

## How has Internet Art dealing with the theme of identity challenged the notion of authorship and the traditional artist/audience relationship?

The Internet has grown at an almost exponential rate since the introduction of the first web browser in 1993; current estimates state over four billion web pages and almost fifty million web sites on the World Wide Web alone. [1] Although in its earliest stages some artists saw the Net as little more than a telephone directory it would benefit their career to be listed in, [2] the Net has also provided the artist with an unprecedented opportunity to be their own publisher, curator and gallerist, as well as opening up a new creative space to explore. The term 'Internet Art' will be used throughout this piece to describe those works which exist primarily *in* the Internet. Although they may have involved a gallery experience at some point, these works deal with and are embedded in the specific possibilities that the Internet offers, and are unthinkable without it. [3] Many of these specific possibilities have contributed to a reappraisal of the artist/audience relationship and the notion of authorship itself. Common features of Internet Art, such as interactivity, collaboration and the opportunity to remain anonymous behind a veil of multiple selves or avatars, have also led many artists to question not only the nature of the art object but also that of personal identity.

### Interactivity and the birth of the 'user'

Interactivity is one of the most noticeable features of much Internet Art. The inherent structure of the Internet allows the individual to remotely access and interact with digital files and software. This activity effectively turns what could have been seen as a passive consumer of artwork into more of an active participant in its display, or even its creation. The term 'user' fits this activity better than 'viewer' or 'reader' and will be used throughout this piece to denote 'the person who is experiencing the art.'

Interactivity can come in different forms and it is entirely possible for an artist to produce an interactive piece which in no way challenges the traditional role of the artist as the sole progenitor of their work, or the relationship between the artist and the audience. Two such pieces are Tina Laporta's *Distance (1999)* and Nick Crowe's *Discrete Packets (2000)*. The structure of *Distance* is simple, a long sequence of still images, apparently taken from webcam footage, each image accompanied by a fragment of text. The text forms a poetic meditation on the experience of communicating in online webcam chat rooms; "there is a sense of intimacy here...without touch...are we getting closer or further apart?...we are artefacts in motion... becoming pixels on the screen." The piece has a set sequence prescribed by the artist, user interaction being limited to bringing forward the next instalment.

*Discrete Packets* is also a narrative, which, despite using the language and iconography of emails, search engines and active links, remains traditionally filmic in nature. The piece tells the cautionary tale of Robert Taylor, a man searching for his daughter over the Internet. When he finally discovers that she is working for an online sex chat-line and contacts her she reads his greeting as a typical client fantasy and replies 'Big Kiss Daddy Big Kiss xxx.' During a credit sequence Crowe declares this to be 'A Movie by Nick Crowe,' and even provides a cast list.

In both pieces the amount of interaction for the user is minimal, they are reduced to merely clicking for the next 'scene' to begin, rather like turning the pages of a book or jumping to the next chapter of a DVD. Indeed, both pieces could exist in those forms without significantly altering their inherent structure, only the context in which the pieces are shown would change (interestingly *Discrete Packets* consists of a Shockwave movie and a set of HTML, or Hypertext Markup Language, pages. Once the user has downloaded the compressed files to their computer the piece runs without a live Internet link). Although they are both reflections on the instable nature of online identity crucially the identity of the author remains sacrosanct. Indeed Nick Crowe archives his own pieces in a gallery website entitled [www.nickcrowe.net](http://www.nickcrowe.net). It could be

argued that both artists are simply using the Internet as source material for their work and as the means of its publication. Essentially the user 'reads' *Distance* and watches *Discrete Packets*; in both cases the audience retains its traditional place as the largely passive consumer of the work.

As the level of interaction increases the relationship between the artist and the audience, and as a consequence our notion of the role of the artist, begins to change. One of the basic features of websites and their HTML building blocks is the ease with which any one page can be linked to any other. This feature has been utilised by writers to produce 'hypertext,' in which a 'reader' is given the opportunity to navigate around a database of text elements, creating their own narrative structure as they go.<sup>[4]</sup> Although not by any means a new development<sup>[5]</sup> this type of experiment with narrative structure is particularly suited to the Internet. A reader who has traditional expectations of a text piece may find themselves confused and frustrated by hypertext, particularly as pieces often deliberately eschew the notion of the satisfactory ending. In most cases the user creates their own ending simply by deciding to quit the piece.

