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Rachel Greene

SOUND OFF

BURN ➡

Internet Art

232 illustrations, 174 in color

roll over stripes
and choose a colour.

click songs to listen.

choose a song and drag
it onto the cd.
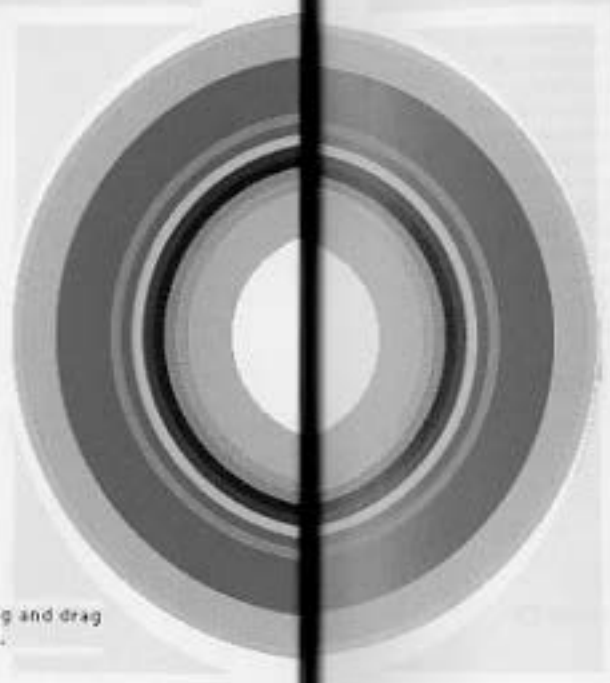
DOWNLOAD   bb0061 db0005 sk0233 bb0061 db0005 sk0233 bb0061 db0005 sk0233 bb0061 db0005
sk0233 bb0061 db0005

RESET

The World's First Collaborative Sentence

(browser window: address http://hettfo.lehman.cuny.edu/davis/Sentence/sentence1.html)

Welcome to the World's First Collaborative Sentence:

I DID NOT FEEL SEPARATED I FELT VERY CLOSE EVEN THOUGH WE WERE THOUSANDS OF MILES APART AND I WAS SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE HERE I FELT CLOSE HOW ARE YOU THIS IS DURBAN WE FEEL WE ARE A PART OF THE WORLD AT LAST IN THE PALACE HERE I AM WAITING FOR THE PRESIDENT I SEND YOU GREETINGS HERE I AM IN THE GALLERY LOOKING AT THIS BIG PENCIL I AM LAUGHING COGITO ERGO SUM GO GO GO SENTENCE swing swing swing ring ring ring ring ring let hereberereverywhereGUMBOGUMBOhellhole! DONT KNOW WHAT TO SAY A LITTLE LEARNING IS A DANGEROUS THING FREEDOMFREEDOMFREEDOM**GET OFF ME GET OFF MY BACK** SCRATCH MY ASS DOUGLAS HOW ARE YOU? FAR AWAY YET FREE DONT COME AFTER ME PHI KAB NAUNG LANG PHAU PHI NAUNG SEX RELATIONS BETWEEN FIRST COUSINS ARE FORBIDDEN THE MOON BRIGHTENS THE BATTLE CAMP SO YOU LIKE TO LOOK AT ME PAY FOR IT YOU PAMPER ME SO MUCH YOU MAKE ME FEEL LIKE A QUEEN I SEND GREETINGS FROM FRANKFURT GOD BLESS AMERICA AMERICA NEEDS IT ANIMALS ARE GOOD TO THINK AND GOOD TO PROHIBIT BE GOOD IT IS THE TIME TO BE GOOD I LOVE EVERYBODY I HATE EVERYBODY THE SON IN LAW MUST NOT ENTER ENTER THE SLEEPING QUARTES THROUGH THE DOORWAY OF THE PARENTS IN LAW CALL ME RIGHT NOW TO SAVE THE WORLD I LOVE YOU WORLD WORLD WHEN WILL YOU SEE HOW BEAUTIFUL YOU ARE STOP DYING WORLD HERE IN THE BRONX WE HATE THE POLICE GIVE ME YOUR HAND I FEEL YOUR FINGER HERE MANY MILES APART I THINK IN BASEL WE UNDERSTAND AND APPRECIATE YOUR WORK KEEP GOING WE ARE BEHIND YOU NO BODY CAN SWEAT SO MUCH WE FIND YOU NEAR EVEN WHEN FAR TO THE HEALTH OF DON CESARE'S WOMA N AU REVOIR MONS ENFANTS RED RED RED RED RED RED RED RED RED RED RED RED BLUE BLUE BLUE BLUE I AM SO BLUE I SAW A MAN HE HELD A STICK OUT TO ME I HOLD THIS STICK OUT TO YOU ACROSS THE WORLD I ASK YOU WHEN WILL YOU COME TO MOSCOW AGAIN DOUGLAS er mror mror mrage THE BUSHES TWITCHED AGAIN THE STICK BEGAN TO GROW SHORTER IN BOTH ENDS HERE IN KAUNAS WE HAVE SATAN MAKING LOVE TO AN ANGEL IS THIS WHAT DROVE HIM INTO HELL WELL THIs thing of of writing in all caps is getting a bit tiresome and why does **this sentence** have sound so disgusting and arty who do think we are

