BlueScreen

About ("empowerment")

On-line version: http://www.constantvzw.com/transmedia_archive/000094.html

Artistic creation has always gone hand in hand with the ideas of influence and inspiration. As Lavoisier said about constituent elements of our universe, "Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed". It is obviously the same for the thought and arts fields. Works of art are not created in a vacuum, but are undoubtedly the result of more or less conscious processes of transformation, interaction, digestion, cloning and research by the artist. The parallel influence of movements (art and thought), artists, artworks and outside factors on the art domain has always been present in art history and is certainly one of the driving forces behind artistic evolution.

However, two major events have revolutionized this idea by "updating" the relationship between artist, artwork and frames of reference and because of this, have drastically changed the relationship to creation. The first concerns technical evolution that has allowed mechanized reproducibility of an artwork [1]; thus, from a technical point of view, authorizing the reproduction of it. Then of course, Marcel Duchamp's Ready-Mades forever changed the perception of the art act. When Marcel Duchamp added a moustache to the Mona Lisa, signed the reproduction and named the new work L.H.O.O.Q. [2], art was no longer only about original creation governed by various underlying influences or more or less inspired by existing works. From that time on the artist had given himself the right to copy, possibly modify and sign an existing work of art. Thus, the artist's contribution lies in the modification of an original work and/or its context.

Though since then, this approach has become widely incorporated into artistic practices, in accordance with the artist's carefree attitude, enjoying the belief that his practices are above the law, today, poseas a problem. Increasingly restrictive legislation on copying the creation of others led many photographers to publicly express worry about restrictions of the freedom to create, while surprisingly enough the "art world" for its part, distanced itself through a dangerous silence. Today, legal owners of images or sounds have banned an increasing number of works, particularly on the Internet, because of the reuse of elements legally belonging to them [3]. No less serious, are others in the process of being banned, because even though in practice the latter remain the responsibility of the artist, their exhibition/promotion or their accessibility escape them and so could at any time become impossible due to a third person legally possessing the rights of the work.

The creation of artworks based on existing data lends itself particularly well to the Internet medium. First of all, its digital nature which is therefore instantly and faithfully reproducible, but also the foundation of the network itself and Internet writing. Apart from the fact that Web pages are literally copied on the visitor's hard drive when visited, Internet languages are designed so that it's unnecessary for the artist to copy or reproduce elements that he plans on using in his creations. One only has to list them, as the Internet browser treats information on the page in the same way whether it's found on the same server or not. The artist only needs to write 5 lines of code, mainly containing the position (URL) of the images on the network, so that the visitor can see on justone page 5 images out of their original context, coming from 5 different sites from 5 servers regardless of their position of the server. The artist no longer needs to copy anything, he only describes the desired composition using text based on elements (images, sound) belonging to him or not, as long as they are on the network. I wrote virtual-underground [4] using this approach. This project is

based on the confrontation and coexistence of geographical and virtual spaces using public transportation networks in various cities and proposes a new typography and a new perception of the web. Starting with the premise that networks transporting information and underground transport networks undeniably transform the perception of space, the project offers a new way of navigating through the net. The hypertext link network, composing the Web's surface (street network), is extended to an underground network authorizing the connection to Web "zones" (stations). Each station is a junction between the hypertext surface network and the composed underground network and opens onto sites containing images with the same name of the station, thus forming specific selected zone.

Visually, the upper part of the stations are made up of an algorithmic composition of images coming from these specific sites and allow, with a click, to go there. Likewise, the underground route from one point to another, is graphically represented by scrolling typography, composed of metadata [5] from sites forming the network. It's interesting to note that in this sort of project, no images or visible texts are stored. The work is just an automated "tool", an "immaterial machine", which builds its own perceivable dimension on demand, from data collected in real time on the Web. Technically the frames [6] project, put online during the Irak war, is based on the same method. A series of selected images from the Internet actually copied on the server, was put in contact with other displayed images and texts (changed everyday) taken from a famous daily American newspaper, in real time, putting them in a new context.

In my opinion, reusing existing data (text, images, sound) is an inseparable characteristic of the Internet medium. It seems obvious to me that artists [7] who work on this aspect of the medium must not corrupt their process because of ill-adapted laws that don't take the evolution and reality of contemporary art processes into account and must not under any circumstances give up the reuse of existing works, whether protected or not, if their output calls for it.

"Cracking" artworks could be compared to the use of pirated software or copying music files (mp3) which is as legitimate as it is illegal. These illegal and very widespread practices, through media coverage of the legal problems they pose, highlight the extent of the incompatibility between current legislation and daily practice by users. Because this the problem arose very early in this the computer science sector, other alternatives and approaches were initiated, creating free software and the copyleft movement.