Artists were quick to explore the creative possibilities of hypertext and develop it into what has been termed 'hypermedia,' the linking of text, graphics, images, moving images and sounds. An early Internet Art piece that exploited this potential was Olia Lialina's [My Boyfriend Came Back from the War \(1996\)](#), in which the user chooses how to navigate around a series of frames containing images and text. The meaning of the piece appears to be dependant to a small extent on how a particular user sequences these elements, creating the possibility for seeing the 'finished' piece as a sort of collaboration between Lialina and the user. Indeed, it could be argued that the sequence the user creates is uniquely theirs. Can we really say that being able to order the way in which set elements appear on the screen is really a genuine act of collaboration or appropriation for the user? In her seminal work on hypertext, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) Janet H. Murray claims that hypertext has over-valued confusion, often leaving users blindly clicking, lost in a sea of links, images, sounds and text.<sup>[6]</sup> It is only in retrospect that users can see the effect that their actions have had upon the piece; if they are playing a creative role in the construction of the work they are effectively doing so blindfold. The artist has dictated the rules of the game and the user is confined to playing within those rules. Even though the user is no longer a passive viewer the artist is still the 'other' who has defined the boundaries and provided the original elements.

Partly in recognition of these limitations Lialina encouraged other Internet artists to create their own versions of *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War*, using her original graphic and text elements. The resulting pieces, by artists such as the Belgian duo [Jodi](#), [Masha Boriskina](#) and [Vadim Epstein](#), often used different media and software to reinterpret the same source material. The elements that make up *My Boyfriend...* are archived at Lialina's website *The Last Real Net Art Museum*; any Internet artist is free to download them and create their own version. Although many of the reinterpretations of the piece contain no interactive features (Boriskina's, in fact, is a rendering in gouache) this opening up of source material is a powerful act of egalitarianism on the part of the artist. Lialina hopes that her vision of the Internet art gallery, which allows for "the infinite reconfigurations of information in an open system,"<sup>[7]</sup> will form the basis for online galleries in the future.

### **The limitations to online collaboration**

Creating a personal version of Lialina's *My Boyfriend...* relies on the user making a certain time commitment and on the possession of specific art making skills. Other artists have sought contributions from users in a more immediate and simpler form. The practical limitations of these contributions are demonstrated by one of the earliest celebrated works of Internet Art, Douglas Davis's [The World's First Collaborative Sentence \(1994\)](#). The title of the piece raises an important question; at what point in Internet Art does interaction

become collaboration? To collaborate means ‘to work with another or others in order to realise a joint project.’ The word ‘interaction,’ despite originally meaning ‘to act on or in close relation with an other,’ has seen its meaning shift in recent times due to its connection with the Internet and computer gaming. In computer programming the term ‘interactive’ describes a system or program which is designed to involve the user in the exchange of information. The interaction with the user is usually conducted through either a text-based or graphical interface; indeed, the interaction is with a piece of software and not with the artist. In a collaborative project the two way flow of information may result in significant changes to the structure of the piece, whereas in interaction the user is to a large extent confined to playing within the rules already laid down by the artist.

In *The World’s First Collaborative Sentence* Davis invites users to add words to a sentence that theoretically has no end (no one is allowed to add a full stop, its primary rule). Many years later the piece continues to run having incorporated increasingly sophisticated contributions from thousands of users. In an exuberant introductory page for the project Davis declares “come closer...we are about to create together,” and also makes some exaggerated claims for the effect that the Internet will have on the traditional artist/audience relationship. Speaking directly to the user Davis states that the Internet is the medium “where **you** take over from **me**.” Ironically Davis then goes on to name a group of people who he believes should take the credit for the work, a list of technicians, designers and supporters who have helped to create and maintain the site. [8]

