

Internet Art, Technology and Relational Aesthetics

Jerry Galle* – Helena De Preester*§

*Faculty of Fine Arts – University College Ghent

§Department of Philosophy and Moral Science – Ghent University

Jerry.Galle@hogent.be

Helena.DePreester@hogent.be

Abstract:

Some contemporary artistic practices, such as internet art, are difficult to understand, partly because their originality and relevance is not perceived. In this contribution, we look at internet artists' relations to society, and to their position in art history. This can elucidate a number of important characteristics of this contemporary form of art. First, it is interesting to see that the goal of early 20th century avant-garde (in particular Dadaism), nl. to bring together social life and art, is motivated early internet art. The role of technology (the computer, the internet, hacking) is very important in this, and also implied the possibility that avant-garde strategies reached a more widespread public. Second, we present the main points of so-called 'relational aesthetics', a contemporary theory of art that considers contemporary art practice in terms of interhuman relations and small-scale social networks. Third, we question the possibility of considering internet art as an example of relational art.

Keywords: internet, art, relational aesthetics, networks, Dadaism, establishment.

1. Introduction: Avant-Garde Strategies and the Internet

By way of introduction, it is interesting to look at a number of unexpected resemblances between Dadaist strategies and early internet art. The driving force behind the early 20th century Dadaist movement was the desire to 'reintegrate art into the practice of life' (Bürger, 1984: 54). The bourgeois ideal of beauty was replaced with the ideal of a more social art, understandable and accessible by everyone. Dada reacted to the catastrophic consequences of ratio-based technology (cf. World War I) by using chance, the irrational, and the absurd. The techniques used by Dadaïsts, such as chance, audio and image interaction, photo and film collage and collaborative networks, have all been fully integrated into the current working of the internet. Dadaïst reacted against the established art institutions (cf. Duchamp's pissoir), against conventional ideals of beauty, e.g., by using everyday objects, and mutilating icons from the art world (e.g. Duchamp's L.H.O.O.Q, his version of the Mona Lisa). It was up to the beholder now to give meaning to the work of art, which no longer functioned as the authoritarian source of meaning. The Dadaists wanted to shock audiences, in order to awaken them from their collective complacency (not unlike hackers, cf. infra). During their performances the audience was forced to react. Verbal insults and violence – commonplace in the early Dada performances – marked a turn towards participatory audiences. A similar call for participation and interaction continues to the present day on internet, with its possibility of user interaction.

The internet nowadays is mostly typified in its development as web 2.0. Web 2.0 is characterised by a number of new applications, based on new software en hardware technology. This version of the World Wide Web is different from Web 1.0. (which was called so retrospectively with the development of Web 2.0) in the sense that earlier web technologies were mainly based on one-way communication. Its status was more library-like, i.e. it was a one-way flow of information, through websites containing 'read-only' material. Web 2.0, in contrast, facilitates communication, secure information sharing, and collaboration

on the web. The Web 2.0, as we know it today, is said to be fully integrated into the life of the user. It is filled with user-generated content and has become a social medium. The network acts as platform for showing material (video, photos, text, ...), for exchanging data and information, and for mass-collaboration. Myspace alone has 300 million users, Youtube has every 24 hours 65.000 new videos uploaded (as of 2006).

At first sight, it seems that Web 2.0 offers the platform Dadaists were looking for: a place independent of established institutions where free exchange – also of art works – is possible. If we take a closer look, however, the internet and its technology is controlled by global concerns and straightforward economic gain. As such, the internet clearly is part of the status quo and the establishment. Yet, the internet also offers the potential for a critical distance to the web's standard channels of production and distribution. An outstanding example are hackers – or better, hactivists – whose rage against the misuse of the digital machine is noticeably similar to Dadaists' reaction to the role of technology in the catastrophe caused by WWI. The public view of hacking – unmotivated, anarchic, criminal – resembles the initial, bourgeois response to Dada. This similarity is illustrated by a nostalgic Dada virus, called *dada 1356*, which simply appends "da,da ..." to infected files. Specific political (anti-establishment) motivations are better illustrated by the work of hackers who overcome government content filters, or protest to other, very specific web issues.

Next, the anti-establishment reaction is also directed to the art world itself. According to Natalie Bookchin (Basting, 2000), the Dada strategies used by net artists should not have anything to do with museums or art institutes. "These have to do with networks as an art form, with achieving and creating alternative communities and spaces." (Basting, 2000: 1) Therefore, we first have a look at the position of the professional artist. What are the characteristics of a form of art that takes root in the above context?

