

On Internet Art: A Critique of the Imperceptible Interface

Eileen Isagon Skyers

Abstract

In this text, I examine the role of network-based art practices as an aesthetic critique of our engagement with interface technologies that are increasingly seamless and, indeed, largely undetectable. Despite our incessant customization of web content, we are unable to observe the computational processes that make this information manifest. I investigate what network-based art practices reveal about the changing nature of subjectivity in relation to this imperceptibility. Internet art, I argue, constructs temporary, physically variable structures that rely on retromediation and technological anachronism so that actions inherent to networked space are, by necessity, thrown into question. These practices, I argue, function as a critical interruption of the ruling tendencies and assumptions of screen-based operations, namely, transparency and interactivity. The complexity and speed of new technology are the cause of both euphoria and anxiety. Drawing on Žižek's concept of interpassivity, I examine current notions of user agency, arguing that the strong correlation between imperceptibility and distraction demands a reconsideration of subjectivity, mediation and technology.

Keywords

Network, Interface, Interruption, Interpassivity, User-Agency, Internet Art

Introduction

In this text, I assert that there is more to Internet art than mere design and aesthetics. Internet art, I argue, first calls attention to the spatial reconstruction caused by the interface, and second, subverts the habitual and programmatic nature of technology's use, which bears significant implications for subjectivity. Technology causes societal change on both macroscopic and individual levels. By failing to address these macro-level changes, we also fail to develop an informed attitude about the changing nature of subjectivity. In particular, we fail to develop a sense of subjectivity that allows us to distinguish between mediated space and reality. I argue that Internet art (often referred to as "net art") prompts a reinterpretation of the network and, particularly, the interface. Net art creates the conditions necessary for critical reflection by disassembling the elaborate technical ensemble of the interface into its smallest symbolic parts and then reassembling them into a visual language. The work indicates a break, or disruption, from a procedural flow. Net art promotes the interface's revelation of itself.

On the Interface

The interface is an apparatus that affects the way its users perceive, acquire, and disseminate information, both online and offline. With respect to computing, an interface is the

program through which we mediate software, hardware, or peripheral devices such as monitors and keyboards. "In semiotic terms, the computer interface acts as a code that carries cultural messages in a variety of media," notes new media theorist Lev Manovich. "The interface shapes how the computer user conceives of the computer itself. It also determines how users think of any media object accessed via a computer." According to Manovich, the interface is not merely a neutral part of the computational process; rather, it has the capacity to impose its own logic on media. "[F]ar from being a transparent window into the data inside a computer," Manovich writes, "the interface brings with it strong messages of its own." These messages are the semiotic content of the interface, and they endow it with a cultural grammar. They carry a set of prescriptions about the interface's use, directions that the user nearly always follows without notice.

Mobile devices, such as the cellular phone, laptop, and tablet, enable us to mediate through interfaces in many different environments. This is partly how the interface permeates every aspect of life, making all media aesthetics uncannily uniform. The interface is a program through which we traverse freely all the time, and yet, it seems invisible to us. Indeed, design foretells, in a conscious manner, a new ethos of personal computing, characterized by the disappearance of technology products themselves. Rather than existing as discrete entities, they promise to coalesce fully into other objects, surfaces, and spaces.

The term "design," both a noun and a verb, derived from the Latin *signum* meaning "sign," has multiple definitions. Once we become aware of design as a construct, technology becomes demystified. Czech media theorist Vilém Flusser writes at length about the technological image and its ability to change the way that we see the world. "A machine is a device designed to deceive; a lever, for example, cheats gravity," he asserts in *The Shape of Things*. Under Flusser's assumptions, de-sign is a function that requires a certain degree of cunning or artifice. He maintains that design tends to deceive nature through technology, replacing the natural with the artificial. Continuing this line of argument, one could say that mediation through a purely artificial environment can radically alter the level of everyday micro-behaviors, affecting autonomy and tactility at once. The interface supplies us with a series of embedded distractions that inhibit a complete perspective, placing us instead in a constant state of reaction.