Many early Internet artists were immediately critical of this type of work and what they saw as its fraudulent claims towards collaboration. Alexei Shulgin made the distinction that in most cases ‘interaction’ merely equalled the manipulation of the user. Shulgin has even wondered whether manipulation is the only form of communication that the audience knows how to appreciate; “they are (happy) following very few options given to them by an artist: press left button, jump or sit.” He has said “there is always an author with his name and his career behind it, and he just seduces people to click buttons in his own name.” [9] Shulgin even went so far as paying contributors to one of his pieces in an attempt to bring the inequalities of this relationship to light. [10] Paul Virilio has stated that the Internet is not the precursor of a new liberty but of social cybernetics; users are acting as the feedback mechanism in a system that has its own autonomy. [11] In the case of Internet Art this is often an autonomy designed and maintained by the artist or their technical supporters. In a sense the idea behind the work becomes a machine for its production, [12] effectively turning the user into a nameless, voiceless operator, reminiscent of the hordes of worker drones servicing the behemoth machine in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*. This is demonstrated most effectively by the Davis piece; where exactly is the work of art here, is it genuinely in the collaborative text that has been produced? The text in reality is essentially unreadable, containing, as it does, a clash of conflicting contributions from thousands of users. The true work of art is Davis’s original idea, its suitability to its medium and its precedence. Contributions to it merely help to increase its size, prolong its life and add to its (and Davis’s) fame. [13]

In an attempt to create genuine collaborative projects many early Internet artists were keen to build both virtual and physical communities. The group of artists who formed under the banner net.art (which included Lialina, Shulgin, Natalie Bookchin and Heath Bunting) often shared programming code as well as studios, and a crucial element in the groups coherence was face to face meetings at conferences and international digital art fairs. Collaboration was from the outset something which seemed to the group to be central to Internet Art practice. In 1999 Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin produced a work entitled [Introduction to net.art \(1994-1999\)](#) for the ZKM exhibition net\_condition. The work, which consisted of a set of statements carved into virtual marble, doubled as a creative piece and as an instruction manual for Internet artists. The piece remains as close as Internet Art has come to a comprehensive self definition, and contains, under the

heading of 'Specific Features of net.art,' the declaration that Internet Art must embrace "collaboration without consideration of appropriation of ideas."<sup>[14]</sup> Joachim Blank in his piece *What is net.art ;-)?* echoes this when he writes "a single artist may initiate a project but the final result should lie beyond his control."<sup>[15]</sup>

### The construction of the 'ghost-like' avatar

One way in which these ideals have been put into practice is through contributing to the construction of multiple selves and avatars. Investigations into the Internet and its effect on society have identified a major paradox at its heart; the Net is seen as both an agent of social alienation and the harbinger of a new sense of global community. For this reason Jean Baudrillard can describe the modern citizen as living a monadic existence inside "an archaic, closed off cell," connected to the outside world via the telephone, the radio and television, and more recently the Internet.<sup>[16]</sup> Heavy Internet users are often portrayed in the media as damaged individuals who have lost (or have never gained) the ability to interact properly with others. This monadic nature, however, masks the computer's communicative possibilities. This point is exhaustively explored by American psychologist Sherry Turkle in her work on the effects of the Internet on our sense of personal identity.<sup>[17]</sup> Turkle employs the metaphor of Microsoft's 'Windows' to describe how email, Internet chat rooms and Multi-User Domains (or MUDs) have afforded individuals with the opportunity to construct multiple selves. Real Life, she explains, is just another window, and it is often one that her subjects keep minimized in favour of exploring Internet relationships. This environment, Turkle argues, becomes a laboratory for the construction of self, and artists using the Net have used personal identity in a similar way as just another creative material to work with.

The primary act of self-creation on the Internet is often the construction of an alternative persona, or avatar. The term 'avatar' has its origin in Hinduism and refers to the 'descent' of a deity to Earth in an incarnate form. More than being merely a mask or character role "an avatar aims to provide the displaced self with channels for interaction."<sup>[18]</sup> This opportunity for the wholesale reinvention of identity is seen by society as being both liberating and threatening by turns. Much recent concern about the Internet has focused on the fear that it is being used by paedophiles to groom children for abuse, often employing false identities or avatars to gain their acceptance and trust.<sup>[19]</sup> John Carr, Internet consultant to the children's charity NCH, has suggested that an online element be added to UK Home Secretary David Blunkett's proposed identity card scheme, making it difficult for anyone to contact another person on the Internet without giving accurate personal details.<sup>[20]</sup>

It is against this highly charged background that Internet artists have worked with the construction of Net avatars and attempted to embrace the Utopian ideal of collaboration without the appropriation of ideas. Josephine Bosma has identified two types of avatars on the Net, the comic book hero and the ghost, or drifter.<sup>[21]</sup> Bosma dismisses the hero as a flat stereotype but sees the ghost as a more fluid creation, a being in a constant state of composition. Bosma makes reference to some of the most famous ghost-like avatars in Internet Art, including *Brandon*, *Keiko Suzuki* and *Mouchette*. *Brandon*, an event and web project originated by Shu Lea Cheang, was a year long collaboration centred around the life of a real person, the tragic Nebraska teenager Brandon Teena/Teena Brandon, who was raped and murdered in 1993 when members of her community discovered she was a female posing as a male. In the piece, which was commissioned by the Guggenheim to be incorporated into their Internet Art gallery, Cheang wished to explore both online and offline spaces using avatars and multiple selves by allowing users from all over the world to shape and author the project.

