

(HE)ARTBREAKING TO THE CORE. ZOMBIE DATA AND THE ARTS OF RE/DE/TRANSCODING

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Digital corpses all abound, zombie data that is still there, but cannot be performed anymore. Besides archivists' efforts to revive the work in its original state, artists have developed their own strategies of embracing errors and glitches of re/de/transcoding processes and open up a dialogue of sameness and change, obsolescence and progress, memory and forgetting, positioned as an antithesis to constant technological progress and perfection.

An Art Historical Perspective on Methods

With net.art and non-programmers learning to write in html, it first became widely used that artists would use code as material. From the very start they played with its rules, modified existing systems, tinkered with obsolete data. Through intentional creative abuse and a playful disrespect for industry/proprietary protocols they rip open a Wunderkammer for re/de/transcoding, compression artefacts and feedback. Of omnipresent obsolescence, endless errors, forced failures, and grown glitches, thereby defining a New Language of New Media, full of references and relations, ruptures and departures. Defining Media Art as a process, not as a product.

Art Historically we can find similarities to the Situationist International's détournement, appropriation art, readymades, sampling, cut-up, bricolage. The list is endless. Yet, there is something radically different between Digital Art and its predecessors. It is the direct impact code has on an artwork, its operability as well as its look and feel. In pre-digital artistic practices, new layers of information and meaning were packed on top of the old. With reusing and modifying code, the layers in the back are reworked. The artwork is opened up, declared unfinished, its multiple dimensions and unrealized potentials exposed. Signal processing is de- & reconstruction in its original architectural sense: it reworks the very statistics of code.

This approach is often described as creative abuse; a mutiny of the inscribed politics of protocol. Artists such as JODI, Rosa Menkman, Sven König et al go on a quest to discover and exploit the flaws of these systems, find their loopholes and weaknesses to tweak and bend until a satisfactory mayhem results. An assault on code as an assault on culture "for language under technological rationality is functionalized, rendered pure instrumentality; and its repeated use is also internalized as social behavior." [1] Or, as Herbert Marcuse writes in *One-Dimensional Man*, "the Great Refusal - the protest against that which is", the axioms of consumption as the unquestioned a priori of our culture are under attack. "Whether ritualized or not, art contains the rationality of negation. In its advanced positions, it is the Great Refusal – the protest against that which is. The modes in which men and things are made to appear, to sing and sound and speak, are modes of refuting, breaking, and recreating their factual existence." [2]

In analogy to what Tilman Baumgärtel writes about game art, this approach "is critical and ironic, disrespectful and deconstructivist. The artists do not take technological dispositives for granted, but rather

manipulate and abuse, circumvent and modify," [3] thereby not only altering the source code, but on a meta level the very structures inherent to it; the rules for working with&&in a particular system. The game of Digital Art is taken to the next level, playfully, skilfully. The modifications are simultaneously texture, context, code, law, functionality. These interventions make the immaterial code tangible, concrete poetry, dys/functional, stuttering image. The text is speaking in an unfamiliar voice, often nonsensical, abstract. The artists lead us into semantically unnegotiated space, a new territory where what we perceive does not have meaning yet.

Baumgärtel describes "customizing or even redesigning digital code" as a form of hacking. Hacker culture has become a role model for artistic political disobedience, critique and aesthetics. Out of a "lack of respect for technological givens" technology is challenged and disputed on its own terrain [4], playfully driving any system into schizophrenia and towards epic fail, pure and absolute aggression and irony, "laughing terror" (Thank you, Mr. Bazon Brock). Just like in game hacks the artists test their skills against the systems/authorities, pervert the rules and declare them suspended, defining anything as potential playground. To analyse these processes, we have to unwrap them from their original form/ula/tion and focus on the data's shapelessness, its sleeping potentials. We enter the realms where colorless *green ideas* sleep furiously (Thank you, Mr. Noam Chomsky).

