

Net Art and Activism

Tijen Tunali*

Abstract

Digital art activities (commonly known as net art) refer to a wide range of works that are computer-based art, accessed freely online, created by artists using web browsers, developer codes, scripts, search engines, applications, and various other online tools. Net art blurs the boundaries between art, design, political activism, and communication and raises questions about the authorship and translocality of art. Its relationship with the art world has been unclear as much as its nature as an avant-garde art movement.

The activist artists on the Internet incorporate new as well as old media into their practice and reach a diversity of audiences that was not possible for the mass movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The unknown recipient is involved in the tactical intervention of civil disobedience without necessarily recognizing its artistic origins. The activist net art practices take a revolutionary role already by transcending the exhibition-oriented nature of art and its commodity function. Not all the producers of tactical media on the Internet call themselves artists but their practices are often seen as a form of art, in their creative and subversive uses of form and content, and their symbolic, representational and practical work that intervenes, disturbs and challenges the commercial and corporate power in the cyberspace. This study points to some issues on the nature and outcome of the net art and investigates its potentiality to be a plausible tool for political activism.

Keywords: Net Art, New Media Art, Virtual Activism, Tactical Media, Digital Activism.

Since the turn of the late twentieth century, marked by the advances of information and communication systems, many avant-garde artworks seek to be resistant to instrumentalization and try to escape the controlling mechanisms of the institutional language of art as well as a disciplinary criterion by which to analyze artwork. Identified as “collaborative art”, “community-based art”, “dialogic art”, “participatory art”, “research-based art”, “relational aesthetics”, “action art”, “art of processes”, “littoral art”, and “digital (net) art,” a plethora of art practices have emerged as a reaction to the spectacularisation of artistic practices by the culture industry and the proliferation of international art biennales. There are no borders, no special coordinates, no markets and no fixed positions for this art, which makes them imminently counter-hegemonic. These open-ended art practices often do not seek to enact or obliterate political views or ideological perspectives; with spontaneous collectivism and aim to create communal and egalitarian relations through interaction and

exchange.¹ They seek to invert common thought patterns, challenge established social and economic exchanges and changed what is accepted as aesthetics in art. Since this type of political engagement of art is ephemeral, and the outcome cannot be calculated, the social and aesthetic viability of these practices are questioned. Net art stands at the crossroads of technology, art, and politics. It blurs the boundaries between art, design, political activism and communication. It raises essential questions on the authorship and translocality of art. This essay points to some issues on the nature and outcome of the net art and investigates its potentiality to be a plausible tool for political activism.

The Internet has engendered a new era of instantaneous connectivity and interactivity in which representation and communication have become intertwined. For the countless

¹ Curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud called aesthetics based on human relations as “relational art” in his book *Esthétique Relationnelle (Relational Aesthetics)* in 1998. Bourriaud defined relational art as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.” Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. (Paris: Presses du réel, 2002), 113.

interactive possibilities, it has presented, artists have been drawn to the Internet from its very inception. The art practices took advantage of the uncensored space of the Internet in the 90s called themselves “art glasnost.” First and foremost, they were connected to the phenomenon of the fall of the iron curtain as much as the emergence of the network of communication. The art in the 1990s on the Internet was hard to define, simultaneous and collaborative. The media art festival and journal *Ars Electronica* in 2002 was devoted to the theme “Unplugged – Art as the Scene of Global Conflicts.” The organizers as well as the editors of the journal, recalling the emergence of art in the cyberspace in the 1990s, stated that:

In their simultaneity, the triumphal progress of the World Wide Web together with Glasnost and the fall of the Iron Curtain once provided an occasion for inspiring visions and utopias. A free and open society seemed to be achievable by technological infrastructure [collective mind, global village, etc.] and ... many thought they had the key to a better future in their hands.²

