MIKLÓS PETERNÁK*

ART ON THE INTERNET, *NET.ART*, ARTISTS' NETWORKS AND THE MEDIUM OF PRESERVATION

Abstract: Most works of art stand before us uncoded and easily accessible to our senses and emotions. It is a peculiarty of media art that one needs an apparatus and sometimes even a code system in order for it to be accessible. By apparatus we refer - using Vilém Flusser's concept – to the tools and the knowledge concerning their use, by code we should understand special individual systems of notation. The preconditions of presenting and preserving a work of nw media art are firstly the apparatus and secondly the knowledge and functional presence of the code system. There are points of intersection between the different apparatuses: a reproduction is more often close to identical with the original than before the emergence of technical mediums. The disappearing elements of one apparatus can be replaced by a new apparatus.

What are the new artistic possibilities for works made for the internet? How can net.art, the product of the communication change in the 1990's, survive the attacks of constant upgrades?

The appearance of technical media in the arts and in cultural communications brought with it a new phenomenon: the audience had to confront both the unfamiliar features of these media, and the new content that appeared in the context of the (same) new media.

Most works of art stand before us uncoded and easily accessible to our senses and emotions. It is a peculiarity of media art that one needs an apparatus, and sometimes even a code system, to make this art accessible. By "apparatus" (Vilém Flusser's term) we mean tools and the knowledge required for their use. By "code" we understand a special system of notation (for example a particular filter system or a chemical combination, specific software, or directions concerning presentation).

The issues discussed below are closely tied to the World Wide Web. We can use a map created by the net-art pioneer artists' group JODI containing what they perceive to be relevant links to the topic.

The question of the mid–90s was this: What are the new possibilities for representing art using the Internet? What are the artistic possibilities of the Net itself? What are the new kinds of artwork that can be made for the Internet? But the time for the big questions passed and we found ourselves asking in the late 90s how net.art, this special art product of the 1990's, could survive the attacks of constant upgrades.

Let's start with a possibly provocative remark, plus a small demonstration:

A significant percent of the artworks I shall speak about no longer exists in its original form, though none of them is more than 15 years old. Andy Warhol's famous "15 minutes of fame" in this context is not relevant to the society of spectacle so much as to the society of obstacle.

One of the messages related to a recent topic oin the *nettime* list "Goodbye Classic?" initiated by David Garcia, says that "we're pushed by the industry to upgrade every 15 minutes" – the

* prof. Miklos Peternak, Head of the Intermedia Department
Hungarian University of Fine Arts
H-1063 Budapest, Kmety György utca 27.
Tel. ++36-1 3730069 Fax ++36-1 3730070
peternak.miklos@mke.hu
http://www.intermedia.c3.hu

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meaning of this is nothing less than that generally we do not even recognize the updates happening oin our online computer while we are working on it. This situation is, of course, not brand new; it has been the constant state of the art at least since the turn of the century.

During the course of art history, it has sometimes happened that a new art form, together with all its initial products and the first corpus of work, disappeared over the centuries. We do not have the very first relief of Dibutades, though it was mentioned for centuries after its "invention" as an existing object. We do remember the famous metaphoric scene in Fellini's "Roma" where the newly-discovered frescoes in the metro tunnel suddenly disappear in real time right before the camera.

Here I would like to examine this short period of time and explore why it was unique. Naturally, the fact that something has disappeared has a kind of significance for us; but this same process is still happening nowadays, near the turn of our millennium, right before our eyes, with sophisticated new tools, and new cultural and archiving strategies. Despite the fact that there are giga-projects for archiving, there is a significant, innovative parcel of new art that has been lost for us, disappeared before art historians could recognize its originality, relevance, or even more important, before they could observe and study the original work in its original shape.

Let me provide examples of how this happens and why.

It is obvious that net.art-works may look different due (for example) to differences in browsers and the features available to users and visitors. This is a given. But when the differences far exceed an acceptable level, the work itself might become a mere disembodied torso – or torsos of various types, in different hardware and software environments.

Example 1: Olia Lialina: "Agatha appears" from 1997. http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/

Original: Netscape 3.0 browser (and optimized for the browsers at the time) *(fig. 1)*

> The story of Olia Lialina's work is based on a dialogue between a just-fired system administrator and Agatha, a country girl lost in the big city. "Giving away the joke: we reveal that he manages to persuade her to be teleported."

Before 2002 (or maybe earlier), when Real Player ceased to be an integrated part of the browsers of the day, there were no problems with integrated sound elements, but at some later point an error message pops up in place of the music. A user who does not know the original does not even notice that the music is missing unless she gets an error message. Given that fake error-message-like windows are sometimes part of the artwork, this is also sometimes misleading. And if the user does not allow pop-up windows, which is a normal option nowadays, another significant element of the piece is lost.

