How to frame ephemeral art: curating before and after the Web 2.0
By Elena Giulia Rossi

What does curating net art or new media mean? First of all, what do these terms refer to and what is their position within the contemporary art scene? What role can museums play with respect to art forms that are alive? In many ways, the answers to these questions are as mutable and ephemeral as the works they inquire about.

In 2001, I was recruited for a part-time job at the Joan Flasch Artists’ Book Collection at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Special collection librarian Anne Dorothee Boehme was dedicating a section to net art, that is to say, to art that is conceived on and for the Internet. My earlier curiosity had driven me to research these issues the year before, and during my time at the job, the continuity that exists between artists’ books and some practices of the network, a relation that many are still resistant to believe, clarified much of the spirit of these artistic experimentations to me. At the time, many institutions were already beginning to embrace net art and the broader wave of new media art, promoting them to the public for the first time after ten years of being nurtured by a hub of specialized professionals who had shared it outside institutional hierarchies. Many exhibitions were dedicated to that theme, and beyond museums devoted to it, such as the ZKM in Karlsruhe, new media departments were established in several major institutions, such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, The MoMA, the Guggenheim in New York, the Tate in London, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. For instance, äda ‘web, a significant online platform dedicated to experimentation funded by Benjamin Weil in 1994, was acquired by the Walker Art Center’s website in 1999, thus becoming institutionalized. Soon after, in the year 2000, the historical Art Base Rhizome.org entered into a partnership with the New Museum.

The term “new media art”1 does not necessarily refer to works where technology is new. Rather, this definition came into usage in order to refer to works where technology is a major component but also an important part of its content, often revealing its hidden functions and what is invisible to the naked eye of a user who is so immersed in technology that he cannot see the mechanisms that underlie it. The relation of the term “new media art” to the medium has been discussed extensively and controversially; this is in contrast to the ease with which we still categorize more traditional

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1 New media art was everything but new at the time. Moreover, the involvement with technology in art experimentations belongs to earlier times, when the mail was invented and it was adopted by the Italian Futurists at the beginning of the XXth Century.
works of art according to technique, such as “oil on canvas” or “drawing on paper”.

The radically ephemeral nature of the works and their existence in continuous flux, are the two factors that have challenged curators the most, and many of them are engaged in a deepening dialogue with artists on how to exhibit the works in a particular space. While galleries are concerned with the placement of the works on the market, institutions such as museums address their display and preservation.

As far as net art is concerned, not only are the idea and the online “action” at the core of the work close to performance art, so too is the fact that their existence is removed from anything material except for the computer, whose screen embodies the boundary between the viewer and the network that the works are connected to.

Works that we now consider as art have been perceived, for more than a decade, as underground expressions shared by only a handful of specialized professionals, promoted at festivals and through mailing lists. Why are more mainstream institutions welcoming them all of a sudden? Why did they feel so pressured by issues of preservation and display which had already been introduced by conceptual and performance art, photography and video? Again, why did institutions slow down after they had first embraced them? I believe the answer is clear: nothing has changed throughout history. Museums, even the most contemporary ones, are the last place where artworks arrive in the art system. It is a natural consequence that any work that enters the museum’s doors in any form becomes historicized by the mere fact of inhabiting that ‘sacred’ space. Photography, video and works involving technology are now assimilated art forms, only twenty years after they were first proposed as art. This has also been true with respect to other art forms that relied on ideas, experience and the body as subject matter - those that are respectively recognized as part of conceptual art, Fluxus and performance art. What is different today is the fact that the works have a technological component, they reside, evolve and change alongside it.

A work of net art can evolve into something radically different from one day to the next. When I presented net art at the Museo d’Arte (MAXXI), which courageously embraced a three-year project operating in temporary venues (2005-2008), net art was considered new. Nevertheless, by that time, this art form was already shifting towards a new stage, mostly determined by its move into the mainstream art system, though still controversial due to the many issues that ephemeral media imply. When the computer that delivers the works online is enclosed by the institutional walls, the machine becomes an object, and everything - works and computer - fall into an unavoidable paradox: content and modes of interaction undergo a radical change, private viewing suddenly becomes public.