Antimatter

Art that conceptually includes failure poses a juxtaposition to technotopia's hysteria of constant progress, i.e. perfection, crystallization. Failure is unmodern, misplaced in our culture, it is the omni-present / ever-absent meta narrative, an "endless progression of catastrophe and death" (Thank you, Mr. Walter Benjamin). This topos of the "dark side" of progress can be found in steampunk, in dystopias, in the night tales of romanticism. As Slavoj Žižek points out in "Grimaces of the Real", the subject of Enlightenment was the monster. I want to take this a step further and say that it is not only the subject, but the real result. The return of the monster, i.e. the uncanny, a reestablishment of the force of the unknown. These monsters are built and constructed out of reused, broken remnants of once shiny and promising, then discarded futures. They are failures. Cyborgian organisms. Eternal heterogeneity. Always in flux. Conscious of their partiality, temporality, temporeality, temposurreality. They are temp-sensitive devices with a strong sense of morbidity. Forever undead. Zombies.

When code is reinterpreted, re-repaired, and re-re-reused its function and meaning changes.-This change creates dis/continuity, sustains connections via references. It is relational, pointing to a historical rootedness. JODI's "SOD", while removing most of the recognizable parts of the original, still carries the reference in its title. Rosa Menkman's "Collapse of PAL" is a straight-forward obituary to the death of a standard. Jeff Donaldson commits his artist alter ego noteNdo to a single system. Melissa Barron's Apple II hacks and her glitch weavings pay tribute to a very specific historical computer model and pre-computational contraptions. In all these cases, even though there is a strong connection to the past, the intention of re/de/transcoding is not to dwell on lost times, but to discover through it something new, not yet realized. Therefore this approach can hardly be defined nostalgic. Rather, it is magical. It is about finding the right spell to conjure up the invisible. The meta material is the absent, a constant referrer, permalink to a lack. The conjunctions are simultaneously breaking points, fragile alliances, fluid, because of their original brokenness. Artists tear these apart, rip them open. "Rip it up and start again", as a song title by Orange Juice says. It's a digital punk attitude. Through these processes of ripping, scarring and safety pin mending the antimatter materializes, its potentials shape-shift from immaterial to material.

It is in the “nature” of the medium, this potential to create and evoke certain effects. It is in the politics of the protocols to discard most of them. If one dares to intentionally misinterpret, misuse, refuse to accept the underlying axioms and the closure of the system and hack open this black magic box, Alice's rabbit hole lets us slide into a plenitude of marvels and potentials. Artists take hostage of the information within the hacked systems, re/arrange and corrupt it, make their own interpretations and thus create something new, not in the scope of the policy makers' original intentions. They are politically incorrect so to say, intractable, unruly; digital punk; it's a hacker ethics and aesthetics.

Hacker Aesthetics and Digital Punk Approach

What Karl Popper calls “critical imagination” is the ability to think creatively, outside of the box, to break through given limitations. An unbound curiosity for the hidden potentials and unknown aesthetic qualities of a medium are the driving forces behind art practices devoted to failure. The aesthetics are a consequence of these ethics and just as much a result of the artist's skills as they are inherent to the particular medium chosen, purposely breaking with aesthetic stereotypes of future and progress. A materialization of the medium's crisis and its cries of torture. It is the process that the artists are after, redesigning and redesignating the originally inscribed purpose and aesthetics. Hacking into the magic code that can make miraculous things appear. Working in the spirit of hacker ethics creates hacker aesthetics, as Florian Cramer writes: “Ever since BBS underground culture of the 1980s and net.art of the 1990s, 'hacks' and intentional crudeness of software and hardware design have been embraced as an alternative computer aesthetic. By themselves, they perfectly conform to classical philosophical notions of the sublime as the opposite of beauty. [...] It is an aesthetic, however, that constitutes itself as the symmetrical opposite of neo-Pythagorean beauty ideals that have governed computer science from Knuth to fractal geometry, the 'art and beauty' from white-hat hacker culture described by Steven Levy, and the human/computer interface designs of mainstream, high-tech media lab arts.” [5] The beauty of this approach lies in the process itself, which is still reflected in the crudity of its temporal appearance. It is Baumgärtel once more who identified that “this ethical believe is at the core of all creative use and more importantly the creative abuse of computer technology.” [6]