2. The Strategies of Early and Contemporary Internet Art

Early internet art (early 1990s), also known as net.art, clearly was a reaction against the establishment and those who economically profitted from the web boom, by using the very same technology for developing their works of art. Internet artists like the duo Jodi worked with the continuously evolving structure (or lack of structure) of the internet. By questioning structures such as the navigation window and challenging its functionality, Jodi has shown that what is considered to be 'normal' by most internet users is actually highly constructed and controlled by corporations like Microsoft. Company browsers like Internet Explorer display user-friendly structures, but the content accessed in navigating, is very controlled and limited. Jodi, with a series of pop-up interventions and browser crashing applets, disordered the imposed rules of navigation.

Because early internet art was not shown in the usual art institutes or galleries, it was by definition underground art. But unlike traditional underground art, it is – via the internet – available and accessible for everyone. For example, as soon as Jodi's website was visited, anyone's browser could be 'attacked'.

Another reaction was the use of error in the computer. 'Glitch' is a term describing a temporary software malfunction, that results in a scrambling of the graphics on the screen. "A glitch shows the ghostly conventionality of the form by which digital spaces are organized" (Goriunova and Shulgin, 2008: 110). During this brief moment, the computer does not react the way a machine should react, i.e. logically and straightforwardly. It is as if the computer can only be 'creative' when its logic is broken. Browser art and the use of glitches nicely show how creative interventions by early internet artists are a reaction to the predominant and dictated way of using the internet.

In *contemporary* internet art, the use of networks is predominant. Networks combine real life social structures and the communicative possibilities of the net. These networks are critically

implemented or investigated in contemporary internet art practice. Heath Bunting, e.g., created the work 'Community courier' for the exhibition 'Art for Networks' (2003). In this work, Bunting bypasses the traditional postal networks of Cardiff, to provide for a new network of personal courier services. Deliveries and journeys are co-ordinated by the artist through his expansive website (<http://irational.org/cgi-bin/courier2/courier2.pl>). "The main function of this service

is to match travellers who are prepared to carry parcels against people who have things that need to go to the same place." (Bunting, 2003) By using extensive networks, the work is spread over an immense amount of participants, who actively contribute to the existence of the artwork. The meaning of the artwork is equally dispersed and because of the intrinsic unstable character of networks (digital or social), it evolves and changes daily, or it can disappear if the relevant group of people disappears.

Thus, since networks are part and parcel of daily life, the meaning of the work of art is susceptible to time and social context. Current internet art based on the use of networks is inherently dependent on social networking, and exemplifies the possibility of an intimate intertwinement between communal life and internet art.

3. Contemporary Art and Relational Aesthetics

Dada opposed to the utilitarian and authoritarian forces that wanted to subjugate people. According to Bourriaud (2002), contemporary art continues this fight, but on another basis. Now it is only possible to create *minor* modifications; social utopias and revolutionary expectations are abandoned in favor of 'micro-utopias' which do not directly criticize society. The subversive and critical power of contemporary art is attained in works that try to rid people of 'the straightjacket of the ideology of mass communications' and invent 'places where alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of constructed conviviality are worked out' (Bourriaud, 2002: 44) This is what Bourriaud calls 'relational' works of art, which produce interhuman experiences on an *everyday* basis, i.e. in a non-utopian way. The work of art becomes a social 'interstice' within which social experiments and new 'life possibilities' can appear (ibid: 45). Bourriaud's theory, *relational aesthetics*, aims in particular at an elucidation of the art of the nineties. In this section, we briefly present the main points of relational aesthetics, in order to prepare the concluding section, in which we critically consider the possibility of viewing internet art as instantiating a 'relational aesthetics'.

Relational works of art are often poorly understood. One of the main reasons is their specific material form or lack thereof. A nice example is Rirkrit Tiravanija's work produced for *Aperto 93* (Venice Biennale): "A metal gondola encloses a gas ring that is lit, keeping a large bowl of water on the boil. Camping gears is scattered around the gondola in no particular order. Stacked against the wall are cardboard boxes, most of them open, containing dehydrated Chinese soups which visitors are free to add the boiling water and eat." (Ibid.: 25) Tiravanija's work does not have a traditional material form. The true work of art consists here – as in so many of Bourriaud's examples – in aiming at modest connections between people, or in trying to open up obstructed passages, or in connecting separated levels of reality. Relational art has as its horizon human interactions and the social context of these interactions. Contrary to often heard criticisms, contemporary art does involve a political project that has subversive aspects. This is because contemporary society, infused with technology that enables us to move and communicate faster and more efficiently, has the drawback of turning the human subject in a by-product of technology and commodities. Against this background, Bourriaud considers the role of art: "(...) artistic praxis appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments, like a space partly protected from the uniformity of behavioural patterns." (Ibid: 9) According to Bourriaud, the sociological explanation of this is the birth of a worldwide urban culture.