This was also the case with *Keiko Suzuki*, although no one artist has ever come forward to claim to be the projects originator. *Keiko Suzuki* was the virtual 'hostess' and moderator of the influential Internet Art mailing list 7-11. The administration page of 7-11 allowed anyone to become *Keiko Suzuki*, which led to her being taken in several different directions at once, being portrayed, for example, as both a passive figure of

pornography and as a feminist activist. Bosma herself conducted a text-chat interview with *Keiko Suzuki* in 1997, although no hint was given as to who was answering her questions. The interview contained a great deal of playful banter concerning Suzuki's supposed appearance at a series of Internet Art conferences, where she claimed she had kept a low profile because she didn't feel important enough to introduce herself formally. Many of the participants at the events, in fact, wore 'Keiko Suzuki' name badges. Bosma states that over many months the character eventually became "a near visualisation of the net psyche," not an individual consciousness, but the sum of many contributors efforts. *Keiko Suzuki* is now virtually 'dead,' after an incident in which her administration page was taken hostage by an art-terrorist. As Bosma declares this type of avatar is "by and large a work of love...this life form can only stay alive if its creators care about its continuity and shape." [22]

It is interesting to compare these two collaborative projects with a third, *Last Entry: Bombay 1<sup>st</sup> of July...*, originated by Andrea Zapp in 1997. This project was inspired by a novel which Zapp describes as almost a visionary metaphor for the role of identity on the Net-- Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). In *Orlando* the eponymous hero changes gender and defies the aging process, allowing him/her to embark on a series of adventures around the world and down several centuries. Orlando can be described as a flâneur, a self-conscious, ironic observer, detached from the crowd and yet able to influence its behaviour. The notion of the flâneur in many ways fits easily with the concept of both the web surfer and the avatar. [23] The projects collaborators, which have included Mark Amerika, Alexandra Pohl and Annabelle Wick, have created their own pages for the project in which they are free to take Orlando to any place in time and space. Contributions vary greatly in their style and content, and Zapp describes the work as "an open and permanently growing process of dialogue with the user." [24]

These three projects, in which a group of users contribute to the construction of an Internet avatar, raise similar questions about authorship and the nature of the art object. In *Last Entry: Bombay...* each contributor is named by Zapp and was presumably invited to produce work for the piece. Despite being a collaborative effort the work does not raise any challenge to the traditional artist/audience relationship. Indeed, the dialogue with the user Zapp refers to appears to be one conducted solely amongst the artists who have contributed to the piece.

When questioned by Geert Lovink about her working practices Shu Lea Cheang describes group projects as if they were mainstream movies; "I take the credit as concept/direction in executing large scale productions... I decide which writers, designers, programmers, cinematographers...I collaborate with." She goes on to dismiss the romantic notion of the artist as loner and sole operator. [25] It seems clear that she sees herself as the director of a project which accepts contributions from other artists.

With *Keiko Suzuki* things are not so clear-cut. Contributions to *Keiko Suzuki* were often transient and slight, amounting in many cases to little more than comments on 7-11's bulletin boards. The over-whelming majority of these contributions have gone undocumented and can no longer be traced. The resulting ghost-like nature of the avatar becomes so vague it is impossible to fix any boundaries around what we could describe as 'the work.' Our inability to circumscribe the project, to trace the creative intelligence behind it, or to identify any specific art object seriously challenges our notion of *Keiko Suzuki* as being a work of art at all. This inevitably leads into a much larger argument, what exactly is an art object, and how relevant is its definition to Internet Art? In her unpublished thesis on site specific Internet Art Josephine Berry discusses this question at a time when Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' seems more relevant than ever. [26] As works of Internet Art have no specific aura (available, according to Benjamin, only to the unique, distinguishable and immutable art object) she believes that they are in danger of "merely duplicating the banalised modalities of mass media in (their) attempt to free (themselves) from the cultish myth of the artist as progenitor of sublime realities." [27] This is in many ways

the fruition of the modernist dream, the melting of life and art into one another. Indeed, in their *Introduction to net.art (1994-99)*, Bookchin and Shulgin cite 'closing the gap between art and everyday life' as one of the key aims of Internet Art in general.<sup>[28]</sup>

