

## Saying Goodbye to the Wild West

### Thoughts about Net.art on the Threshold of Institutionalisation

Lecture at the "under construction: art.net.dortmund.de" conference on May 19, 2001

First of all I want to outline the field in which we work. I perceive the beginning of net.art as an independent, heterogeneous art form that is currently on the threshold of institutionalisation, since the creation of portals or platforms has brought an end to the era that I would like to call the "Wild West" phase. A phase in which (if you want to view it in a romantic context) artists could work independently and be uncommitted without having to worry about markets or collectors. A phase in which artistic freedom reigned in the sense that the artists alone decided what they would create, how it would be realised and could offer the results themselves directly to the public. In the process they formed networks to exchange ideas or formed groups to work together on joint projects. If this system had some disadvantages - especially those of a financial nature - remains to be seen. When I use the term "institution" I am not referring to groups of artists that present themselves as organised institutions, but rather to institutions in the sense of museums, galleries and similar exhibitors that curate and collect and criticise art. I am trying to define the differences between independent and institutionalised art production and the impact the two have on the way the work of art is perceived in order to work out the pros and cons of both production forms. We can probably find a way to unite the advantages of both forms of production. I want to come up with questions that should be considered when people are working together to build a network art platform, because it is very important to create the best possible conditions for the artist and the art work itself. I want to briefly touch on a few facts, which may sometimes sound somewhat polemic, so I would just like to apologise in advance.

Net.art exists in the public sphere, and is accessible in many different forms. The audience is in a private or professional environment and has the opportunity to switch between the shopping mall, information and art whenever they want. And since the public sphere continues to expand and become more and more complex (and is above all becoming more and more commercialised), art is becoming more marginal. That is why we are trying to make it easier for the audience to access art by creating portals. Portals are institutions that organise space on the Internet that was at one time independently available and fill that

space with content. Portals are an answer to the tremendous expansion of the Internet, which leads to the audience losing sight of what is available. Portals try to act as a ultimate authority in their field of interest, thereby attracting a larger audience. The larger the number of users that visit the higher the sighting numbers, and in the case of commercial sites it means more money through increased advertising revenue. For art institutions, increased sighting numbers could lead an increase in public funding. For the Internet as a medium, which in its early phase was used to complement what was on offered by the organised institutional art system, this would be a dramatic development.

The enthusiasm of many artists for activities on the Internet in the mid-1990s stemmed from the fact that they did not have to first attract the attention of an art system institution (such as a gallery, a museum or curators) in order to directly reach the public. In fact, the Internet ensured that the art was available to the public in the form that the artist wanted. This was a huge help especially to artists who were not from Central Europe or North American countries and who wanted to operate internationally. Eventually net.art attracted the attention of curators and the structures began to develop a resemblance to those in the traditional art system. The Internet became started to become institutionalised. The institutions chose the artists that they felt were worthy of promotion. Since institutions have the money, they can < even offline < attract wider circles of the public and thereby create a larger community than the independent sites, which also still exist alongside the institutions. And so the cycle begins. Press echoes and attention generate even more attention and even more press. For the artists who are represented by an institution this may have a synergistic effect. However, for other artists it is more of a disadvantage as they become threatened by disappearing into insignificance. Or they have to work hard to be noticed by the institutions and become a part of this system. Those artists who are integrated in institution may have to adapt to the institution, which now decides how net.art can be curated, distributed and collected, which could mean that independently operating artists may have to give up some artistic freedom. In contrast to "gallery art," it is not the room in which net.art is presented that differentiates it from art shown in commercial galleries. First of all, it has no quantifiable context. Every site stands alone and does not have any influence on what the audience has seen before, how deeply the visitors delve into the structure of the site, how long they stay and where they go afterwards. The links may serve as a channel, but they are in no way binding. Context is only created by the coherence within a site, in other words within the same URL. When you assume that an independent project has its own URL, it exists without context. Context is only generated in an institutional framework. The institutional framework is the net.art gallery, even when it does not call itself a gallery but rather a space, sphere or something else. In these galleries projects are automatically perceived as art projects. They are contextualised

by appearing with other projects and are perceived in a joint context. Projects may be linked together outside the institutions, which shows a loose, general interest and has nothing to do with the URL of a project. Projects that have nothing in common may possibly be mentioned together in a list of links, which could create contexts that generate tension on the Internet. Within the framework of an institution, the connection between the projects is such that the curator searches for and finds the projects. In contrast to a link list, they are much more selective and make the viewer consider them together or at least think they related to one another. The projects are comparable through the contextualisation. By placing a work of art in context it may possibly be viewed in isolation from other kinds of non-artistic sites. It can be found through a targeted search and can be viewed in internal artistic contexts, this can have a positive effect on the viewer's classification and understanding of the art. Institutionalised net.art projects can still be found using search engines. This means that they can be found independent of their existence on an art server. However, the URL betrays their physical location and thereby creates a contextual reference by its inclusion on an institution's site. Would it be desirable to reject standardised addressing in order to achieve independence from the institution or would that be hypocritical?

