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## The Art Happens Here: Net Art's Archival Poetics

New Museum, New York, 22. 1. – 26. 5. 2019

Michael Connor, Aria Dean, Dragan Espenschied (eds.): *The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology*

Rhizome, New York 2019

by Domenico Quaranta

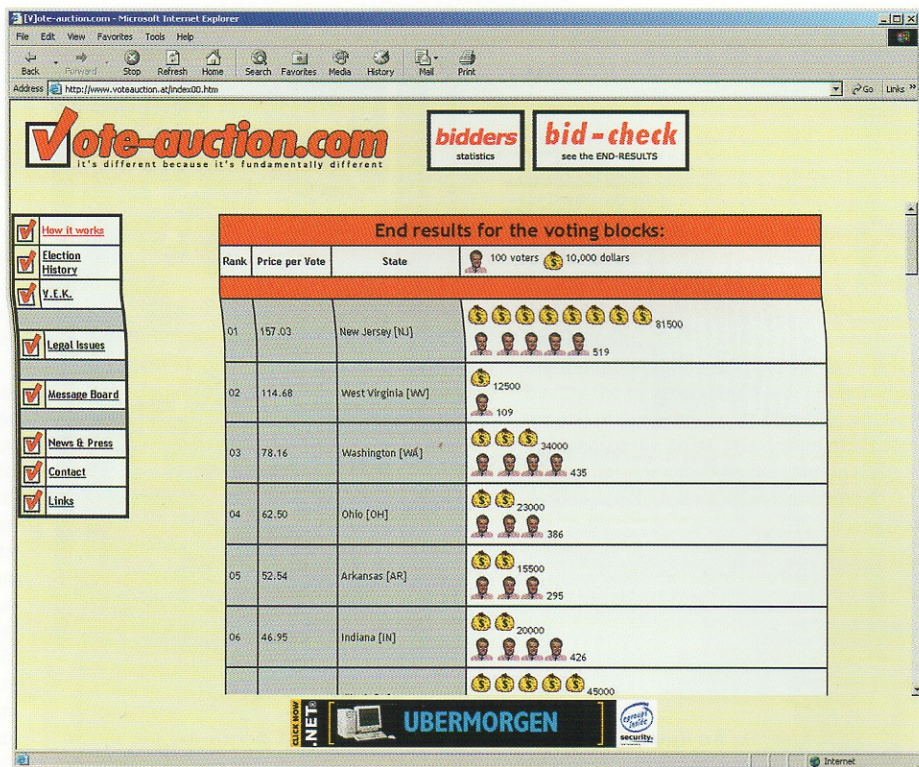
In a recent comment about his ten-year-old project “Post Internet,” the author Gene McHugh, who is based in Los Angeles, says: “What was so vital then, often appears dated now. That fact, it’s becoming more and more clear, is the ontological condition of post-internet art. Most of it is an art of the right now and quickly becomes dead, at best a historical example. That sounds disparaging, but I don’t exactly mean it that way. At the time it mattered more than anything.”<sup>1</sup> “Post Internet” was a blog project started in December 2009, thanks to a grant from the Arts Writers Grant Program by Creative Capital / Andy Warhol Foundation. Using a default WordPress template, McHugh posted—from December 29, 2009, to September 5, 2010, sometimes on a daily basis, sometimes less frequently—his notes about the online practices of a generation of artists he felt akin to, often gathering around online communities they called “surfing clubs,” which—following the definition suggested by artist and Rhizome curator Marisa Olson<sup>2</sup>—he described as “Post Internet artists” (a definition that would later become viral).

In 2011, an edited selection from the blog was published as a book.<sup>3</sup> After the disappearance of the blog sometime in 2013, the book helped to preserve McHugh’s notes until May 2019, when Rhizome restored it for the “Net Art Anthology.”



The Art Happens Here: Net Art's Archival Poetics, 2019. Installation at New Museum, New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio.

