

DATA TRASH

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Data Trash traces the texture and tactility of HTML - looking critically at the evolution of the online interface and its appropriation back into object based artefact; clarifying the pivotal place of the network in our cultural realm.



Stella Brennan, Tuesday, 3 July 2001, 10:38am, 2001-2002, detail- cotton on canvas.

Does HTML leave a trace of tactility and texture?

Net art first appeared in a geeky corner, a few degrees removed from existing curatorial and museum practices. When Marc Andresson's *Netscape Web Browser* was introduced in 1994, it opened up new frontier of immersive, intimate public space unmediated by the art museum. On the net artists believed that they could work without context or censorship, retaining control of their content while constantly connected to a global community.

The net seemed like an intimate affair - a rich tapestry of connections. There was an element of forging a new craft. Stella Brennan has captured needlepoint, created in cotton on canvas, [Figure1] the Apple Macintosh operating system at the turn of the twenty first century – a view we no longer see as the landscape has radically changed. The approximately one meter square *Tuesday, 3 July 2001, 10:38am*, simply depicts a screenshot of Brennan's desktop, encapsulating an era.

The best networked art often relied on non-standard software and hardware, on glitches and on happy accidents to function. It was built with dynamism, rather than preservation in mind. We've already lost many fleeting works from the early experimental days of Internet art through corruption and mutation. Net art archives usually retain a minority of works – ones which are straightforward to conserve because of their common and stable formats, or their ability to be easily migrated. . With the certainty of either going out with a crash or slowly fading away, online art becomes data trash.

Ironically material culture responded to these issues with a mutant field of migratory practice with artists producing static artefacts from the ephemeral net.art works almost as soon as the works appeared! The wonderfully whimsical *Introduction to net.art (1994-1999)* a manifesto formulated by Natalie Bookchin (USA) & Alexie Shulgin (USSR), carved on six marble tablets by Blank & Jeron (Germany). The representation is derived from the Blank & Jerons work *Dump your Trash (1998)*, where a software agent recycles existing web pages into new pages. Pages filed at this site stay stored even after the original has been long lost or shut down. The texts carved in stone secure their presence in the physical world while simultaneously subverting the ephemeral - an ironic commentary on the way we deal with data in the information society.

The memorial concept is taken further with Nick Crowe's *The New Medium (1999)* – fifteen glass panels hand-engraved with internet memorial pages that had been submitted to a web site called Virtual Heaven. First shown at the long defunct Lux Gallery, London in January 2000, *The New Medium* examined different forms of internet use including the iconography of personal homepages and the growing use of cyberspace as a spiritual medium. The fragile works glow faintly in the gallery full of sentiment and touching naïvety.

Investigating the point where the mind starts to confuse what is reality and what is illusion, Jan Robert Leegte focuses on the physical experience of the internet. His *Scrollbars (2005)* installation isolates elements of the Windows interface, which are projected onto various structures. As an artist he moved from being internet-based, to creating physical installations to develop a more meditative relationship between the audience and the work. Pixel depth is perhaps too superficial?

Carving in stone or painting on canvas secures a presence in the physical space of an object-driven art-market. The Google browser is surely the most painted, sketched, photographed and built interface artefacts, with Japanese artist collective Exenemo's 3.5x 2.5 m *Google (2004)* painting being one outstanding example. It is of course owned by the Google collection.

The *Rhizome* screenshot, drawn on paper with pencil and gouache (2000) by Russian Masha Moriskina, was as well, immediately bought by art portal Rhizome. Moriskina continued to create highly desirable web page renders – important historical documents which reminding us of the long forgotten stories of Internet art victories such as that of the eToys/Etoy wars! [1]

It was never an easy fit as existing art forms such as drawing, photography, poetry, video, animation and radio moved to the net, adopting the unique aesthetic of chunky pixelated low res images, low bit sound, and the now vaguely recalled rhythm of slowly downloaded net-art. Networked art challenged but never usurped the well-established commodity value of the discrete art object and the primacy of authorship.

In 2003 Thomson and Craighead created the *dot-store* - an e-shop environment which delivered a series of artworks both on and offline. This included “a beautifully crafted set of four tea towels sporting a series of authentic search engine results returned to a user when the criteria, 'Please Help Me', 'Is Anybody there?', 'Please listen to me' and, 'Can you hear me?' were entered into the search field, while using Google in Netscape 4.7 on Mac OS 9.2 or Netscape 6 on Windows 98.” [2]

The printed textiles, embroidery, drawings, engraving, sculptures, paintings, machinima and etchings have a ready-made future while the ephemeral coded works they are derived from do not. To break

the glass, to trash the art, to rip the fabric is to scatter the bleached bones of HTML – the skeletal remains of the lively richness that once connected people across networks.

As we speed into that future, there is a certainty of corruption and mutation and decay. Online work becomes disposable data trash, environmental and cultural wreckage, littering the web with dysfunctional and lost artworks. But remember today's data trash will resurface, be revalued and recycled in a not too distant future.

References and Notes:

1. *Jill Priluck, "Etoy: 'This Means War,'" Wired's official Web Site, December 21, 1999, <http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/news/1999/12/33189> (accessed June 7, 2012).*
2. *Thomson and Craighead, "Google Tea Towels," UCL's official Web Site, <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade/slide/docs/towels.html> (accessed June 7, 2012).*