The consequence of presenting art in a context leads to a change in reception of the project. The audiences' perception is from the very beginning gauged on artistic perception, in other words the emphasis is placed on this aspect. The surprise of landing on a site that at first the viewer can't pigeonhole because the intention is not immediately obvious is not there. Since the viewer can immediately classify it as art, such a moment of surprise no longer applies. The viewer's perception is then focused on how the project differs from non-artistic projects. The viewer does not perceive the similarities to non-artistic sites, but rather the differences, thereby simplifying the meaning. If the project is primarily perceived as art it is then defined into the categories of good or bad, interesting or boring, original or repetitive, beautiful or ugly, this perception always correlates to the project as a work of art. It can no longer be perceived solely on its own merits. It is as if has been marked with the attribute ,art' and thus initial perception is influenced: "Oh, I see. It is an art project." The irritation an art project generally involves because it raises questions that can't be immediately answered is missing. They have to be in the work itself and can no longer be found outside the work. As far as the production of the project is concerned, this means that the strategy may have to be changed if a project is created for an institutional context.

Due to the fact that projects are located together on one server, it is possible that the visitor's understanding of complex projects could be simplified. Whereas the an isolated project has the task of defining its own context, the institutionally-sponsored project can relax and

concentrate on conveying its content. It doesn't need to be completely self-explanatory because it can rely on the institution to provide a contextual and explanatory framework. It also does not have any problems with visitors defining it as art, because through its inclusion in the institutional context the question is not even posed. In as much as, the institution has the power to define what art is. This excludes all other work from achieving art status. This exclusion can't claim to be absolute, but it can make it more difficult for an independent project to be recognised as a work of art.

Projects that are designed to integrate themselves like chameleons into the Internet and not immediately be identifiable as art can not be shown within the context of an institutional site. The projects legitimise themselves through their similarities to commercial or other sites, and they irritate the visitor to such an extent that after a while that they suddenly appear not be the site that initially seemed to be. These projects are probably not targeted to be viewed by visitors looking for net.art. Instead, they try to irritate people who do not normally view net.art projects. Nonetheless, these are art projects that run the risk of being forgotten and ignored because they can not be presented within the framework of an institution. However, since such projects are important to the historical understanding of the development of net.art, they deserve to be heeded by the public - even if they do not appear in an artistic context. The projects that can be displayed within the framework of an institutional platform are probably already, in general, located somewhere on the Web. These are projects that put the main emphasis on a visual presentation. But what happens to projects that go beyond the visual WWW surface? What about projects that belong in the communications sector and can't be reduced to fit on a Web browser? Is there any way at all to present these on the Web? Could these projects be integrated within the framework of an institution even if it does not have a Web site? What would the projects look like?

Thanks to their financial backing, institutions have the opportunity to produce or have someone else produce projects on a high technological level. If they support artists on a technological level, this could affect the production process of the art. If that is the case, do so-called "low-tech projects" even have a right to exist? Will high-end productions cause institutions to neglect a large number of users who may not be equipped with the latest software or technology? We have to ask ourselves whether it is possible to present projects that are extremely different from one another together on one institutional platform and whether it is good for the projects to be formally linked together with this institution. Does the link to the institution take away some of the project's autonomy or does it give added value to the project?

The art lover (and by that I mean someone who is interested in art but happens to be outside the internal discourse) who is looking for net.art would probably first look at institutions that appear to guarantee quality. The government has probably offered public funding for the site, and the people who are involved in the selection process, have learned their trade and are paid for doing what they do, they are all professionals. It is more or less assumed that these people are well-versed in their specialised area and can therefore differentiate the good from the bad and the interesting from the boring projects. The net.art "browser" surrenders the right to make his or her own decisions about what he or she chooses to view and judge and accepts the institution's choice, confident that an institution can't be completely wrong. Without even being aware of it, he or she hands over the responsibility to the institution, which gladly performs this function since, after all, it is its job to choose, contextualise, display, judge the work intellectually and present it to the public. That is why the institution should always be aware of its responsibility as the interface between the interests of the public and those of the artists - even those that they do not represent.