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# Essays

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## *net.art 101: Entry points into digital culture*

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*Search for \_\_\_\_\_*

It will come as no surprise to many web-users that often the most unreliable way to seek out artistic activity on the Net is the use of a search engine (such as InfoSeek, Lycos, Excite, etc.). Part of the reason for this is that search engines, like any other databasing or encyclopedic system, organize information according to a specific type of universal scheme (in the case of search engines, by the keywords placed in the “meta” tag in the HTML document, or by the title of the document or first words in the document). This is certainly one way of organizing large amounts of information, but it also bears the symptom of often saying nothing about the content of the information it is organizing. This is a technical issue, but it is an experiential one as well; the majority of net.art projects which I’ve found have often been through less formalized, more communicative channels (word-of-mouth, specific mailing lists, e-mails, on-line exhibits, etc.). Therefore, what I would like to provide here is a kind of user’s guide to artistic/cultural activity that is based on the Internet and the Web as a medium (distinct from, say, web pages about artists not working within the medium). This user’s guide, it should be emphasized, is partial, open-ended, and contextual; this is not a complete guide to net.art, but is situated by the characteristics of

the Web itself as a constantly developing, fluid, often unpredictable, emerging, frustrating, complex, and important medium.

*What is net.art?*

Originally (that is, a few years ago), net.art could be said to have referred to more conceptually driven art projects using computer programming and a self-reflexive, lo-tech aesthetics to ask questions concerning the role of the Web in artistic and cultural activity, the status of the work of art, and the relationships between art and technique/programming (e.g., the work of Vuk Cosic [<http://www.vuk.org/>], Alexi Shulgin [<http://www.easylife.org/>], and of course Jodi [<http://www.jodi.org/>]). But as the artworld and related institutional sites become more aware of artistic activity on the Web, net.art has come to signify a much broader range of technical, aesthetic, political, and cultural concerns which depend in different ways on the Web as a medium. One thing for certain is that there is a felt need to highlight, discuss, and articulate the diverse body of artists, issues, and projects that are concentrated around the Web, as illustrated by information nodes such as Rhizome, nettime, and by recent on-line exhibits of net.art (see below).

Clearly there is an aesthetic and formal dimension at issue in net.art, dealing with the

ways in which the art-technology relationship takes on particular characteristics with a medium such as the Web. These are also technical and technological issues, and whether net.art is regarded as an example of multimedia (a spatial intersection of various media collectively outlining a new genre), or whether it is regarded as an extension of other media (a temporal dynamic involving the transformations within and to different media), there is a recursive element in play in discussing net.art and the Web, as each technology and its uses carries with it a complex set of histories, themes, and problematics.

In addition to framing the question of net.art in terms of aesthetic, technological, and historical concerns, numerous misinterpretations have also surfaced which reveal equally important elements in discussing the Web in general. One of these alternately views artistic activity on the Web as a passing (techno)fad or, conversely, sees it as the latest installment in an ongoing narrative of cultural vanguardism. While there is certainly no shortage of hype concerning the Web, the cultural anxieties and desires need to be differentiated from the surface acceptance of the Web and Internet as the media-to-replace-all-media. Similarly, while the exhaustive and infinitely reiterated narrative of the avant-garde may apply to certain net.art activities, this is only a partial coverage of the heterogeneity of net.art—here the critical, political, and historical lessons of cultural vanguardism need to be distinguished from the familiar claims concerning transgression, resistance, and recuperation.

Both of these interpretations, though at opposite ends of the spectrum, share an assumption concerning the dependence of net.art on the technology of the Web. This does not need to be a value judgment on net.art itself, but often it is, seeing this technological dependence as an instance of technological determinism. At issue here are

the types of reconfigurations that are occurring in the ongoing, mutual interconstruction between artistic practice and technological medium. Many net.art projects take up these issues, asking how the specificity of the Web as an emergent technology will challenge notions of authorship, production, reception, distribution, interactivity, technical knowledge, narrative, and critical thinking. Certainly net.art is not the sole example of an art-technology nexus, but through it two other assumptions arise which are instructive for considering these issues of art and technology.

