Net.art: Shedding the Utopian Moment?

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Introduction

Excitement about new technologies has been generating a lively discourse recently, in which artists and scholars are attempting to situate new media in the contexts of both contemporary and historical art practices. Some contributors to this discourse consider today's technologies transformative, capable of changing artists' ways of working. Others argue that these technologies simply provide new means to reiterate older concerns. Others wonder whether the novelty of new media is being overly emphasized, promoting an image of artists who work with these media as anachronistically avant-garde.

There was a time when the term "avant-garde" was applied to any artist making a radical break from artistic convention. Today, however, there is little support for this view, as it leads to an erroneous conception of art history as a trajectory sequence of movements, privileging artistic innovation. What prevails, instead, is a more expansive idea of the relationship between the new, the old, art production, and art history. That is, artists look at recent developments in work methods not just to see how these developments proffer originality or novelty, but to see how they might be utilized to address, critique, and/or further the concerns of contemporaneous as well as previous movements. In the arena of new technologies, this process gets played out as artists deal with old, ongoing challenges posed by the integration of art and technology, while simultaneously grappling with brand new issues that arise as technologies continuously emerge and evolve. While not wholly deterministic, inherent relationships do exist between the material properties of new technologies and how they are put to use by artists.

It is in the light of this more expansive view of the relationship between old and new, art production and art history, that I should like to compare and contrast some of the ideals pursued by early video artists with those upheld by contemporary artists producing "net.art"—artwork for the World Wide Web. What can we learn about this current technology-driven art form and its prospects by looking at an earlier, similarly driven one?

Video and Its Utopian Moment

Early in its history, video art experienced a utopian moment in which it seemed that the medium held the means to redress problems many artists were feeling during the waning years of Modernism.[1] Martha Rosler, an influential video artist, photographer, and theorist, has argued that the utopianism of early video artists in the late 1960s and 1970s grew out of their belief that the medium could foster broad social and cultural critique. In an important 1985 essay titled "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," Rosler wrote:

Not only a systemic but also a utopian critique was implicit in video's early use, for the effort was not to enter the system but to transform every aspect of it and—legacy of the revolutionary avant-garde project—to redefine the system out of existence by merging art with social life and making "audience" and "producer" interchangeable.[2]

The dream for video art to induce a fully fluid interchangeability of production and reception never took place.[3] These utopian hopes were dashed, Rosler argues, by the institutionalization of the medium.[4]

Cultural theorist Peter Lunenfeld has observed that today, "The utopian dream has moved from video to digital media."[5]

If true, one might ask what will happen to the utopian dream in this new domain. Will it, as was the case for video art, be proven to be an impossible project? After all, embedded within the notion of utopia is a dream that cannot be attained. Moreover, what hopes do artists have for net.art, to begin with? Discussing these issues with two artists who have shifted their practice from video to net.art—Jane Cottis and Adriene Jenik—has helped me answer some of these questions.

Jane Cottis has worked in video since the mid-1980s, producing such tapes as *Dry Kisses Only* (made with Kaucyila Brooke) and *The War on Lesbians*. She has also worked on productions by Paper Tiger Television, a well-known collective that critiques the relationship between politics and the representation of politics by the media. More recently, Cottis has been involved with the artists' collective ®™ark. Adriene Jenik has made video works primarily in the context of collaborations and collectives. Her works include many Paper Tiger TV productions, the short video *What's the Difference Between a Yam and a Sweet Potato?*, and the live satellite broadcast *Naftazteca: Cyber Aztec TV for 2000 A.D*.with Guillermo Gomez-Pena. Her current work is an ongoing series of interactive, collaborative Web performance works made with Lisa Brenneis and a troupe of approximately 15 actors titled *Desktop Theater*. Exchanging thoughts with these two artists as I wrote this essay, and doing a close read of Rosler's article, were instrumental in helping me think through what might lie ahead in the development of net.art and how it might ultimately be entered into art history.[6]

History

In the early 1970s, artists seized upon video as a medium with the inherent potential to renegotiate a range of concerns, all germane to aspects of emerging theories of postmodernism. Among these concerns, according to Rosler, were the following: 1) artists' access to the means of production; 2) art's potential to enter the public sphere as politicized speech; 3) art's contestation of the art institution as the privileged site for the exhibition of artwork; 4) the art institution's canonization of artists; and 5) the writing of art histories. Rosler asserts that the utopian moment in video history was that moment when the goal of using video to address all these concerns (and more) still seemed realizable. In her article, she chronicles the end of that time.

