NET.ART: A LOOK

Roberta Bosco and Stefano Caldana

We consider **digital art**, and specially **net.art**, as one of the **most original and genuine** artistic expressions **in this time**. As journalists we were lucky to deal with subjects related to art development linked to new technologies and with their impact on the world of art and culture. In this way we witness -and to a certain extent we contribute- its public evolution, at the same time as we could know what happened in the "back room". Our point of view is the result of the union of these two information elements, sifted through by a pragmatic approach to the subject and with the perspective which concedes a history of ten years.

A decade is a long time for children's growth and maybe the **first ten years** are precisely those when they change and learn more... something like that happens to **net.art**, which in this space of time has undergone a **unbearable development** for being fast and convincing. Most of these expressions in contemporary creativity won't probably last through centuries… but where do the everlasting and emblematic masterpieces come from, but from the many experiments which mark the development of ideas, aesthetics and even the simplest habits?
It's clear that net.art and the other formats related to new technologies, and in a special way to information technologies, correspond to a series of very specific conditions which have happened in our time and they represent in no way an isolated phenomenon outside the development of **art history**. Net.art is the inheritor of **experiments** that, since the appearance of these means, some artists have carried out putting together two very powerful elements per se: communication systems and art. The first attempts to use telecommunications in art have very deep roots and their development is closely linked to the **technical evolution of the circle itself**.

An evolution which, beyond the fascination of new resources and potentialities, implied the materialization of the great democratic utopia of the **Internet: participation, collaboration, internationalism, global community**. These values, that the digital world shares with the visionary models of **the historical avant-gardes**, together with the characteristic possibilities of the new technologies: **interactivity, ubiquity, processuality, virtuality and interdisciplinarity,** have given rise to absolutely original works and to some changes which have affected the whole art system, influencing and changing the **processes of creation, exhibition, delight, collection** and of course buying and selling artworks.

Artists working with the Internet want to reflect their creation, communication and exhibition spaces in an autonomous and independent way. **They want to change their relation with the audience, dragging them out of their passive role** and involving them in the creation of works where the process is often more important than the result. They want to change their relation with technology, using the situationist techniques of detournement to modify programs, changing their original functions and purposes for which they were invented. To the crisis of values and victory of market economy and wild neoliberalism they respond with **immaterial works**, which have nothing to do with the object, nor with the fetish object preserving the memory of an action. Unmarketable works in a society based on the accumulation of objects; works which do not require an exhibition space and establish a direct and personal connection to the user by means of the computer.

We share the idea that the impact of the new digital technologies on the contemporary artistic creation has marked **the end of post-modern period**, which

characterized the history of art in the last 30 years, given birth to **a new modern age**. Artists stop quoting and they create again. The fascination of relativism, doubts and plurality of options in postmodernists gives way to processuality, internationalism and the wish to go beyond the local and global dichotomy in the digital world. "There is a different creation sensibility to the one which characterized the 80's and 90's. Digital artists are the children of a technological revolution similar to the industrial revolution at the end of XIX century, which has also generated an experimental wish and attitude", states the curator and theorist **Carolyn Christov Bakargiev**. The artists who appear between 1995 and 1998 (called "the heroic period" by **Olia Lialina**), **Vuk Cosic**, **Jodi**, **Heath Bunting**, **Alexei Shulgin** and **Lialina** herself know, value and focus their works on the digital technology, but at the same time they establish references to the utopias of the moderns in the beginning of XX century, ironic or not, like the famous History of net.art by Cosic. A trilogy which begins with *History of Art for Airports* (http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/history/) where he satirizes the representation of art in the Net through a series of ideograms similar to those you find in the airports, which represent key moments and creators in the art history, from **Lascaux** to Wahorl, including **Heath Bunting**.

The Internet helps to bring the yearning for modernity to fruition, since it helps to evade the usual ethnic classification and national clichés and, although it is basically controlled by the big American communication companies and multinational corporations, it means the chance of using different production and distribution channels to the traditional ones. On the other hand, net.art denies the supposed women technophobia and it is commendable to be the first artistic expression since the II World War which goes beyond frontiers and cultural differences between Western and Eastern Europe.

Despite during the Transmediale 2001 **Mark Amerika** declared that **net.art was dead**, experiments are more alive than ever. Despite the unprecedented entailed problems, net.art has received recognition and acceptance much more quickly than other artistic expressions such as video and even photography, and every day we see how it is strengthening ties with the different agents from art system and business world. This is proved by the experience of the Future Lab in **Ars Electronica Center**, the *Auto-Illustrator* de **Adrian Ward**, a software that after winning Transmediale 2001 it has turned into a commercial program, or the funding of many projects based on the Palm precisely during the commercial launching of this technology like *Tap* (http://awp.diaart.org/buckhouse/indexreal.html) and *Zombie & Mummy* (http://www.zombie-and-mummy.org/) by **Olia Lialina** and **Dragan Espenschied**, produced by the **Dia Center** in New York.

The dynamism and variety of the scene presages very interesting times. Sometimes it is difficult to give the accurate and suitable names to the more and more numerous forms/tendencies/trends of art in the Internet: **art software, art browser, net.art, web-based projects, virtual reality, artivism, hacktivism, weblogs, telepresence, media-performance, artificial life environment...** We love words and we like to look for and use the appropriate ones. However, names also can be used for starting endless arguments and debates can turn into futile controversies. Rather than setting labels or using them to classify a experience, names should be used to define it and, as far as possible, explain it. When net.art appeared even its name raised suspicions, with this odd spelling having a full stop in between, and this made it seem an inconsequential game. However, it is **such a strong, powerful and different means as any one**, that what some visionaries began has become a more and more extensive phenomenon, which join together countless experiences, in some cases far away from what was the concept of the first net.artists and the essence of the first works in net.art.

There is no backward step. The contamination between art and new technologies is already very advanced. The evolution of means and medium has contributed to change the

way of thinking and creating. There will be more and more hybrid works and experiences, which mix different means, medium and disciplines. The meaning of these terms is fading away: means turn into content, medium into means and information into art.