James joyce's greatgrandchildren

> or some kind of gertrude

1. stein
2. stein
3. stein

at least there are a few things that could be done to make this page look a little more attractive or at least more readable but tHEN DONT BE *SO F***ING LITERAL YOU* #@%*'! THIS ISN'T A TYPOGRAPHY LESSON LIke the one that beautiful Swedish girl gave me on the train to Gdansk and then later in the cargo hold of the ship with the moonlight on here snowy-white scandanavian breasts which made me feel so asf asf asf This is another lustless technical test before all hell breaks loose with artists contributing sociological prose and poetry, but is this really art, or is it so what else can be said, anyway and more and more and more but what difference is this making WELL ISN'T IT JUST FUN TO WRITE TOGETHER LIKE THIS millenial exaggerations overstate our singularity, basic humanity is as lonely as (I'm feeling a bit spacy) there are a lot of things that could be said, but i don't know what to say but i want to say it my father is coming and i have to stop now he always comes upstairs like this in the middle of the night that follows dust in the endless progression of biological kitchen-ware 1001001 SOS 1001001 IN DISTRESS 100100 Everything is deeply intertwingled I want to be unique, just like everyone else After this, Jen decided, finally, to attempt to bring the killers to justice, in his own way, of course, and, in so doing, rid the world of a terrible scourge, created by all yet fascinating as well to a small, perverted subset of the community who had watched their antics progress from random, petty violence to the full-fleged sociopathic acts they had been performing, almost as if for entertainment for our benefit, for the last eight months all this stuttering the other night, when, traveling uptown on the 6 train, a man and a woman got on at 23rd street, laughing and babbling to one another in some uncomprehensible language while I leaned back against the bench, trying hard not to fall asleep, and the woman sitting next to me jabbed at my arm and asked me crackily, a microphone held up to her neck Because I think her larynx had been removed, "What language you think they're talking" the problem for the revolutionary artist in the nineteenth century—perhaps it is still the problem—was how to use the conditions of artistic production with easel in the studio, in the salon for a month, and then on the wall of a sitting room in the Faubourg Saint-Germain? how to a

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Early internet art is very much inextricable from the technology and politics of the 1990s and early twenty-first century, although its preoccupations with themes such as 'information', 'communication', 'interaction' and 'systems' linked the genre to postconceptual art. As artist and theorist Peter Weibel (b. 1944) has noted, cyberspace seems a '1960s idea', even if it was not technically viable until decades later. As important as these historical connections are, net artists have also developed and created new methods for production, consumption and exchange. Not only do net art practices extend the arena, capability and reach of artistic production, but they have offered ways to remix and revitalize categories often reified in the art world and beyond.

Internet art is buoyed by the technological, economic and social specifications of its medium. Though still evolving today, dominant tools are email, software and web sites. Unique economies of attention exist, in which international web traffic and email forwards and downloads are the indexes of the public consumption and success of the art, as opposed to conventional means of valuation, such as visits to a museum show, magazine reviews or monetary worth. Rapid rates of reaction and widely available production tools have also been defining. For example, if one does not like a web site, chances are that one can offer feedback (email) or find tools to create an alternative (web publication). Those who view commerce as irredeemable corruption will be pleased to know that, as yet, there exists no viable or stable market for net art. As a result of this isolation and specialization, internet artists often develop close-knit online communities, and oppositional and radical content has remained an undiluted component. Net art's audience is a social medley: geographically dispersed, varying in background, these art enthusiasts are able to morph their involvement constantly,

18 Douglas Davis, *The World's First Collaborative Sentence,* 1994–present. Composed by internet participants, this ongoing collaborative work, which initially only supported text, now hosts multimedia entries. Polyvocal, international and seemingly endless, the project is often held up as an emblem of internet aesthetics.

drawing from roles such as artist, critic, collaborator or 'lurker' (one who just watches or reads, without participating). Finally, 'viewers' have a direct relationship with net art: they can log on from any computer with net access and the right software, see an artwork, download it, share it or copy it.

In the early 1990s, however, internet art was just one small part of widescale proliferations of media and consumer technology. People in the West were becoming increasingly reliant on television, satellite and cellular devices in their everyday lives. The first Gulf War exemplified the ubiquity of globalized media, with CNN, an international, twenty-four-hour television network, broadcasting weaponry deployed and operated via sophisticated computer systems. At around the same time, reality television became a hit among young Americans. MTV's The Real World, in which people living together were taped, edited and broadcast, made theatricalized and mediated daily life friendlier, hipper and younger. Cellular phones began to be used widely. A new tempo and frequency of communication and device usage was evolving. Although the internet began as a project of the US Government's Department of Defense, more and more civilians, office workers, students and artists used it following the development of graphics and HTML viewers, called browsers. Email and the World Wide Web (the 'web') became tools for work and home, with email allowing for instantaneous communication, and the web supporting various graphic and communication applications, and endless nodes for text and image publication – web sites. These events were symptomatic of significant cultural changes, suggesting emergent social groups in which divisions between behaviour, emotions and thoughts – and media, technology and commerce – were blurred.

From its earliest moments, the ways in which commercial and governmental interests and technologies powered the net's development were obvious. One would experience the web with a commercial browser, such as Netscape Navigator, that had been designed according to corporate interests, not educational or aesthetic ones. Commercial interests, which were receiving ample attention from the venture capital sector at the time, operated next to social communities and organizations. These diverse collectives were based on everything and anything, from the pragmatic, like news groups (an internet bulletin board system requiring special software) for car mechanics, to the more scholarly, such as mailing lists focused on Virginia Woolf criticism.