Interface design assumes technology can, or should, seem immaterial. While the goal of designing a purely transparent interface is unobtainable, innovation nevertheless seems to require that an interface interfere with the user experience as little as possible. This design principle encourages the user to forget about the presence of the medium and to believe in the directness of immediate transmission. In the words of media critics Jay David

Bolter and Richard Grusin, “[O]ur culture wants to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them.” It is the very “logic of immediacy,” according to Bolter and Grusin, which “dictates that the medium itself should disappear.”

The extent to which the interface suffuses everyday life is attested by the development of what is increasingly referred to as the “Internet of Things.” This phrase describes the communication between the Internet and uniquely identifiable objects, effectively enabling the Internet to reach into dimensions of physical space. The term “real-time” describes the instantaneity of information technology. Real-time computing requires the operating system to respond to commands without perceivable delay. These two forms of computing development illustrate how the complexity and speed of new technology can cause both euphoria and anxiety. The increasing demand for instant feedback and response provides a new sense of urgency that segments our attention and imposes low-level, reactive panic. In a hyperconnected society, the operation of an interface is a highly orchestrated event—requiring the user to dedicate a significant amount of perceptual and mental resources to the very act.

Just as twentieth-century modernism was determined by technologies of manufacturing, mass media, and lens-based imagery, the most pressing matter determining contemporary culture may well be the sheer omnipresence of the Internet. The Internet’s reach was extended by the popularization of Web 2.0, a second-stage development of the World Wide Web characterized by shared information, user-generated content, and the emergence of social networking. The Internet underpins the whole apparatus of communication and data processing by which our hyperconnected culture operates. Without it, we would have no email or chat software, no computer-aided industrial production, and none of the invisible, “smart” design-interfaces through which we increasingly mediate identity, relations, and the world.

We must cautiously examine the nature of our exchanges and connections through web technology. To ignore this responsibility is to approach technology with an upward, or somewhat magical, bias. We must call into question the extent to which reciprocity characterizes our actions within a space where we mythologize technological immateriality. And how does this exchange affect subjectivity, agency, and the determination of the material environment in its sensorial dimensions? The great philosopher of communication theory, Marshall McLuhan writes in his comprehensive study *Understanding Media*:

All technological extensions of ourselves must be numb and subliminal, else we could not endure the leverage exerted upon us by such extension. . . . No society has ever known enough about its actions to have developed immunity to its new extensions or technologies.

McLuhan warns prophetically that we are as much a product of our tools as they are of us and, more critically, that technology routinely outpaces our ability to locate or interrogate its effects. Interface invisibility contributes to a sense-distorting, technological bias that, in McLuhan’s terms, has been accepted subliminally throughout most of modern history.

On Internet Art and the Interface

What is at stake in Internet art is not only what it produces but how it is produced. Although the terminology used to chronicle this work remains largely undeveloped, the discourse about how best to perceive web technology as a platform for the circulation of artwork is not new. Public astonishment surrounding the rise of computer networking in the late 1980s was coupled with an enthusiasm for dispersed authorship. Indeed, dispersed authorship and anonymity contributed to the preemptive exclusion of the Internet from the fine arts as a widely accepted medium for art practice.

Nevertheless, in the early 1990s, Internet artists began to connect through a *Nettime* mailing list, developing novel methods for the production and exchange of their work. The original “net.art” movement included an assembly of European and Russian net artists and writers. Among these artists were Heath Bunting, Vuk Cosic, Jodi.org, Olia Lialina, and Alexi Shulgin, whose contributions and audiences remain almost exclusively online. The use of an online platform resulted in the long-term failure to document net art or, at least, to connect it to other art-historical practices. In many cases, “net artists” relocated themselves to more installation-based grounds as “media artists.” This relocation essentially traded the web browser for the traditional gallery space.

Computer coding can be the force behind movement across digital space; it can even lead to the formation of images and three-dimensional objects. That said, the degree of code manipulation unique to network-based art ought to challenge our approach to the interface and enable a new perspective on computation. For instance, *Post-Internet art* refers specifically to works that are consciously created with the assumption that the network’s omnipresence is a given. The name refers to a set of assumptions rather than a time “after” the Internet. These assumptions indicate that the centrality and omnipresence of the network is a given and that the Internet is no longer a novelty, but a banality. Post-Internet artwork employs much of the visual rhetoric of outdated Internet branding, stock imagery, and various technical glitches in order to highlight the ways a networked system functions and malfunctions. Post-Internet art seems to celebrate the obsolescence of early web technology in displays of anti-aestheticism and anti-design.

