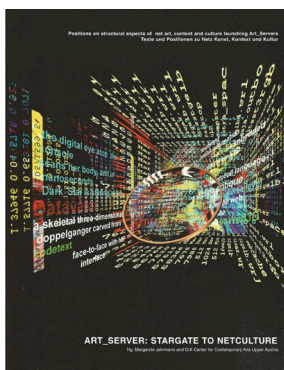


## ART\_SERVER: POLITICS, CULTURE & NET.ART

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According to the argumentation of many cultural initiatives and cultural practitioners, the sector of society that relates to the social domain, in addition to the first and second sectors relating to industry and services, the “socio-cultural sector” or “Sector3/Culture”<sup>1</sup>, is concerned with those tasks that previously concerned an obsolete concept of “art”: aesthetic and symbolic formulations were transformed there into actions, which were no longer looking merely at the commodity character of art, but rather intended to directly influence the fields of social issues and politics, for instance.<sup>2</sup> What has also recurred recently as “civil society” makes use of the available structures of the Internet in the course of its political activities, while at the same time, however, these existing possibilities actually first made it possible in its current form.

The political dimension of (net) artistic agency was already in the foreground of the early forms of net.art. The concepts and executions of the 70’s and 80’s, also called “telecommunication projects” were already largely attempting to achieve one aim: to use the communicative, discursive possibilities of this “new” media, in order to imbue artistic works with an explicitly social dimension. In this respect, in the beginning it was mostly a matter of formally “occupying” new spaces. What occurred later, though, was that “... another intention, a discursive one, emerged in that which was event-related and random in the forms of manifestation in the networks. In the networks, art itself - not merely the critique or analysis of art - becomes discourse.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1989 the Ars Electronica Festival, for instance, was entitled “In the Network of Systems.” Here it was still a matter of the networks of telecommunication, particularly the telephone and radio networks, without explicitly mentioning the Internet. “Radio Art” (Heidi Grundmann), “Interactive Sound Art” (Andrew McLennan), “Interactive Cinema” (Graham Weinbren) or “Telecomputing” (Carl Loeffler) were the buzz words of that year. At that time, Loeffler himself characterized the convergence of digital media and technical communication networks as a field of research.<sup>4</sup>

Particularly when all of these artistic statements are located in a new environment - because it is mediatized and therefore a new environment in terms of media - it is even more important to return to the term “art”, in order to make it impossible for party and daily politics to make art disappear from the political by banishing it to quasi all-encompassing “cultural matters.”<sup>5</sup>

Net\_art projects that surf between the artistic and cultural (in terms of daily politics) claims offered by the flood of communication potentials on the Internet, may be observed most recently especially on the part of Austrian artists. For example, most of the art web sites automatically have links to protest and resistance sites.<sup>6</sup> Among these are not only initiatives and groups, but also individual artists<sup>7</sup>, who move in a broad field of activities, exploring the very different areas of net, pop or design culture. Art and cultural servers take an important stance here, offering not only web space and time to artistic and political activities, but also offensive structures.

Culture as communication or the exchange of information as a cultural action come together in an environment that welcomes experimentation, where the contents are just as visually and acoustically present as in the field of politics. Groups from the field of culture cooperate with artists and activists of every provenance, when it is a matter of purposely

using the system of the Internet for political (=cultural) concerns. In this context, the immensely important role of net culture initiatives in Vienna and in the federal provinces should be mentioned, such as servus.at, sub.net, mur.at, public netbase, and many others. These have been demanding free Internet access for everyone (public access), with an emphasis, however, on communicating an active (rather than passive, consumerist) use of the media.

The potential power and influence that the Internet community has on the economic system was recently demonstrated as well: the US American toy corporation eToys brought a law suit against the artist group etoy, demanding that the artist group should give up their domain name because of the possibility of the names being confused.<sup>8</sup>

Net culture should be understood as something different from net art. Net art is when artistically oriented projects make use of the structures of the Internet (including those extending into the social or economic fields that have been discarded) and act with and through these or reflect on them. This may take place just as well on a purely aesthetic level or on a level that is purely action-oriented. The most interesting artistic projects, however, usually go beyond these kinds of attributions or focus on their obsolescence.