### **Towards the anonymity of the artist**

Some Internet artists have deliberately used the difficulty in separating art from life in order to challenge our notions of identity and authority. @TMark's infamous George W. Bush website is a prime example. The Internet Art activist group were able to secure the '[gwbush.com](http://gwbush.com)' domain name and used it to create what appeared at first glance to be the US President's official website. By doing this @TMark were able to force the user to question their assumptions about Bush, his personality and policies. The site caused enough confusion for Bush's lawyers to demand that it be closed. The dispute was brought to wider notice when in an interview Bush demonstrated his irritation with the site and declared "there ought to be limits to freedom."<sup>[29]</sup>

The Nick Crowe piece [Service 2000 \(2000-2002\)](#) is similar in its intent and execution. Crowe created a whole series of spoof websites for many of the most prestigious galleries in the UK, populating them with kitsch clip art graphics, poor quality photographs and schlock music. Crowe was able to acquire many of the galleries more obvious domain names, a sure sign of how slow curators and collectors were to responding to the potential of the Internet and Internet Art. The sites were convincing enough for web designers to contact the galleries offering to improve their online profiles. Heath Bunting, one of the first major international stars of Internet Art, has identified hoaxing, faking and rewriting as key activities to the medium. Bunting writes "if you say: this is an artwork, you've blown your cover immediately."<sup>[30]</sup>

If we define an artist as someone engaged in the production of art, what happens to that definition if we can no longer distinguish between art and life? *Service 2000* and *gwbush.com* are hoaxes, and part of the natural life of a hoax is that at some point the perpetrators are revealed. The traditional role of the artist and the relationship between them and the audience is merely delayed; both pieces are now placed firmly placed within the canon of Internet Art. Did the contributors to *Keiko Suzuki* consider themselves to be artists, however, and is it right for those contributions to be solidified now into something approaching a recognisable art object? In order to investigate this point further it is enlightening to look at a similar project, one which is still very much alive, [Mouchette](#).

*Mouchette* is another avatar web project which seems, in the light of the current atmosphere regarding paedophiles on the Internet, to be all the more pertinent and disturbing. The site is supposedly the personal website of an emotionally troubled thirteen-year-old girl who is planning to commit suicide. *Mouchette* is in fact based on a novel by Georges Bernanos (filmed in 1967 by Robert Bresson), in which a young girl is sexually abused and contemplates killing herself. Who exactly is behind *Mouchette* is unclear, rumours are often circulated in chat rooms and on it's own pages, and further investigations reveal a site which is growing all the time and appears to be collaborative in nature. Indeed, users are invited to become members of a *Mouchette* club, which gives them the privilege of sending emails as *Mouchette*, answering her mail, and even uploading their own HTML pages and artwork onto the site.

*Mouchette* continues to raise questions not only about the 'author' of the piece but also about what constitutes an artwork. For example, in one of the most vibrant parts of the site, entitled *Suicide Kit*, *Mouchette* asks users to write in with suggestions as to how she should commit suicide.<sup>[31]</sup> Although this was not the intention of the originator(s) this has become a chat room for people with suicidal tendencies, a virtual meeting place in which they can exchange advice and express support for one another. The users of this particular part of the site make little reference to *Mouchette*, either its origins or its purpose, and generally seem disinterested in their virtual surroundings. Some clearly believe that *Mouchette* is a real thirteen-year-old girl, a precocious one with highly developed web building skills.