Since then, in response to changing political and economic circumstances, just like top-down grassroots organizations, artists formed networks and alliances on the World Wide Web – although they have no common style, use of the medium, or a social goal. This kind of networking, differently than the modernist idea of a movement, is a self-organization that helps bring the peripheral artists into the social web of an alternative art world. Many critiques have argued that it is the viewer or the user who is empowered as the Internet diminishes artistic authority. For example, as an art historian and net artist Niranjan Rajah observes that “the participatory mode of the Internet heralds a culture in which each man and woman will be an ‘artist’ paradoxically, substantiating radical notions of the end of art.”³ Internationally renowned Turkish art critic and curator Beral Madra points out that the contemporary artists

embrace the cyber space without having to apply self-censorship:

Artists, curators, critics who have been suffering under institutional conservatisms were looking to acquire skills to bypass them. Internet environment has prepared the way to do so and created new kind of independency and freedom. The Internet gives space to the young artists and critics to put their inventions, ideas, projects, and concepts into idea-market without being humiliated by formalities and conformism.⁴

Net art (as opposed to art on the Internet) has been especially taken upon by artist/activists. Net art could encompass a variety of activities such as Internet-linked networked installations, Internet-based original software projects, interactive and streaming video, audio, or radio works, and networked performances that use multi-user domains, chat rooms, games and other networked environments. The essence of net art is unclear and unstable. Therefore, net art’s relationship with the art world has also been unclear. After the first curious flush of the net art at in the late 1990s and early millennium, the art institutions, the art magazines and the art market raised a cold shoulder to net art and embraced other media art and digital artworks. There have been a plethora of discussions on “relational art” and some other types of collaborative art projects, but except the initial flirt of the art biennials, net art has remained outside the interest of serious art criticism.⁵ Most of the writers, commentators, and critics of net art are from the disciplines other than art history such as cultural studies, sociology, media studies. Julian Stallabass notes:

There was a point, at the height of the dot-com boom, when it came close to being the “next big thing,” and was certainly seen as a

² Gerfried Stocker; Christie Schöpf; Hatje Cantz and Ostfildern-Ruit, eds, “Unplugged – Art as the Scene of Global Conflicts,” *Ars Electronica* (2002): 13. In 1996, in Linz Australia, a center for electronic arts is found by *Ars Electronica*. The museum shows the latest avant-garde media art from all over the world in its six-floor venue.

³ Niranjan Rajah, “Art after the Internet: The Impact of World Wide Web on the Global Culture,” accessed November 5, 2013, http://.isoc.org/inet97/proceedings/G3/G3_1.HTM#r16.

⁴ Beral Madra, “Cultural Exchanged via The Internet – Opportunities and Strategies”, accessed October 9, 2012, <http://archiv.hkw.de/forum1/doc/arc/0014.html>.

⁵ Stallabass remains the only art historian with a serious publication on net art. See Julian Stallabass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003). Hence, one could find other publications by the Sociologists who analyze the area that intersects net art and activism. See Annemarie Chandler and Norie Neumark, eds., *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2005); Berry Slater, “Bare Code: Net Art and the Free Software Movement,” in *Engineering Culture*, eds. Geoff Cox & Joasia Krysa (New York: Autonomedia, 2005): 133-149; C. J. Saper, *Networked Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (Thames and Hudson, 2004).

way to reach new audiences (while conveniently creaming off sponsorship funds from the cash-rich computer companies). When the boom became a crash, many art institutions forgot about online art, or at least scaled back and ghettoized their programs, and that forgetting became deeper and more widespread with the precipitate rise of contemporary art prices, as the gilded object once more stepped to the forefront of art-world attention. Perhaps, too, the neglect was furthered by much Internet art's association with radical politics and the methods of tactical media, and by the extraordinary growth of popular cultural participation online, which threatened to bury any identifiably art-like activity in a glut of appropriation, pastiche, and more or less knowing trivia.⁶

This poignant observation of the renown British art historian brings some questions in mind: The idea of postmodernism is to dislocate the meaning of art as well as its location and its dependency on the object, then why would the art world dismiss net art so quickly after reinforcing it as a symptom of postmodern culture? Similarly, Zach Pearl also questions net art's place in postmodern theory:

The institution can't contain it; it can't truly control its access or its translocality when it is not (and never will be) physically present in the institution. What does this liminality suggest? Does this constitute the physical exhibition of net art as a turning point that both dissimulates the art institution and escapes Baudrillard's rules of simulation? A hybrid space of the Real and the Hyperreal in which the gallery is not a gallery in the conventional sense, but a threshold? The visible scape of a Fourth Estate?⁷

Pearl concludes that the postmodernist theory of hyper-reality is inherently faulted and "symbolizes a social edification of Postmodern ideology" but net art exhibited in the gallery space bridges between Real (the gallery/museum that proliferates societal values and

behaviors associated with modernism) and the Hyperreal (the immaterial and ephemeral, of the postmodern social practice), which sustains a double edge sword of great (in)material and historical significance.⁸

It appears that what is practically dangerous about net art that makes it an opportunity for new aesthetic modes is its uncontrollable nature. Net art dissolves the borders of whom and where the audience is and is not controlled by its creator, neither by those who participate in it through their computers. For Zach Pearl, this is enough to make net art activist. In fact, activist and artistic interventions in the cyberspace overlap so much so that it is hard to distinguish one from the other. Also, for Pearl, net artworks urge users to engage with a familiar cyber aesthetics, with the help of cursor, hypertext, window, etc. which connects net art to tactical media even though it does not have a political or activist agenda.⁹ While, with its omnipresent, immaterial, interactive, collaborative, immediate and uncontrollable nature, net art makes it a good tool for activist practices. In the late 1990s activist/artist groups using the cyberspace such as *DotCommies*, which is collective of digital artists participating in the street protest, attracted attention to the Internet as a possible public space where political and artistic activities could meet.

Net art occurs in an egalitarian space where small and large activist organizations, as well as an individual art maker and activist, could have access to many of the tools of modern public communication. Not all the producers of tactical media on the Internet call themselves artists but their practices are often seen as a form of art, in their creative and subversive uses of form and content, and their symbolic, representational and practical work that intervenes, disturbs and challenges the commercial and corporate power in the cyberspace. These kinds of activities are commonly called "electronic disturbances" that block the flow of information in cyberspace. Those often complement a traditional street disturbance or the interventions of a resistant group or community in the physical spaces.

One of such examples is the Zapatistas' "electronic civil disobedience campaign." The

⁶ Julian Stallabrass, "Can Art History Digest Net Art," in *Net pioneers 1.0 - Archiving, Representing and Contextualising Early Netbased Art*, eds. Dieter Daniels and Gunther Reisinger, (Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2013), 165.

⁷ Zach Pearl, "Bridging Realities: The Exhibition of Net Art and Activism," accessed January 12, 2016, http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/bridging-realities-the-exhibition-of-net-art-as-activism/#_edn4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Tactical media* is a term coined in the mid-1990s by theorists David Garcia and Geert Lovink for the use of media against the institution of itself, or media infecting media. Tactical media works within the present code of signs and conventions only to subvert those conventions and disrupt the mainstream.

web site is called *Zaps Flood Net* and uses the 404 error code to create Internet art out of tactical media. This conceptual Internet art's action is called a "virtual sit-in" and it found so many participants that it eventually crashed the Mexican government's server. Now a legendary operation, this is also called "tactical net sculpture" among the net art enthusiasts, but the site itself declares that error log spamming is conceptual Internet art. All the Internet users are familiar with "File, not Found" or "Error 404" message when requested a document with HTTP. This message, which is also an HTTP document, also records the URL that was being asked for in the server's error log file, which is used by system administrators to track down bad links coming from other sites and in some instances to trace security threats or break in attempts. Basically by making an intentional mistake when searching the desired HTTP document, you can "upload" a message. *The Zaps Flood Net* site is designed in a way that all you have to do is to place your message in the appropriate box to be sent "by mistake" to Mexican government's HTTP URL.