Net culture, on the other hand, comprises a genre of activities surrounding the Internet, ranging from communicating media skills, the structured work of setting up technical means and making them available, all the way to actions with and through the Internet that are explicitly related to the cultural, social or political fields. This almost always involves projects that cross over boundaries, space and sectors and take place on several levels and in fields that are less concerned with new aesthetic forms and experiments as artistic productions, than with changes in the field of the culture of everyday life. This also includes an understanding of dealing with digital media as a new cultural technique. Net art and art servers are essential components of net culture, since this art is already unlikely to have a place in the canon of art operations with its market-oriented interests, and in this way it can become differentiated in a relatively free form.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This term has been most influenced by the IG Kultur Österreich (Austrian Special Interest Group Culture) and was particularly discussed at a conference from March 31 to April 2, 2000 in Vienna. Cf.: Kulturrisse. Zeitschrift für Service und Diskurs der autonomen Kulturarbeit. Spezial zur Konferenz. Vienna 2000

<sup>2</sup> With regard to the term "civil society", Gerald Raunig, chairman of the IG Kultur, wrote: "The third cultural sector, a designation borrowed from economic theory on the Third Sector to refer to a completely heterogeneous civil society >sector< in the field of culture, is now mutating in the shadow of its big brother >Civil Society> into a battle cry. On the one hand, because of the intensification of the political situation, more and more initiatives have taken a clear stance and redefined their functions of generating and using public space. For instance there are political actions from the field of art from >performing resistance< and >gettoattack< or the free radio stations throughout Austria or the real discussion spaces of cultural initiatives from Feldkirch to Oberwart. On the other hand, the right wing is exacerbating a conflict over the definitions of both the terms art and culture, implying a separation into >political< (>bad<) culture and >unpolitical< (>good<) culture: ..." From: Der Standard. Vienna, 31 March 2000, p. 37

<sup>3</sup> Ries, Marc: Netzkunst - Kunst der Netze. From: Aigner, Carl / Hölzl, Daniela (Ed.): Kunst und ihre Diskurse. Österreichische Kunst in den 80er und 90er Jahren. Passagen Verlag, Vienna 1999, p. 175 - 192, p. 178

<sup>4</sup> Loeffler, Carl: Telecomputing und die digitale Kultur. In: Im Netz der Systeme. Für eine interaktive Kunst: Ars Electronica Linz (Hgg. von G.J. Lischka und Peter Weibel). Kunstforum International. Bd. 103. Köln, September/Okttober 1998. S. 128-133

<sup>5</sup> As we see in the new FPÖVP government program, culture is frequently mentioned - in terms of "folk culture" - yet art is only mentioned in conjunction with tax write-offs for the purchase of market-conform works and products. Therefore, "net art culture" would do well to push the "folk culture" (i.e. culture for the people) and research aspects of its activities to the foreground of all argumentation, as a political action, in order to fulfill Point 9 (Research Emphasis Folk Culture) of the chapter "Art and Culture" of the new government program.

<sup>6</sup> For example:

<http://widerstand.nebase.org/>

<http://www.stophaider.com>

<http://gegenschwarzblau.cjb.net>

<http://xarch.tu-graz.ac.at/publ/declaration/>

<http://welcome.to/linkswende>

<http://www.undergroundresistance.org>

<http://www.dextro.org/krise/>

<http://www.zivildienst.at/widerstand-links.htm>

<http://www.aktion-zivilcourage.at/>

<http://www.to.or.at/gettoattack/>

<http://www.demokratische-offensive.at/>

<http://www.popo.at/>

<http://www.sos-mitmensch.at/>

<http://www.ubermorgen.org/>

<http://www.rassismus.at/>

<http://www.lot.at/boycott.html>

<http://www.servus.at/kanal/gegenschwarzblau/index.html>

<http://www.volkstanz.net>

<sup>7</sup> For example: konsum.net, Tina Frank, lia and others

<sup>8</sup> Cf.

<http://www.etoys.com>

<http://www.toywar.com/shop>

<http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/inhalt/te/5768/1.html>