

THE WORK OF ART AND THE INTERNET. NEW CURATORIAL ISSUES: NETINSPACE – A CASE STUDY

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The paper shapes from the experience of *NETinSPACE*, the project I curated at MAXXI — the newly born National Museum of XX1st Century Arts in Rome (2005-2011). With a theoretical, as well as a practical approach, it focuses on curatorial issues raised when dealing with artworks that employ the web as a territory for creation and as a means of artistic production, mostly when within the institutional walls.

Introduction

What is "new media" art? The relation of the term to the medium has been discussed extensively and controversially, in contrast to the ease with which we still categorize more traditional art according to technique, such as "oil on canvas" or "drawings on paper". New media art is generally perceived as existing outside the mainstream art system. This is particularly true for "net.art", a term that recognizes art practices that use the internet as a creative terrain and as a tool for artistic production.

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Much new media art can exist perfectly well without any institutions. But, as Christian Paul, Adjunct New Media Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, has pointed out, "new media art constitutes a contemporary artistic practice that institutions cannot afford to ignore". [1] Conflicts that occur as these unconventional and mutable works come into contact with art institutions and their established parameters, inevitably affect curatorial practice.

The vast quantity of critical writings on the subject shows that there is no universally applicable paradigm. The analysis of case studies can therefore be a useful strategy in the exploration of a curatorial practice that is in constant flux, not only when dealing with new media art, but also when it comes to art that, since the avant-gardes and irrespective of the medium, has dissolved into a "gaseous state" (*état gazeux*) to use French philosopher Yves Michaud's metaphor. [2]

Issues of terminology, curatorial tasks and display issues, are here explored through my experience at MAXXI in Rome, Italy, where the NetSpace project was launched in 2005, evolving, by 2010, into NETinSPACE. It has proved to be an interesting terrain of curatorial research. Choices – of terms of reference and of display – have been part of the task. The curator, in her role as mediator between the artists and the museum, had to find points of convergence with the institution.

NetSpace (2005-2008), held at MAXXI when the new born museum was located in the neutral spaces of former military barracks whose shape inspired the design by architect Zaha Hadid, consisted of continuous events as well as an "active" archive closely linked to education and research. Thirteen consecutive events related to net art, including video-screenings and artists' talks, were held in the course of three years. The goal was to provide, throughout significant works and artists, an overview of then over fifteen years activity on the net during which these art practices were shared by almost only specialized artists and theorists. Computers gave visitors access to online works grouped in thematic cycles that addressed the general nature of the internet (i.e. *Content and Forms, Art and Virtual Identities, Electronic Landscapes*). The audience were invited to interact with the works, and to deepen their knowledge of historic contexts. The selection of works was never intended to be exhaustive, but to provide an introduction to modes of art production and thinking, new to the institutional scenario, and to encourage visitors to continue their journey by navigating the web – where net.art has originated – from their own (home) computers.

Historic context was a crucial component of the project. Essays realized in conjunction with the Department of Education provided content descriptions and located these works in art history, and in the artists' research. Their historic framing was a task of "interpretation" as intended by Beryl Graham and Sara Cook in their recent, extensive critical survey on curatorial practice. [3] Also, categorizing and defining this particular art form in this particular manner was a useful way of further contextualizing and exploring art practices that were still obscure to many – especially in Italy and at that time.

Now that net.art has crossed the threshold of institutions, despite meeting with some resistance, we need to move on and release it from its ghetto to consider it in the much wider context of idioms of contemporary art and culture in general. NetSpace was already travelling in this direction insofar as each event included international artists who tended to use relatively more traditional media but had begun to experiment with the internet as a tool of creative research. Francis Alÿs (*The Thief*, 1999), Arturo Herrera (*Almost Home*, 1998) were among these artists invited to experiment with the internet, as web commissions, by the newyroker DIA Art Foundation, a pioneer institution to pay interest towards these art practices.

This was the basis for the renamed project, NETinSPACE, which was launched on May 27, 2010, on the occasion of the inauguration of MAXXI, as a section of its first thematic collection called *Spazio/Space*. Part of it has moved beyond the computer screen to invade the museum's physical space, "infiltrating" the passages adjacent to the exhibition galleries. Established and emerging artists, working both on the internet and in a variety of non-web-based idioms, have shaped a new territory where diverse languages interweave and merge into one.

Katja Loher, Miltos Manetas, and artist duo Bianco-Valente were the first to embrace this challenge by creating site-specific installations at MAXXI/NETinSPACE. The web components that characterize each of their works were conceived both in their own right, for on-line viewing, and as extensions to site-specific installations, affording different perceptions. The internet functioned as both "tool" and "space", conceptually and physically meshing with the museum as a location.