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The first involves the anxieties over the so-called immateriality of the Web as a digital medium. Along with the implosion of physical space, the Internet and Web, as networking technologies, also have no “object” which defines them. In addition to this absence of the object, much net.art emphasizes the fluid morphologies of working on the Web; notions of ongoing, constantly changing projects have replaced notions of finished, closed works, where, potentially, a work can be in a state of terminal process. Thus, issues concerning communication, the physical/virtual relationship, and the control and regulation of information are primary concerns among many net.artists.

For many, the lack of an object and the morphology of net.art has placed net.art in a unique position with regard to museums, exhibitions, and modes of viewing, participating, and distribution. Some examples: When the net.art hosting site äda’web folded last year due to discontinued support, it was to be acquired by the Walker Arts Center as part of its permanent collection; *Grammatron* [<http://www.grammatron.com/>], a pioneering hypertext work by Mark Amerika, has been presented in diverse contexts, from universities to electronic arts festivals, literary journals, and computer industry conferences; and just this past

year the Guggenheim museum has commissioned its first net.art project, Brandon [<http://brandon.guggenheim.org>], by film maker Shu-Lea Cheang. Other responses (see list below) have been the setting up of electronic galleries, not-for-profit arts organizations, and other types of contexts wherein net.art projects can be shown—the challenges here involve the complexities of translating the physical gallery space into electronic cyberspace. Still other net.artists such as Fakeshop [<http://fakeshop.com>] or the Electronic Civil Disobedience Theater [<http://www.nyu.edu/projects/wray/ecd.html>] have taken the route of performance art or process-oriented art, asking how the communicative and real-time, data-transmission capacities of the Internet and Web can be utilized in a way that bears little obligation to the production of an art object.

At issue in all of these concerns is, above all, the need for a critical involvement within the emerging medium of the Web (it should be reiterated that while the Internet dates back to work being done by military-affiliated research institutions in the 60s, the Web only makes its entry into electronic culture in the early 90s—despite the frenetic rapidity of its development, it still is, by many standards, a just-emerging medium). This critical involvement not only involves asking questions concerning the role of technology-in-culture, but it also involves asking how a medium such as the Web will potentially reconfigure the different meanings which artistic/cultural practice can and may have when the distinction between art and technology increasingly becomes an interrelated, redoubled contingency.

#### *Site Map*

Concurrent with the “what is” question concerning net.art, there is also the “where is” question, with which this essay began. Artistic activity engaging the Web can, generally, be divided into several categories: (1) digital arts organizations and net.art hosting organizations (mostly not-for-profit arts groups emphasizing new media production, though not limited to net.art or the Web); (2) net.art online exhibits

(online shows presenting a group of net.art projects, usually under a given theme); (3) information networks (news, discussion forums, electronic journals related to digital culture and the Web); (4) electronic arts festivals (festivals or regular events dedicated to new media in performance, installation, conferences, and other projects); and of course (5) net.art projects themselves (art-based projects made for and in most cases existing exclusively on the Web). As one entry point, a selected list is provided below of the first three categories, since it is often through these collective contexts that the variety of net.art-related activity can best be felt.

#### (1) DIGITAL ARTS & NET.ART HOSTING ORGANIZATIONS:

##### **äda'web**

[<http://www.adaweb.com/home.shtml>]

Founded in the early 90s by Benjamin Weil, äda'web features projects by artists working in other media but making their first attempts in the medium of the Web (artists included Jenny Holzer and others).

##### **Alt-X**

[<http://www.altx.com>]

One of the early electronic nodes for net.art, Alt-X (directed by Mark Amerika) has become well known for its online exhibits, experimental prose, interviews, and networking experiments with artists and writers.

**ANAT**—Australian Network for Art and Technology [<http://www.anat.org.au/>]

Australia's peak network for assisting artists working in the new media.

