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Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

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# ***Net.Art as Language Games***

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ABSTRACT. This paper is primarily concerned with the difficulties posed by aesthetically assessing contemporary art. There is a general sense of unease towards current art practices. The possibilities of rationality weaken when faced with an art which lacks definition, and which moreover is diluted by information, fashion and overall cultural consuming practices. Yves Michaud in his book *Critères esthétiques et jugement de gout* offers the possibility to solve the problems of rationality and comprehension of contemporary art practices through a line of thought, analytic philosophy, that connects Hume's Philosophy in *Of the Standard of Taste* and Wittgenstein's language-games.

In this paper, I intend to focus on the experience of net.art, specifically in the work of Jodi, as, on one hand, the experience of these net artists represents a new formalist current, especially the metalanguage pertaining to the so called "heroic period" of netart. In a specific way, I am relating the work of Jodi to some of the conditions of the functioning of language-games as seen in Wittgenstein, such as: aesthetic perplexities, supplementary descriptions and family resemblance.

## **The Aesthetic Judgement, between Michaud and Wittgenstein**

We will start by saying that, in relation to aesthetic judgment, Michaud believes any commitment to a general theory of artistic qualities or aesthetic answers is unnecessary. He considers that a grand theory on this matter would inevitably go towards the recognition of language games and local adjustments between art and the aesthetic experience, which, although they account for a general mechanism, could not be defined in an abstract way, but rather, by the agreements between spectators and artists in their communicative local practices.

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For Michaud, the notion of aesthetic criterion is the most important within the *aesthetic judgment*<sup>1</sup>, as his interest goes beyond the criteria or knowing what they are, and he can focus on them, on their functioning within Wittgenstein's theory of language games<sup>2</sup>. That is why Michaud bases his refusal of an ontology of art on Wittgenstein, while at the same time he highlights the necessary existence of shared identification mechanisms, as it occurs in the manners of inhabiting the world through languages games, which are not entirely personal, but neither are they totally universal, which is to say that they are not wholly objective but neither are they completely related to subjectivity.

Thus, we find a coincidence in the recognition of similitudes, by way of family resemblance, something that comes to reinforce Michaud's position, which he himself calls an *objective relativism*. This is because, much as those similar ways of living the language work as criteria that performs as the objective part, while its relativism resides in that they properly differ in the number of local games and contexts in which they are given and lived, in the same manner as Wittgenstein recognizes that language games are lived.

The aesthetic judgment as a language game of evaluation and communication would be one among many and there would be as many aesthetic language games as objects to be evaluated and groups which would carry them out, with the possibility of recycling and reinventing among them. So it would be in practices where certain inventions are accepted or rejected as rules. Thus such diversity of games coexists, where their expressions construct themselves in the possibilities of their exchanges.

In this sense, the criteria do not work as principles that give either validity or ontological reason to art, but they rather work as ways of understanding that allow to make distinctions in communication and to have tools for justification. It is equally understood that the aesthetic value, just as any other value is an element of discernment and communication within a language game, where there are agreements to appreciate, evaluate and above all, to live certain qualities of certain objects and experiences.

For Wittgenstein, as well as for Michaud, aesthetics obey an analytical

<sup>1</sup> Michaud, Yves (200). *El juicio estético*. Barcelona. Idea books.

<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein Ludwig (1982). *Investigaciones filosóficas*. Barcelona, editorial crítica.



philosophical exercise which focuses on the expression of ideas and feelings, which is where lies the importance of an analysis of language from art, about art and its ways, or the creation processes and perception, but overall the ways of living it. So, for Wittgenstein, aesthetics is speech about art, understanding this philosophical exercise as a language about language or a metalanguage through descriptions which concern philosophy, in as much as it allows analysis and criticizing this language in relation to sense.

Both Michaud and Wittgenstein consider it is important to cleanse all metaphysic darkness with signs of absolutes (fundamentalisms) in aesthetic judgements, such as beauty or some sort of meta aesthetic that separate itself from the practical sense of language and its usages. So, more than an explanation, it is convenient to describe and compare many cases or experiences that would allow to reach an agreement through their differences, as, in relation to aesthetic notions, it is not possible to establish anything exactly.

Even though expressions as net art are useful to trace some uses of language games as criteria for aesthetic judgement, that does not mean that in this manner it is possible to find rules. On the contrary, for Wittgenstein, rules obey certain expectations among certain groups of people, as a way to convert the desires in rules, without this excluding the existence of the grammar in these artistic expressions.

### **Net.Art**

The net.art or network art, is not only about an expression that depends on the technical conditions of the Internet. It also concerns the same language of the medium itself and experiments with the rationality of its communicative features<sup>3</sup>.