The introduction of the Sony Portapak, the first truly portable piece of videotaping equipment, provided producers access to video equipment in the late 1960s. Artists seeking a means to engage the mass media were excited by this new technology for its relative ease of use and low cost of production, particularly vis à vis film and full-scale television production. Unlike other, rarefied art forms, such as painting or sculpture, here was the possibility to make work using the very stuff of mass society. What better way to critique popular culture than to use television itself? As Rosler writes, "Many of these early users saw themselves as carrying out an act of profound social criticism, criticism specifically directed at the domination of groups and individuals epitomized by broadcast television and perhaps all of mainstream Western industrial and technological culture."[7]

Access

Although early video artists utilized the tools of popular culture, there was at that time a great difference formally between video art and broadcast television productions. While recent digital editing technologies have diminished this difference, enabling artists and television producers alike to access higher-end post-production for very little cost, the discrepancy persists. Some artists have used this to

their advantage, mining the amateur aesthetic as a postmodern statement of non-mastery. Still, we can readily see the difference between a video art production and a made-for-TV sitcom, drama, or news show.

When considered in relation to their parent technologies—video in relation to broadcast television, net.art in relation to the commerce-driven applications of the Internet—the gap in the latter relationship may be shrinking. The primary reason is that the means of production are precisely the same: net.artists and corporate Web designers draw from the same skill set, sit at the same computers, and use the same software. As Adriene Jenik states, "Web art is made with the same tools and coding scheme that the 'big boys' use."[8] For this reason, it is easy for a net.artist to create truly subversive work, since it can be completely indistinguishable from its commercial counterparts.

One such project is the gwbush.com site produced by the artists' collective ®™ark.[9] Prior to the last United States presidential election, the group obtained the domain name "gwbush.com." ®™ark then created a site, which at first glance appeared to be the official website for the George W. Bush campaign, but instead was a parody site containing anti-Bush articles. More important than the site itself was the response it generated from the official Bush campaign. Threatening litigation and pursuing attempts to shut down the site, George W. Bush made the now infamous comment, "There should be certain limits to freedom."

®™ark's strategy was precisely to garner enough attention from the media and Bush supporters to make their own counter-position widely available. The strategy worked. Many news pieces addressed the site. An article in the Dallas *Morning News* described ®™ark's site as a mock site attacking Bush's policies on drugs and crime.[10] The article quoted a letter from Bush's team of attorneys to the Federal Election Commission complaining about the ®™ark headline, "Just Say No to Former Cocaine User for President." Frank Guerrero, who was identified in the article as an ®™ark spokesperson, was also quoted. "The site is meant to poke fun at Mr. Bush," Guerrero said, "by comparing what he calls his 'youthful indiscretions' with his tough-on-crime policies as an adult." All this publicity, of course, only helped further ®™ark's project beyond the Web presence it had already established through its use of the domain name alone.

Entering the Public Sphere and Other Issues of Distribution

Because net.art can enter the public sphere seamlessly, the possibilities for subversion are far greater than for video art. In the early days of video art practice, artists had hoped that their works would reach a larger and more diverse audience than a museum-going one. Inherent in the medium itself is the possibility of distribution via broadcast, or at least local-cast, and it was assumed that these options would be offered by the burgeoning network of cable access television stations, as well as through innovative public programming. However, problems arose and this hope was never fully realized. During the Reagan/Bush years, for example, censorship and funding cuts severely limited the range of work that was shown by publicly funded stations. And while public access stations existed (and still exist), their viewership has been quite limited. Video artists' dreams of reaching a wide audience through television have never come to fruition.