Within the institutional setting, net art becomes part of a “live documentation.” For example, visitors are compelled to continue navigating the web from their own computer in order to properly interact with the work. Gradually filling a fifteen-year gap, during which these art practices lived outside the institutional realm, has been more a work of research from an educational perspective than a curatorial choice of display. It was in fact supported by MAXXI’s Department of Education. In 2010, after two years of restructuring, MAXXI opened its new spaces and the project evolved into the renamed NETinSPACE. Emerging and established artists working with a variety of media were invited to create projects for the screen and beyond, “infiltrating” the passages adjacent to the exhibition galleries: an elevator, the auditorium foyer and a wall adjacent to the coffee shop were

\[1\] I would recommend in this regard D. Quaranta, Media, New Media, Post-Media and the discussion that it raised in the blog Art Fag City at http://medianewmediapostmedia.wordpress.com/2011/08/31/reaction-art-fag-city/ (August, 30 2010).

the locations called into play. This “live archive” was still an important component of the project, and it continued to link to online works, participating in what since its inception was meant to be part of a hyper-textual structure. An important element of this archive is the special collection the Library at MAXXI created in 2005, which today includes over 200 titles.

If what is shown in the museum is not new, this is coherent with its mission. In order to fulfill it, historical distance is needed as the present is always too near to permit discerning an art practice objectively. This objectivity is becoming even more difficult in the Web 2.0 era. Everything is increasingly interconnected as relations and content built by users through social networks intersect and merge. Some works have already become obsolete, others float untouched in the net, and many more have migrated to newer technology, while various websites are now old-style static net corners.

The urgency of providing context as a collaborative process is now a matter of fact. Since it is impossible to fill these gaps completely, we can instead attempt to evoke a sense of consciousness of their existence by providing some “crumbs”, to borrow the term used to describe a pioneer platform dedicated to curating new media art that is still a major point of reference.

Benjamin Weil, former curator at SFMOMA and currently curator at the LABoral Center in Gijon, Spain, envisioned this as early as 1997, when he organized “Map the Gap”, an exhibition of material documenting the process of collaboration between artists, webmasters and curators to realize works for the online platform āda ‘web (the material consisted mostly of notes, sketches, and drawings). Additionally, many of the pieces included in the show “The Art of Participation”, held at the SFMOMA in 2008, documented past performances and experiments. As stated by curator Rudolf Frieling, the exhibition “brought together historical and contemporary concepts of participation, tracing a lineage of artistic approaches that include communication art, institutional critique, relational aesthetics, and social practice”. Some works, such as Telephone Call by Janet Cardiff, an audio-video walk through SFMOMA’s spaces, were also handing down memories of the show “010101. Art in Technological Times,” which the piece was commissioned for. These are only some major examples of a shared feeling of the urgency to document what obsolescence captures in time frames that are increasingly shorter in time, thus leaving unreachable gaps.

The role of museums is not only important for the preservation of works of art, but also to keep track of contemporary culture and of the many gaps it is comprised of. Considering the limits of space and the unavoidable paradox implied by hosting live works, one of the many possible solutions could be the creation of points of convergence within the very same technological medium. Exhibitions, performances, talks and everything that happens in space, become flashes of memory,

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4 Miltos Manetas, Italian duo Bianco-Valente and Swiss artist Katja Loher were the artists who created these site-specific works. From computers, and through a moving cube as an interface, online works by Bestiario.org, Boredomresearch, David Crawford (Whitney Artport’s commission), HugoHeyrman, LesLiensInvisible, Steven Vitiello (commission by DIA Art Foundation for the Arts) were made available.
5 CRUMB was funded by Beryl Graham and Sara Cook as a research institute at Sunderland University in 2000.
6 SFMOMA held 010101. Art in Technological Times. It was one of the major exhibitions dedicated to the new developments in contemporary art, architecture, and design as they evolved and were influenced by digital technology. On that occasion, Benjamin Weil, curator of the show, featured an online section for works of net art.
8 Janet Cardiff’s work as well as the works by Rebecca Bollinger, Rineke Dijkstra, Karin Sander and Sarah Sze, all commissioned for the exhibition “010101” are now part of the SFMOMA’s permanent collection.
which are then reconnected to the virtual constellation. In this scenario, the museum becomes a part of a whole, shifting its centre of gravity from the role it has in the physical space towards the liquid realm, where it can be an active player in shaping the intelligent architecture that the evolution of the Internet from the Web 2.0 into the Web 3.0 is meant to be.