The adventure began in 1984, when Richard Stallman, a researcher at MIT launched the GNU project, in opposition to ownership practices concerning computer software that appeared at this time. It mainly consisted in technically and legally prohibiting the copy and modification of computer software. Although at first sight, keeping the programs' internal functioning (source code) secret seemed to be an economic safeguard for software publishers (as well as for pirating), it prevented any improvement or adaptation. Making this information public unquestionably promoted the development of computer science as a whole, thus benefiting the computer user community at the same time. This was the beginning of "Free software", meaning freedom and not no-cost. The fact that software can be freely distributed or modified doesn't prevent its marketing. In return, such software gives the computer user the freedom to use, modify and copy it, all the while preventing developers from "reinventing the wheel", thus allowing them to go farther and especially to concentrate on their own contribution, which also considerably increases the number of potential developers. To my mind, this sharing of knowledge, the direct exchange of techniques and know-how has permitted scientific and artistic evolution since the beginning of civilisation.

So that this system could legally function, a license was established. The GNU General Public License (GPL), guarantees users the right to freely access, distribute, modify and market a program, while making it impossible to commandeer it. I'll skip the history and evolution of free software [8], which is not my subject today to come back to artistic creation and the coming together of the two fields. This coming together materialized in the beginning of 2000 in Paris during "Copyleft Attitude", the first meeting between computer scientists, free software personalities and contemporary artists. During this event, the Licence Art Libre / Free Art license (LAL) was created on the initiative of the artist Antoine Moreau. This legal license faithfully

restates the essential of the GPL (General Public License) while enlarging it, beyond the digital medium, to include all artistic creation. It allows anyone to copy, distribute and freely modify an artwork while respecting the fundamental rights of its author [9].

Contrary to a process that would give up the work to whoever wants it, thus authorizing anyone to take exclusive credit for it, this license aims to protect and defend the moral right of the author as well as the free nature of the work.

Apart from works on the (illegal) reuse of elements not belonging to me (and subject to copyright), all my work makes use of this license. This is above all an assertion of my convictions about the free copying of works and questions the proprietary policy of the copyright.

It is also about a perception of art based on constant experimental research, a belief in a community and a desire to allow the sharing of approaches, techniques and virtual material throughout this community. By community, I mean all of the artists, researchers, programmers and users who experiment or consult the works. To my mind, it's not a limited group involved in the copyleft movement, but a wide range of individuals. One of the LAL's essential interests is the fact that it's a legal license. It's not about an artists' collective or even less so an art movement advocating or trying to copy works, but a legal framework in which anyone can freely and individually register their works. I don't absolutely want others to modify or reuse my works, but I openly authorize it.

However, the idea of empowerment is not limited to the reuse of existing works by other creators. I see it as also being a characteristic of some works that reflect a new idea of the viewer or addressee [10] and his/her relationship to the work. The artist's approach consists in orchestrating a creation that is continually becoming, rather than showing finished original output.

Creation on the Web is certainly the best adapted artistic process for reciprocal communication between the work of art and addressees. Not only through the medium itself and its interactive possibility, but especially through the Internet's virtual space in which the work takes form and evolves. By giving up the position of an outside viewer, the addressee has the ability to take his place within the work. More than entering the geographic space of the work, it's about taking a place within the process, assuring its existence and evolution, to permeate its essence. One can say that algorithmic work is literally living, or at least has the potential to become alive (cf. extra-physicalworlds [11]), the addressee himself sometimes breathes life into it, thus giving form to a creation orchestrated by the artist. This new situation unquestionably disturbs and renews the relationship between the viewer, the work of art and the artist. The issue for the artist/orchestrater is perhaps to incorporate this new situation and manipulate the addressee element the same way that a painter manipulates colours, forms and titles of his works. Though before going into that and in order to see the respective position and relationship between the addressee and the work, it may be interesting to have a look at the new relationship that the artist could maintain with the work and even the work's nature itself.

As I mentioned earlier, the computer program (its instance to be precise) is based on a source code, a language understable by humans, which defines the work. So, the artist doesn't create the work's perceivable dimension, but writes the rules that give it form and life and allow its perception and evolution. Writing a work (its code) doesn't mean describing it in a fixed or absolute way (for example a descriptive document language like HTML), but making conditions for its existence like initial rules and hypotheses for its evolution and limitation.