As granting sources have dried up, distribution of video work has also faced enormous challenges, with an already small number of distribution services facing closure or severe financial cutbacks. Video Data Bank in Chicago, one of the most active distribution houses for video art, has drastically cut back the number of independent titles it distributes. This sort of situation has been aided in part by the Web, which has provided an easy means for curators and programmers to locate and solicit tapes from the artists themselves, thereby making self-distribution more viable.[11]

Net.art distribution is intrinsically easy. A URL can be given out by mass e-mail, in response to specific inquiries, or on a website, and people in varying locations may view the work as long as they have access to a computer and an Internet connection. More so even than with video, Jenik argues, the distribution system for net.art is so intrinsic to the medium that it helps shape and define the work itself:

To the extent that the Web is a distribution system [which] is also linked to the basic tools of production (HTML), it has been granted a great deal of power in structuring the art created for it. If the network is down, there is no way to see/access the work, so in that case it may no longer even 'exist.' Also, many works are dependent on the 'distribution' or connectivity of the Web in their very conception--in a way, the distribution becomes a theme or layer within the work itself.[12]

Thus, distribution of net.art among an art-seeking audience is simplified and made considerably less expensive than video art. In a project like the gwbush.com site, distribution is part of the project itself. But how works that are not intentionally interventionist might reach a non-art audience in significant ways is still not evident.

Exhibition Practices

Subsequent to attempts to integrate itself into television, video exhibition shifted to independently operated festivals, art galleries, and museums. Video festivals, sometimes coupled with film festivals and sometimes not, are largely structured around identity-based work of one sort or another. Gay and lesbian festivals, women's festivals, African-American festivals, Asian or Jewish, to name a few, play to large crowds comprised not only of artists but others from the constituencies served. However, the festival circuit has produced its own kind of elite. Works that do not fit the identity-based categories on which the festivals were founded are often excluded. Certain topical works can be guaranteed a screening; others that are not easily programmed into an evening of shorts on a given subject are not.

Net.art has followed these practices and is being exhibited in new media festivals such as L.A. Freewaves, the Women in the Director's Chair Festival in Chicago, and the Immedia Festival in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Once a space with computers and an Internet connection has been obtained, it is easy to program a festival of net.art, as artists need only submit a URL.

But many net.art works, which are meant to be seen at a leisurely pace because of their complexity and/or their emphasis on text, sit uncomfortably in a festival type of venue. Sites which are visually flashy, requiring relatively less time to view, tend to fare well, while more conceptual works, which demand prolonged attention from the viewer to be appreciated, do not. With video art, the festival venue at least provides viewers with a comfortable chair in a darkened space and a preordained program of works, tacitly suggesting the viewer set aside a particular amount of time and settle in for a full viewing experience. With net.art, viewers are often discouraged from spending much time with a work, as it is typically presented in the context of a group show offering many works, all running simultaneously, from which the viewer must choose one at a time. It is not at all unusual for long lines to form, each viewer waiting for his or her turn to sit at a computer.

Even with the problems that can be ascribed to the festival scene, video does screen well within that situation. By contrast, video's presentation in a gallery or a museum is much more problematic, at least in terms of conditions for viewers. Single-channel works, meant to be viewed from start to finish, have not been prioritized in either museum/gallery exhibition or in the writing of video histories. The physical spaces set up to accommodate such works are always at odds with the strolling *flâneur* environment of the art museum or gallery. If the single-channel works are screened on an ongoing loop, viewers often come into a piece in the middle. If the works are programmed into a theater-like viewing

space, they may screen only once a week or even less, so that the ability to see a given work is hit or miss.

Other Exhibition Practices, Canonization, and the Function of Myth

A form of video that is successful within the museum setting is the hybrid video/sculptural form, the video installation. Rosler attributes this success to the historicizing of video art within the museum and gallery system and, more specifically, to the heroizing of Nam June Paik, who has focused on video installation throughout his career.

As people started writing about video art, Paik was looked upon as a kind of founding father. Rosler makes her rancor toward this prominence evident in her language, describing Paik's "sanctification" as one who was "born to absolve video of sin."[13] Paik's aesthetic and formal investigation of the television set as a sculptural object, Rosler argues, enabled subsequent discussions of video art to trace this legacy only, to the exclusion of works which dealt with more activist-based types of media critique. "The myths of Paik suggest that he had laid all the groundwork, touched every base, in freeing video from the domination of corporate TV," Rosler writes, "and video could now go on to other things."[14] The problem is that Paik's work does not reflect the goals of other kinds of producers, who sought to engage not sculptural or installational space, but the single-channel work and its relationship to mainstream television audience.