Although it could be better contextualized as a piece of art criticism, “Post Internet” shares many features with most net-based artworks: as a blog, it’s inherently an online performance, a textual intervention in the shared infrastructure of the Internet that reacts—often in real time—to other bits of information and generates further reactions. In terms of visual design, as I mentioned above, the blog aligns with the preference of its time for “defaults” and “semi naive, regular use of technology,”<sup>4</sup> against the disruptive



Screenshot from: UBERMORGEN, Vote-Auction.com using Internet Explorer 6.0 in Windows 2000, 2000–06. Courtesy: Rhizome, New York.

aesthetics of the first net art. As a work relying on a technical infrastructure, it ages fast and requires restoration. At the same time, as a diary of the “right now” based on the relatively stable technology of the written text, it is an extraordinary act of preservation in itself—of that kind of preservation that matters the most, when it comes to net-based, digital artworks. Not just because it speaks about many works that are now either lost or dysfunctional, but mostly because it speaks about them from the moment in which they “mattered more than anything”: preserving the language and the keywords according to which they were understood, the values upon which they were evaluated, the social, technical, and cultural environment in which they manifested—in other words, their context.

In this respect, there is a lot in common between “Post Internet” and the “Net Art Anthology.” The latter—an ambitious, monumental curatorial project—was launched in October 2016 with a refresh of VNS Matrix’s seminal “A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century” (1991), with the promise of publishing, once a week, 100 works along two years. It is now garnering more attention thanks to two consistent side projects: the exhibition “The Art Happens Here: Net Art’s Archival Poetics,” on view in the Lobby Gallery of the New Museum, New York; and the publication of the 444-page catalogue *The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology*, designed by With Projects and featuring all of the works, including the ones not yet presented online. The “Net Art Anthology” wants to retell “the history of net art from the 1980s through the present day” and “aims to address the shortage of historical perspectives on a field in which even the most prominent artworks are often inaccessible. The series takes on the complex task of identifying, preserving, and presenting exemplary works in a field characterized by broad participation, diverse practices, promiscuous collaboration, and rapidly shifting formal and aesthetic standards, sketching a possible net art canon.”<sup>5</sup> As this mission statement shows,

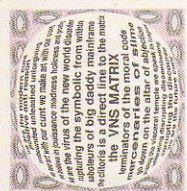
the initiative sits in between preservation, historiography, and storytelling, thus mirroring Rhizome in its multiform nature of a respected institution grounded on a community and with a focus on the preservation of digital, net-based art practices. Founded in 1996 as a mailing list, after a short-lived attempt to exist as a dotcom, in 1999 Rhizome turned nonprofit and founded the ArtBase, which soon turned into the largest collection of digital artworks ever, grown out of its community base through a mix of curatorial selection and submissions. Inevitably, the issue of preservation rapidly became prominent, and after becoming, in 2003, an affiliate of the New Museum, New York, Rhizome started developing the institutional infrastructure that brought in curator Lauren Cornell as executive director (2005) and Ben Fino-Radin as its first digital conservator (2006). In 2014, when Rhizome appointed the artist, musician, and educator Dragan Espenschied to lead its Digital Art Conservation Program, this institutional infrastructure was fully established, as well as Rhizome’s reputation as a leading platform for digital preservation. Together with the new executive director Zachary Kaplan and other collaborators, Espenschied shaped the institution’s current preservation program, centered around *Webrecorder*, a tool that can “create and share high-fidelity, fully interactive copies of almost any website,” available online to be used by anybody, and around the use of emulation of operative systems and legacy browsers to present old websites and desktop applications in their original software context. In 2018, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded Rhizome \$1 million for the further development of *Webrecorder*, the largest donation in Rhizome’s history—recognizing the public relevance of the research developed there, which can be applied not just to net art, but to any kind of online artifact.

And yet, technical preservation is just one side of the “Net Art Anthology” that was envisioned



1.05 VNS MATRIX (JOSEPHINE STARRS, JULIANNE PIERCE, FRANCESCA DA RIMINI AND VIRGINIA BARRATT)  
A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century, 1991

A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century gave vivid expression to the emerging political position of cyberfeminism, which aimed to reimagine technoculture from a feminist perspective. Produced by the Adelaide, Australia-based collective VNS Matrix, the manifesto was splashed across a Sydney billboard; wheatpasted in numerous cities; sent by



fax and email; and shared on LambdaMOO, the text-based virtual world popular on the early internet.

The manifesto can be thought of as an early meme, and like many memes today, its tone was confrontational. Pronouncing that "we are the modern cunt" and decorated with a labia-like motif, the poster weaponized biological sex against technological patriarchy. The billboard version, featuring a topless, androgynous unicorn-person with feminine breasts, reflected a more expansive feminism that aimed to destabilize binary distinctions imposed on genders and species and evoke the identity play that was common on the early internet.