The originator(s) of *Mouchette* state categorically that they see the whole site as a work of Internet Art,<sup>[32]</sup> but does that mean that we should not attempt to distinguish between its various pages on the grounds of content or style? How can we compare, for example, the home page of the site, with its garish colours and ambiguous whimpering sounds, to the response pages of *Suicide Kit*, where one suicidal seventeen-year-old girl writes “this web site is keeping me breathing.”<sup>[33]</sup> Theodor Adorno has written that he is concerned that we may exchange “art’s elite separateness for something worse—its undifferentiated continuity with the ‘barbarism’ of everyday life.”<sup>[34]</sup> This is particularly pertinent to Internet Art as the hypertextual nature of the Net means that every website is theoretically just one click away from any other. Interestingly Robert Atkins has claimed that *Mouchette* was more powerfully ambiguous before it found its current home in an on-line art gallery context.<sup>[35]</sup>

*Mouchette* is undoubtedly a collaborative piece and contributions to it can come from many different sources. Although the originator(s) do reserve the right to reject pieces if they so wish there is evidence that the project has been taken in directions not entirely to their liking. The identity of the originator(s) is not known and most of the contributions to the site are also anonymous. In many ways the project fulfils the early Utopian dream of the net.art group; an artist has started a project but the outcome of the piece appears to be to some extent beyond their control.

*Mouchette* also achieves something which may never have been its original intention; it destabilizes the relationship between the artist and the audience. In her essay ‘Streams of consciousness: Info-narratives in networked art,’ Christiane Paul writes that “in interactive net art, the boundaries between self and virtual art object often appear to collapse, and the art work is not necessarily perceived as an ‘otherness,’ because it is the user/viewer who assembles or even creates it.”<sup>[36]</sup> It is interesting, in the light of this, to consider what may eventually be the disenfranchised position of the artist. The *Mouchette* site contains a salutary tale for the artist who anonymously constructs this kind of ghost-like, web persona. In a text piece entitled ‘*My Real Face*,’ the originator, who describes himself as a middle-aged man, details how he was forced ‘out’ of the virtual closet at an Internet Art conference in Toronto.<sup>[37]</sup> He describes the resultant audience reaction as ‘chilly’ and ‘aggressive,’ and was reduced to fielding questions about whether he was a real child abuser. Even personal friends, who had not previously realised his involvement with the piece, were vocal in their dismay. He claims even though the audience “had felt betrayed by my coming out as an alternative persona... I (felt) even more betrayed that no-one supported my identity construction as an artistic project.” There is no guarantee, of course, that this event actually happened, or that the writer is in fact the originator of the *Mouchette* site. The writer ends the piece “you may ask yourself: who is writing?...How many people witnessed these events?...Are you the art context?...Is this an artwork?”

### **Post modernism and the death of the author**

This kind of experience may become common in the future for artists who seek to claim both authorship and ownership of similar web-based projects. Artists may well find themselves to be as much the victim of, as well agents for, a process which is endemic to post modern culture; the ongoing deconstruction of authentic identity. The Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek sees the mutability of digital files as meaning there can be no effective closure of information, this has come to typify for him the more generalised decline of symbolic authority throughout Western society.<sup>[38]</sup> The Internet as a source of research material has been a matter of concern for many academics as it is often, in common with Internet Art, impossible to discern the true author of any text. French social theorist Michel Foucault has questioned the nature of authority itself, and how in particular individuals can learn to speak with the voice of legitimate authority. Foucault sees the rise in the Eighteenth century of the growing ethic of individualism as paradoxically leading not to increased freedom but to increased authority.<sup>[39]</sup> Our dominant definitions of ‘author’ and ‘artist’ also coalesced during this

period and are intrinsically linked to the concept of the individual and the possibility of ownership.

It is this very concept of individual authority which has come under attack, and has led post-structuralist theorists to declare the death of the author. In his essay of that name Roland Barthes asserts that writing is the place where all identity is lost, starting with the identity of the author.<sup>[40]</sup> His description of a culture in which “ a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash”<sup>[41]</sup> seems to be a premonition of the Internet, a collaged medium where chat, information, propaganda, gossip and opinion mix in such a way it is often impossible to distinguish one from the other. For Barthes the one place where all this information comes together as a unified whole is in the mind of the reader. This is the basis of a new type of literary criticism, one which does not focus on the intentions or biographical leanings of the author, but instead sees the text as being part of the fabric of the culture, understandable only in relation to other texts. It could be argued that the practice of ‘surfing the Net’ is a realisation of this idea. The user or web surfer, as indicated by the names of the two most popular web browsers, is both an explorer and a navigator, finding their way around a sea of links, forging a path that is uniquely meaningful to them.

The result of this is effectively an autonomy shift from the author to the reader, or, in the case of Internet Art, from the artist to the user. Christiane Paul has describe hypermedia Internet Art as a form where “readers and writers collaborate in the process of re-mapping textual, visual, kinetic and aural components, not all of which have been provided by what used to be called the author...the very notion of authorship itself becomes questionable.”