Relational art is “an art form where the substrate is formed by intersubjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the ‘encounter’ between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning.” (Ibid: 15) The interstice created by relational art is a place that suggests other ways of trading and other communication possibilities than those in effect in the overarching system. As such, relational art encourages interhuman communication that differs from the standardized, imposed ways of communication that are restricted to spaces planned to that end. Therefore, contemporary art certainly develops a political project by entering the relational field.

Exhibitions are places where such momentary groupings can occur. Human relations have become fully developed artistic forms or aesthetic ‘objects’ (meetings, encounters, events, games, festivals, etc.), which transcend pure and simple aesthetic consumption. These works of art are not available in the sense of classical works of art. Contemporary art often is marked by its non-availability, because it often is only visible or experienceable at given times. The most typical example is the one of performance art, in which the public is summoned by the artist. Moreover, the micro-community gathering in front of the work of art has become the actual source of its aura. “The aura of art no longer lies in the hinter-world represented by the work, nor in form itself, but in front of it, within the temporary collective form that it produces by being put on show.” (Ibid: 61) But precisely because the relational artistic practice is restricted to galleries and art spaces, it also elicits criticism. Relational artists are reproached for denying social conflict and social differences, and the impossibilities to communicate within alienated social spaces. Relational art still would be elitist and only offers a watered down version of social critique. Bourriaud’s answer is that these artistic works should also be judged on a formal basis, i.e. in relation to the history of art and the political value of forms. If not, we run the danger of promoting ‘committed’ art, which can only be propagandist art. The exhibition does not *deny* social relations, but distorts and projects them in a space-time frame encoded both by the art system and the artist herself.

It seems that relational aesthetics can offer a fresh and valuable perspective on an important part of contemporary art. Yet, internet art – reacting *per excellence* against dominating social forms and economic forces – is not even mentioned in Bourriaud (2002). According to his ‘law of relocation’, “the main effects of the computer revolution are visible today among artists who do not use computers” (ibid: 67). This ‘relocation’ would enable artists better to show the effects of recent technology on our daily life, and would prevent using technology as an ideological instrument. In our view, this is not only misjudging the critical motivation and potential of, e.g., internet art, but the unwarranted ‘law of relocation’ also results from a naïve view on the way artists can use new technologies precisely in order to criticize them.

4. Conclusions: Internet Art and Relational Aesthetics

One of the main obstacles for appreciating contemporary ‘relational’ art, namely its material features or lack thereof, manifests itself differently in the case of internet art. Although it is true that internet art is not tangible, this does not lead to the non-availability that marks a lot of relational works of art. On the contrary, the fact that internet art is by definition present on the World Wide Web, makes it in principle available for everyone and at all times, i.e. as long as the work of art is still ‘alive’ on the internet. The ‘elitist’ reading, possible in the case of relational art discussed by Bourriaud, is more difficult in the case of internet art. This is also the reason why the Dadaist aim of integrating art and social life is more easily obtained by internet art than by other kinds of relational art, which is mostly (though not necessarily) restricted to galleries and art centers. Due to the infusion of daily life with computer technology, web artists tend to address the whole community of web surfers. When Bourriaud sociologically explains the rise of relational art in the growth of a worldwide urban culture, he

does not explicitly mention the technological conditions of this growth, such as the important role of the internet. In Bourriaud's viewpoint, technology – the computer in particular – mainly is what is being reacted *against*. Using technology itself as a reaction to this technology is too hastily equated with using technology in a non-critical, ideological way. As we hope to have shown, the overall motivation present in relational art is shared, if not prefigured, by internet art, which reacts against the standardisation and the commodification of human relationships and the role of technology therein.

Acknowledgment

The authors are financially supported by a research grant from Ghent University College, Faculty of Fine Arts.

References

- B. Basting, 'Daring Utopian Thinking', 1 p. (translated from the German article in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), July 20th 2000, cf. <http://bookchin.net/texts/bastingtranslation.pdf> (visited on 27/04/2009).
- N. Bourriaud. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon, Les Presses du Réel, 2002.
- H. Bunting, *Community Courier Courier*, 2003. Cf. <http://irational.org/cgi-bin/courier2/courier2.pl> (visited on 27/04/2009).
- P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press 1984.
- T. Elsaesser, 'Constructive Instability', pp. 13-31, in *Video Vortex Reader – Responses to Youtube* (ed. G. Lovink, S. Niederer). Amsterdam: Insitute of Network Cultures, 2008.
- O. Goriunova, A. Shulgin, 'Glitch', pp. 110-119, in *Software Studies* (ed. M. Fuller). Cambridge, Ma: MIT, 2008.