Though marketing and press outlets touted the rise of internet culture as 'democratic' and 'revolutionary', the writers and artists who searched the net for new possibilities during these early years were often more restrained in their enthusiasm. In fact, those who sought to find contemporary art on and about the internet had to look quite closely. Not only would a search engine not provide the right kind of results for a quest for 'art', but directories such as Yahoo! or Netscape tended to bury net art under many layers of web pages. Even beyond its text-heavy aesthetic, the net elided evidence of being an easy or refined venue for artistic production. Its ability to realize international and relatively inexpensive communication and exchange, however, was potent. And internet art's earliest beginnings crystallized within this matrix of communication technologies.

Art and communication were at the centre of many initiatives undertaken by European non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the European Commission in Brussels after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s, these new computer centres and media art programmes became more prominent fixtures in the European and Russian culture- and leisure-scapes, offering events, education, internet access and production tools. The internet was emblematic of the increased access to information in these regions, and the opening of international borders, and was very appealing.

Many net artists, such as Heath Bunting (Britain), Olia Lialina (Russia), Alexei Shulgin (Russia) and Vuk Cosic (Slovenia), worked as offline artists, photographers, graffiti writers and filmmakers before experimenting with art online. Leaving behind more accepted aesthetic practices, they came to make art from media centres like T0 (Vienna), C3 (Budapest) and Backspace (London) via computers in their living rooms, or from desks at their day jobs. Instead of film or oil paint, they used low-fi net production tools: HTML, digital graphics and Photoshop were likely requisites (later, Java, Flash and Dynamic HTML). They were introduced to one another via the internet and became contemporaries, friends, collaborators and travel companions, meeting face to face at technoart events like Next 5 Minutes, the Cyberfeminist International and Ars Electronica. These artists were able to draw on the work of 'early adopters' of the internet's most basic offerings, like bulletin board systems (BBS) and email. They also benefited from the experience of the respected figures who worked with technology-informed installations or intermedia involving video, satellite, sound and computers, such as Robert Adrian X (b. 1935), Hank Bull (b. 1949), Roy Ascott (b. 1934), Sherrie Rabinowitz and Kit Galloway.

This early generation of internet artists exhibited a diverse set of interests. Some wanted to realign traditional modes of communication and audience address, pursuing direct dialogue and exchange with other artists and art enthusiasts from around the world, independent of the cumbersome commercial channels of galleries, museums and dealers. To some, the digitized screen and computer aesthetics were dominant preoccupations. These themes were explored through configurations of six main net art formats between 1993 and 1996: email, web sites, graphics, audio, video and animation. These often appeared in combination – communication and graphics, or email, texts and images – referring to and merging with one another. Whatever the premise or organizing principles, artists were internationally dispersed, working from wildly disparate local contexts and using different tools. But along with developers, programmers, critics and media outlets, all of these artists were watching net culture evolving on their screens, even as they helped to shape it.

Participation in Public Spaces

The earnest, straightforward tone of Heath Bunting's instructions on the web site *King's Cross Phone In* (1994) [19] belies the significance of what the artist points towards: an opening up of web page capabilities to extend into public spaces, enabling play, subversion and artistic intervention. On a simple, white web page with black text, Bunting listed the numbers of public telephone booths surrounding London's King's Cross station. Designating a time and date for a collective, international phone-in, the artist orchestrated a telephonic musical in a public transportation and commuter hub. These participatory and playful aesthetics, significant to early net artists, also stand as part of a twentieth-century avant-garde interest in instigating activity, replacing passive consumption of a medium (the web site) with engaged response (making a call, chatting with a stranger). Disrupting the flow of pedestrian traffic in and around King's Cross station and channelling web functionality into friendly phone calls from around the world, Bunting and his group of participants conducted chance encounters in an unlikely venue. It was one of Bunting's earliest web projects but it bears many of his hallmarks: minimal ornamentation and low-fi graphics, a basis in direct action and the capacity to unite fields of public art, hacking and street culture.

King's Cross Phone In came out of Bunting's explicit goal to 'bring high tech to street level'. In addition to his introduction of train workers and commuters to the internet as an art platform, it

also bears the hallmark of situationist works, echoing that international artistic and political movement's (1957–72) famous tactic of transmogrifying existing elements into more radical or oppositional forms. Bunting (b. 1967) follows the situationist recipe almost to the letter. The quotidian forms that are put to use in *King's Cross Phone In* – public phones, ring tones and a web page – retain their everyday qualities but, in their means and manner of deployment, change the tenor of a particular setting and time. Though Bunting can be seen as travelling paths broken by artists of earlier generations, with this work he sets up a collaborative performance that is unlike those of his forerunners by virtue of its manifestation of the web's capacity for international organization and collective performance. 'I basically spent most of my time wandering the streets at that point doing graffiti and looking in trash', Bunting says, describing his research for the project. Inspired by forms of public and street art, Bunting's interests at that time also focused on expression and communication via new technology: he ran a BBS out of his living

19 Heath **Bunting**, *King's Cross Phone In*, 1994. In this work, the web was used to transform a commuter hub, King's Cross train station, into a venue for social and musical spectacles. Though internet art rarely dominates political or artistic life, the theoretical reach of a web page is such that artists interested in public, open contexts, such as Bunting, found it to be a rich creative platform.

room and had a voicemail system based in his kitchen cupboard. For his experiments, the internet was 'the next logical step – i.e. cheaper and wider audience'.

Russian Internet Art Scene

In the same year that Bunting organized his *King's Cross Phone In*, three major factors were encouraging internet art practices in Russia. Firstly, net technologies synchronized with artists' reactions against a local commercial and publicity-driven art scene. In addition, though the internet as a commercial venture was marked as American and European from the beginning, it offered ways for Russian new media artists to communicate beyond their borders and reinterpret the net in their own ways. Finally, Russia's rich history of avant-garde film schooled many young artists in narrative and screen-centred visuals that could be extended and reconsidered on a computer screen with more interactive capabilities. We see these elements evolve in the work of Olia Lialina (b. 1971) and Alexei Shulgin (b. 1963), who first began to use the net in the mid-1990s as a distribution platform outside the Moscow film and art worlds, respectively. Both quickly adopted its idioms and tools as the core of their practices.

