channel for existing work.

The ultimate loss of initial media-utopian momentum transformed all of the artistic currents described above, even net.art, despite its less-naïve politics. Once the New York Film Coop – to pick a prominent example – had to give up the idea that it represented the 'New American Cinema', experimental film mutated from an attack and reconceptualization of cinematic image and culture to, these days, either fine art practices or intimate love affairs with the old materiality of chemical film. Video mutated from artist's anti-TV into the successor of painting as the major medium of contemporary exhibition art, while the broadcast stations themselves became even less permeable for contemporary artistic work. For similar reasons, experimental radio turned into audio art, and mail art ended up as a postal exchange of collage and stamp art work of hobbyists.

Josephine's definition of net art as 'art based in Internet cultures', while concise and historically correct, also describes the major challenge to this kind of art today. The notion of an Internet-specific social communication culture has migrated from artist- and activist-run online systems (fully in parallel and agreement with the movement of artist-run spaces) to corporate services like Blogspot.com and Facebook, which have turned social networking into a commodity. The 'Web 2.0' domination of the Internet through a handful of slick, shrink-wrapped platforms had a much more detrimental effect on the net art ethos of self-designed and self-organized media than the dotcom crash at the turn of the millennium. I remember how in 2002, Jodi's Dirk Paesmans was mildly culture-shocked when he discovered that all Internet art projects shown in an exhibition at ICC Tokyo were based on existing major websites such as Google and Yahoo. A few years later, this had become the norm for Internet-based art, globally.

Nowadays, younger-generation fine artists who create strictly non-electronic white-cube installation works are the most avid networkers via blogs and social networks, more so than many net and media artists with their frequent reservations towards these systems. In sheer reader and posting quantity, e-flux for example has by far surpassed Nettime and all other net artistic mailing lists, and has created a powerful network of artists, critics and curators. A blog like VVORK is likely to be read by far more people from the 'classical' fine art system than *We Make Money Not Art* or *neural.it* in the net and media art world. If net.art was 'most of all the beginning of a serious debate about online art', does this mean – to play the devil's advocate here – that it was nothing more than a historical milestone in between earlier art that experimented with telecommunication systems and the countless contemporary art blogs and networks of today?

Let me continue to flip perspectives for a while in order to flesh out a conflict addressed in this book. From a typical curatorial and critical perspective, speaking of net art is as problematic as speaking of video art – as a genre or field of its own, apart from the countless hybridizations of media and materials in all contemporary art, and given everyone's use of googled information, YouTube videos and downloaded music in today's art. On top of that, the idea of medium-specific art yields strong anti-reactions in the contemporary art world. If the branding 'relational aesthetics' helped a larger audience to frame what could be called the curatorial art of the last two decades, the term 'post-media' has been much more important for artists themselves.

The chapter 'Let's Talk Net Art' discusses the oedipal schism of Rosalind Krauss – the coiner of post-media – with Clement Greenberg. In his famous 1960 essay 'Modernist Painting', Greenberg had decreed that 'the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium'. With this, he meant (last but not least as a core member of the CIA's Congress of Cultural Freedom) the very opposite of artistic media cultural interventions from the New York Film Coop to net.art. The passage intrinsically refers to abstract painting, seen by Greenberg as a desirably pure form of art. But, at the very heart of the controversies and rifts about 'media' in contemporary art is simply a linguistic misunderstanding. Greenberg, Krauss and academically trained contemporary artists like Fowler

understand 'medium' in the sense of 'material or technical means of artistic expression' (*Merriam-Webster*), a notion that has existed in Anglophone art criticism since the eighteenth century. This notion was canonical for defining the single departments of art academies until the 1970s, and, for a good part still is today: painting, sculpture, drawing, nowadays also photography, performance, video, etcetera. The socially, politically and economically much farther-reaching communication studies notion of medium as 'a channel or system of communication, information, or entertainment' (*Merriam-Webster*, same article, different definition) did not converge with the traditional fine art notion of medium until – with Fluxus and Nam June Paik – TV and other electronic mass media 'system[s] of communication' were effectively turned into 'technical means of artistic expression'. This illuminates, by the way, a crucial difference between net art and classical media art: most media art, even Paik's, focused on turning mass communication devices into individual artistic tools and objects while the art described in this book on the contrary embraced mass communication media in order to radically move art away from objects and individual practices, described in this book as the 'potential and actual expansion (or even redefinition) of various art practices' in net art.