Although net art is commonly associated, or thought of, in two fundamental ways: as activism or meta-language, it is the latter which will take our focus of attention, that is, the so called heroic period of net art (1995-2000). In this way, Wittgenstein's methodology allow us to identify the main traits of internet art as metalanguage, and at the same time it

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<sup>3</sup> Baigorri, Laura. Cilleruelo Lourdes (2006). *Net.Art. prácticas estéticas y políticas de la red*. Barcelona, Editorial Brumania y universidad de Barcelona.

serves us to comprehend certain conditions of language in net art and its functioning as aesthetics criteria.

In this sense, we propose to confront the perplexities (misunderstanding or conceptual confusion which presents certain difficulties when explaining with ordinary language) in net art from the functioning with other Wittgensteinian categories, starting by assuming these perplexities as a way of "see as" avant-garde techniques that are possible to comprehend by resorting to descriptions that allow to place them either as language game contexts, or as comparative procedures in some of its characteristics and/or their most elementary conditions.

Maybe one among some of the most relevant perplexities or difficulties for the understanding of net art resides in that it keeps and almost consummates the avant-garde technique of art dematerialization, a condition that makes it difficult to preserve.

This immateriality of net art is also made evident in the fact that its objects (web pages) as well as its processes (net acts) are materially ungraspable, because they take place in one instant escaping its fixing in time, as in the last vanguards, where the act prevails on the object.

It is in this very same sense that the absence of an original character of the work constitutes another difficulty in comprehending net art, since not only the original does not exist, but neither do copies, there is only data, which is the only thing that there is on the net, so, it has often been said that in net art the data base in itself functions as art and that makes the artist of the so called new media a producer, where the data bases for instance are assumed in a symbolic way.

The self reference and appropriation are also net art characteristics that are possible to understand as perplexity, in as far as they suppose a knowledge of the distributing tools that allow to establish and play from the spaces of legitimation of net art through its visibility. For this, the so-called hybrid spaces combine art and communication through forums, mailing lists, online artwork, and even broadcast commissions artworks and artists.

The collective creation is seen as a methodology with ethical, aesthetic and playful features, due to net art demanding the contribution or intervention of the spectators, now as users. The artist stops being a solitary author that decides when the art piece is completed, especially when any

user may permanently modify as in a fluxus sense, where we can all become artists.

Another perplexity that we can identify as an avant-garde characteristic, condition and heritage, is its character as a process, which is not exclusive to net art. There is a phenomenological record of the performance through two connected computers which is basically stressed.

In this manner the creative process has some of its antecedents in performances and happenings, as it is not about the contemplation of an object, but an activity and event that is accompanied within a time sequence. In this regard it remains conceptual, as it is not an attitude which the transmitter demands from the receiver, but an aesthetic act that circulates as Sol LeWitt interprets it "from the artist's mind to the spectator's", as it also happens in the net art works that not only seek to document an action but also to update it on-line. So, seeing net art as a flux of information that questions the art work itself as a merchandise-object, it retains the features of conceptual art, in as much as what matters as art experience is the communicative value of its constant creative character.

In net art, as a child of conceptual art, the idea is of the utmost importance, at the same time as the material form becomes secondary and dematerialized, without pretensions, reevaluated as a process, like unhierarchized instants, without any perfect beginning or ending, where the development of each stage contributes as a fleeting thought where the idea gets elaborated.

The Internet network conditions not only document processes, but they shape it, in the form of the ideas that are exposed there, and the lived processes that, as Wittgenstein conceives language triumph over the emotional and besides, an object is not seen or lived unless it is through it. This, as a result of some modes of experience which are the product of the expansion of new technologies in a postindustrial society, do not only need to merge entertainment and show, but also articulate their modes of experience with the forms of critical articulation of everyday life, as it is becoming more and more hyperpresent on the internet.

The net.art can be understood within the artistic creative processes of contemporary artistic creation with a metalanguage similar to object *trouvé*, almost in the manner that Duchamp carried it out, which, applied to net.art, could be a sort of aesthetics of a metalinguistic reflection on

internet, as it is eventually a conceptual art, where the medium strives between its possibilities to express a message or to be, itself, the message.

Despite the fact that the descriptions can get to be less exact, they are more flexible, varied and timely, and, at the same time, they account for the manner of the sense in the aesthetic experiences and conditions of the aesthetic judgement in relation to art, for which neither the adjectives nor the intellectuallizing of such experiences constitute a warrant. On the contrary, the model of Wittgenstein allows us to account for the way to face some comprehension challenges, they are viewed as perplexities, we can come to understand them using elements of language games as additional descriptions and comparative reasons the order of family resemblances as we tried to do with some cutting-edge trends to explain some features of net.art I.O.

#### **JODI** ([www.jodi.org/](http://www.jodi.org/))<sup>4</sup>

JODI's work features a questioning of the capacity and conditions of the net through the display of Internet's own dysfunctions. One can say that, in a sense, JODI invite us to an experience that is reactive rather than interactive, that is to say frustrating, regarding the accustomed possibilities and use of the net.