Contrast the directness of *King's Cross Phone In* with the more medium-conscious approaches of Lialina's project *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War* (1996) [20], or Shulgin's *Hot Pictures* (1994) [21], both of which were made at a time when the web could support only the simplest graphics and text. The former creates an oblique, dramatized romantic narrative, set against the backdrop of war, and uses frame programming (in which HTML is divided into quadrants and subdivisions on a single web browser window). Its balance of text and image across a darkened screen has been described by new media art theorist Lev Manovich in the 1997 essay 'Behind the Screen' as a manifestation of a Russian legacy of screens, and film director Sergei Eisenstein's (1898–1948) theories of parallel montage. It is also one of the earliest examples of a work in which the user can directly influence the narrative arc. The interests professed in *Hot Pictures* included the dissolution of boundaries between the computer image, painting and photography, and the separation of artwork from the Russian gallery scene. As the 'first Russian electronic photo gallery', as Shulgin called it, *Hot Pictures* was novel by virtue of its self-styled context: a gallery space free from commercial, white cube constraints, accessible from home and office and amenable to both private reflection and public reaction.

20 Olia Lialina, *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War*, 1996. Lialina jettisoned the no-frills technical style then popular with net artists in favour of a more intimate, decorative, narrative, and, for that time, personal approach to web-based art. She later included the work as part of The Last Real Net Art Museum, which took the original *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War*, coupled with other artists' variations on it, to create an archive of work.
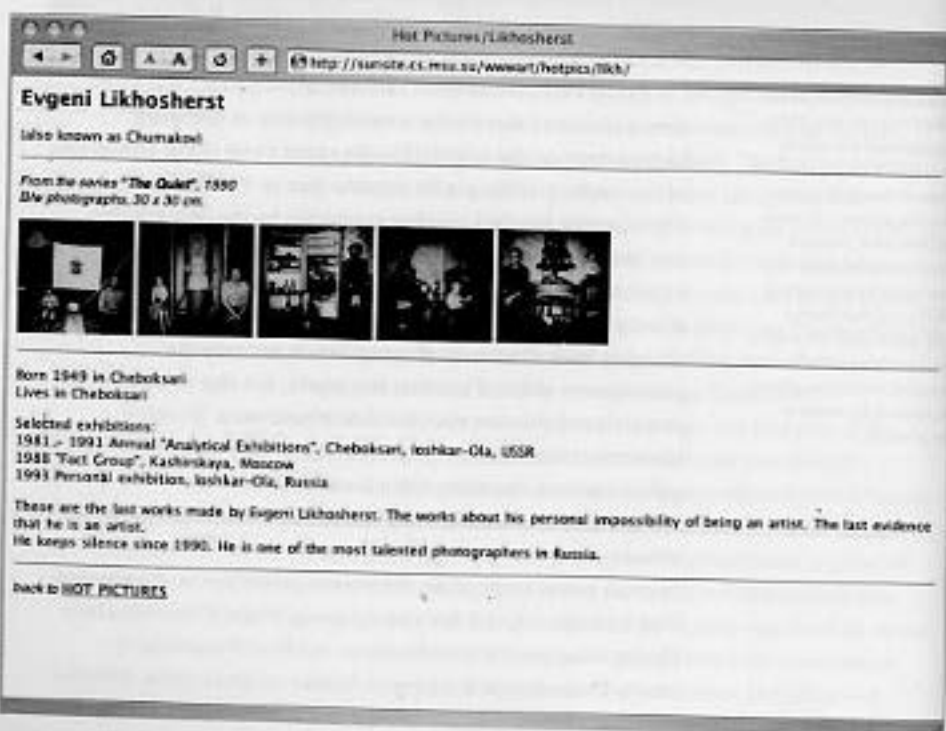
At this time, the internet's role in relation to art was by no means clear, and there were no authoritative or complete formulations on the subject. Shulgin notes some of the ambiguities of the medium, writing in his introduction to *Hot Pictures* : 'Photography for the long time seemed to be the only credible method for reality reflection. But the development of the computer technologies had put this postulate on trial. So photography which in its time had changed all fine arts now is changing itself. Electronic photo gallery is not only the presentation of specific artists and works, but also an attempt to research and visualize the described phenomena.' Shulgin's 'electronic photo gallery' extracts photography from the offline gallery context, depicting it as a broad medium that accommodates painterly, mechanized and documentary aspects. We see these themes reflected in the art in *Hot Pictures*, which covers a broad range of work from the politicized to the pictorial. One example is *Empty Icons* by the group Medical Hermeneutics (Sergei Anufriev, Vladimir Fiodorov and Pavel Pepperstein) – heavily Photoshopped photos of Russian religious icons. Another example is found in Evgeni Likhosherst's (also called Chumakov)

works that are about the 'impossibility of being an artist' and recall the concurrent work of British photographer Richard Billingham: tragicomic, touching and unsettling. They were, according to the information provided on *Hot Pictures*, Likhosherst's last works: 'The last evidence that he is an artist. He keeps silence since 1990. He is one of the most talented photographers in Russia.'