This error log is discovered by Brett Stalbaum. He is the mastermind behind *Zaps Flood Net's* 404 intervention which utilizes this act creatively on his many "conceptual net sculptures" on various websites. One of those sites is called "Joint Tactical Disinformation Distribution" that, with a click, allows the visitors to upload information to the server of the United States government. The web page is designed as a commercial of a war game that invites you to play the game that does not exist. On this otherwise "useless" webpage Ben Eakins comments:

These web pages work as instigators of social interaction and play. Working within this scientific / military / business infrastructure, altering it to function, not for productive purposes, but instead for reasons of "useless" play and community, can be seen as constituting a 'resistance' to the socio-economic situation in which they are situated. In their role as parody, the question can be raised, does it act as ridicule, that is, as an attack upon the system which they inhabit or something less than ridicule, some form of parody which merely relieves pressures caused by the system and allows for the maintenance of the system, rather than an attempt to

resist the system in which it exists? That is to say, does it function as temporary release or as (hit and run) resistance?¹⁰

Drawing from a critique that establishes art within the social practices that emerge from complex and contingent conditions, net artist and theorist Brett Stalbaum argues that: "Art as represented on the web, the hundreds of museum, gallery, education and working artist sites, serve to conceal that it is art practice itself that is dead... Art in this sense, on the web or in the world, exists to rejuvenate the fiction of art."¹¹ What Stalbaum refers here is the Western social conception of art; hence, he also encourages us to think how to situate the net art practices strategically within the contemporary postmodern contingencies. In fact, the artist believes that the Internet creates opportunities, where: "Western art and its vast complex of semiotic signifiers can un-join, dissipate and connect with other discourses in a knowledge practice."¹² Stalbaum also connects the artist's role on the Internet as the conqueror of a new aesthetic territory that opens his/her audience to new experiences to the modernist conception of avant-gardism with the difference in the medium. When asked about the difference between art and tactical media, he explained:

It not desirable to make exclusive critical distinctions between tactical media and art. There is a telling comparison to be made between the Joint Tactical Disinformation Distribution System (JTDDS), which is more a conceptual net sculpture than truly invasive attack software, and the Zaps Flood Net, which is a cultural work agitating for and facilitating civil-disobedience in the name of a cause; yet which is also supported by some peripheral art activity. Tactical media and art are best treated as relative concepts.¹³

One of the net art pioneers is the error 404 intervention, *Jodi 404.org* founded in 1994. It is a collective initiative of two artists Joan Heemskerk (Dutch) and Dirk Paesmans (Belgian).

¹⁰ Ben Eakins, "Useless Web Pages: Conceptual Folk Art or Postmodern Web Dada?," *Switch* Vol 3 No: 1 (Spring1997), accessed October 18, 2013, <http://switch.sjsu.edu/web/v3n3/JTDDS/frames.html>.

¹¹ Brett Stalbaum, "Conjuring Post-Worthlessness: Contemporary Web Art and the Postmodern Context," *Switch*, Issue 7, accessed October 26, 2013, switch.sjsu.edu/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php?artc=264.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Their work was shown at Documenta X in 1997, where net art was exhibited in an institutional space for the first time. JODI also questions the allegedly decentralized, dislocated, and delocalized environment of the Internet and explains that this de-nationalizes the works and the artists:

It makes the work stronger that people don't know who's behind it. Many people try to dissect our site and look into the code. Because of the anonymity of our site they can't judge us according to our national culture or anything like this. In fact, Jodi is not a part of culture in a national, geographical sense. I know it sounds romantic, but there is a cyberspace citizenship. More and more URLs contain a country code. If there is '.de' for Germany in an address, you place the site in this national context. We don't like this. Our work comes from inside the computer, not from a country.¹⁴

There has been much celebration on the trans-locality of net art often without taking into account the incommensurability of its meaning, consequences, or effects.¹⁵ Trans-locality refers to putting the local issues in the global contest by making them widely accessible to the audiences around the world. "Trans-local thinking" along with "de-centralization" and "de-contextualization" has been among the most important aspects of the net art since its early days.