The work can evolve autonomously with the help of data included in its source code or as we've seen previously, from external data orchestrated by the code (and behind it the artist), incorporating the addressee within the rules changes the character of the work and gives the addressee a new position. The perceivable dimension that follows running the program no longer comes from the artist's unique action, but from, consciously or not, the addressee(s), according to the artist's orchestration. The temporal execution of the work, without taking the easy way out such as the random digital [12] direction, loses its determinable quality. So the addressee, his choices, reactions and sometimes just his presence, will determine the present or future state of

the work. I'm not referring to the impression of superficial and recreational interactivity flourishing on the network, giving the visitor the feeling of activity, nor approaches aiming to give the user the illusion of becoming an artist by simple interaction with the work, but the precise interaction bestowing a new status on the addressee.

ipPainting [13] is perhaps the most representative project of my personal approach in making use of the addressee in the work's process. When we arrive on the site's home page, we learn that we've just participated in the elaboration of several graphic compositions. The simple fact of going to this page transmits the visitor's ip address [14] to various algorithms allowing the modification of specific images, which he may sign if he likes. In this way he participates in the work's active unfolding of various compositions, without any other action on his part. After treating the data that make up his ip address (4 numbers), a visual element is generated that is added to other elements that were generated by previous visitors. The compositions evolve like this, either indefinitely (permanent composition), the oldest forms being progressively deleted, or during a specific duration. In the latter case, when I feel that they are finished, they are stopped, then stored in a consultable archive on the site. The addressee's role seems particularly interesting in this sort of proposition, from the impression of "non action" that results. It's the exact opposite of a proposition that would allow the user to freely express himself (But could such a proposition still be considered as an artwork?); this work doesn't authorize any conscious voluntary action, except coming back. The entirety of addressees produce the work's perceivable dimension, the various compositions being empty when I put them online and only evolve in relation to the data that is transmitted to them. This work, between provocation and derision, where the user's action is limited to a strict minimum, remains representative of a situation where the work's material is supplied by the addressee and where the artist's role consists of prior orchestration of information using the source code. A possibility that gave the addressee total freedom, wouldn't be an artwork, but a call for project. What defines the artwork is the definition of power and limits given to the addressee. Thus, the unfolding and evolution of the work is not predefined. Even if I define the rules of interpretation, that vary from one composition to the next, when I write the composition, I'm incapable of predicting its evolution or appearance at any given time.

The existence of these rules could even escape the addressee, who participates in the evolution of the work without knowing it. An interactive work must be that by nature, the relationship with addressees is a means and not an end; I'm not trying in any way to give the impression or illusion of interactivity. In 1999, being irritated by the percentage of viewers who are incapable of perceiving and giving a personal judgement of the work seen and who are constantly in search of explanations from the artist, I wrote urinoir du champ [15] as a sort of game. A series of images rapidly flows onto the screen. When the addressee looks for an explanation of the work on the site, a window opens asking him first to give his own opinion on the meaning of the work. He can then read what he was looking for…and it is in reality nothing other than one of the explanations entered by a previous visitor. Without seeing the work in its totality, in other words its functioning and mechanisms and beyond his personal vision, the addressee defines the meaning of what's been seen and thus modifies the interpretation, but also the content of the work itself. In works like ipPainting, the content - of a structural work defined by the artist-is in some way the responsibility of the addressee. The perceivable work needs the addressee to go beyond the purely conceptual aspect of its source code, created from the artist's as well as the addressee's contributions. In cimetière des donnée disparues [16] for example, this virtual space that accommodates graves of various lost data left by visitors, the functioning and structure are visible, but the addressee is responsible for the perceivable aspect and atmosphere emanating from the space. Just like when I wrote the algorithms for the compositions in ipPainting, I give a potential direction to the project with an intuition about the result, but in the end the addressee materialises it, with more or less freedom according to the project and influences what will be seen. The cemetery was originally called "cemetery of lost files". Although I maintained computer references in the introduction, while including a pinch of ambiguity, the choice of a more general title, discreet modifications on the "burial entry form", opens it up implicitly, allowing the user to more feely appropriate the space if he likes. In fact, at the heart of the cemetery, among computer data lost forever in the realm of unsaved files one can find friends or traitors, lost addresses and other sorts of lost immaterial data buried by addressees…

