

Radical Software

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Critical text written for the exhibition *Radical Software*, hosted by the Share Festival, Turin, 08.03.2006 – 12.03.2006.

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If we leave aside its historical precedents, Software Art, in its classical definition formalized by the Jury Statement of “Transmediale 2001” [1] and extended by Florian Cramer [2], saw the light in 1997 with *The Web Stalker* of the English Group I/O/D and with the theoretical speculation started by one of the software authors, Matthew Fuller. Right from this first example and definitions, Software Art reveals its radical nature. The fact itself of transforming software from a mere instrument into “subject” and “contents” of a cultural and artistic reflection represents a Copernican revolution liable to be considered as heresy. Similarly heretic is the idea of adopting a language (HTML), a protocol of communication (HTTP) and the whole system of cultural objects (the web) and make them visible in a form that contrasts with their own original function. Software Art is radical even in its most harmless and politically neutral manifestations; when, in addition, it overturns the structure of the browser in controversy with the standardization of its interfaces, and when it adopts a slogan that sounds like: “software is mind control, get some”, then the controversy turns into poetics, the prime mover of a creative process.

RADICAL SOFTWARE is an exhibition including some recent examples of radical software. The name pays explicit homage to the magazine founded by Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot in 1970, that had the merit to combine, for the first time, political considerations and use of the media (in that case mainly video and

television).

But, if the deep nature of these projects is political, the initial target of the subversion they put into effect is rarely so; and, even when it is, the blow it receives is never direct, but it is the ultimate consequence of an attack directed elsewhere, similar to a bullet hitting the mark after being diverted by a series of obstacles that are as many primary targets. This is the case, for example, of *Bush Bot 0.4*, of the **ROVERBOTICS** Group: which, after insinuating doubts – with the support of manipulated images – that George W. Bush may be a cyborg, demolishes his politics, creating the software that nourishes his totally artificial intelligence, allowing people to talk to him and even dictate his new speeches, through a simple chat system. No doubt Bush is the target, but the blow is struck by drawing on a by now classic story – *Simulacres* by Philip K. Dick – and by parodying artificial intelligence algorithms. In the same way, *Mc Donald's Videogame*, of the Italian game factory **Molleindustria**, attacks the famous fast food chain, by subverting the form, by now highly widespread, of advertising videogames. *Where Next*, realized by the same Molleindustria in collaboration with the advertising agency **Guerrillamarketing**, attacks the spectacular way adopted by the media when presenting terrorism and their ferocious abuse of forms of betting games and the most common advertising tactics as well as that extraordinary instrument of location that is *Google Earth*, with a type of political incorrectness that is directly proportional to the implications of what it reports. Both these products are very distant from Software Art from a formal point of view and yet they are very close to it from a conceptual point of view.

Different is the case of *GWEI (Google Will Eat Itself)*, realized by **UBERMORGEN.COM** in collaboration with Italian **Alessandro Ludovico** and **Paolo Cirio**, that takes to the extreme consequences the algorithm of capitalism entirely adopted by Google, but it does that to induce one of the powerful companies in the world to devour itself in an extreme form of digital cannibalism. The critical scope of Software Art doesn't even spare the culture of shared knowledge based on hacker culture and the activism of the media. *Un_wiki*, by **Wayne Clements** is a very

simple software that limits itself to retrieving and making visible the log file with contents refused by the open and democratic community of *Wikipedia*: a crafty speculation on the paradoxes of a system that matches the maximum opening made possible by the software and a substantially oligarchic structure as the only guarantor of the contents quality.