Making use of deconstruction of language and net configuration, the work of Jodi appears as jokes or simple formalist abstractions, although actually, what it is all about is an aesthetic proposal to a meta-linguistic reflection on Internet, a questioning of the possibilities and limitations of the medium through the medium itself in relation to the confusions that it can provoke. Hence we can say that JODI makes us face a philosophical exercise of the order of Wittgensteinian aesthetic perplexities.

In this way, from a language about an artistic language, that is a meta-language, we can face the work of JODI following the interpretive frame, since Wittgenstein, with the understanding that it allows us, indeed, it forces us to resort to descriptions and/or comparisons in the way of Wittgenstein (supplementary descriptions) to explain an art that challenges

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<sup>4</sup> Collective of artists Joan Peskers and Dirk Paensmans, whose work is centered on meta-linguistic netart. Their work, since the beginnings of netart, or heroic period, can be seen in their website <http://www.Jodi.org/>.

the language of its artistic expression to the limit, net.art, and therefore, Internet, as we can see in works like this:

<http://oss.jodi.org/ss.html>

When we enter works like this, we access a disconcerting space, a type of simulation of a computer that has gained conscience and that is capable of deciding in place of the user. So, through the imitation of the operating system that deconstructs on the screen, JODI reverses the relation between programming and interface and mainly transforms the code into an image and vice-versa. In this way, JODI rescues, re-utilizes and de-construct the technological inputs of communication and language in the net, such as HTML, transforming them in conceptual jokes, making a recreational use of computers.

This work that apparently presents itself as a virus or an error of ICT also warns us in an aesthetics of error, in the way of Glitch<sup>5</sup>, when the screen begins to fill with small wallpaper windows that change place and colour intermittently, multiplying as if deconstructing the system, it would throw out a criticism from non-conformity and the rigidity that high technology poses. This questioning is always thrown by JODI from the net's own logic, from the self-referencing that characterizes net art, mainly in what concerns its origins, what is known as the heroic period (1995-2000), of which JODI is one of the main representatives.

In this way, JODI leads us to think in the machine as an interface, in the process of perception. Through a supposed threat, we are confronted with the power and vulnerability of Internet web. This is one of the reasons for its conceptual character. Hence, in these works we are proposed to rediscover the medium through an unexpected experimentation with it, as a re-signifying of the use of this type of language which allows other poetics, as it weaves stories that can solve those incomprehensible surprises or perplexities.

JODI denounce the exhaustion of possibilities of the use of the net by de-naturalizing the use of ICT language and its apparent infallibility,

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<sup>5</sup> Glitch, as considered in ICTs as an error which does not affect negatively the working of a program, is used by JODI in a conscious way, intending to generate disorientation and simulating error.

using the language's own weapons in order to betray it. This concern with language- meta-language is frequent in contemporary art, and maybe even more evident in expressions as net.art.

This also supposes an approaching the visual language of the net, which uses techniques inherited from avant-gardes such as montage and collage, often used in movements such as surrealism, which are now formalized in algorithms and coded in programs which represent an important advancement of these techniques, as is the case with photo-collage or overlapping or superposing of fragments in layers of images. That is why, theoreticians like Lev Manovich maintain that the techniques in the so-called new media still remain what they were since the first avant-garde movements:

“Surrealists joined pieces of reality in illogical combinations; cubists cut reality in small pieces; abstract artists reduced reality to what they considered their geometric ‘essence’; photographers of the new vision showed reality from unusual points of view, but, in spite of their differences, all of them concerned themselves with the same project in reflecting the world. Therefore, modernity’s main concern is the invention of new forms, that is, different ways of ‘humanizing’ the ‘objective’ image, alien, in the last instance, of the world, that technology provides us with”<sup>6</sup>.

In this way, following Manovich, we can say that the so-called new media, as is the case of the Internet web, do not invent new formal languages, although they do introduce new techniques equally important and revolutionary at an epistemological level, which are not new forms of seeing reality, but rather of accessing information and of the capacity to intervene in it as in the processing of images, interactivity and the ways to analyze data.

That is why, seeing expressions as net.art through works as the ones offered by the JODI collective, one could state that the new media, because the base on the old media, are rather post-media or meta-media, as José Luis Brea argues in his *La era postmedia*<sup>7</sup> (*The post-media era*). In this sense, the work of JODI turns into a return to its beginnings in order to

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<sup>6</sup> Manovich Lev (2002). *Avant as software*. <http://www.uoc.edu/artnodes/espai/eng/art/Manovich1002/Manovich1002.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Brea, José Luis (2002). *La era postmedia*. Salamanca, Editorial consorcio Salamanca.

challenge the very medium as a meta-medium of the society of information and the ways in which the data are processed and live through it from its formal features.

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