For my part, I recently buried the expérience d'oeuvre éphémère [17], the first project signed under the BlueScreen name and whose survival up to now was in the hands of the addressee. Works like iPpainting or even the cimetière des données disparues could be considered as generative, as the addressee serves the work by allowing it to evolve, it's just as possible to write works where the addressee doesn't serve the work and may even destroy it. For example, the experiment faites vibrer mon téléphone portable [18] that is based on the feeling of power given to the addressee in allowing him to trigger, at any time, various actions of my mobile phone or especially l'experience d'oeuvre éphémère. In this project, addressees influence the evolution (destructive) of the work, they don't participate in its elaboration, but chose to participate in its planned demise, to commit a destructive act. The addressee has the ultimate responsibility in his hands, the power to destroy the creation he's been given to see. This experiment, conceived more as research of possible process interactions between the addressee and the work than for true creative use of this process, offered the visitor, if he liked, the visualisation of an image that existed only through its virtual dimension. He learns however, that the image can only be seen a given number of times, after which, it will be definitively destroyed. The work, as a structure (which had several thousand visitors), still exists. The ephemeral image, put online in early 2000, was consulted 500 times and is no longer visible today. This fact reduces the work to the foundation of all algorithmic works, beyond the perceivable instance emanating from it, to the textual rules that define its presence, evolution and conditions of existence: the source code.

The work takes on life between these source code lines, the work's true DNA. Through the arrangement of the characters and subtle variations of this arrangement, it stands out and becomes unique. Works dispersed throughout the Web, are born, evolve, face surroundings, develop through the contact of the beings they arouse and sometimes disappear from lack of understanding. By perceiving the nature and potential of this form of writing, allowing the understanding of the processes that constitute it, practicing confrontation, mutation and cloning of resultant output, this creative form that's still in its youth, will evolve. Having passed the experimental stage and the discovery of inferred potential that it carries, the progressively enormous expressive potential of this media appears. From today on, it might be through influences, contact and confrontation between diverse approaches, practices and beyond the cocoon created by the network, that this art will fully reveal itself.

//about("empowerment");
//Brussels Conference Text
//English Version [Translation: Holly Manyak]

[1] cf. Walter Benjamin - The work of art is in the age of mechanized reproduction.

[2] "L.H.O.O.Q." This when letters, of this title by Duchamp are read aloud in French, they're pronounced "Elle a chaud au cul", which translated word for word means or "She's got a hot ass" or "She's turned-on".

[3] The last case to my knowledge was the banning the film Quizz by the artist Mouchette (http://mouchette.org). This work, which reutilises the images from the film Mouchette by Bresson and pays homage to this filmmaker, was however banned by his widow, who owned the legal rights to the images. Like many other artworks in this case, this work is now illegally hosted by different people and servers (called "mirrors") and remain consultable. The list of these servers is available, among others at the following address:
http://www.b-l-u-e-s-c-r-e-e-n.net/terreDexil/mouchette/

[4] http://www.virtual-underground.net
(To access this site, one needs specific transport tickets available in the cities where the project is set up).

[5] Data included in Web page headings is invisible to the user. It contains information on the content of these pages and is interpreted by crawlers, that continually explore the Web's basements, building databases for search engines.

[6] http://www.b-l-u-e-s-c-r-e-e-n.net/frames/

[7] A certain Reynald Drouhin (http://reynald.incident.net/) comes to mind, who in continuing to put out images, has for some time been designing the majority of his work on the network, in employing existing images or videos that make up the material for his creations.

[8] Those interested in this free software and its history can find information on these sites:
http://www.gnu.org/
http://www.fsfeurope.org/

[9] The Licence Art Libre (LAL), as well as diverse information about this license, its use and evolution is available on the Copyleft_Attitude site (http://www.artlibre.org).

[10] The "potential addressee" doesn't have a predefined status. From the moment one accesses a site, one is by nature an "addressee", the status is non-definite, varying according to the nature of the work.

[11] Extra-Physical Worlds - An Extra-Physical life experience: http://b-l-u-e-s-c-r-e-e-n.net/epworlds/

[12] Random digital is in reality pseudo-random, due to the computer's completely deterministic nature.
The programmer doesn't possess the means to have an influence on pseudo-random data supplied by the computer, in the end conserving a random nature within its utilisation.

[13] http://www.b-l-u-e-s-c-r-e-e-n.net/ipPainting/

[14] The IP address is a digital identifier composed of 4 numbers, each one between 0 and 255 inclusive, attributed to each computer connected to the Internet allowing its identification.

[15] http://www.b-l-u-e-s-c-r-e-e-n.net/urinoirDuChamp/

[16] http://www.b-l-u-e-s-c-r-e-e-n.net/cimetierre/

[17] http://www.b-l-u-e-s-c-r-e-e-n.net/oeuvreEphemere1/

[18] http://www.b-l-u-e-s-c-r-e-e-n.net/sneeze/