**Social Media Art: From Dada to TikTok - an online course by Filippo Lorenzin, available at aos.arebyte.com**

# Lesson four transcript

Hello everyone, thanks for joining me today. This is the fourth episode of Social Media Art: From Dada to TikTok, a course produced by Arebyte and hosted by me, Filippo Lorenzin.
This is the last lesson of the first section concerning art history. Today I will cover net.art, the most important digital art movement of the last 30 years. We will see who were the protagonists and what works were produced in order to question the Web and digital technology. As always, feel welcome to get in contact with me if you have questions by sending an email.

**Lesson 1.7**
**Binary Language: net.art**

In December 1989, a few months after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Romania was shocked by protests and violence that culminated in the trial and the subsequent execution of the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife: one of the most memorable moments was the intrusion of the revolutionaries in television studios to present their reasons in front of the cameras.

As Hito Steyerl suggested, "in that moment images changed their function": the transmissions carried out by the occupied studios became active catalysts of events, abandoning their nature of recordings or documentation. In short, with that event, it became clear that the images were not objective or subjective products of a pre-existing reality and the institutional media lost their authoritarian aura, becoming lively and potentially democratic tools.

This phenomenon was typical of the post-Cold War situation, especially in Europe and Russia, and it is no coincidence that the so-called net.art, a term coined by Serbian artist Vuk Ćosić in 1997, has developed mainly in these areas since the first half of the nineties: after the official end of the tensions between the United States and the USSR, art and communication were at the center of many initiatives developed both by the European Commission and by non-state organisations: the Internet was the emblem of renewed opportunities for dialogue between the Western bloc and post-Soviet countries. Domenico Quaranta suggested that the reason why net.art was a substantially European phenomenon is that in the United States technologies became obsolete very quickly and this obsolescence did not leave time for artists to study them from a critical point of view, while in Europe there was a tendency to use them for longer times.

Many of the artists who were part of the very first phase of net.art, such as Heath Bunting, Olia Lialina, Alexei Shulgin and Vuk Ćosić himself, had a background in other creative fields such as advertising and graphics. While some of them wanted to realign to traditional modes of communication and audience address, pursuing direct dialogue and exchange with other artists

and art enthusiasts from around the world", others were more engaged in critically reflecting on the digital screen and its aesthetics. In both cases, we can see a parallel with philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's reflection on the postmodern condition, which is "extraneous to disenchantment, as well as to the blind positivity of delegitimisation."

At the basis of this possibility there was a new way of perceiving and using the computer: no longer a bulky machine that required the technical support of programmers and engineers, but a tool with a reassuring design that could be used by everyone. Windows 95 and Macintosh computers were the almost mandatory systems for those who wanted to approach computer science. Their success depended on lowering production costs and introducing intuitive interfaces that facilitated interaction between the user and the software.

The fundamental thing to remember is that the net.art artists did not just use the computer and the Internet as tools to create a finished product, perhaps as spectacular as the installations that in the meantime were created by artists such as Eduardo Kac and Stelarc, but to explore and subvert an elementary language, create a communication short circuit, infiltrate a global means of communication.

A clear example of this approach is "%Location", a work by Jodi made in 1995: hosted on the site jodi.org, it is a page on which an incomprehensible flow of green symbols, letters and numbers runs continuously on a black background. This low-tech aesthetic was taken up by a film that was fundamental for the collective definition of computers and the Internet of the late 1990s, The Matrix (1999). In that film, the green symbols that cross the screens hide a fictitious reality, and can only be interpreted by those who already know the codified nature of the virtual world; it is, in short, language, code and interface. The viewers of Jodi's work don't understand what is happening and the only way to find out what the green symbols refer to is to view the page in HTML and reveal the code: at that point they find themselves in front of a drawing in ASCII characters accompanied by other graphics. The aspect at the center of Jodi's reflection, pseudonym under which the artists Joan Heemskerk and Dark Paesmans worked, is the subversion of the traditional relationship between code and interface and therefore of the logic of the design object, assessed on the basis of its functionality.

The interest in the potential translation error of languages is one of the foundations of net.art - an interest, this, which stems from a deeply skeptical position towards the ideologies that led to the development of computers and software used to make the works. To quote Lyotard, "the operational criterion is technological, it is not relevant to judge the true and the right". For net.artists, the Internet and computers were products of a certain utilitarian logic, barely hidden by a patina of optimism generated by the post-Cold War geopolitical situation.

Important similarities can be found between these practices and those of twentieth century movements, some of which are indicated as putative fathers by the same exponents of net.art. In 1997 Vuk Ćosić stated that he and the other net.art artists were the children of Marcel Duchamp and, therefore, of a certain research that is based on the Dada experience. As we saw in the first lesson, the Dada was fueled by a strong feeling of protest against the official art system and the political and social conditions of the time: it was in this research context that some of the most radical attempts of changing the concept of a work of art were developed by embracing randomness as a means of expression.