The discussion of Paik's work can easily be expanded to include other video installation artists such as Gary Hill and Bill Viola, whose work became popular in the 1990s, or more recently, Pipilotti Rist or Jennifer Steinkamp, among many others. But it does not leave much place for practitioners like Paper Tiger Television, Martha Rosler herself, DeeDee Halleck, John Greyson, Gregg Bordowitz, or numerous others who work in the long tradition of media activist producers. The works of these latter artists are all located within a political practice founded on rigorous critique of both popular media and the art institution, with no room for what Rosler calls the mythologizing of video.

Quoting Roland Barthes, who wrote that "myth is depoliticized speech," Rosler traces how video history has indeed become mythologized.[15] Barthes, in his essay "Myth Today," shows the ways in which society typically seeks to naturalize ideology. When history becomes myth, it is emptied of its political content and of its operational account of the interactions between people and ways of thinking. As Barthes writes:

In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.[16]

As a medium is institutionalized, according to Rosler, it is necessarily mythologized. All art, she argues, is emptied of its political content as soon as it is brought into an institution, such as a gallery or museum.[17] For within these institutional parameters, a medium is generally discussed in terms of its formal qualities, is associated with other already institutionalized media, and is categorized accordingly. Thus, the affective aims of works in a new medium are overlooked as their content is subsumed by their categorization. Cottis sums up the misleading effects of this practice with her axiom, "Dada is not Collage Art."[18] When it comes to technology-based works, institutionalized discussions seem to revolve around the tools used to produce the works. Rosler criticizes this approach to video art:

[I]t is the self-imposed mission of the art world to tie video into its boundaries and cut out more than passing reference to film, photography and broadcast television, as the art world's competition, and to quash questions of reception, praxis and meaning in favor of the ordinary questions of "originality" and "touch."[19]

To write about such a category as video art in the first place, it seems, is to fall into this trap (this is an issue I shall address at length shortly). As Rosler states, "In separating out something called 'video art' from the other ways that people, including artists, are attempting to work with video technologies, [video art historians] have tacitly accepted the idea that the transformations of art are formal, cognitive and perceptual."[20]

Interestingly, this caveat does not fully apply to net.art. Because net.art pieces can look so much like other types of websites, net.art can confuse efforts to categorize it. Jenik addresses some of the benefits of this current confusion:

Something exciting about this moment seems to be the way that the production of Web-based art is blurring and smearing categories—for instance, around politics, design, commerce, fashion, entertainment, activism. I'm not sure if this separation of 'net.art' matters so much in a certain way, because museums, though centers of funding and legitimization, are behind the curve of what artists are doing.[21]

Nonetheless, I would argue, net.art has become part of the institution. Museums have found ways to exhibit net.art, even if these institutions are playing catch-up. The much-touted inclusion of net.art in the 2000 Whitney Biennial was followed by major exhibitions in the United States including blockbuster shows like *Bitstreams* at the Whitney Museum of American Art and *010101* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (both held in spring 2001), not to mention the longer history of net.art exhibition in Europe, most notably the 1999-2000 *Net_Condition* exhibition at the ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie) in Karlsrühe, Germany.

But the ways in which net.art has been exhibited in such venues are problematic. Forcing net.art into conventional gallery and museum settings threatens to defuse its aims toward public intervention. As with video, monitors displaying net.art pieces are typically placed on pedestals, or a small projection area is set aside with a few chairs or benches. Suddenly, works that were meant to intervene in a public space through their appearance in a living room or at someone's office desk are now validated as high, elitist art by virtue of being pedestalized and sequestered.

In order to become an official part of art history, it would seem that museum/gallery presence is required, even if this means that the work is seen in unbefitting circumstances. But some artists prize this institutional validation. Cottis ponders the issue:

Unfortunately, the museum site is a site of recognition for the artist, from grants to jobs. Many video and net.artists want and believe in the prestige of museums. One net.artist has even argued for some kind of copyright for her work because she is unhappy that it is used without her permission, which is ridiculous due to the very nature of the Web. [This attitude promotes] the commercialization of the Web. The original, if not utopian, interest in the Web was [its status as a] cyber site that was independent from the art market and traditional art practices. Easy, free access to Web art is completely contrary to copyrighted material.[22]