"I will teleport u wherever u want" – says the *sysadm* [the system administrator] to Agatha. "This is not a technology, but a new world, a new philosophy" When the teleportation page opens, Agatha travels from server to server and, in the visible part of the work, only the URL of the server changes; the image remains unchanged in the same shape and place. The travel around the Web world happens thanks to the functioning servers. But 10 years later, some of those servers are down.

A recent restoration process has resolved the problems of Agatha, but this is not always possible. The fragility of tools in this unstable media, and the speed of creation and utilization of various hardware and software, all make this difficult. Anything can disappear, and yet we may think it is still available (imagine a magic book on your bookshelf: you've almost read it through, but next time you find there are partly empty pages in it), and this is widely accepted. Even the net-art historians have given up on constant updates. To quote Vuk Cosic: *"While searching for links to my old vuk.org domain, which I let go as part of an invisibility project (it was then bought by a casino), I found this list, created by Dr. Reinhold Grether. With some seven thousand links covering Net artists, researchers, and publicists, it might be the most comprehensive website of what Grether calls "Net knowledge" – and possibly the worst nightmare of a link list to navigate. If you're watching the Net, Dr. Grether is watching you. The site itself may not be pretty, but its ambition alone makes it a great art project."* (Vuk Cosic *in: Artforum, March 2002*). And now we find in this page the following remark: *Net Art Links 1995–2004 no linkchecks anymore. dr reinhold grether*

Example 2: Alexei Shulgin: "Form" (1996/97) http://www.c3.hu/collection/form/ *(fig. 2)*

Quoting its description: "In his work entitled Form, Alexei Shulgin uses the formal elements of HTML language without adding anything to them. The mere multiplications, recombinations and unusual combinations of the elements offer a suitable material for artistic expression to this artist notorious for his peculiar methods. The outcome is a series consisting of a stunning number of elements, oscillating between provocation and meditation. On the grey pages the elements of the HTML code self-organize into playful, repetitive, ceaselessly changing visual systems that generate new experiences in the viewer. Form becomes content here. The project was awarded an honorary mention in the .net category of the 1997 Ars Electronica in Linz."

The description continues, "Form becomes content – while the form changes parallel and due to the generations of browsers." What needs to be done is to develop a strategy of preservation. There are various initiatives like the *Variable Media Network* (http://variablemedia.net/) and projects such as *404 object not found* which provide solutions for dealing with this temporality.

In the case of Alexei Shulgin's "Form," which is based on the graphic interface of the browsers, we would obviously see an authentic visualization of the work if we were to use Netscape 3.0. There are simulations available. At the same time, since it can be found on the Internet, the work is always adjusted to the programs found on the specific computer on which it is being viewed.

We will not ask how a new browser might have inspired the artist, since it is obvious that this would have led to different pages and different proportions. The author did not choose the Internet by accident: to understand the work's essential newness we must take this choice into account. Sitting in front of the computer, on-line users (i.e. potential viewers) are engaged in several parallel activities. In other words, their attention is divided.

A so-called "accurate" or "objective" presentation, where the work is divorced from its medium, leads to even greater misinterpretations than a presentation based on an acceptance of the fact that the work's medium constantly and inevitably transforms it. The medium creates new mutations, even as old versions disappear. To insist on showing this work on its original browser is therefore a destructive type of dogmatism, since it is of primary importance that the work be quickly and widely accessible – so long as it functions properly. (Yet at the same time we are aware of many examples from the past where works of art were taken from their original context and placed into a new environment.)

There are points of intersection between the different apparatuses: a reproduction can now more often be close to identical with the original than before the emergence of technical mediums. The disappearing elements of one apparatus can be replaced by a new one. In other words, sometimes the migration from one medium to another is the only way to present – and preserve – certain works of art.

Example 3: Szegedy-Maszák, Zoltán: "Cryptogram" (1995/96) http://www.c3.hu/cryptogram *(fig. 3)*/

"Cryptogram is a communication system: it can be used to encode messages (for example e-mails) into virtual sculptures (generally VRML files). Textual messages can be sent in the form of virtual sculptures containing the hidden document, to be decoded by the recipient. By trying the interactive demo-sites users can test the Cryptogram system and view the "text-sculptures" created by others. All instructions can be found on the Cryptogram sites along with the necessary software for everyday use in e-mailing."

Excerpts from *404 Object not found*, a C3 key study:

When we first set out to outline a case study of the conservation of "Cryptogram," we thought it necessary to consider all the available possibilities and to raise the questions that inevitably come up in discussions concerning the preservation of media art. Moreover, we resolved to examine the usual (by and large hypothetical) answers to these questions with regard to Cryptogram itself and to offer some practical suggestions that may serve as solutions to the problems that might arise in the preservation and presentation of such an art form in the future.