Young multidisciplinary artist Katja Loher's work was on display in the foyer which hundreds of people pass through from the main entrance every day. *Sculpting in Air*, Loher's work produced for this occasion, was one of many incarnations of her planets/universes in which choreographed bodies filmed from a bird's eye view come together to form the letters of a new language. In this instance, the post-production editing process orchestrated a dialogue between man and machine. Her projections onto large weather balloons (*Videoplanets*, since 2006), inside circular sculptures (*Miniverses*, since 2008), through coloured water in three glasses (*RGB Well*, 2009/2010), or inside glass bubbles (*Bubbles*, 2010) are just some of the ways in which Loher achieves the transformation of video into sculpture.

The audience's perception of and interaction with her work has always played an important role in Loher's explorations. The different ways in which her videos become sculptures also encourage different modes of viewing: while the balloon projections embrace the audience, the *Miniverse* sculptures force people to bend low to peer at the videos through holes.

Adding the internet component to *Sculpting in Air* enabled Loher to construct a much more complex scenario, pushing the game between observer and observed to its extreme: in the video projected on the front of the balloon, a sudden zoom-in of the camera frames the gaze of one of the dancers, establishing a strong connection with the observer. A moment later, this connection is broken by an equally sudden zoom-out which merges the dancer's face back into the ensemble. Meanwhile, the audience itself is also being watched. Images from a camera that films visitors as they observe the work are projected onto the rear of the balloon and incorporated into the "planet". From there, the images are returned in reverse live-stream transmission to observers who watch both video and filmed visitors on a computer screen located at a distance, in another part of the foyer.

Sculpting in Air emphasises a fragmented vision in which both sculptural component and mode of viewing are based on circularity. Moreover, the internet extends the voyeuristic aspect already present in her earlier works. This time, however, it involves both the online observers and the artist herself, who can stay connected to her work and to its physical visitors regardless of her/their own whereabouts.

MILTOS MANETAS - *IAMGONNACOPY*, 2010

If Katja Loher uses the internet as an experimental tool to extend the scope of her exploration, it is second home to Miltos Manetas. One of the first artists to produce oil paintings of the world of information (e.g. *Italian Painting*, 2000, in the MAXXI collection), Manetas is a pioneer in the use of the internet as a tool of artistic production. His presence in this new stage of the project was of particular relevance as this artist continuously moves between worlds with a forward-looking vision that embraces technological advances as well as new modes of communication.

IamGonnaCopy (2010), the title of Maneta's "action" conceived for MAXXI, constitutes the convergence of a number of elements from his previous on-line work, *IamGonnaCopy* (2001), and from his contribution to *Internet Pavilion*, presented at the 53rd Venice Biennial (2009), which included his manifesto, *Pirates of The Internet Unite*.

The initiator of artistic currents such as Neen, a name Manetas commissioned from Lexicon Branding, the artist has been constantly exploring the interface between the analog and digital dimensions. *IamGonnaCopy* (2010) is a synthesis of his past and present work. It is his vision of a new territory where body and information merge into a unified whole. Manetas' manifesto and new stickers bearing

the title of the work as a logo, design by Experimental Jetset, were distributed in various locations, with the Manifesto posted all over the city, and covering one of the foyer's main walls. The stickers were distributed by hand, and inserted in more than 5,000 copies of the free "cura.magazine". Everything came together in the web component, a platform where, apart from documenting his intervention in physical space, Manetas invited participants in cultural life to vote in favour of or against copyright. While the posters remain on the wall, having almost merged with it, the artist's action has moved on towards a "metascreen" [4] dimension in which a new, post-internet analog era is evolving.

BIANCO VALENTE - *EVOLUTIVE CONVERGENCE*, 2010

At a considerable distance from the main foyer, in the vicinity of the gallery dedicated to the work of architect Luigi Moretti, visitors encountered Bianco-Valente's *Evolutive Convergence*, realized for the transparent elevator that connects the ground floor with the upper level. The Italian artist duo has been exploring the boundary between matter (body) and the ephemeral (mind), experimenting with and using a variety of materials and supports, predominantly video. They are often engaged in site-specific installations related to interior and exterior museum architectures as well as public spaces.

Evolutive Convergence extended the artists' field of interest to a confrontation between real and virtual space that, exposed to mutual influences or cross-fertilization, evokes the functioning of universal natural laws. Ramification processes that are characteristic of trees, for example, also form the basis of most natural ecosystems, including neural structures. Bianco-Valente turned them into metaphors for the organization and visualization of the fluid space of the internet. For the web component, the branching patterns materialized in pastel on the museum elevator's four-meter tall glass surfaces were translated into flash images.