Antimafia (2003), of the Italian group [epidemic] is instead software that automates and coordinates collective actions. Based on a “peer to peer” action, it makes it possible to share hacking actions without any intervention from the user – apart from the activation of the programme – and without a leader that coordinates the action. It might seem the definitive solution to the problem of the effectiveness of protests online, the “killer application” of net activism; in reality, the first victim of this programme is activism itself, deprived of any human components and above all of leadership. Which justifies the strange story of this project, rejected and censored by the same community it was meant for. A censorship which was actually caused by an error of perspective: if *Floodnet*, software made available to a community for a collective action online, was in every respect a work of net.art, *Antimafia*, read in that light, failed miserably; if it is re-read as Software Art, instead, it hits the mark splendidly, showing that “the code is not harmless” and revealing the weak point of activism that withdraws when it discovers that it can be really dangerous.

If *Antimafia* is a subversive interface disguised as commercial software, emulating the “packaging” of famous security software, most Software Art projects make the interface the object of subversion. This is an attitude inherited from the first net.art. from JoDi which tears the browser to pieces in controversy with corporative hi-tech. The premise is that standard interfaces convey a specific ideology, and that defacing, violating, reconstructing them in new forms can be a form of re-appropriation and liberation. I/O/D’s motto, “software is mind control, get some” very well explains both **Peter Luining** and Italian **K_Hello**’s formal games as absolutely harmless conceptual experiments in practice, yet capable of pulling down in a moment the castle of metaphors on which the graphic interface with windows is

based. In the same way *Scream* by **Amy Alexander** manages at last to give us the satisfaction of a physical outlet (in this case, a scream) that can produce immediate repercussions on the stability of the interface.

Others contest the surface, the froth of the data, like Slavic **Marketa Bankova** with *Scribble*, software that superimposes “graffiti” to the CNN homepage, with the same pleasure as a child destroying the Lego castle he has just built. This is the case of *Super Mario Movie*, where **Cory Arcangel** breaks the world of Super Mario into pieces and follows its fall with satisfaction, turning the horizontal flow into an endless vertical collapse, and depriving the game of any possible interaction. A subtle subversion, that disguises itself behind the pleasure of fruition but isn’t less radical for that.

Finally, entirely focused on language is the operation carried out by **[[MEZ]]**, one of the best heirs of the code poetry tradition. For **[[MEZ]]** language, even the usually immediate language of a blog is a programming code that can be disassembled and reconstructed, being aware that if the Net has something to share with Babel, this is the confusion of languages. For this reason her “mezangelle”, an idiom that merges natural language with IT code, becomes part, on one side, of the great tradition of language experimentation going from Dante to Joyce, and, on the other side, picks up a great lesson from Dada and Surrealism, i.e: discussing a society means firstly to attack its logical and rational structure, exactly embodied by the language.

Notes

[1] "...software art has the potential to make us aware that digital code is not harmless, that it is not restricted to simulations of other tools, and that is itself a ground for creative practice." In F. Cramer, U. Gabriel, J.F. Simon Jr., "Jury Statement", 2001, online at http://www.transmediale.de/01/en/s_juryStatement.htm

[2] "... software art could be generally defined as an art: – of which the material is formal instruction code, and/or – which addresses cultural concepts of software..." In Cramer, Florian, "Concepts, Notations, Software, Art", March 23, 2003, online at <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~cantsin>

][MEZ][

[/net]blog to log[/ah!rhythm][, 2006

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/netwurker/>

][Mez][presents her blog as "a reverse-engineered weblog - read: *_bio_log_* as opposed to a standardized weblog". In order to write it, you'll need the "mezangelle", which is the polysemic idiom that][mez][employs by adjusting her natural language into a hybrid form through remixing code. She began this process with e-mail art in the early 90s.

[EPIDEMIC]

AntiMafia, 2003

<http://epidemic.ws/antimafia/>

It appears as commercial software for Windows, with a GPL licence. It is based on the "peer to peer" programme, but instead of sharing files, its users share protest actions. When somebody launches a campaign, the others join it, the programme does

the rest, in a form of direct democracy bypassing any mediation or leadership.

AMY ALEXANDER

Scream, 2005

<http://scream.deprogramming.us/>

Small software that, when activated, introduces in the application bar an icon modelled upon the Scream by Munch. It stays quietly there until the machine, for some reason, makes us angry. And we scream. Then the machine echoes our rage or our anguish and, as it happens with the masterpiece of Symbolism, our scream “pervades the whole nature”.