Spread from: *The Art Happens Here, Net Art Anthology*, ed. by Michael Connor, Aria Dean, Dragan Espenschied, 2019, pp. 30–31.

under the artistic direction of Michael Connor exactly to provide what's missing when you have a perfectly restored net-based piece: context. In the framework of the "Net Art Anthology," contextualization is offered on two levels: by providing and linking bits of information—documentation, interviews, historical account, statements—that help the viewer to understand why a work was relevant when released, and critical insights suggesting why a given work should be relevant today. A significant example is offered by "Vote-Auction" (2000–06), a work by the Vienna-based duo UBERMORGEN. During the 2000 US presidential campaign, the newborn artistic duo took over a website pretending to be an online auction platform for votes. With "Bringing Capitalism and Democracy closer together" as their mission statement, UBERMORGEN were able to keep the website alive for months, de-

spite the huge effort made by the American legal and political system to shut it down. They were able to participate in the political conversation at an unprecedented level, mainly thanks both to their ability to manipulate and use the media and to the opacity of the project. While the documentation website has been kept online for almost twenty years now by UBERMORGEN itself, and hasn't needed any restoration, its presentation in the "Net Art Anthology" has been the chance to reconstruct a sociopolitical and technological context that has changed beyond recognition, and to reconsider the project in the light of the current political situation, as Diana McCarty does in her featured article.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of other artworks, the restoration itself is crucial in providing the context. Let's take Ann Hirsch's "Scandalishious" (2008–09), a true masterpiece in net-based art preservation. For eighteen months, Hirsch ran a YouTube-based performance based on the character of Caroline, the online persona of a "hipster college freshman" who played the role of the cam girl by dancing, vlogging, and interacting with her many followers. The work is rooted in the early days of YouTube and social networking, focusing on "issues of gender, labor, and power in a social media context long before these topics had entered mainstream discourse."<sup>7</sup> It belongs to a phase of the platform that is long lost—one in which users were invited to "broadcast themselves," in which big media, big money, copyright regulations, and censorship had not yet colonized the platform, and in which "YouTube" was not yet a stereotyped, profitable activity. Rhizome was not only able to reconstruct the original account page, with its custom layout and user comments, but also to collect and share forty video responses submitted by Hirsch's fans.

Let me conclude with a few last words about the declared strategic endeavor of "forging a canon." In his catalogue essay, Michael Connor explicitly refers to the Essential Cinema Repertory collection, a list of films compiled between 1970 and 1975 by James Broughton, Ken Kelman, Peter Kubelka, and others as an attempt to define the art of cinema, as an inspiration. Rhizome did its best to make its Essential Net Art

Repertory as unbiased and objective as possible—by involving an international network of expert advisors, by caring about gender balance, and by trying to adopt a truly global perspective. A canon is always a canon, and Rhizome—although plural and open-minded—is nevertheless a subject with its own peculiar vision. It would be more than easy to find holes and weaknesses in this 100 artworks list. On a personal note, as an Italian I find it a little bit discomforting to see my country represented by only one artwork: Italy contributed to the history of net art with much more than the amazing "Life Sharing" (2000–03) by Eva and Franco Mattes. Cao Fei's "RMB City" (2008–11) was not the most interesting thing I saw in Second Life when I was hanging out there. It's easy to claim that the success of some artists in the contemporary art world probably had an influence on their selection, and it's even easier to find biases when it comes to recent works by younger artists. Yet we can't blame Rhizome for being Rhizome—we can only hope that the excellent work started by them will be further developed by other institutions. And in the meanwhile, we cannot but enjoy how the flowers they selected are revived.

- 1 Gene McHugh, March 12, 2019. Personal communication.
- 2 Régine Debatty, "Interview with Marisa Olson," in *We Make Money Not Art*, March 28, 2008, [http://we-make-money-not-art.com/how\\_does\\_one\\_become\\_marisa/](http://we-make-money-not-art.com/how_does_one_become_marisa/).
- 3 Gene McHugh, *Post Internet* (2011; repr., Brescia: Link Editions, 2019).
- 4 Guthrie Loneragan, *hacking vrs defaults chart*, 2007, <http://theageofmammals.com/secret/netart/defaults.html>.
- 5 See <https://anthology.rhizome.org/>.
- 6 See Diana McCarty, "Vote Auction 3.0: Digital déjà vu; Rewind, news fake, fast forward," in *Rhizome*, November 6, 2018, <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2018/nov/06/vote-auction-news-fake/>.
- 7 See <https://anthology.rhizome.org/scandalishious>.

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## The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology

The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology.  
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