Dada poetry was based on instructions that, in the context of online art, remember software codes and projects that use the Internet to create situations in the "offline" world; three examples of this are "King's Cross Phone" (1994) by Heath Bunting, "Telematische Skulptur 4" (1995) by Richard Kriesche and "Learning to Love You More" (2002) by Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher.

In "King's Cross Phone" (1994) by Heath Bunting a Web page offered the telephone numbers of the public telephone boxes near the King's Cross train station in London, indicating the exact times and days to call them, orchestrating a performance in collaboration with anyone who wanted to participate.

"Telematische Skulptur 4" (1995) by Richard Kriesche was a sculpture that moved on tracks, the speed of which depended on the number of e-mails that online users sent to an electronic address created for the occasion: the object, installed in the Austrian pavilion of the Biennale di Venice in 1995 repeatedly hit a wall.

"Learning to Love You More" was a website that presented a series of instructions that invited users to perform small, simple actions throughout their daily life - a practice that resumed what was developed by Yoko Ono with "Grapefruit" (1964).

Many fundamental artists of net.art came from Russia. This was possible for three decisive factors: first of all, the technologies of the Net were well in tune with the reactions of protest and refusal of the artists had towards the commercial and state exhibition spaces of the time - as the artist Jon Ippolito well underlined, "the online art community has developed almost entirely outside the purview of galleries, auction houses and printed art magazines "; secondly, the internet offered the artists themselves the opportunity to communicate across national borders; finally, the rich Russian tradition concerning the experiments in the field of cinematographic narration offered young artists the opportunity to give continuity to these reflections in the context of hypertext. This approach is clear in the works of Alexei Shulgin and Olia Lialina, two of the major exponents of this first phase, who, respectively in "Hot Pictures" (1994) and "My Boyfriend Came Back From the War" (1996), reflected on the ways with which the Internet affects the visibility of original works and the structure of a narrative.

"Hot Pictures" was an electronic photo gallery that bypassed the traditional art context. On the internet, there is no need for curators, gallerists and museums: Shulgin could upload his pictures according to his taste and needs without having to accommodate the demands of others.
"My Boyfriend Came Back From the War" is a website that, thanks to the clever use of HTML language, asks the viewer to take part in the cinematic narration of the story of a woman reuniting with her lover after his return from a conflict. With its use of browser frames, hypertext, and images, the work highlights the parallels and divergences between cinema and the web as artistic and mass mediums.

In the 1990s, many artists, curators, activists and theorists used the Net mainly to engage in international dialogues and discussions: at the same time, festivals and conferences offered opportunities to socialise and promote projects. It was within this context that net.art was created and evolved both as an artistic and cultural scene. The mailing lists and chats, two of the most used online services of that time, were the platforms on which most of the critical discussions on net.art took place; these tools allowed those who participated to compare themselves with everyone else, in discussion groups with hundreds of users. This atmosphere of camaraderie

among well-prepared personalities is comparable to that generated by the communities that practiced Mail Art, as we defined it in the last lesson: it is AA Bronson, one of the three artists who form General Idea, who outlined this parallel in a 2000 interview: "the whole idea of networking on very horizontal rather than vertical structures.... It's much more about free-form networking that operates in a very organic sort of way. So the correspondence art was very much like an illustration of that. It's like the Internet... it's exactly like the Internet in its structure and in the way it happened and the way it changed and shifted all the time."

Nettime was one of the most important online discussion groups of the time: founded in 1995 by theorists Geert Lovink and Pit Schultz as a reaction to the corporate optimism of the so-called "Californian Ideology", it was a fundamental platform for the development of studies and reflections on technological culture, very often dealt with from a purely political point of view.

Another important online space for the definition and development of certain issues central to net.art was THE THING, founded in 1991 by artist Wolfgang Staehle. It was a platform that allowed everyone to participate in discussions and artistic projects that for many years dictated the standards for other similar initiatives, such as äda 'web and Rhizome: it was also one of the very first online spaces to sell and distribute art. äda 'web, created in 1994 by the curator Benjamin Weil and the entrepreneur John Borthwick, hosted projects specifically designed to be seen on the Net. One of these was Jenny Holzer's "Please Change Beliefs" (1995) whose interest in sharing information in public spaces using means like t-shirts and billboards, fit well with both the commercial and community context of the Web of those years - a context that was rapidly changing in terms of pervasiveness in people's everyday lives. The work is a digital space that displays Holzer's statements. The simple interface offers few choices. When the site's title is clicked by the viewer, the page turns to a list of statements within a small box. Instructions encourage the participant to choose a truism and change it if they wish. Each newly submitted truism is added to a list. By documenting each and every statement within an archive, Holzer has turned her site into a collaborative work.

This is all for today, thanks for joining me. You are very welcome to get in contact if you have any questions or comments! See you next week, ciao ciao.