Writing Art Histories

Institutionalized art practices play a prominent role in the writing of a history of any medium. This is one of Rosler's chief concerns, as she explores the general drive to write art histories and the specific

reasons for the ways in which the histories of video art have been written. Ultimately, she concludes that there is a fundamental, institutionalized ideology at work: A history of video "must" be written in order for the medium to sustain a position in the art world, from being a tool for curatorial work and fundraising, to providing a means to keep video in the realm of art practice and out of the realm of social practice. She writes:

The naturalization of video in mass culture puts the pressure on to produce a history of "art video," or "video art," that belongs in the art world and that was authored by people with definable styles and intentions, all recognizable in relation to the principles of construction of the other modern art histories.[23]

Contributing to this modernist privileging of authorship, according to Rosalind Krauss, is video's innate narcissism, as the artist often turns the camera onto him/herself.[24] As such, those working in the medium can be more easily assumed into the canonized star system of the art world.

Rosler's and Krauss's sentiments apply to the writing of net.art history as well, though for different causal reasons. In net.art, it is the hyperlink which makes a history that relies on canonization so available. Often, net.art histories on the Web are nothing more than a series of links; these sites lead to other links, so that the same work is frequently found in numerous histories.

Of course, this canonization is radically different from other historical models in that the canonization of net.artists is occurring at the hands of the practitioners themselves. Many net.artists have their own websites, which link them to other artists who do what they do, providing a means to self-identify and elucidate what exactly comprises the field. Yet, when a newcomer sees a list of artists described as the originators of the field, a canon is created, regardless of who has created it. For both video and net.art, Rosler's declaration rings true: "The history...becomes a pop history, a pantheon, a chronicle. Most important, the history becomes an *incorporative* rather than a transgressive one."[25]

The distinction between an incorporative history and a transgressive history is the key to a fuller understanding of both media. This distinction parallels Barthes's differentiation between a work and a text. "The work," Barthes writes, "is a fragment of substance…The text is a methodological field…the work is seen, the text is demonstrated."[26] The writing of incorporative histories of video or net.art approach the medium by assessing the value of its individual works, rather than considering these works as texts. As with the creation of myth, an incorporative history rids events of, in Barthes's words, "a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions," resulting in "a harmonious display of essences."[27]

A transgressive history, on the other hand, evaluates how a text inflects and informs other works both within that medium and outside it, and therefore assesses its potential for oppositional practice. A transgressive history will return to the dialectical, contingent, and textual quality of the works it discusses.

Both video and net.art have run the risk of having their histories written in an incorporative fashion. In part, this is due to the relation of these media to their parent technologies, deeply embedded as they are in mass culture. Additionally, many practitioners in both fields desire to remain apart from the aesthetic context of more traditional art forms. Artists carry out this separation by going against the grain of the aesthetic field—that is, by positioning their work in the realm of the "anti-aesthetic," which Rosler refers to as a "supposedly challenging counter-artistic practice."[28] Rosler is borrowing here from Hal Foster's celebrated anthology of essays on postmodernism published in 1983 under the title *The Anti-Aesthetic*, which Foster describes as a "sign not of modern nihilism—which so often transgressed the law only to confirm it—but rather of a critique which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them."[29]

Many artists have attempted this destructuring since the inception of the avant-garde. And yet, as Rosler point out, "instead of destroying the art world, the art world swelled to take [these artists] in, and their techniques of shock and transgression were absorbed as the production of refreshing new effects."[30] This is the paradigmatic scenario of an incorporative history.

What, then, might a transgressive history look like? To my mind, Critical Art Ensemble's books, *The Electronic Disturbance* and *Electronic Civil Disobedience*[31] published in the mid-1990s, seek to answer this question. In each case, the collective authors' intention is not to write an art historical text at all. Rather than rehearse a list of works or practitioners that might appear as a survey of work done in the field, these writings instead focus on providing a neo-anarchist version of the development of cyberspace that includes a wide range of practices not only in the field of art but in other disciplines as well. The authors' stated aim is to initiate possibilities for subversion and resistance. They associate the conditions for the location of power within cyberspace with similar conditions that have existed previously. In so doing, these writings suggest ways for activists, artists, and others to work together to achieve the same goals. Sections with titles like "Nomadic Power and Cultural Resistance" and "Resisting the Bunker" offer paths to resistance, and "Video and Resistance: Against Documentaries" offers an ironic "how-to" manual for producing a sympathetic documentary film on political struggle. In their use of the how-to, do-it-yourself formulation, these accounts work to bridge the gap between viewer and producer, exposing Critical Art Ensemble's own strategies rather than mystifying or mythologizing them.