##### **Ars Electronica**

[<http://www.aec.at/>]

Ars Electronica is best known as perhaps *the* electronic arts festival; recently it has also incorporated net.art into its exhibits as well as the annual Prix Ars Electronica contest, which went this year to Knowbotic

Research's piece "IO\_dencies" [<http://www.khm.de/people/krcf/IO/>].

### **artnetweb**

[<http://artnetweb.com>]

Founded by Robbin Murphy, artnetweb has presented numerous web-specific works placing an emphasis on the aesthetic and conceptual side of working creatively on the Web.

### **Blast**

[<http://www.users.interport.net/~xaf/index.html>]

Blast, a not-for-profit arts organization, has recently held networking experiments focusing on collective activity as well as questioning what a "publication" is.

### **CTHEORY MultiMedia**

[<http://ctheory.concordia.ca/>]

A new addition to the CTHEORY online journal, featuring digital video, streaming audio, net.art, and essays relating to digital culture.

### **Difference Engine**

[<http://www.gold.ac.uk/difference/engine.html>]

An online node presenting periodic exhibits and conferences including artists working in both electronic and other media.

### **EBR—Electronic Book Review**

[<http://www.altx.com/ebr/>]

The critical forum of Alt-X features regular thematic exhibits of writers and visual artists presenting hypertext works.

### **Eyebeam**

[<http://www.eyebam.org/>]

A not-for-profit organization focusing on the idea of the "digital museum" and the role of education in the arts. Eyebeam holds regular conferences and

discussion groups on electronic culture.

### **Hell**

[<http://www.hell.com>]

A cryptic site which requires membership and regularly features net.art projects.

### **HotWired RGB Gallery**

[<http://www.hotwired.com/rgb/>]

The net.art side of HotWired and Wired magazine, featuring net.art experiments which place an emphasis on innovative uses of Web technology and programming.

### **Irrational**

[<http://www.irrational.org/>]

A host for a variety of net.art and non-net.art projects, much in line with the original lo-tech, net.art aesthetic.

### **LEA—Leonardo Electronic Almanac**

[<http://mitpress.mit.edu/e-journals/LEA/home.html>]

LEA is a sister organization of Leonardo magazine, and features a regular exhibit of net.art projects which are grouped under a theme; the artists are also asked to respond to each other's work as it is exhibited.

### **Ljudmila—Ljubljana Digital Media Lab**

[<http://www.kud-fp.si/>]

An interesting node of net.art and networking activity, again along the lines of the lo-tech net.art aesthetic.

### **Public Domain Inc.**

[<http://www.pd.org/topos/frontend/1/pdhome.html>]

PD features several online multimedia journals, including *Perforations* and *Sprawl*, as well as theory discussion lists.

### **RSUB**

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One of New York's best ISPs and networking and information nodes on digital culture, The Thing regularly features net.art projects, installation/gallery projects, discussion lists, theoretical texts and columns.

## **Turbulence**

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A not-for-profit organization founded by Helen Thorington, dedicated to the production of net.art projects, placing a dual emphasis on conceptualization and use of technology.

V2 [<http://www.v2.nl/>]

An electronic arts organization from Rotterdam, well-known for its conferences, hosted performances, and its yearly festival, DEAF.

## **Xchange**

[<http://Xchange.re-lab.net/>]

An internet audio network dedicated to non-commercial broadcasts and groups focusing on audio.

## (2) NET.ART EXHIBITIONS

### **Beyond Interface**

[<http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/beyondinterface/>]

Curated by Steve Dietz as part of the 1998 conference, "Museums and the Web," this show features a strong group of net.artists exploring different methods of extending the notion of the "interface."

### **Digital Studies: Being in Cyberspace**

[<http://www.altx.com/ds/>]

Presented by Alt-X and curated by Mark Amerika and Alex Galloway in 1997, this show features both net.art projects and hypertext-specific projects addressing the issues of how subjects, identities, and desires navigate themselves through the Web.

### **Port: Navigating Digital Culture**

[<http://artnetweb.com/port/index.html>]

This show, organized by Robbin Murphy and Remo Campopiano in conjunction with MIT, focused on using the Web as a performance medium.