The post modernist destabilization of the master narrative and authority has of course been explored in other art movements, including the Surrealists, Conceptual art and the Fluxus group, but the Internet appears to be a medium particularly suited to it. What Internet Art promises is, in another of the iconic statements made by Bookchin and Shulgin, the *practical* death of the author. Arguably this claim is made good in pieces such as *Mouchette* and *Keiko Suzuki*, but at what cost? In his piece *‘Why Have There Been No Great Net Artists?’*<sup>[42]</sup> Steve Dietz makes the point that the “idea of the lone, inspired creator conflicts with the consistent practice of borrowing and collaboration” in Internet Art. The more the Internet artist challenges the ‘cultish myth’ of the sole, creative genius, the more they risk marginalizing their own contribution to the production of art.

It is possible to see a reaction to this in more recent developments. Early Internet Art, due to technical restrictions and the newness of its form, was usually text based and constructed with standard HTML pages. It was possible for a user to download whole sites and alter their code, effectively making the work their own. A link can be made here to what is known as the Open Source movement. Many of the original Internet pioneers had a Utopian dream that all software would be freely available over the Net. In fact, not only would software be free but also its code would be open for anyone to tamper with, or (as was the hope) to adapt and improve. They argued that by releasing the combined creative potential of theoretically millions of users software could be improved at a rate impossible through normal business practices. The dream foundered on the rocks of commercialisation, as big businesses, particularly Bill Gates’ Microsoft, sought to capitalise on software sales. Recently many Internet artists have begun to use commercial multi-media software packages, such as the Macromedia’s Director and Flash, in the production of their work. The resultant publishing files, which can only be viewed through specific Shockwave and Flash players, give the artist the option of keeping the piece as Closed Source. This means that the code of the piece cannot be altered or even downloaded to the user’s computer (and hence the work cannot ‘live’ outside of its online context). This in turn offers the artist the option to commercially capitalise on their work by selling interactive pieces as CD ROMs, distinct from their publication over the Internet.

Julian Stallabrass has stated that there is still very little truly interactive work on the Internet and cites the complexity of the necessary programming code as its major stumbling block.<sup>[43]</sup> It will be interesting to see

whether, as artists become more adept at using complicated software packages like Director and Flash, they use this potential to champion collaboration without the appropriation of ideas. If, as Roland Barthes states, the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author, will the birth of the user necessitate the death of the artist?<sup>[44]</sup> Exasperated Internet pioneers have said that they never dreamt that people would *watch* the Internet, it was always envisioned, from its outset, to be a participatory medium. Despite this a large section of the population, who we could term the 'audience,' seem quite satisfied to consume Internet content without any determined desire to collaborate in its production. It seems to matter little to them that some commentators have seen this process as one in which they become part of an art-making machine, which even forces their own bodies into a shape which is determined by the computer set-up.<sup>[45]</sup> The attachment society has to the notions of individualism, authorship and ownership may be more resilient than expected, and may form a bulwark against the ongoing fragmentation of personal identity heralded by the growth of the Internet.

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## Footnotes

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[1] A public organisation called the Internet Archive Project is involved in a constant process of backing up the data on the Internet, for up to date figures visit [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

[2] Blank, Joachim, 'What is net.art ;-)?'

[3] Inke Arns, 'A Particular Site-Specificity, or: Do I have a good reason to be here?'

[4] The definition of hypertext is still under debate, see 'So what is hypertext anyway?'

[5] Many experiments with branching narratives have taken place with the printed medium over many centuries. These experiments formed the basis of many of the earliest text based computer games, particularly the 'Dungeons & Dragons' type, which had a great influence on the resulting phenomenon of MUDs.