From Passivity to Agency

Early video artists sought to shrink the gap between the viewer and producer, performing a critique of the passive relationship viewers typically have to television. One of the main and ongoing questions behind much of the work done in video and net.art, in fact, has to do with issues of audience/viewer reception. In video, artists use various strategies, many of them borrowed from experimental film, to engage the viewer more actively. Examples include addressing the viewer directly, and delivering a complex text that requires the viewer to participate in the production of meaning.

As theoretical discourses develop around net.art and digital media, some of these same concerns are being addressed and strategies utilized in the context of interactivity. Net.art, even at its simplest in terms of interactivity, allows the user to choose a path through a work, making the viewer an active participant. Inevitably, however, the question arises: Is a mouse click enough to change the passive relationship of the viewer to the work? Or, to be more precisely parallel to the video art model, can net.art effectively challenge the relationship of the Web surfer to the commercial orientation of the Web? For Jenik, the challenge simply does not apply. As an artist working on the Web, she sees her relationship to Web commerce not as a hierarchical parent-child relationship, but as a relationship in which she can work alongside commercial interests. To her, the result of using the same technologies as commercial sites is a "change in location of the artist from 'outside' to 'inside' as low-budget artists [turn] to content-providers overnight."[32] While this change may occur on the side of the producers and artists, the question of what happens for the audience remains central to artists engaged in activist practices on the Web.

Video art has made some inroads into the production of work that could be closely associated with mass culture, but ultimately it is still viewed primarily by artists and audiences interested in art. For net.artists, it was easier to reach a wide audience in the early days of the Web. The current saturation makes it more difficult to locate art on the Web. The sheer volume of sites currently posted makes the use of search engines increasingly challenging, even as search engines become more sophisticated. On

the other hand, many museums and art institutions have posted links to net.art. But this may only mean that those already seeking art on the Web have new ways to find it. The number of net.art sites seen accidentally, by people not looking for them, is still arguably low. However, domain names are still potential territory for resistance and contestation, as the ®™Mark project for *gwbush.com* proved.

Does ®™ark's inclusion in the Whitney Biennial depoliticize their work? The reason it does not, I believe, has to do with ®™ark's aforementioned strategy, which is one of dissemination as a means of activism. Their notoriety within the art world proper probably has no effect on the person who still does a Yahoo search for "gwbush" and ends up at their site.

In another example of the complex relationship among commercialism, practices of subversion, and institutionalization, the net.art group www.0100101110101101.org was asked to contribute a piece to a widely-read mailing list on net.art issues, *Rhizome*. The mailing list always opens with a "splash screen," or introductory animation made by various net.artists at the invitation of Rhizome. The www.0100101110101101.org group had become known for their work which took the source code of other well-known net.artists' projects, and hacked it in order to subvert or slightly change their pages. For *Rhizome*, www.0100101110101101.org proposed to create a splash screen that would expose the source code of the mailing list. *Rhizome* refused to post the piece.

In a subsequent project entitled *opensourcing Rhizome.org*, www.0100101110110101.org posted on its own site the proposed splash screen, which exposed the source code of Rhizome's home page. This page would then redirect the viewer to Rhizome itself, so that something of www.0100101110101101.org's original intention was maintained. In an announcement of the project, www.0100101110110101.org stated: "Don't get us wrong. We applaud rhizome.org for using splash screens." By visually presenting itself much as commercial sites do, "Rhizome.org critically debunks all false myths that Net Art was ever anything different from corporate mass media and failed dotcoms."[34]

This prank was discussed for some time on various mailing lists, most notably nettime, before the plug was pulled and it was announced that the splash screen was not created by the original group, www.0100101110101101.org, but by Florian Cramer, who had registered a domain name almost identical to that of the original group (Cramer's domain name is www.0100101110110101.org), except for the transposition of two digits. Under this subtly altered name, Cramer had produced a number of projects that he felt were in keeping with the spirit of the original group. Cramer felt that, at that point, he could produce their work more effectively than they could, because "it [had] become more difficult for them to be subversive within net.art since they themselves [had become] a recognized brand in net.art."[35]