### **The Shock of the View**

[[http://www.walkerart.org/salons/shockoftheview/sv\\_front.html](http://www.walkerart.org/salons/shockoftheview/sv_front.html)]

Presented in conjunction with the Walker Arts Center and curated by Steve Dietz, this show, currently going, presents thematic juxtapositions between the physical and virtual and also includes discussion lists and commentary by leading net.artists and theorists.

Some of my favorite websites are:

#### **art**

[<http://www.alberta.com/unfamiliarart/>]

This 1998 online exhibit, curated by Rhizome, featured a small, focused group of net.artists whose projects challenge notions of what constitutes "art."

#### **W3LAB: works-in-process/works-in-progress**

[<http://gsa.rutgers.edu/maldoror/techne/techne.html>]

This show, organized by [techne], was just recently launched, and uses the "laboratory" trope to present net.art, performance, design, programming, and other experiments which make use of the Web. It is part of an upcoming conference at Rutgers University on "Globalization."

## (3) INFORMATION NETWORKS

### **ArtByte magazine**

[<http://www.artbyteonline.com>]

A print-based magazine with regular columns, essays, and features on digital art and culture.

### **CTHEORY**

[<http://www.ctheory.com>]

CTHEORY is well-known as a cutting-edge cultural theory journal, edited by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker.

### **Intelligent Agent**

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A print-based magazine with some online excerpts, focusing primarily on the Web and net.art, and featuring regular essays, interviews, and columns.

### **nettime**

[<http://www.Desk.nl/~nettime/>]

A information node and mailing list, emphasizing cultural and political media theory.

### **Postmodern Culture**

[<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/pmc/contents.all.html>]

A well-respected academic online journal featuring articles, reviews, and features on postmodernism, literature, cultural studies, and technoculture.

### **Rhizome**

[<http://www.rhizome.org>]

Rhizome is among the most recognized and well respected information nodes and mailing lists relating to digital culture. Edited by Rachel Greene and Alex Galloway, they have been continually active in conferences and exhibits both in physical and virtual spaces.

### **Telepolis**

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### **art**

[<http://www.alberta.com/unfamiliarart/>]

This 1998 online exhibit, curated by Rhizome, featured a small, focused group of net.artists whose projects challenge notions of

what constitutes “art.”

**W3LAB:** works-in-process/works-in-progress  
[<http://gsa.rutgers.edu/maldoror/techne/techne.html>]

This show, organized by [techne], was just recently launched, and uses the “laboratory” trope to present net.art, performance, design, programming, and other experiments which make use of the Web. It is part of an upcoming conference at Rutgers University on “Globalization.”

### (3) INFORMATION NETWORKS

#### **ArtByte magazine**

[<http://www.artbyteonline.com>]

A print-based magazine with regular columns, essays, and features on digital art and culture.

#### **CTHEORY**

[<http://www.ctheory.com>]

CTHEORY is well-known as a cutting-edge cultural theory journal, edited by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker.

#### **Intelligent Agent**

[<http://www.intelligent-agent.com/>]

A print-based magazine with some online excerpts, focusing primarily on the Web and net.art, and featuring regular essays, interviews, and columns.

#### **nettime**

[<http://www.Desk.nl/~nettime/>]

A information node and mailing list, emphasizing cultural and political media theory.

#### **Postmodern Culture**

[<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/pmc/contents.all.html>]

A well-respected academic online journal featuring articles, reviews, and features on postmodernism, literature, cultural studies, and technoculture.

#### **Rhizome**

[<http://www.rhizome.org>]

Rhizome is among the most recognized and well respected information nodes and mailing lists relating to digital culture. Edited by Rachel Greene and Alex Galloway, they have been continually active in conferences and exhibits both in physical and virtual spaces.

#### **Telepolis**

[<http://www.heise.de/tp/>]

Telepolis is a German-English online journal which features articles on electronic culture and current events, reviews and interviews, and sections on net.art works.

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