The notion of 'expansion' reminds one of George Maciunas's 'Expanded Arts Diagram' and of a 1960s' discourse of extending art's expressive means, including ones which Dadaists employed in the 1920s for ostensibly anti-artistic ends. But even the concepts of 'mixed media' and later Dick Higgins's 'intermedia' (see page 84) conformed to the traditional notion of artistic media as materials akin to paint or clay, from the eighteenth century to Greenberg. Their only twist was to demand their hybridization instead of purity. To leave the fixation of artistic work on 'media', in this sense of craftsmanship, entirely behind, embracing a post-media art that focuses on larger aesthetic, conceptual and social issues rather than material mastery, makes perfect sense if one understands 'media' in this particular (limited) sense. This might explain, to quote page 43 of this book, some of the 'undefined reasons art historians apparently no longer felt a need to deal with specific issues of technology in their field' after the 'modern periods'. The difficulty of seeing media and technology as broadly cultural, not simply formal-aesthetic concerns – in both systems, it should be said, fine

art as well as 'media art', each in their own way – is the persistent collateral damage by Greenberg's modernism.

Of course, post-media is an abstruse term from a media theoretical understanding of the word 'medium'. There can, after all, be no communication and thus no art without some medium – including of course exhibition spaces. The real downside of a notion like post-media is that it gives artists and curators an easy excuse to no longer critically reflect the media (and politics) of art display and distribution but to fall back – as is now massively the case – to the white cube installation paradigm with no further questions asked. In the same vein – and to conclude my switching of perspectives – e-flux and VVORK function as conventional news resources on art happening anywhere else but on the mailing list itself. Despite the Internet marking the arguably most massive transformation of media since the Gutenberg press, the contemporary art world is still stuck in a mentality of regarding (and using) it merely as a medium *on* art instead one where art can happen (and whose cultural impact presents urgent aesthetic-political issues such as the notion of intellectual property). The situation is comparable to earlier times when photography, books and magazines were considered media only for the reproduction, not the production, of contemporary art.

A book on net art therefore is as legitimate as one, for example, on artist books or artist-run spaces. The early net.art of the 1990s had grasped the potential of the Internet just like Fluxus artists had grasped the potential of artist books and punk culture had grasped the potential of zines a few decades before they became major contemporary artistic media. From a strict media theoretical point of view, media do not merely define the aesthetic parameters but also the social constraints of art. Oddly enough, however, net.art was perfectly post-media in the arts sense of being post-Greenbergian. Alexei Shulgin's 1996 manifesto 'ART, POWER AND COMMUNICATION' ends with the following call to his fellow artists: 'Don't be dependent on [sic] medium you are working with – this will help you to easily give it up. Don't become a Master.' Which brings us back to square one and the quote at the very beginning of this foreword, that net art addressed issues of 'cultural relevance' rather than 'specific forms of technological development and skill'. How exactly, can be read in this book.

Introduction

This book is a mixture of highly accessible and more theoretical reflection on art in the context of new technologies, specifically the Internet. In some ways it is the result of my efforts over the past 15 years. Most of the texts, however, are new and were written especially for this project. It is not my habit to walk down trodden paths. In fact, I dislike it immensely. I like to keep moving as I explore new territories (or hidden layers in familiar territories). But the field of net art – although it has been much discussed and several books on the subject have appeared – still feels like virgin land. I do not see that my views are sufficiently represented in the available books on net art I have read, even if some of them have been very sympathetic. I think it is necessary for me to describe the framework from which I work to avoid misreadings and misunderstandings regarding my position.

Therefore, I think it is essential for me to explain what I think net art is. I do this in the first text in this book, 'Let's Talk Net Art'. Here I try to explain my view on what I think net art is to 'insiders' as well as to people less familiar with it. Art in digital media (or practically all electronic media, for that matter) faces significant amounts of prejudice that have been expressed quite passionately. I try to address what I consider the misconceptions about net art from two sides: from people involved in the Internet or media art, and from the angle of the critics and viewers from a more traditional contemporary art background. I have discovered there are people in both worlds who find it difficult to fully value art in all of its complexity. The main problem seems to be the location of the medium. I believe it is impossible to judge a work of art based solely on its conceptual or material elements. Although many critics would agree, they find it difficult to comprehend or imagine the roles that the computer or the Internet may play in an art work. I have tried to establish my argument in favour of a new, very distinct form of medium specificity by referencing the works of various critics and theorists.