Making Things Strange

What makes failure so attractive is its surprise effect. Failure “hacks the possibility of automatized perception” as consumption, it's the anti-control. Intentional errors are an anarchic gesture towards the System, and, as Harald Szeemann puts it, have a poetic dimension as they are “allowing the fiasco to actually take place.” [7] Delightful terror, beloved destruction, welcomed mayhem, a diversion that upsets the peace of mind of the audience, their learned attitudes. It forces reaction and dealing with the situation by alienating expectations. This strategy gained special prominence in the work of Bertolt Brecht. His “Verfremdungseffekt” (alienation effect) is based on the concept of *ostranenie*, coined by Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky. [8] *Ostranenie* alienates by means of making familiar things strange, by estranging us from what something used to mean. “I stare at the glitch as a void of knowledge”, says Rosa Menkman. [9] While formally indistinguishable, everyday language and poetic language belong to different spheres. “Making things strange” lives of redesignations, decontextualization, violence to the usual and terror to established connections of symbol and meaning. Working with failure creates a poetic language that is simultaneously a meta critique of that language's implemented politics, i.e. the rules of acceptable usage within the system. It is poetic digital disobedience.

Shklovsky defines the purpose of art as “to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.” [10] Baumgärtel quotes Shklovsky in the context of game art / art games, thereby referring to the ludic, playful qualities of *ostranenie*. *Ostranenie* refers to playfulness and code=text in yet another way, the game of constructing meaning in language. Language Games, as Ludwig Wittgenstein defines them in his *Philosophical Investigation* [11] and the necessity of rule-following [12] in order to play the same game. In artistic code interventions such as JODI's or Cory Arcangel's, the rules of the chosen system are followed, but the rule-following itself is perverted, resulting in *ostranenie*. The game of meaning is the battle/play//ground for renegotiations on code and meta code levels. While pretending to play the game, subversive actions are taking place. The game is not played, but played *with*. We make up the rules as we go along, says Wittgenstein. [13] These Language Games enable us to leave accustomed positions and open up the magic circle (as in virtual worlds) for the sublime, the strange, the miraculous. It is this otherworldliness that turns something polemic into being poetic. “Poetic language must appear strange and wonderful.” [14]

Archival Issues

“It is obvious that our work is against HiTech”, JODI say. [15] As diverse as the artworks in this context may be, what many of them share is their interest in decay and a refusal of planned obsolescence. In its own way, such an approach is therefore a form of preservation. Reusing opens up the artwork for its inherent, unrecognized poetic potentials that seemingly defy archival interests while disturbing learned perceptual mechanisms and critiquing unquestioned obedience to the protocols of code and culture. This possibility of opening up a work as well as the necessity to do so in the light of technological obsolescence poses questions whether and how it is possible to archive Media Art. For the scope of this paper, I only want to focus on the question of what accepting the errors and resulting differences to the original look and feel means for preservation. This mainly is a matter of what constitutes a (digital) original.

Reusing and altering finished works seemingly runs counter to all goals of preservation, against the perfect in the sense of the finished, the hard, the crystal. Media Art resembles a Cyborgian organism that rapidly decays, aware of its timeliness. It stands there, amidst the utopia of constant progress of consumerism and continuous future, as the antipode of forever, of crystallized moments and formats, of perfection. “All these moments will be lost in time like tears in the rain”, are Batty's final words in *Blade Runner*. The (unreachable) maxim of eternal life (i.e. the archive) is the perfectly lossless timond (timond = time + diamond, a concept used for example by Morgan Higby-Flowers in “TIMONDS are forever”, <http://bit.ly/psQYbA>). With Media Art being process, not product, stretching over time as well as space, what remains of this concept? If with preservation we mean to keep the original alive, what after all IS the original? For Walter Benjamin, it is defined by its aura, and aura is about presence, the co-presence of work and spectator. Isn't this precisely what is realized by copies and their dissemination nowadays? The aura, it is not lost, as Benjamin predicted. Like a form of energy, it only shape-shifted. If the aura is related to presence and presence is realized by ample dissemination, regardless of a specific format or quality, then true originals are possible on every computer. Viral dissemination processes via YouTube, Tumblr, and other social media platforms create digital originals in zillions of places simultaneously. They are – not only, but also – preserved by being spread. The archive is not so much a place on a single hard drive, but torrents of bits and pieces distributed and shared over legions of community networks. Similar to the dystopian concept presented in *Fahrenheit 451*, this is how we remember, by re-storing, retelling, remixing, sampling, scrambling. “With wide implications for the media archaeological methodology, the archive is increasingly being rethought not as a spatial place of history, but as a contemporary

technological circuit that redistributes temporality in other ways. This is how Wolfgang Ernst suggests theorists and artists to rethink media archeology; not only as an excavation of the past, but as an intensive gaze on the micro-temporal modulations that take place in computerized circuits of technology.“ [16] The concept of the original – the holy cow of art history – will be slaughtered and Walter Benjamin's seminal text “The Work of [®] in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” has to be reread with a different mindset as “The Work of Art(&facts) in the Age of Viral Remixing”.