In net art, the locality of an artist or artwork is often considered as a burden, but it is not always the case in all net art projects. For example, in 1998, the *DissemiNet* by Sawad Brooks and Beth Stryker started a project involving the testimonies of children, who disappeared during the civil war in El Salvador. The reports are being provided by the local agency *Pro-Busqueda de Los Niños* that involves finding the missing children in San Salvador. The project is still being regularly updated by the remarks of people who have missing children or who have come across with one of them.

Although there are some art historical accounts that celebrate the activist character of

net art and connect it with a long history of radical cultural engagement, the art history is far from canonizing tactical media on the Internet as "art".¹⁶ Net activism and off-line activism usually go hand in hand as those activists/artists are engaged in political practices outside of the realm of the net as well. One of the most internationally known online activist/artist collectives is ®TMark by *gatt.org* and the activities of *Electronic Disturbance Theater* (EDT). Natalie Bookchin, recalls the launch of *Gatt.org* and its raison d'être:

Gatt.org was launched during the few weeks before the World Trade Organization was to meet in Seattle in the Fall of 1999 ... Soon after the site was published the Director General of the WTO distributed a press release harshly criticizing *gatt.org* for being 'deceptive', thus assisting ®TMark in bringing even more public and media attention to our site. While a series of exchanges between ®TMark and the WTO were taking place, thousands of activists were protesting in the streets in Seattle. The on-line activities did not replace the off-line ones, but instead, each reinforced the other.¹⁷

The Electronic Disturbance Theater is another small group of cyber activists and artists engaged in developing the theory and practice of *Electronic Civil Disobedience* (ECD). Until today, the group has focused its electronic artistic activities to engage its viewers and followers in global, mass, collective, and simultaneous direct action. *The Electronic Disturbance Theater* works at the intersections of radical politics, performance art, and computer software design. Acting in the tradition of non-violent direct action and civil disobedience, proponents of ECD are borrowing the tactics of trespass and blockade from earlier social movements and are applying them to the Internet. A typical civil disobedience tactic has been for a group of people to physically blockade, with their bodies, the entranceways of an opponent's office or building or to occupy

¹⁴ www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/6/6187/1.html, (accessed on 22 October 2011).

¹⁵ For more see Ewa Wojtowicz, "Global vs. Local? The Art of Translocality?" accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.hz-journal.org/n8/wojtowicz.html>

¹⁶ For more on the discussion see Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Destruction of Everyday Life* (North Adams, MA: MASS MoCA Publications, 2005).

¹⁷ Beryl Graham, "New Media, Community Art, and Net.art Activism: Interviews with Natalie Bookchin and Brendan Jackson", accessed on October 3, 2013, <http://www.crumbweb.org/getInterviewDetail.php?id=3>.

physically an opponent's office to have a sit-in. ECD, on the other hand, utilizes virtual blockades and virtual sit-ins as a form of mass de-centered electronic direct action. Unlike the traditional participant in a civil disobedience action, an ECD actor can participate in virtual blockades and sit-ins from home, from work, from the University, or from other points of access to the Net. Among the virtual sit-ins that the EDT has organized were: Protest in support of labor and indigenous rights in Mexico in 2002, solidarity with the families of the disappeared and murdered young women of Juarez in 2002 and 2003, against political repression in Italy in 2002; Action Against the WTO at next round of WTO meetings in Sydney 2002; solidarity with the teachers and protesters of Oaxaca in 2006 and virtual protests in support of the healthcare benefits against Michigan Medicaid cuts in 2007.

It is true that the new activism is built mainly on the social networks of the virtual space. This "cyberactivism" that refers to campaigning and organizing does so by the alternative media that circulates on the Internet as clandestine activities; Internet art; tactical attacks to the Internet pages of the governmental and non-governmental organizations; international solidarity formed in Internet blogs, forums and discussion groups, and petition campaigns circled through the social media.¹⁸ The effects of these temporal activities are questionable; however, they constitute a particular form of networking that lacked in the previous anti-systemic movements.