The elevator turned out to be an eminently suitable location to present their work from different angles, not least from the inside of the elevator capsule, which afforded a view of the surrounding space and art exhibits through the filter of the patterns.

NET.ART ON THE COMPUTERS

In a dedicated computer space, visitors could access information about six selected net.art works (1996 – 2008), i.e. site-specific installations as well as their web componets. Each project, both online and on location in the museum, addressed the theme of "space" in its virtual and physical dimensions, and their cross-fertilization. A moving, a-hierarchical cube flash interface gave access to works by Bestiario, Dr. Hugo Heyrman, David Crawford, Les Liens Invisibles (Clemente Pestelli and Gionatan Quintini), Boredomresearch (Vicky Isley and Paul Smith) and Stephen Vitiello. Sustained interest in net.art has promoted a "live" archive where these works are available to the public in a continuing tension between past and present.

The display of net-based art on computers scattered throughout the museum is "barbarian" [5] in the classical Greek sense to identify people alien to Greek culture and unable to speak that language, literally "stammerer". Here – and also as regards the Museum's section dedicated to net.art – the intention has never been one of "display", even if the media have often claimed this to be the case. Rather, such displays are intended to act as a mode of "live documentation" to capture the interest of both the audience and of the institution itself.

With regard to the net.art section, the delivery of online works on the computer screen is now ready to shift into another, perhaps exclusively online, mode. This also takes into account the Museum's new space and audience, who are not only much broader and more heterogeneous, but also much more easily "distracted" from content, and "attracted" by Hadid's powerful architecture.

Conclusions

The above shows that NETinSPACE is located in between spaces, in between art genres, at the edge of research, and on the borderline between the unconventional and the institutional. Location – or rather, dis-location – metaphorically reflects an art form that is everywhere and nowhere, involving all departments and disciplines. Also, "net" does not exclusively refer to the internet but applies to art that manifests itself in a web of convergence of the virtual and physical dimensions.

The museum has played a dual role in embracing this project, both as the unconventional host of net.art, a process which uproots this art form from its context, and as an active participant in the production of conventional and experimental works conceived for and adapted to the museum space.

Adding site-specific installations has also turned the "interpreter" curator into more of a "mediator" between artists and institution. The presentation of net.art works alongside site-specific installations frames these art practices in a broader art scenario.

Like most unconventional art, Net.art has undergone a number of shifts, many of them determined by its move into the mainstream art system. For some artists this institutional acceptance has opened up new modes of production, encouraging them to conceive their works in formats that, while far removed from the dynamics and modes of involvement dictated by the internet, may better suit the institution in terms of its mission, gallery space and audience. Also, some artists have "translated" their works onto new supports in order to cater for the tastes and needs of this particular audience. The online works shown on the computers at MAXXI have been part of the "live" hypertext archive that has explored works created exclusively for the internet and more strictly associated with the original meaning of net.art.

Mostly, when operating within large art institutions, the curator has to adopt a certain accepted terminology to communicate with the general public. However, neither umbrella terms such as net.art – nor the broader term "new media art" – will ever completely fit art practices that are not only multidisciplinary in nature, but "alive" and in continuous flux. Repeated – if occasionally critical – usage in a now vast body of literature has nevertheless established a certain vocabulary. Narrower terms such as "interactivity", "connectivity" and "computability," [6] which Steve Dietz uses to illustrate new media behaviour, can therefore improve the understanding of what the umbrella terms refer to.

The decision to use these terms in a field relatively new to museums was as much dictated by practical issues as by necessities of art theory. In regard to NETinSPACE, presenting online art using the term "net.art" has had a dual objective: on the one hand, as has been mentioned above, to place net.art in a broader context; on the other hand, to continue building the "active" archive that keeps alive the names and categories that designate certain art practices associated with a certain period, some of which may continue to evolve, albeit in a greatly changed context.

This is one of many reasons why "providing context" will always be important when dealing with new-media art – not least to give researchers, curators, and future conservators some points of reference. Ever since art dissolved into a "gaseous state", documentation has proved to be an even more important and inevitable curatorial activity than ever before, and it is the very first step towards conservation and archiving.

As Charlie Gere states in an essay published on the Tate website, "what we choose to archive and thus to preserve for future generations will help determine the future." [7]

This is NETinSPACE's new, intense work being carried out in close collaboration with "MAXXI B.A.S.E", the museum's research centre.

References and Notes:

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