The fakery was uncovered in a self-published interview with Cramer on the nettime mailing list, in which Cramer discussed his goal to expose the ways in which net.art had already become heavily institutionalized. Cramer stated,

It was very interesting for me to see that the little twist of the zero and one had a social impact. I received invitations for festivals, I got fan mail by well-known people in the Net.art community. Everyone believed I was the 01 they knew. People seemed to care less about what I was doing than [who] I seemed to be. ...If dates *[another project produced by Cramer using the www.0100101110110101.org name] and* opensourcing rhizome.org *would not have had the 01 label, but an unknown signature, I doubt anyone would have cared about them. This tells, of course, about the institutionalization, self-gratification, and self-historification [sic] in this community which the original 01 project addressed as well.*[36]

While net.art is being institutionalized, its practitioners are aware of this move and are parodying it themselves.

Conclusion

Sometimes it seems that in order to create a productive discussion of net.art, it might be necessary not to speak of net.art at all. However, if we rethink a definition of a medium not as a sum of its material characteristics, but rather as a relationship between the discourses it generates, then we might end up with a truly interdisciplinary discussion that does not vacate the political aims of individual projects. There are certainly differences in the way net.art history is being constructed and how the medium is being institutionalized compared to video art and its history. However, basic questions of audience and reception remain unresolved. As Jenik states,

Clearly the issues of distribution, access, and means for activism are not fully realized. At the same time, activists and artists are making do, establishing computer support networks and freely distributed technologies that promote activities in the street and community (the proliferation of independent media centers comes to mind here) and extend public forums for debate.[37]

Other possibilities for distribution lie beyond the Web, as Cottis states:

One answer lies in promotion and distribution outside of the Web: on bathroom walls, in political journals, through word of mouth, through political institutions and agencies. We cannot beat the corporate, commercial world of dominant media but we can try to get a toe under its covers, from public access TV, to festivals and URLs.[38]

As Web technology is further developed, inroads are made and many artists continue to pursue and innovate around all of these goals.

Net.art certainly has the potential to address some of the activist and political concerns of early video artists. Has the institutionalization of net.art brought about the end of its utopian moment? Looking historically, we can see that the institutionalization of any new medium seems to be inevitable. Josephine Berry writes,

Despite the declarations by certain net.artists that in entering this new communications medium they were also entering a historically unencumbered, extra-institutional phase of art in which, amongst other things, commodification is defeated by dematerialisation and historicism by communication, many of net.art's premises do indeed condemn it to a series of historical repetitions.[39]

Perhaps, then, artists should focus not on how to remain outside the institution, but on how to maintain their concerns from within it. Projects such as ®™ark's *gwbush.com* website accomplish just that, as their location within the institution might occur after they have achieved their political efficacy. Other works, such as *0100101110110101.org opensources rhizome.org*, are able to produce a form of institutional critique that takes place within the field of net.art itself. In both cases, these projects function through the operation of mimicry, emphasizing the idea that in digital media, there is no original. As Rosler observes, "the aura has passed to the copy."[40]

As institutions pursue ways to commodify and incorporate net.art into their frameworks, which are fundamentally conservative, artists will use the Internet as a means to work against these aims. While net.art may have already shed its utopian moment, it will still continue, as with other media before, to pursue some of its utopian goals.

Endnotes

1. Among these problems were the elite position of official institutions of art within culture, the de-politicization of artistic practice, the commodification of the art object, and claims to "universality" which excluded non-dominant subjectivities, in terms of both artists and audience.

2. Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in *The Block Reader in Visual Culture*, ed. George Robertson (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 259. All references in this essay are taken from this reprint. The essay was first published in 1985.