CORY ARCANGEL (BEIGE) + PAPERRAD

Super Mario Movie, 2005

<http://beigerecords.com/cory/>

Super Mario falls endlessly into a world broken in a thousand pieces by a few code: Cory Arcangel tunes up his electronic swan song to the landscape of our childhood, accompanying it with an 8 bit sing-song and giving at the same time a lesson on can produce a 15 minute video without wasting more than 40 kb of space.

MARKETA BANKOVA

Scribble, 2005

<http://www.initialnews.com/scribble>

An ironical defacement of the CNN homepage, Scribble superimposes on it are half way between urban graffiti and scribbles we draw absent-mindedly, them in real

time according to the contents of the news. The project uses a drawings that are picked up according to the key words offered by the news, be further extended, thanks to new drawings proposed by the users.

WAYNE CLEMENTS

un_wiki, 2006

http://www.in-vacua.com/un_wiki.html

Software that retrieves and visualizes the log file containing inclusions “rejected” by the democratic system of Wikipedia: a consideration on the contradictions existing between the apparent democratism of the software, that allows everybody to load contents, and the substantial oligarchy of the community.

GUERRIGLIAMARKETING.IT + MOLLEINDUSTRIA.IT

Where-next, 2005

<http://www.where-next.com/>

A web page that makes it possible to bet on the place of the next terrorist attack, locatable through a service of Google Earth. The winner is awarded with a T-shirt with a photo of the attack and the caption “I PREDICTED IT!”. A strong reaction to the spectacular representation of terrorism and expectation of new attacks, induced by the media.

PETER LUINING

Window, 2005; *Giant Cursor*, 2005; *100 windows*, 2005

<http://works.ctrlaltdel.org/>

Window opens a transparent window, through which one can see what is underneath and work on it; Giant Cursor installs a cursor-pointer of abnormal size, but perfectly working; opens about a hundred empty pages in sequence. Three minimal software products that can be immediately de-coded, absolutely useless: but capable of revealing, like few others, the conventional metaphors that curb our experience about digital space.

K-HELLO

Wasteoftime, 2003

<http://www.k-hello.org/wasteoftime/itindex.htm>

Author of disrespectful and paradoxical conceptual software, K-hello invites us to an unjustified waste of time (and space): fragmenting a text that we inserted into hundreds of Web pages. The text is legible only by putting the pages into a grid but our computer was not up to understanding it: an experiment of extreme dissociation between form and content, but also in codifying the message in a form whose key to decrypting is just one: patience.

MOLLEINDUSTRIA.IT

McDonalds Videogame, 2006

www.molleindustria.it

A Flash Videogame Sim City Style, where the video player plays the role of the manager of McDonald's, busy with the management of the whole "assembly line" of the multinational, from production, to sales and marketing. An overturn of the logic of videogames used for advertising purposes.

ROVEBOTICS

Bush Bot 0.4, 2004

<http://www.bushbot.ath.cx/>

For who might have been impressed by Bush's "cyborg-like" behaviour, this is the programme governing actions and speeches. Based on an old chat system, the software makes it possible to chat with Bush as well as to offer him new material for his speeches.

UBERMORGEN.COM featuring ALESSANDRO LUDOVICO & PAOLO CIRIO

GWEI [Google Will Eat Itself], 2005

www.gwei.org

Or: how to buy oneself Google with its own publicity. GWEI is an organization that avails itself of the support of a series of sites, subscribers of the Google service AdSense (advertising links where the subscriber earns a sum for each link clicked by its users) and of software that manipulate the programme to increase the number of clicks received by Google. The money is reinvested in Google shares, bought and then distributed among the users, after subscribing to GTTP Ltd. (Google To The People Public Company) In other words, Google is becoming slowly but relentlessly devoured by its users, who take the money paid for advertising.