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Incomplete Images, or Where Does the Art Happen?

REBECCA ULIASZ¹

Book Review:

The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology

Edited by Michael Connor, Aria Dean, and Dragan Espenschied

New York: Art Book/D.A.P., 2019

Although the hefty anthology comes with Rhizome Artistic Director Michael Connor's prescription to "USE NET ART DAILY," I can't help but gulp it down in two feverish nights, skimming through the chronologically organized sections for longtime favorites, later going back to linger in the interstices of works I am not so familiar with.

In truth, despite its bulk, I don't find the collection unwieldy. As Connor notes in his foreword, the printed form presents something of a paradox at the heart of preserving net art—any fixed format of net art's presentation is always reductive, incomplete to the works as they once existed as a nexus of social and digital relations.

The network form, be it computational or analog, is always performative: it is always *in motion*. Noting Rhizome Preservation Director Dragan Espenschied's interjection that "everything inside the computer is a performance," I bracket the slippages between the text and the brilliant accompanying website upon which Rhizome has presented 100 seminal net artworks dating back to the 1980s. Between the broken links, punctuated blog posts, and snippets of interpretive text, something of an underlying form begins to cohere.

The collection strategically blurs binaries and collapses reified modes of categorization. It instead includes four chronological chapters (early network cultures and early web; flash and blogs; surf clubs, early postinternet art, and social media platforms; and mobile apps and social media saturation) and one final chapter of curated longform essays. Divisions blur between high and low, production and consumption, and digital and material, all of which suggests the impossibility of settling on a static definition for this canon of practices which spans creative coding, embodied performance, hardware hacks, and hypertext. Rhizome attempts one such definition for "net art"

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as “art that acts on the network, or is acted on by it.”² The reprise begins to take on meaning greater than the works it restores (or rather “reperforms,” in Connor’s words). In its very failures—the glitches, missing documentation records, and incomplete verbal recounts from the artists themselves—the works begin to index the institutionalization of the internet itself. As I thumb through the pages, or coast through the hyperlinked abyss of the carefully curated online portal, these practices come alive at the moments when they resist full capture, digital orphans of historic practices of institutional critique.

In my periphery, a different image begins to emerge. The selected chronological divisions might be read as key moments in the shifting affordances of the internet—from utopian projections and playful manifestos, to critical hacking and trolling practices, to appropriations of the medium which undermine the eventual ubiquity of networked corporate surveillance—allowing net art to stay alive despite the platformization of the computational network. Perhaps even in direct response to the hyper-commodification of social relations, many of the practices represented spill over the edges of the network form. While they necessarily participate within a certain set of economic and social givens, they queer the logic of the network, or provoke one to imagine a network of a different sort. Take, for example, VNS Matrix’s *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*. Derived in part from Donna Haraway’s iconic cyborg, the manifesto is an early instance of artists claiming network space as a terrain for utopian worldbuilding, this time for the female body to stand in for itself through technological mediation.

VNS Matrix is worth consideration, not for its political gains (we are all too aware of the fact that the internet is still rife with misogyny) but for the ways it spawned an artistic legacy of sorts. The *Manifesto*, by asserting that the internet was *for* feminist critique, paved the way for practices to come. An extended community of thinkers and artists would later appropriate the medium as a way to fabricate gendered or racial identity, or nonidentity in digital spaces. Liz Mputu’s */INB4/*, for example, described as a “CollectiveVirtualDreamSpace birthed of the black imagination,” is an active Facebook group with a common goal of “promoting alternate forms of visibility,” specifically those that counter the hegemonic gaze, as a radical practice of self-care.³ The group, composed of hundreds of members, proposes a communal challenge to mainstream representations of black and queer bodies. Although housed within the confines of a corporate platform, */INB4/* is collaboratively produced through the shared cultural and political values of its usership—it is thoroughly entangled with the non-digital society that it interfaces with.

Alongside Connor, I find myself wondering what a “Net Art Anthology [would] look like if the community, rather than the individual artwork, were the focus?”⁴ I find myself wondering if that is already the case in pieces like Brian Mackern’s *netart latino database* from 1999, a hand-coded

² “Definition,” Net Art Anthology, Rhizome, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://anthology.rhizome.org>.

³ Liz Mputu and */INB4/*, “*/INB4/*,” *The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology*, 354.

⁴ Michael Connor, “Introduction to Net Art Anthology,” (New York: Art Book/D.A.P., 2019), 11.

compilation of works in net art by Latino artists. Or in Electronic Disturbance Theater's 1998 *FloodNet*, a Java applet designed to flood websites run by the Mexican federal government, aligning itself with the resistance tactics of the Zapatistas. Works like *FloodNet* took place on an internet infrastructure quite different from the one we are familiar with today. As the internet became predominantly platformed, many net art practices were made obsolete. Connor argues that net art's strength lies in its ability to rapidly respond to a changing techno-cultural sphere. Despite what Nick Srnicek calls "platform capitalism," we still see challenging works that explicitly confront extractive circulation practices by inserting themselves in the fabric of those same circuits.

Take Biquini Wax member Devin Kenny's *Untitled/Clefa* (2013), a one-time, staged critical reenactment of the popular "Trayvoning" meme that was intended to mock the death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin at the hands of racialized police brutality. Kenny's performance documentation circulates in direct conversation with those images he seeks to critique. Here, Josephine Bosma's claim that net art is "not necessarily screen-based, because digital technologies are not primarily visual" resonates with me.⁵ By embodying his critique, Kenny's performance refuses to participate in the exploitative overrepresentation of Martin's death. The (re)performance of this work in the anthology is removed from the affective register of Kenny's live reenactment, but the pains of racialized violence resound.

Perhaps it is not the *Net Art Anthology*'s job to define net art—as Bosma reminds us, the network is not new, and so long as dominant modes of communication hold, artists will continue to appropriate their logics towards other ends. This anthology has utility for those of us wondering where and if art practice has tactical use value today. I have found myself going back for reminders—"USE NET ART DAILY."

Works Cited

Michael Connor, Aria Dean, and Dragan Espenschied, eds. *The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology*. New York: Art Book/D.A.P., 2019.

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Srnicek, Nick. *Platform Capitalism*. London: Polity, 2016.

⁵ Ibid., 389.