Certainly not the first artist to undertake building his own distribution and promotion mechanisms, Shulgin applied internet capabilities to his critiques of conservative art culture, publishing prescriptive declarations presented in Futurist-like, apocalyptic terms. In a 1996 manifesto, Shulgin identifies 'pure and genuine communication' as a tenable goal for the net artist:

Artists! Try to forget the very word and notion 'art'. Forget those silly fetishes — artefacts that are imposed [on] you by suppressive system[s] you were obliged to refer your creative activity to. Theorists! Stop pretending that you are not artists. Your will to obtain power [over] people [by] seducing them with intellectual speculations is very obvious (though understandable). But [a] realm of pure and genuine communication is much more appealing and is becoming very possible nowadays. Media artists! Stop manipulat[ing] people with your fake

21 **Alexei Shulgin.** *Hot Pictures: Evgeni Likhosherst*, 1994, from the series 'The Quiet', 1990. This project highlights how, as a medium for display and publication, the internet is able to host art and information that would otherwise remain lost or local.

Evgeni Likhosherst

(also known as Chumakov)

From the series "The Quiet", 1990
B/w photographs, 30 x 30 cm

Born 1949 in Cheboksari
Lives in Cheboksari

Selected exhibitions:
1981 – 1991 Annual "Analytical Exhibitions", Cheboksari, Ioshkar-Ola, USSR
1988 "Fact Group", Kashirskaya, Moscow
1993 Personal exhibition, Ioshkar-Ola, Russia

These are the last works made by Evgeni Likhosherst. The works about his personal impossibility of being an artist. The last evidence that he is an artist.
He keeps silence since 1990. He is one of the most talented photographers in Russia.

Back to HOT PICTURES

'interactive media installations' and 'intelligent interfaces'! You are very close to the idea of communication, closer than artists and theorists! Just get rid of your ambitions and don't regard people as idiots, [unfit] for creative communication. Today you can find those that can affiliate [with] you on [an] equal level. If you want of course.

Beyond his confessed aversion to gallery and museum culture, it seems apt that an artist who grew up under the Soviet Communist government would celebrate open realms for 'communication', and belittle art that depended upon 'official' art spaces or intellectual 'seductions'. Curiously, after *Hot Pictures* Shulgin did not make any more web work relating closely to the social and economic conditions around him. He would go on to focus on the formal and medium-related concerns that have guided both new media art discourse and the work of the next wave of net artists.

New Vocabularies

If disdain for the channels of the art world offered one route into web-based modes of art-making, another was provided by the constantly evolving vocabulary of internet protocols, or usage standards. Because of the net's casual climate of constant development, information sharing and communication, deriving in part from its use as an academic tool and large-scale message board in academic settings, new terms often sprung up in the vernacular. As a result, much internet formal rhetoric has a sociable, friendly tenor. The 'handshake', for example, is the noisy process that occurs when two modems interact; it establishes mutually beneficial transmission speeds and other related information exchange metrics. German artists Joachim Blank (b. 1963), Karl Heinz Jeron (b. 1962), Barbara Aselmeier and Armin Haase allude to this term with their 1993 web project *Handshake*. *Handshake* is a visually and organizationally basic work with a small inventory of low-fi images split up among sections called 'Rorschach Test', 'Symbols and Interpretation', 'Life and Work in Eastern Europe' and 'Electronic Art or Electronic Aided Art'. The combination of user-generated content, social commentary, discussion of conceptual and media art histories and awareness of their own artistically impure context (and consequently, what was at stake in claiming web territory for art) shows this group as both knowing heirs to art-historical traditions and forebears of online social spaces and art platforms like THE THING and Rhizome.org. And in light of the rigorous discussions about the cultural role of the internet that would later

take place across email lists and web communities, *Handshake* appears as a prescient example of net art's self-aware tendencies.

Tools servicing internet protocols provided inspiration for artists, propelling them towards more medium-specific work, work dependent on and inseparable from its location online. As site-specific sculpture operates vis-à-vis the particular components and ideologies of a place, so do many works of internet art derive in significant ways from their location within a networked public field of vision and consumption. Taken together with *Handshake*'s manifestation of its process of development and its tools, its site-specificity indicates a quality shared by some of the earliest web projects: the capacity to merge effectively with its discourse and self-awareness. Such works lack the nonchalance or sneakiness of Bunting's approach; instead they evoke minimalist ethics in which process is valued over product, and objects (here, the web site) are almost leftovers or 'leavings', as writer and photographer Max Kozloff (b. 1933) described them.