The peculiarities of net.art, its dependence on context, and the fact that it is used by a broad community all require that the strategies designed to enable the preservation of a work of art

in this medium must not only address the technical specifics, but must also, through a sort of documentation of the history of the work's creation and its artistic and social context, offer a framework for interpretation in which the work can exist in the future. Proceeding from the premise that the loss of the original environment in which a work was created will raise difficulties and impair understanding just as much as if a technical component were to be damaged or lost, we consider the two parts of preservation – technical and contextual – to be of equal importance.

With Cryptogram, we sketched strategies to be adopted for its preservation, giving documentation concerning technical and content/context aspects in the hopes that these specifications would be understandable and accessible to a computer programmer. This way the technical aspects of the work of art can be reproduced, while the information concerning its contextual aspects will enable a viewer to situate it appropriately.

Thus artwork should have a special kind of supplement: a kind of clear documentation, preferably made by the artist – a kind of music notation and/or a score. As part of the visual documentation of Cryptogram, we have made a digital video of the images appearing in succession on the monitor – of the coding and decoding, in other words. We also added a phase-screenshot sequence. These images, as well as the rest of the documentation, have been saved in both digital and printed format. The digital files are stored on CDs, but as technology changes it will be necessary to transfer this information to other, more up-to-date formats for data storage. During the making of the documentation we were uncertain as to whether this documentation, (which for us, knowing the work well, is easily interpreted) will be understood in the same manner by future computer programmers. For this reason a trial situation has been simulated to see what would happen if the work itself were not extant. Could it be reconstructed based on the documentation, and, if so, how would it differ from the original? At first the idea of recreating a (thankfully) perfectly functioning work of Internet art might seem bizarre and pointless, but this was the only means by which we could determine the precision of the documentation.

We realized that new issues had to be taken into consideration, issues that would never have come up had it not been for our dialogues with the programmer. Instead of recreating the work in its original format and programming language (VRML), we decided to use JAVA 3D, because with this we didn't need to use a separate visualization. It seemed sufficient for this test that the new version be an independent application and that it not go online, since the most important questions concerned only the appearance of the work.

It also is possible that there is no ultimate solution for new media art: preservation, migration, and emulation have been the keywords until now. But there is another aspect to take into consideration: Should everything be a simulation? This is the last example:

Synthetic Performances

Eva and Franco Mattes (a.k.a. 0100101110101101.ORG) created reenactments of vanished performance artworks like Valie Export and Peter Weibel's *Tapp und Tastkino* (European cities, 1968–71) These Synthetic Performances became available in Second Life, 2007 *(fig. 4)*.

A special case is the reenactment of Joseph Beuys' *7000 Oaks* in Second Life *(fig. 5)*. This "ongrowing" or work-in-progress project of Beuys started in 1982 within the framework of Documenta 7. Planting the 7000 oak trees *"...took five years to complete, the last tree having been planted at the opening of Documenta 8 in 1987...."* Once, before the World Wide Web, the Dia Center created a continuation of the project using stones of the area where original basalt stones came from: Landsburg quarry of the Nordhessische Basalt. As it is stated in the website, *"Dia installed five basalt stone columns, each paired with a tree, at 548 West 22nd Street in 1988, continuing the sculpture project 7000 Eichen (7000 Oaks) by German artist Joseph Beuys. Five different varieties of trees were planted: gingko, linden, Bradford pear, sycamore, and oak. In 1996 Dia extended this project by planting 18 new trees, each paired with a basalt stone, on 22nd Street from 10th to 11th avenues, adding Pin Oak, Red Oak, Elm Honey Locust, Gingko and Linden."*

The version of 0100101110101101.ORG – given the obvious absurdity that tree-planting is hardly possible in a virtual environment – creates a new access to the original idea, beyond the customary levels of description and documentation.

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KÉPALÁÍRÁSOK

Fig. 1. Olia Lialina: Agatha Appears (1997)
http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha/ (Screenshot)

Fig. 2. Alexei Shulgin: Form (1996/97)
http://www.c3.hu/collection/form/ (Screenshot)

Fig. 3. Szegedy-Maszák, Zoltán: Cryptogram (1995/96)
http://www.c3.hu/cryptogram/ (Screenshot)

Fig. 4. Eva and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.ORG: Reenactment of Joseph Beuys' *7000 Oaks*. Synthetic Performance in Second Life, 2007.
Source:
http://www.0100101110101101.org/home/performances/performance-beuys.html

Fig. 5. Joseph Beuys: "7000 Oaks," as seen at *Documenta* 7, in Kassel, September, 1982. (Photo: Miklós Peternák)