

INTERVIEW JOSEPHINE BOSMA

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Interview Josephine Bosma

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'Beyond the white walls of the white cube' net art : exhibiting/collecting/conserving?

Petra Heck : How would you define internet art?

Josephine Bosma : net.art/net art* is art using computernetworks as a medium, in the sense that the network itself and/or its content (technical, cultural and social) serves as a basis for the artwork. I myself use a broader definition, namely : art that has net.culture as its basis. (This goes slightly further and also includes work that does -not- directly use a computernetwork)

PH : What do you think is the best place to present internet art? (in a (virtual) institution, on the net only, on the site of a museum, in a museum, etc. or does it not matter where?)

JB : The most obvious answer would be : the best place for net art is the network. I think however it does not really matter where it is presented, but there are good and less good ways to present it. The less good ways are mocked by net.art 'lovers', but : one can still regard them as some kind of extension of the net.artwork. Yvonne Wilhelm of Knowbotic Research said it like this : every publication, every letter, fax or mailing in connection to our work is part of it. What you see in the exhibition space is just a different part of the work. A lot of net art works are difficult to grasp in their entirety. The meaning of a net.artwork can be anchored in (or at least influenced by) the communication (around the work, but also in general) on mailinglists etc. Because of this I am a bit reluctant towards galleries, even if they are online, that want to present net art. I always fear that a tendency towards more presentations in galleries etc. and less in 'spaces' maintained by the artists themselves will ultimately be a tendency towards a more 'static' net.art. I would find this a shame.

PH : In which way do you think internet art can be presented best?

What are the criteria, the necessities (theoretically and practically, what kind of space, optical conditions, etc)?

JB : We are talking Real Space here, right? This depends completely on the work. One should take time to find out how to best present it. I will have to do some brainstorming to answer your question, make presumptions a bit. I find this a difficult question to answer. The reception of an artwork depends on so many things, like for instance the mindset of its audience, its location (country, social environment) etc. I think it is important to add to the presentation a sense of extra space, the space of the network. This is my personal thought at this moment in time, for exhibitions in any artcentre of which the audience is not accustomed to net.art. These kinds of immersive presentations work well for any audience in fact, and they do not necessarily have to take up a lot of actual 'Real Space'.

Not all net.artworks are completely 'inside' the networks though! Some have an installation or environment to it. And in other cases a presentation that would most of the times be regarded as silly or boring (solo computer in a corner or on a pedestal) can maybe emphasize an intentional sense of simplicity or clumsiness a work has.

When you show several works at once this in general only works well when you show the connections or the differences between the works, or the variety in styles, choices. There are in fact almost as many forms of net.art as there are 'older' art forms. You don't squeeze those in one room without giving it a good thought either. As a lot of net.art is conceptual or 'abstract' it asks

for background knowledge. The major part of a museum audience is not familiar with net.culture or computer technology. This demands a good pre-presentation which leaves the work as 'intact' as possible, like wellwrought catalogues and thorough press policies. With regards to the presentation, it is at the very least polite to consult the artist. Net.art is sometimes too easily 'withdrawn' from the artists' influence. "didn't they offer it for free?" I think in order to present net.art, one has to somehow give the 'suggestion' of the network to the audience. Again, one has to be creative, and in touch with the artist. It can be very simple, like the Swedish gallery owner who presented Olia Lialina's work on the (back then) recently released I-mac. These machines were so new at that point in time they could easily function as a symbol of a kind of enchanting and futuristic landscape of net.art. Just one such machine in the middle of a white cube;) you can imagine the impact there. It has to be stressed though that the problem of how to present net art is one of curators, not of artists so much. The artist -has- presented his/her work, has his/her own channels. This of course does not apply to works made in request or for a specific location.

PH : David Ross of the SFMOMA mentioned the intimacy of net art. Shouldn't it be shown on a small monitor because of this?

JB : I don't know what kind of 'intimacy' is meant here exactly. But in general not all net art is intimate, far from it I would say, in any meaning of the word. Some net.art is produced within a small 'ring' of discourse, namely that of a few public (read : on the net in lists etc) publications and discussions around the topic, on the level of the artists themselves. Within this discourse the input from the 'artworld' (with this I mean established artcritics, curators etc) is not taken too seriously, because this art establishment is not taking net art too seriously either. So this existing net.art discourse is easily mistaken for being intimate, because some people are simply outside of it. But again : not all net art bears on the development of net art itself.

PH : You say the presentation of a net artwork depends on the individual work. This means though that, if the artist does not care about the presentation, it does not matter whether the work is presented on a large screen or a monitor. This is why I mention David Ross. He sees intimacy as a characteristic. At home you see net art on a small monitor, maybe up to 17 inch. In the case of an interactive net artwork : can you blow it up so that many people can see it, when the actual experience of the work is only obtained when one controls the 'buttons' individually?

JB : Like I said earlier, it is possible to have different perceptions of a net artwork. And as net.art usually has its own space where it presents itself, the presentation in a 'Real Space' is most often an extension of or addition to the work. This therefore can be different then the work was originally. One has to be careful of course. One should try to keep the intention and atmosphere of the work as intact as possible. Sometimes 'enlarging', 'blowing up' the work is necessary to maintain the works' characteristics in Real Space, sometimes it needs to be presented 'intimately'. Intimate would be like maybe in a small space for only one visitor at the time. The latter creates a rather stuffy and closed (in many meanings) perception of the work though, so I would not do it so easily. I think enlarging and/or 'unravelling' the work on many levels works best for a public Real Space presentation. It seems when discussing this one always thinks of large museums : I can also imagine more -really- intimate presentations in small gatherings of interested people though, which is not uncommon already. This often has the artist present, and can have a true 'avant-garde' feel;) of condensed energy.