In contrast to works containing readable discursive content, there were also early projects that appeared muddled, impersonal and impenetrable. Through the collaborative Jodi.org (both a web address and the moniker by which its creators are known), Joan Heemskerk (b. 1968) and Dirk Paesmans (b. 1968) were among the first to venture fully into pure technological abstraction. Their experiments began in around 1994, while the couple were working and living near Xerox PARC's engineering-driven community in Palo Alto, California. During the first few years, across multiple projects, the duo created aggressively technical interfaces, ignoring coherent content in favour of desultory representations of code, protocols and operating system (a computer's central application, on which all other software runs) aesthetics turned inside out. Some of these intentions can be seen in *http://wwwwwwwww.jodi.org* (1995) [22]. The front page is confusing, repetitive, discordant and alphanumeric, but the compositional effects are not what they seem: for behind this web page lies source code (the statements written in a particular programming language, here the markup language HTML), which reveals a cascade of traditional images and diagrams that are almost scientific or astrological. (To view source code, look in the menu of most browser applications, select 'View' and then 'View Source'.) Hiding coherent images in source code seems playful and riddling, a means of separating instructions (the HTML) from the completed task (the front page). This surreptitious divide of the browser is accomplished by radicalizing the source
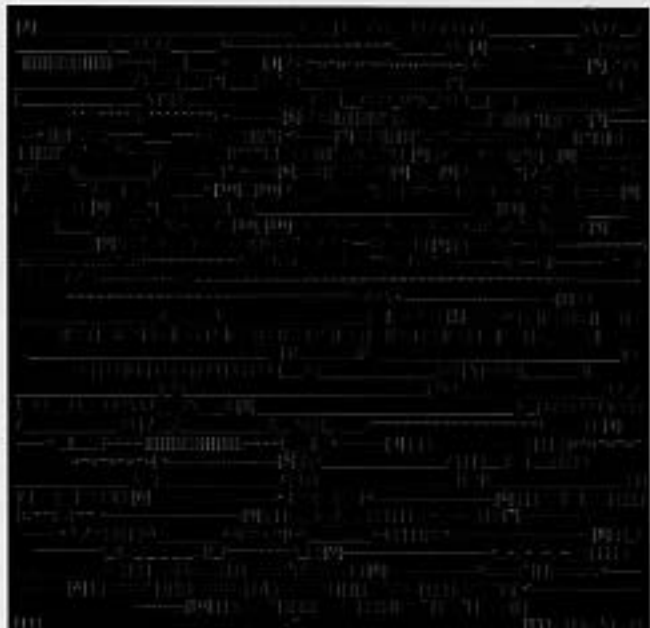
code into the pictorial, and radicalizing the executed task into the unreadable.

Jodi.org also made a web page – a profanity-riddled work which uses the English word 'fuck' as its background – for Alexei Shulgin's site, the Moscow WWWArt Centre. Introducing it in August 1996, Alexei Shulgin wrote: 'The creators are obviously bearers of cyberpunk ideology with rather good taste.... They have presented post-linguistic and post-visual research that reflects very well the state of contemporary culture and communication. It's very logical that they are using the English word "fuck" as a background – nowadays it has become a mere symbol that means nothing and everything at the same time – a synonym for all other words....' The invocation of 'fuck' could be seen as a juvenile anti-authoritarian gesture, but it also reveals the code's human authors, people who value experimental programming. Unlike many other projects from this time, this work is free-standing, full of internecine interactions for users to get caught up in, and independent of external links or other sites. The disinclination of Heemskerk and Paesmans to straightforward dialogue with writers and curators, and their persistent use of oblique and nonsensical communications, have ensured that their own motivations remain unarticulated, often even to those who can read their subtle, cunning code.
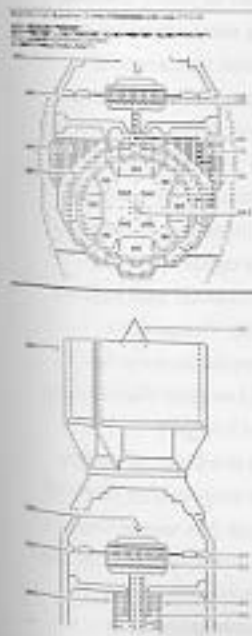
Both Link X (1996) [23] and _readme.html (1996) [24], by Alexei Shulgin and Heath Bunting respectively, rely on the web's protocol for dividing and organizing files into domains (domains are the readable names, such as www.art.net, linked to IP addresses) and URLs (Uniform Resource Locators or file addresses). Like land titles in unchartered territories, in the mid-1990s domain names were entirely up for grabs. On one level, domain names are the most rudimentary, elemental aspects of internet art. They are signifiers, fundamental to the functions of the web, though often obscured by what fills the browser's main screen. Often addresses reveal technical information about a site – for example, if a URL has '.jsp' in its address, one knows that it was likely programmed in Java, while '.asp' means an Active Server Page is in use. On another level, domain names and URLs can help define communities by designating certain parameters of authenticity, expertise, tenure or power. Domain names are limited. For example, at the time of writing it was difficult to buy titles for iconic URLs like http://www.art.com or http://www.sports.net – these would have been occupied long ago, possibly purchased for substantial sums. The inflection of expertise in a domain name can be understood by considering how an art enthusiast would receive a text residing in the artforum.com domain versus one residing on a GeoCities or AOL server.

Shulgin's Link X forces attention to domains by listing them in thematic groups – 'never, never, always, today, now, maybe' is one King Lear-esque section, for example. When one mouses over the links, one sees that repeated words indicate further variances within the name – one may end with '.com' (signifying a commercial enterprise), another '.org' (for organizations) or '.net' (a more neutral suffix, used in varied ways). The multiplicity of a concept like 'desire', all the ideas it represents, is paralleled by the diversity of references made – desire.org is an inter-European initiative (Development of a European Service for Information on Research and Education), while Desire.com is a porn site. The project demonstrates how swiftly expectations or associations can be undone with the click of a mouse. Who would imagine that sky.org would yield the Finnish Cannabis Association? Shulgin's arrangement of concepts into groups brings a modicum of poetic order to a chaotic space, while still effectively emphasizing some of the more surreal aspects of words and language. His use of English, not his native language, signals inter-cultural dimensions of both the work and the medium (which was at that time English-language dominated); the project's form, a list, emphasizes qualities of

coherence and organization, even as the unpredictability and frequent strangeness of the linked sites suggest the net's organic aspects, creating an overall effect quite different from language-based work offline.

