

# Net Art: Black Sun, White Halloween

By Manya Scheps

D'où Venons Nous? Que Sommes Nous? Où Allons Nous?  
[Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?]  
-Paul Gauguin

Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for?  
These are totally useless questions.  
-Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari

The computer is democracy's pastel-colored paper money, an unassuming and glittering representation of institution. It is not a real currency, just as the internet is not really democratic. Non-profits that work to put a laptop in the hands of every man, woman, and child in impoverished countries work as the new liberators, functioning by the equation that access to information equals direct power. Net art operates under a similar set of principles; the ability to create and distribute information subverts the power of the museum, cradling opportunity swathed without prejudice to any deserving wi-fi hotspot.

The term "new media" indicates, quite obviously, that all other media are old, stodgy, unwieldy. New media positions itself as diametrically opposed to the oppressive and archaic institution which, for the last 20,000 years, has imposed rigid hierarchies and rules surrounding art and its production. It works through the Deleuzian idea of the institution as equipment of capture (in fact, all of net art has already read itself as such, not to mention Deleuze). Deleuze's characterization of the institution as patrilineal, as prohibitive to a being's becoming, underpins the assumed revolution of the new media impulse. The conservative distortion of desire and creative moment, the restriction of escape: these are the problems that new media artists see themselves as solving through bit torrents.

Net art collectives, like the pack of wolves in Deleuze and Guattari's critique of Freudian psychoanalysis in *A Thousand Plateaus*, are rhizomatic, interconnected, "libidinal, unconscious, molecular..." This in contrast to the institutional Wolf-Man: singular, isolated, arboreal. "It's daddy."<sup>1</sup> Institution is as fundamentally opposed to desire as the actual is the virtual:

"Once a rhizome has been obstructed, arborified, it's all over, no desire stirs; for it is always by rhizome that desire moves and produces. Whenever desire climbs a tree, internal repercussions trip it up and it falls to its death; the rhizome, on the other hand, acts on desire by external, productive outgrowths."<sup>2</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari pit real against virtual, but this dichotomy, between tree and potato, between institution and desire constitutes a simplified idea of how net art functions in the contemporary art world. Deleuze and Guattari did not (could not) account for the sticky, multi-layered and complex intricacies which exist between internet art and institution. Each maintains a carefully upholstered ideal of self-representation, which quickly rips at the first indication of being wanted by the other.

New media seeks to position itself as a democratic enterprise untouched by the wrinkled grey grip of the art institution and its orthodoxy. The internet is infinite, liberated, radical. Most importantly, the internet is new, which means it is modern, which means it is good. Working on the internet attempts to subvert the institutional fetishization of the individual and the singular moment and to instead create as anonymous packs, in which ideas and actions have no spatial occupation but instead work outside temporality and authorship. Art critic Francesco Galluzzi and artist Claudio Parrini spoke to this emphatically in 2002 when they declared "Network territory is still unexplored, web life is experimental, lawless. It is not yet regulated by hierarchisation models."<sup>3</sup> Working collectively in new media inherently and immediately parks the artist in a camp of counter-practice, ever further from the institution's crotchety grasp.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987) 38.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 14.

<sup>3</sup> Galluzzi and Parrini, lecture at "Making Art on the Web" (Pistoletto Foundation, Biella) convention in November 2002.

This is not to suggest that the internet collective escapes that grasp. On the contrary, it mimics and respects the institutional structure. We believe the internet to represent the medium of free interchange and democracy; in fact it is as privileged a medium as painting in the 16th century. It smells nothing like anarchy: even anonymous surf clubs require both a social organization and software system of hierarchy and value. The management they demand structures itself after the RSS-infused interfaces now so normative to the average internet user. Eerily reminiscent of the pretense and curatorial practices that internet galleries and exhibitions sought to destroy, cyberspace begins to reveal its Corinthian columns.

The internet seems the perfect forum for anonymity but, interestingly, remains unfulfilled as such. Internet collectives are indeed anti-collective in their manifestation. Individuality and authorship are maintained, asserted, protected. Rare is the piece that contentedly exists without a creator; impossible is the piece that exists without intervention by creator to assert individualization. Interaction with a piece is prescribed, either by the creator or by the understood singular direction of the software at hand.

Just as the decisions of the individual artist are paramount, the gesture functions as supremely important—it links net art to its own impressed modernity. Unlike post painterly abstraction, gesture occurs not as a dollop of paint or a zip line but rather an instant message, a comment stream. While Deleuze and Guattari would assert that such gestures are part of the rhizomatic movement they are, in fact, the opposite: freezing authors with timestamps, emphasizing the individual moment. Artworks on the internet exist purely for art's sake; the URL is renowned as something exclusively in and for itself, transcending daily life and objecthood. How very tacitly loyal to institutional ideology.

Net art, then, reveals a paradox of the institution, inseparable from crisis and struggle. That the institution means the death of the rhizome speaks nothing to the notion that the institution is still intent on the rhizome. It subsumes it, yes, but it needs it, as much as the rhizome needs the institution for self-actualization. We cannot be so didactic as to suggest that the two are actually at odds — this is, after all, a net art show. At a gallery. With white walls. Validated by capitalism. The institution may not be able to bend and fold and keep up with the acceleration of new media but it tries. Lamely, gimping, earnestly, it tries.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, net art trips over itself for structural validation. It wants to be historicized, theorized, institutionalized. Whereas the technology was once a signifier of revolution, so thoroughly incorporated has it been by the institution that it is no longer a rebellious medium. Indeed, the internet is institution now, decelerated by capitalist motivations, exercising hierarchy and control at every pop-up and socially-integrated rating system. Subsequently the choice to work in the medium no longer maintains its weight as independent activism. It rests, now, just a medium.

Instead of questioning whether the rhizome of net art operates rhizomatically (it doesn't), we can look at the medium through the same arboreal lens we use to understand the whole of visual art. It opens itself to taste and aesthetic judgment and failure. The show at little berlin admits exactly that, placing internet-based works in a site-specific dialogue with other media, interfacing viral with physical. It discounts the presumed alternativism of the medium, allowing the works to speak as installation, fully gestaltist and aware. The meiotic net slows, under microscope, quietly tabbed, linked, reified.

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<sup>4</sup> cf. "Talk to Me" on view at MOMA until November 7th

The author would like to credit John Paetsch for the title of this essay & J Gordon Faylor for his review.