

net.art: a polymorphous survivor

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Back in 1999 some internet veterans — art types included — were feeling miffed. Mainstream, commercial culture had got hold of the internet — *their* internet — and was acting as if networked culture was a concept invented by dot-com aspirants in a pitch to their venture capitalists. What tasted like sour grapes, for a moment, turned into quiet schadenfreude as the whole thing deflated. Having been shown that the net was no place for brash commercialism, the corporates could now go back to their offices and leave the net in the tender care of those who knew it best: geeks, hackers, slackers, subculturists of all varieties, and artists. That's a caricature of some of the sentiments of the time. Of course there's no going back — not that there ever was a wild and free net utopia. As well as having changed materially, the net now is a very different idea, culturally speaking, than it was two, not to mention five years ago.

Yet the net's main asset, its strongly decentralised structure, is unchanged, as are the sustainable micro-economies of hosting, serving and browsing; these are the bare necessities for independent online cultural practice, including net.art. So the space remains; the questions are, what does it contain, how is it supported; how is it hooked up with the cultural and institutional structures of RL (real life)? The waves of hype, greed and utopianism have subsided; the romance of the network pioneer is unsustainable; the novelty of online art is long gone. The processes and tools involved in making work online have stabilised, to a certain extent, in line with the wider consolidation and industrialisation of the net. Where does Australian net.art go from here?

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One simple answer is, it continues. Most of the artists represented in this collection are experienced practitioners; many been working the net for five years or more. The lines that they have pursued speak to the range of contemporary practice, as well as the shifts in form and approach which have marked out its brief history.

One striking thing, which may sound odd, is the number of web pages here. On the web the page, as a technological form, is old news; the space once imagined as a hypertext — a network of interthreaded documents — now operates more like the slick front end of a giant, largely obscure database. The page has by no means outlived its creative usefulness though, as much of this work shows. Part of the reason for this is that, for all its flaws, the page remains the everyday baseline of internet experience. International net.art has for some time been preoccupied with the formal demolition of the web page, grinding it up into component pixels and code — see for example Jodi.org and Mark Napier's *Feed* (<http://feed.projects.sfmoma.org/>). Strangely ninemsn and f2 seem not to have noticed; in fact with the recent industrial shakedown of the web, and the dominance of the doctrine of usability, its formal and stylistic language is more rigid than ever. Cultural content, too: for better or worse, the dot-com boom has left us with pop-ups, pop-unders, banner ads, portals and e-tailing.

All hearty fodder for satire and subversion, which seems to be a particular strength in local work — in this collection see Ian Haig's *Web Devolution*, in which American cyber-icons *Wired* and the MIT Media Lab appear as members of an insane post-human apocalyptic webbing. Elsewhere there's Van Sowerine's *Girlplay* (<http://www.microslut.f2s.com/>), which last year earned the honour of a threatening letter from ninemsn, and Natasha Dwyer's *Appeal* (<http://www.stalled.au.nu/appeal>) which trashes e-commerce with an elegant minimum of fuss. Fellow Melbournians the Men Who Knew Too Much (<http://tmwktm.axs.com.au/>) produced some disarmingly awful and extremely funny material for their 2000 *Virtual Humanoids* show — like Haig they draw on the web's massive stores of lurid, poorly-constructed scam-sites, dodgy backyard businesses and dead homepages.

Pages are also bodies of text, and there's a strong centre of activity here: Australia's net.writers recently dominated the Electronic Literature Organisation's international

awards. The strength of this work is in the directness of its voice, its candour. The text is often residual, documentary and performative, as much as concrete and composed; and in Mez's work concrete text-strings dissipate endlessly into nested, coded eddies and inflections. Elsewhere text joins image and sound in conjunctions which are simple in principle, but materially evocative — as in the dark, suffocating mass of Francesca Da Rimini's *Dollspace*. Like Mez, geniwaite, and to some extent Melinda Rackham, Da Rimini's vocation is that of "networker", immersed in the texture of email, chat, lists, newsgroups, MOOs and sites. Page-building is part of that same process, which is the real subject here: the ongoing experiment of acting in and through the network. There's more than a trace of the old school about the idea: a lingering sense of the net as a space of potential, a liminal, lateral zone. As the net, and especially the web, become culturally normalised, is that investment in a life online anachronistic, or all the more necessary?