As the social communication on the Internet evolved, the artist/activists have started to use the social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Vine as platforms for their activities. This shifted net art from being based on software and net-page development to creating happenings and staging performance art on the social media. The popular use of these social networks also allowed activist/artists to post creative videos of solidarity, memes, caricatures, satire, posters, drawings, photographs and altered pin-up images to reach thousands of people with one click.

The best example of mobilization through social networks occurred in Arab countries, during the spring of 2011, using networking tools. For example, although only twenty percent of

the population in Egypt had an Internet connection in their homes at the time, it is a known fact that the Egyptian revolution owes a lot to social media networks, especially Twitter and Facebook, thanks to Internet-friendly cell phones that have permeated to the poorest and most isolated places. On January 25, 2011, Internet activists created an event in Cairo's Tahrir Square, titled, "The Day of the Revolution against Torture, Poverty, Corruption, and Unemployment." More than 80,000 people replied "attending." It had all started on June 6, 2010, when five activists created a very creative Facebook page, "We are all Khaled Said," to protest the killing of Khaled Said by police in broad daylight in Alexandria. The organizers of the January 25 protests broadcast the footage of the police attacks during protests through Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Not only this video but hundreds of creative posters, memes, and graphical art inspired many to return to Tahrir Square, the following days, where they retook the square and held it until Mubarak was driven from power. Paul Mason in his book, *Why It's Kicking-Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* argues that the Internet or "the network" will bring a new revolutionary sense of community to the masses:

The network's usefulness is not limited to half-hearted reform struggles that aim only to shock and disturb. It can achieve those elements of an instant community, solidarity, shared space, and control that were at the heart of social revolutions in the early industrial age. It can be as cooperatives were for the workers who launched the Paris Commune of 1871, a space to form the bonds that would take them through an insurrection.¹⁹

Is this the age of digital activism? It is still too early to answer this question, especially when taken into consideration that the corporations and trade associations dominate online traffic, especially on Facebook and Twitter, and access to the Internet is still uneven. Nevertheless, political resistance is now inevitably connected to the electronic media technologies and networks. The radicalism of this connection is not in its form but in its capacity to mobilize the public sphere and in its ability to exist both on the Internet and on the

¹⁸ For the first use of the term "cyber activism," see Martha McCaughey, Michael D. Ayers, *Cyber Activism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge: 2003).

¹⁹ Paul Mason, *Why It's Kicking off Everywhere: the New Global Revolutions* (Verso: January 2012), 84.

streets. Not just organizations of protests and uprisings, but civil disobedience campaigns and political interventions are also dependent on the networks on the Internet. Illegal public poster projects, inflatable plastic shelters for homeless people, clothing, and masks designed for riots are but a few activities that have been possible with public participation, first on the net, then on the streets.

As the contemporary art scene expands outwards with the financial intervention of the corporate sector, the underground cultural activities, experimental communities, and anti-establishment art spaces resist to the systematization of the corporate logic. Contemporary art and artists are not merely confined by the disciplinary boundaries of the

art history canon, the hierarchical structure of art institutions, the constraints of corporate sponsorship or the logic of the culture industry. Net art continues to undermine bourgeois consumerism and institutional control in the arena of art. If net art activism would succeed in enacting critical spaces for a genuinely radical action or if it would transform into a transient form of social engagement that aestheticizes political communication for popular appeal is an idle concern. Counter-hegemonic art practices like net art, find their intended meanings to the extent that they intersect, intermingle, collaborate, inspire and activate the public, while creating opportunities for alternative aesthetical developments, not just in the sphere of art but in the social sphere as well.

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Biographical notes

Tijen Tunali. PhD Candidate in Art History at the University of New Mexico.

Author's Research Interests: Alternative Practices of Art and Cultural Production, Contemporary Art and Ecology, Social Movements and Art in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.