[6] Janet H. Murray 'Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace' (The MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1997), p.133

[7] Olia Lialina, 'My Boyfriend Came Back from the War'

[8] Douglas Davis quoted on the Lehman College Art Gallery page 'Douglas Davis'

[9] Both quotes from an interview with Tilman Baumgärtel in the article 'Art on the Internet—The Rough Remix,' Josephine Bosma (editor) 'Readme! Filtered by nettime: ASCII Culture and the Revenge of Knowledge' (Autonomedia: Brooklyn, 1999)

[10] This piece, a competition involving form-filling, has now unfortunately expired

[11] Quoted in Julian Stallabrass, 'Internet Art: The Clash of Culture and Commerce' (Tate Publishing: London, 2003), p. 64

[12] An idea first put forward by Sol Le Witt, cited in Lucy Lippard, 'Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object' (MIT: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997)

[13] It should be said that Davis himself adamantly denies that the text is unreadable, see his interview with Tilman Baumgärtel

- [14] Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin, *'Introduction to net.art (1994-1999)'*
- [15] Joachim Blank, *'What is net.art ; -) ?'*
- [16] Jean Baudrillard, *'The Ecstasy of Communication,'* (Semiotext: Brooklyn, 1988), p.18
- [17] Turkle's major work to date is *'Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet'* (Touchstone: New York, 1995)
- [18] Lily Diaz, *'Jumping over the edge: consciousness and culture, the self and Cyberspace,'* in Roy Ascott (editor), *'Reframing Consciousness: Art, mind and technology'* (Intellect Books: Portland, Oregon, 1999)
- [19] Rachel O'Connell, director of the Cyberspace Research Unit at the University of Central Lancashire, has published figures stating that one in five children in the UK regularly use chat-rooms, and that a quarter of them have received requests to meet face to face. In October 2003 MSN shut down many of their worldwide chat rooms stating that it was due in part to an "increase in unsolicited and inappropriate material, particularly with regards to children." See MSN, *'MSN Chat has closed in the UK'*
- [20] Quoted in *'An End to Chat,'* an online Guardian article by Neil McIntosh
- [21] Josephine Bosma, *'Keiko Suzuki and Mouchette'*
- [22] All quotations from Josephine Bosma, *'Interview with Keiko Suzuki'*
- [23] For a fascinating analysis of the role of the flâneur in Cyberspace see Lucy, *'The MOO as the home of the post modern flâneur'*
- [24] Andrea Zapp, *"Last Entry: Bombay, 1<sup>st</sup> of July..." A travel log through time, space and identity'*
- [25] See her Interview with Geert Lovink 2000
- [26] Josephine Berry, *'The Thematics of Site Specific Art on the Internet'* (PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2001, unpublished)
- [27] Ibid., p.12
- [28] Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin, *'Introduction to net.art (1994-1999)'*
- [29] Reproduced on an @TMark website (<http://www.rtmk.com/bush.html>)
- [30] Ljubljana interview with Heath Bunting, quoted in Julian Stallabrass *'Internet Art: The Clash of Culture and Commerce'* (Tate Publishing: London, 2003) p. 134
- [31] Mouchette site, <http://mouchette.org/suicide/answers.php3>
- [32] See the interview I've conducted with *Mouchette*, appendix one.
- [33] Contributor Leanne Poole, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2003
- [34] Quoted in *'The Thematics of Site-Specific Art on the Net,'* Josephine Berry, p.12
- [35] Robert Atkins, *'State of the (on-line) Art.(art on the World Wide Web)'*
- [36] Christiane Paul, *'Streams of consciousness: Info narratives in network art,'* in Roy Ascott (editor) *'Reframing Consciousness: Art, mind and technology'* (Intellect Books: Portland, Oregon, 1999), p.161
- [37] Linked to from the Mouchette site, [http://drivedrive.com/mouchette/power\\_plant.html](http://drivedrive.com/mouchette/power_plant.html)
- [38] Quoted in Josephine Bosma, *'The Thematics of Site Specific Art on the Internet,'* p.16
- [39] See in particular *'Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,'* Michel Foucault, translated by Alan Sheridan (Vintage: New York, 1977)
- [40] Roland Barthes, *'The Death of the Author,'* in *'Image Music Text,'* (Fontana Press: London, 1977), pp. 142-148
- [41] Ibid., p.146
- [42] Quoted in Julian Stallabrass, *'Internet Art: The Clash of Culture and Commerce'* (Tate Publishing: London, 2003), p.143
- [43] Julian Stallabrass, *'Internet Art: The Clash of Culture and Commerce'* (Tate Publishing: London, 2003), p.67
- [44] Roland Barthes, *'The Death of the Author'* essay in *'Image Music Text,'* (Fontana Press: London, 1977), p.148
- [45] Christiane Paul, *'Streams of consciousness: Info narratives in networked art'* in Roy Ascott (editor), *'Reframing Consciousness: Art, mind and technology'* (Intellect Books: Portland, Oregon, 1999), p.162