Heath Bunting's controlled and more cynical project on domain names, _readme.html (which is also entitled Own, Be Owned or Remain Invisible) takes its name from the instructions document that accompanies software installers. Inviting the viewer in fairly informal terms to engage with the project, the title also serves to unite several registers: personal, procedural (almost all software has a text file called 'read me' that users are meant to read before use), self-promotional, instructional and technical. Like Link X, _readme.html foregrounds the centrality of the link and the domain name: here, each word in the article links to its semantically equivalent domain (every.com word.com becomes.com a.com dot.com com.com). As in Link X, the links are discovered by mousing over the linked words on the web page. Unlike Link X, however, _readme.html's external links across the web are unified by a journalistic text, an article profiling Bunting by journalist James Flint from British paper The Daily Telegraph. An account of the artist's background, family and interests, the

THE TELEGRAPH, WIRED SO Heath Bunting
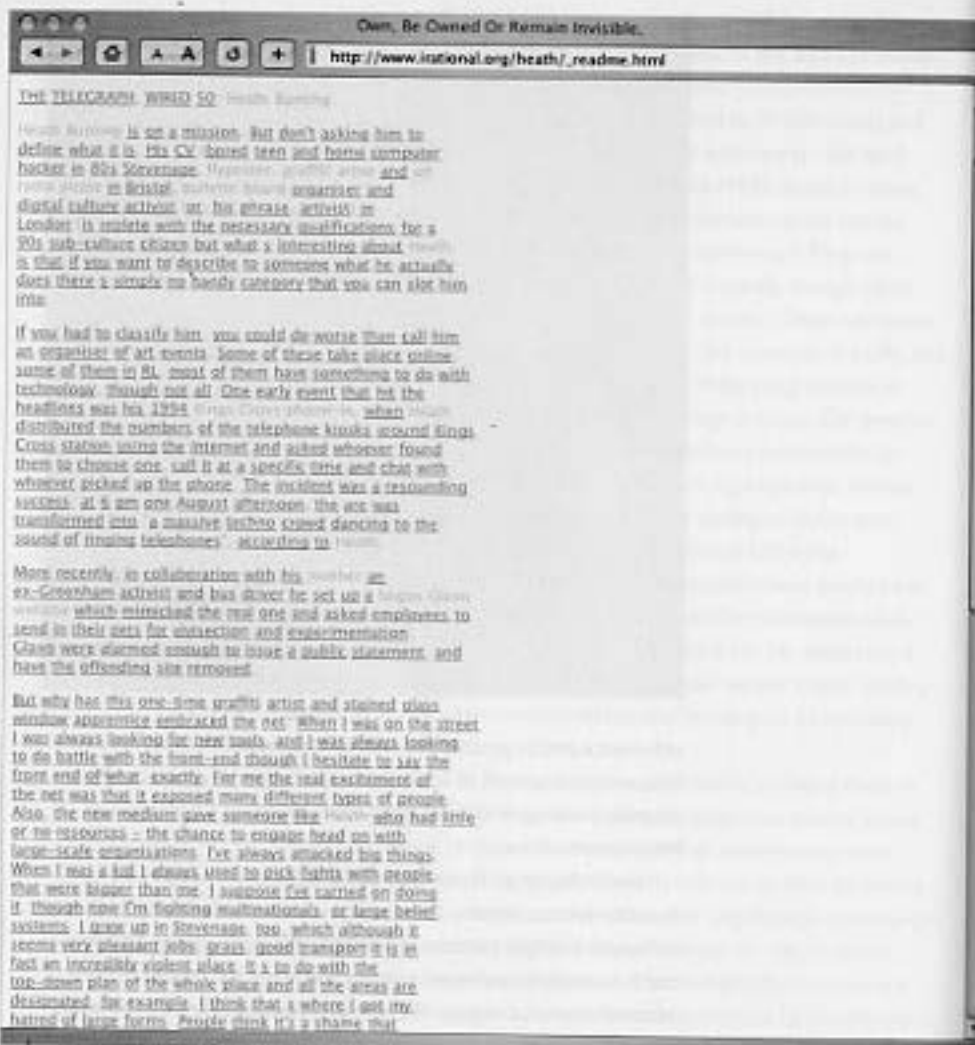
article's re-publishing and mapping onto the web is provocative. Does the artist approve of this profile? Is it press material or a subversion of it? With its faded palette, light grey on white, the colours are barely there, an invocation of melancholia. There are poetic strategies at work: the article's content speaks of an individual and his preoccupation with attacking 'big things', 'large ideal systems', and the text creates a tension between the artist and his invocation of eight hundred commercial domains (one for each word in the article). Users encounter a mode of displacement and decentralization as they interact with the project which makes critical and hypertextual links between artist and discourse.

_readme.html hints at a different operational relationship between artist and critic. Proficient in programming and adept at various tricks and short cuts, Bunting modifies the authority of Flint's article by appropriating it into his own set of concerns and idioms. Similarly, in 1997, Bunting was widely considered to be behind the counterfeiting of various critics' identities. Both Tim Druckrey, a prominent new media art curator and writer, and critic Joshua Decter were spoofed when texts about net art, bearing their email addresses and names, were posted to various mailing lists – the power of the critic subverted by some basic email software manipulations.

Travel and Documentary Modes

Many artists and curators involved in media art of the 1970s and 1980s extended their work and interests easily into the internet space. In Europe and Russia these sorts of transitions were enabled by the significant political and cultural changes taking place: agencies, governmental or NGO, that specialized in art, education and open-media initiatives were established and wired as network technologies became an increasingly significant part of the development booms taking place in the United States and Europe. Philanthropist George Soros, a consistent advocate of media literacy, was responsible for supporting centres in Moscow, Ljubljana, Budapest, Macedonia and other Eastern European regions, funding conferences, exhibitions and workshops. The artists, teachers, curators and critics who existed near or within these scenes often had different relationships to technology than many Americans who, in the midst of an economic boom, came to new media via consumer, entrepreneurial or academic pathways.