PH : Should a museum give the work surplus value?

JB : It is more leaving the work in its own value and offering the possibility to the audience to judge the work on its own merit. This is hard as a lot of net.art is really a network experience. It is not so much offering surplus value as it is compensating for the lack of presence in the network (so not just the lack of the experience of technically being 'inside' a computernetwork, but also lack of knowledge of the social, political and cultural circumstances in this network).

PH : I am not sure in how far the creative solutions you suggest should be found. I do think the museum should find its own solution, but shouldn't these also meet the wishes, the characteristics of the medium? Or do you simply see it as a different environment, a different context, a new part

of the work, the museums own way of presenting? I can follow you, though I do want to stick to the context and characteristics of the medium. Can't musea adapt a bit? I find for instance presenting net art offline unacceptable.

JB : Presenting net.art offline is absolutely perceived as blasphemous, and it is not to be preferred. Sometimes though an institution does not have the possibility to present work online. I remember an exhibition in Belgrade, at Cyberrex, where they had no choice but presenting net art offline, and it was done with a very conscious attitude. There are many possible answers to your question. I would like to keep it short though, also because what I am going to mention now is not something I would say I know deeply. I just want to steer you away a bit from the train of thought you have. I think you should try to think about the influence of computer/network structures on other structures. It is a subtle change of standpoint, point of view, and way of working. This change does not produce completely new concepts. I am thinking of (just an example) Pierre Levy who wrote about the history of the virtual. Virtual is not just what happens inside a computer, or what happens inside a network. Also in Real Life we deal with virtuality. The 'meaning' of a net artwork is not just a technological one. I know you are realising this, but it has deeper implications than just the evolving of two worlds next to each other, in which one world produces work that only consists of information and thus is intangible, where this intangibility has all kinds of consequences. Information is language, is code : it is being structured and it provokes changes in structure depending on its environment. The way we are forced to deal with this re-structuring, this re-thinking of placement, of language, of hierarchies, of value, ultimately will translate itself into the Real World. The problem with net.art is that net.art is presented in a world that is barely touched by or aware of these influences yet. Sometimes these influences are intentionally kept as small as possible btw, for reasons of tradition or otherwise. Sometimes the influences are not visible, as you look for the wrong things maybe. What I really mean to say is that the characteristics of the medium you are referring to can be represented or accomplished in other ways than purely technological. Also I do not feel like losing my temper or something over stupidly placed terminals in an exhibition. In the end a museum remains a good or a bad museum, with the preferences and insight of its board that decides everything.

PH : Do you think internet art should be collected or saved for posterity?

JB : I sometimes regret that some net.artworks which impressed me have changed or have vanished completely. For instance performance-like net.art is mostly irretrievable. I think however that through the use of different techniques one could try to save their essence. So my answer is yes.

PH : What are the criteria for this, and are they different from other artforms?

JB : The criteria are comparable to those for the 'preservation' of for instance fluxus-art, land art, performance art, intervention art and other (partly or completely) transitory work.

PH : Do you have any idea how this should be done?

JB : There are plans to collect net.art together with computers and software from the specific 'age' it was created in. A part of the work would be saved this way. Net.art possibly is best saved in parts or elements. Just speculating : correspondence in books or on a site; interviews and documentaries on cd-rom, video, or sound carrier; special online musea could include entire websites and archivesÉ documenting it in any manner which is available really. I would not mind having a nice big portable harddisc or something that contains net.art and somehow creates the illusion of the original network. This can only be done with certain kinds of work though, and one should be very aware of this. It would be just an object, a toy, an artbook for your salon table. It has many limitations as to what it can contain : it cannot contain performance, it cannot contain info-guerilla etc. Plus the works would have to be translated especially for this purpose. It would just be like a snapshot. This will then produce the old question again : is this still net.art? In my definition it is.

PH : How do you think institutions (should) deal with internet art in the future?

JB : Computer networks and everything that comes along with them (so also the culture within and around them) will most probably get so interwoven with everyday reality that there will be no more discourse and almost separate development of net.art next to those of other artforms, like it is mostly now. Many disciplines will be 'networked', and discourses, traditions, styles will get so entangled that in the end we will come across the situation where a kind of strict nostalgia will be developed to preserve the term net.art. Already now some make a distinction between 'pure' net art and net art in general. Pure net art -only- exists online, has no extensions or presence outside of it, is what is argued. Often this view of net art is due to some inexperience with net.culture by some people that recently discovered the network medium, and are full of it. They are not aware of the developments and research in net.culture that deal with the body, with extensions to the real world. Others are cyborg-traditionalists. They want to be pure data. It is a kind of romantic attitude that I find quite charming actually. The term net.art at the moment still needs to be used though. It is very much a different approach to art still, and we need to be able to discuss it.

Answering your question I would say : in the future net.art is totally common, whatever it is called by then. People will deal with it according to their own taste and insight. Institutions will however, as in the past (and as at present), never be able to completely cover, steer or enclose artpractice. Art activities outside of institutions on the other hand will, like now, only grow and become more important. We are really not at the end of history yet. I really hate it when people talk like that. Institutions will have to share their power with more (smaller) institutions, short or longterm projects and individuals. What is and is not good art is not in the hands of few anymore. This is important to realise. It sounds like 'old news', but one needs to be aware of this ongoing development. It has nothing to do with certain mythical stories about the internet. It is simply caused by the general development of technologies. Just compare it to the number of channels available on TV. The way one then in the end, like with TV and slightly less with radio, accesses ones information in the near future is an other story. It is in the hands of those who by that time possess the most important lines or networks. The development of streaming media in the net produces powerful structures and hierarchies that will control bandwidth use.

* the terms net.art and net art are used interchangeably, for appropriate confusion. net.artists are net artists and vice versa.* JB