If Duchamp redefined art through the act of selection, we have all become descendants of his aesthetic revolution insofar as our hyperconnected culture is predicated upon selection and remixing. Internet art may appear to be little more than a whimsical endeavor characterized by a de-

rivative aesthetic of popular media and network branding; however, I argue, it constitutes nothing short of an anti-environment in an era of imperceptibility. By this, I mean that it offers the user a perspectival awareness of an interface-mediated environment that would otherwise remain unnoticed.

From a historical perspective, it might be tempting to view the determining role that the Internet has taken within visual arts communities simply as an extension of the dissemination of the arts in pre-existing mediums (i.e. print media, film, radio, TV, etc.); however, the Internet seems to represent something absolutely new in terms of flexibility, immediacy, and autonomous production. The Internet has demonstrated significant community-building potential since its inception. It can support, expand, and even create its own publics through publication just as print media and other forms of linear communication have in the past. However, Internet media come into being a priori as dissemination and reproduction and thus, quite unlike print media, incite a nonlinear distribution of thought.

Network-based art plays both a unique and necessary role in subverting the programmed nature of interface technology. In McLuhan's view, such intervention is the singular ability of the artist, as the artist responds to cultural and technological challenges before their transforming impact occurs:

The ordinary person seeks security by numbing his perception against the impact of new experience; the artist delights in this novelty and instinctively creates situations that reveal it and compensate for it. The artist puts on the distortion of sensory life produced by new environmental programming and creates artistic antidotes to correct the sensory derangement brought by the new form.

Internet art functions as an antidote to interface mediation, one that might subvert cultural attitudes toward—and assumptions about—seamless technology.

Network-based art practices function principally as an aesthetic critique of our relationship with digital media. As Belgian RFID analyst Rob van Kranenberg notes, “We are entering a land where the environment has become the interface.” The interface, however, is not necessarily impenetrable, solid, or static. It can be breached, and intervention of the interface is critical to our continued perception of a physical, material world. One critical difference between Internet art and traditional art is that the work generally will not disclose itself without specific modes of engagement with interface technology. Internet art constructs variable modes of anachronism and anti-design, reconstituting the user's expectation for otherwise transparent interface mediation. Planned obsolescence and nostalgia have made the gap between new and old technologies both smaller and more dialectical. Although obsolescence and retromediation used to be closely connected to the factor of linear time, this factor has become more frac-

tal, resulting in a transformation of the anachronistic, or avant-garde, tendencies of Internet Art.

It could be argued that, in light of both hyper-connectivity and real-time computing, obsolescence is always immanent. This can be observed in the rapid migration and subsequent demise of those image objects on the web known as “memes.” In her study of the post-medium condition, art critic Rosalind Krauss suggests that obsolescence is necessary for the production of inventive New Media work. It is precisely its obsolescence, she claims, that allows us to see the apparatus for what it really is, in all its dirt and glory. Many network-based art projects are precisely about reality: the artist constructs a deliberately outmoded space, be it online or offline, wherein the navigation and perception central to the interface is subtly controlled and manipulated. By confounding the narrow conception of the interface and its functions, Internet art offers the potential to recognize the machine as an apparatus.

As American curator Steve Dietz has stated, “art is different after New Media because of new media—not because New Media is ‘next,’ but because its behaviors are the behaviors of our technological times.” Agamben's articulation of the contemporary, as one who firmly holds his gaze on his own time, predates Dietz's observation. For Agamben, perceiving the obscurity of one's own time is not a form of passivity, but instead a singular and active ability. Contemporariness can be found in a relationship that adheres to time through disjunction. Thus it is that the avant-garde must pursue the primitive and the archaic. The radical momentum and conceptuality of net.art was, initially, a way for artists to critique the social and economical drive behind the development of new technologies. To call net art a genre is to suggest that it is intelligible as a tendency—a tendency to exploit medium-reflexivity and to interrogate the perfect use and function of technological convention and expectation. As a form of anachronism and anti-design, network-based art can aid in the understanding of interfaced mediation, making the invisible visible and undeniable, subverting media constructions and providing the perceptual conditions for subjective autonomy.

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