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What makes this networked practice feel retro is the rise of an approach where the net is the platform rather than the milieu — where the work somehow sits 'on' the net, rather than 'in' it. The page here is not a work surface but a shell, a delivery medium. The browser is a ubiquitous technical wrapper for work in any number of other forms: Flash, Shockwave, Java, streaming audio, VRML, Quicktime, and so on.

This shift is conceptual and cultural as well as formal; the three are entangled, of course. It means different aesthetic surfaces — the antialiased swoosh of Flash-based interactivity has been the most recognisable — but more importantly it reshapes net.art into something more diverse, more polymorphous, and more closely entangled with other lines of creative practice. Paul Brown's online works are a good example: these generative visual surfaces have a long ancestry, having moved over years through a series of manifestations in print, CD-ROM, and now online. As it happens these latest pieces work very well on the web: they're compact and efficient, with an elegance of means that is both technical and aesthetic. However the net itself is never a concern of the work — here it's just another platform, a new distribution channel for a project which has

So in this case, generative visual art gets piped neatly onto the net; the same applies to other pre-existing forms and practices. A parallel development has been the complete absorption of the net into wider electronic arts practice; the norm now is for any project — installation, audio, video, CD, performance — to have a web presence of some sort. The site is an all-purpose resource for documentation, advertising and archiving as well as actually delivering the work, or a version of it. The buzzword is "multiplatform"; artist and work shift media forms tactically. While Linda Wallace's video *Lovehotel* has spent most of its life online, it hopped off to recently to share first prize at the Palermo International Video Art festival (see <http://www.leggera.it/html/award.htm>). Any distinction between primary and secondary material — 'the work itself' as against its supporting ephemera — becomes unsupportable.

Used in this form, the net has had an immensely positive influence on local creative practice. Nowhere is this clearer than in experimental electronic audio, which has moved online through streaming projects like L'audible (<http://laudible.net>) and Radioqualia (<http://radioqualia.va.com.au>), as well as through the sites of innumerable artists and labels. International projects and collaborations flourish, and the scene's major figures are talked up, signed up, and released, online (I'm thinking here of Pimmon, aka Paul Gough).

But is it net.art? This question surfaced in recent discussion on US net.art hub *Rhizome*, after the linear, non-interactive, Flash-based work of Young Hae Chang Heavy Industries (<http://www.yhchang.com>) received the Webby award in the art category — edging out works more deeply and typically embedded in the net (see <http://rhizome.org/object.rhiz?2773>). There has been a strong trend internationally towards abstract, reflexive, conceptual work, grappling with the net as a data-space, and providing interfaces and tools for reimag(in)ing it (see for example Lisa Jevbratt's *1:1*, <http://www.c5corp.com/1to1>). This is internet art in the purest and most self-referential sense, and some of it is striking, but surely net.art's total project must be more than formal, and broader than the net itself. Any move for a kind of purity of the medium is questionable, especially in a field where that medium is so polymorphous and

unstable, and so tightly coupled with the proliferating hybrids of cultural practice.

What we imagine net.art is, or can be, is of course bound up with how it operates in our cultural experience, and that is one aspect of this field which is very closely tied to locality. Net.art in the purest sense receives a tiny amount of support and exposure in Australia; the backing of major cultural and research institutions is conspicuously absent. Like so much of local arts culture, the developed practice represented here has few visible means of support, subsisting on a mixture of public funding and personal and tertiary institutional subsidy. Paradoxically one of the other hallmarks of local practice is its international connectivity; a relative lack of local opportunities, and the mobility of the work, results in artists showing, and often premiering works, offshore.

What's striking is that the work survives, and that a small but significant number of Australian artists have created sustainable practices, and international profiles, online. This is an ongoing experiment in how to be an artist which is, in some ways, as interesting as the art. It carries a romance of its own, of a transnational microculture of creative practice, constellations of like-minded art geeks emailing, collaborating and festival- and conference-hopping; of course the reality is quite different. In particular the tenacity of this practice should never be taken for granted, or used to justify underfunding. Still, waiting for net.art's next Great Work (has it had one yet?), or plotting its infiltration of official, high-art culture, is perhaps less interesting than participating in the net's familiar, everyday achievement – wired-up cultural practice.