Rosler explains that the project of the revolutionary or historical avant-garde was to merge art with everyday life, a concept quite different from the notion of the avant-garde as simply embracing the new and different. She situates her examples in surrealism, Dada, and abstract expressionism, which attempted this merger, and, in so doing, managed to displace the elitism of the gallery and museum system to varying degrees. Inevitably, however, these movements were absorbed into institutional practice, thereby rendering their subversive potential inert. Rosalind E. Krauss has pointed out that this problem stemmed from these movements' erroneous beliefs in their own originality (see her *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986]). Rosler goes on to cite Alan Kaprow—"non-art is more art than ART-art," he wrote in the early 1970s—to talk about how the system absorbed avant-garde ideas by applauding any works that did not look like familiar, prior art forms (Rosler, 268). This argument becomes Rosler's historical basis for describing the ways in which video art inevitably became institutionalized.

3. Shifting into a post-utopian phase of video history does not necessarily imply that artists did not continue to make successful, provocative, or critical works, however. A few examples of video artists who have continued to make the kind of work that early utopian thinkers envisioned for video art include Rosler, Diane Nerwen, Jocelyn Taylor, Craig Baldwin, and many others.

4. Rosler's arguments about the institution were framed in a way that is often read as didactic, absolute, or totalizing. However, the notion of institutionalization remains relevant when considered not as the sum of premeditated aims on the parts of curators or historians, but merely as the ways in which works are codified in the process of their presentation. It is in the spirit of the latter definition that I use the terms "institution" and "institutionalization" throughout this essay.

5. Peter Lunenfeld, *Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 146.

6. I would like to thank Jane Cottis and Adrienne Jenik for their generous support and contributions to the writing of this piece. ®™ark may be found online at www.rtmark.com, and Jenik's Desktop Theater may be found at www.desktoptheater.org. All quotes by Cottis and Jenik in this piece are from e-mail interviews with the artists in May, 2001.

7. Rosler, 258.

8. Adrienne Jenik, e-mail interview with the author, May, 2001.

9. This work, as well as other past projects, are documented on the ®™ark website at www.rtmark.com.

10. Dallas *Morning News*, May 22, 1999.

11. There are advantages and disadvantages to the self-distribution of video via the Web. One advantage, as noted, is that it is quite easy to self-publish and create a presence for oneself. On the other hand, there were wide-ranging services provided by distribution services, which can act on the artist's behalf much as a gallerist might, that are not available through self-promotion. These include diverse services such as taking care of dubs, packaging and shipping of work, and making connections for artists through relationships with curators and other programmers.

12. Jenik interview (my emphasis).

13. Rosler, 271.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 272.

16. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), 143.

17. It would be possible, of course, to ask whether any work really exists outside the institution, or outside some form of an institution. The borders, as construed in Rosler's arguments, between in and out, might be more permeable on the Web, as was the case with the gwbush.com project.

18. Jane Cottis, e-mail interview with the author, May, 2001.

19. Rosler, 270.

20. *Ibid*., 275.

21. Jenik interview.

22. Cottis interview.

23. Rosler, 269.

24. Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John G. Hanhardt (New York: Gibbs M. Smith, 1986), 179-191.

25. Rosler, 270.

26. Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 57.

27. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 142.

28. Rosler, 273.

29. Hal Foster, ed.,*The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), xv.

30. Rosler, 265-66.

31. Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994) and *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas* (New York: Autonomedia, 1996).

32. Jenik interview.

33. <www.rhizome.org>.

34. "0100101110110101.org opensources rhizome.org," post to nettime mailing list by propaganda@0100101110110101.org, May 11, 2001. A full archive of the nettime list may be found at <www.nettime.org>.

35. "0100101110110101.org opensources 0100101110101101.org," post to nettime mailing list by snafu@ecn.org, May 30, 2001.

36. *Ibid*.

37. Jenik interview.

38. Cottis interview.

39. Josephine Berry, chapter titled "The Redematerialization of the Object and the Artist in Biopower," in *The Thematics of Site-Specific Art on the Net* (Ph.D. diss., Manchester University, England, 2001), 1.

40. Rosler, 268. In using the term "aura" here, Rosler is referring to Walter Benjamin's frequently-quoted essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin, Illuminations, ed. and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken Books, 1969]). Benjamin describes how, before mechanical means of reproducing artworks were available, original works of art possessed an aura. Rosler's claim that this aura has shifted to the copy reflects major shifts in the meaning of artworks that are created using inherently reproducible forms, shifts resulting in large part from the aestheticization of the artworks that is concomitant with their institutionalization.