Being in constant flux as a state of being here to stay challenges traditional archiving and its impossible stasis. For digital media to live, there is no alternative to change. Even doing nothing does something. It creates zombies. Undead shelf corpses that brainlessly stroll around some museum every once in a while. Digital Media Art is an active process, or - in reference to Umberto Eco – an Open Work. Its archiving/preservation has to adapt to this and remain flexible. For now, I would like to call such an approach that embraces variability of all kinds, virality of dissemination, shifting from format fetishism to Free Software liberation “speculative archiving”. Media archaeologists Jussi Parikka and Garnet Hertz stress on this aspect, too, when they declare obsolescence of media as an opportunity for active artistic practices rather than merely an archivist and conservative drama. Not the product, but the process, “the circuit, not the past, is where media archeology starts – as an excavation of the timecritical processes of culture; its not only a mode of analysis, however, but a mode of creation as well. This extends the idea of criticism from a second-order reflection on things into a mode of creation. [17] Media criticism within the medium. This indicates a new notion of archiving, criticism and art making alike. A procedural culture instead of a static one. One that fulfills its purpose of keeping alive not by means of crystallization, but by change and dissemination. A digital diaspora. This is not yet another utopia, it's everyday life reality already. We are becoming Johnny Mnemonic. With digital technologies and their obsolescence we seem to move back to historic means of storage, old school fairy tale communities, in which stories are retold and passed on from person to person, generation to generation. Something is lost and something new is added by every passer-on. Some things are remembered, some forgotten. Everyone involved in that game becomes an organic part of this body of knowledge. Digital viral communities resemble oral communities and their ways of preserving knowledge. We are all torrents of information. To the advantage that while a single instance might have a faulty memory, the chance of survival and sustainability of the (fragmented & reassembled) whole are increased. The multitude of storages does more than just make up for individual copies' errors. Repetition is a form of fucking change (Thank you, Mr. Brian Eno).

P.S.: With the recurring “Thank you, xxx” I was trying to find a way to escape the limitation of characters in the footnote section. I hope this is acceptable for you, for this text was intended to be as relational as the artistic practices discussed.

References and Notes:

1. Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 30.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Tilman Baumgärtel, "Gaming Culture and Computer Games by Artists," <http://bit.ly/pAWvoQ> (accessed June 6, 2011), 13.
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. Florian Cramer, "What is Interface Aesthetics, or What Could It Be (Not)?" in *Interface Criticism: Aesthetics Beyond the Buttons*, eds. Christian Andersen and Soren Pold, 117-129 (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2011).
6. Tilman Baumgärtel, "Gaming Culture and Computer Games by Artists," <http://bit.ly/pAWvoQ> (accessed June 6, 2011), 3.
7. Harald Szeemann, "Failure as a Poetic Dimension," in *Failure*, ed. Lisa Le Feuvre, 194 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).
8. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique (1917)," <http://bit.ly/cqFWht> (accessed June 6, 2011).
9. Rosa Menkman, "Glitch Studies Manifesto (2010)," <http://bit.ly/dA2P33> (accessed June 6, 2011).
10. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique (1917)," <http://bit.ly/cqFWht> (accessed June 6, 2011).
11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001 [3rd edition]), 4e, §7.
12. *Ibid.*, 70e, §§206ff.
13. *Ibid.*, 33e, §83.
14. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique (1917)," <http://bit.ly/cqFWht> (accessed June 6, 2011).
15. Tilman Baumgärtel, *[net.art 2.0]: Neue Materialien zur Netzkunst*, (Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 1999), 108.
16. Jussi Parikka and Garnet Hertz, "Zombie Media (2010)" (forthcoming in *Leonardo Journal*, 2012).
17. *Ibid.*