Many projects that emerged from these networks were highly accessible and well known to the small net art scene, publicized by

24 Heath Bunting, _readme.html
(Own, Be Owned or Remain Invisible),
1996

media. Nettime, set up by Lovink, German Pit Schultz (b. 1965) and others in 1995 as a reaction against hyped, often American, press touting the internet as a utopian free-market platform, was small yet enormously influential in international media activism and theory circles until around 2000 and continues as an important larger-scale discursive list. Australian critic and long-time Nettime participant McKenzie Wark notes that Nettime was 'a mailing list, but it was also a series of meetings, and publications in different formats…. It thrived on the positive confusion of the aims of its participants, all of whom could think of it in their own way and imagine everyone else concurred. [It] arose out of the discontents of critical theory. It found a negative semantic terrain in its hostility to *Wired* magazine, the *Rolling Stone* of new media sellouts, and positioned itself against the "unbearable lightness of *Wired*".' On an email list like Nettime, users subscribe by adding their email addresses to a list, and when an email ('post') is sent to the list's master address, it's automatically forwarded to all subscribers on the list.

While Nettime posts ranged wildly in style and topic – for example, reports on the status of Brazilian radio, writings on artificial life, complexity and art, musings on electronic music, essays on media consultants, French theorists Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) and Felix Guattari (1930–92), and announcements for projects or events – there were two strands of thought that connected them. One common theme was intellectual and critical scepticism of the 'Californian Ideology', a term referring to the utopian visions of the net, coined by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron in their highly influential 1996 essay of the same name. The other was that various aspects of technology culture and industry were discussed constantly, in great detail, and often in political terms. Though rarely focused on art, Nettime was an invaluable network for the emerging European net art community.

Net.art
Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many artists working in Eastern Europe and Russia – cultures in which the promises of marketed 'democracy' and ideology were unwelcome – openly disavowed the consumerist, utopian and often apolitical content of dominant internet discourse. The social responsibility of this group of artists was salient, particularly at a time when many important cultural and political decisions regarding access to technology were taking place. This context encouraged a number

of artists to make polemical statements and gestures to attack norms of the art establishment. By the late 1990s this genre would involve subversive product design and hacking-related projects. Others made work that had a less practical reach, but that captured the spirit of the artist as a catalytic and social force. Many of the artists who espoused these attitudes remained less interested in art discourse by non-artists. They tended to write their own declarations and definitions, and remained out of the fray of art-related communities like THE THING and Rhizome.org. A seminal project that illustrates this position is Vuk Cosic's *Net.art per se*.

Vuk Cosic, born in Belgrade in 1966, has shown consistent interest in historical narrative (he worked as an archaeologist before becoming an artist) and variable ways to make ideas material (such as teaching, art and writing), but it was the reduced amount of time between publication and feedback that eventually led him to create internet-based art. Cosic, who had taught archaeology and been active with cultural initiatives through the Soros Foundation in Slovenia and Serbia, also had experience as an activist: 'My background includes several years in the ranks of what we called the Dissident movement. Most of my actions were part of the very general oppositional activism. Some of those were artistic, some journalistic and some were agitation. I felt very deeply an imperative to create a parallel system of values that would counter the dominant discourse in socialist Yugoslavia. The language that I used at the time was thus heavy on "us" vs. "them" both in social and artistic thinking. I believe that actually there is a bridge between that and what later became net.art.'

In 1994 Cosic came across the World Wide Web, which had a huge impact: 'I saw the web for the first time and dropped everything I was doing…. I immediately decided that I want to be involved. It was one of those situations when you are 100% confident at the very first moment…. I remember surfing for 18 hours for days. I believe I have clicked through the entire Yahoo! directory. By 1995 I was busy with the Ljubljana Digital Media Lab which was no more than a group of people talking. Luka Frelih and I started making sites for everybody that wanted them. For free. I was thinking of art in that context but very little was around that I liked. Then in March I somehow met Heath Bunting (first contact was via telephone) and found his web site was the best thing online. Then in June Geert Lovink and Pit Schultz invited me to Venice for the first Nettime meeting….'

At first, Cosic's art practice consisted of mailing images to other artists and like-minded peers. But as his affinity with Bunting and the Nettime crowd grew closer, and his mastery of HTML evolved, he began to present his own web-based artworks. Net.art per se (also known as CNN Interactive) [30] was his first project, a fake CNN site commemorating a meeting (called 'Net.art per se') of artists and theorists in Trieste, Italy, in May 1996, including Pit Schultz, Andreas Broeckmann, Igor Markovic, Alexei Shulgin, Walter van der Cruijsen and Adele Eisenstein. Net.art per se is a fairly comprehensive statement of the ideas that were critical at that stage of development in internet art: a serious engagement with popular media, a belief in parody and appropriation, a scepticism towards commodified media information and a sense of the interplay of art and life. At 'Net.art per se', meetings were held to consider how net artists should distribute and control work, how the 'modernist romantic perception of the "artwork"' applied to the internet, and how artists could deal with global audiences when topics and premises were not universal. Net.art per se is a replica of the concurrent CNN site of that time, complete with the multi-typeface logos for which the Atlanta company was famous, images of Pentagon staff and banal headlines about baseball and advertising promotions. This was the first internet art project to appropriate a mainstream web site, and Cosic created some of his own headlines. The main one blared 'Specific Net.art found possible', and the smaller headlines, which were buried under headers such as 'World', 'AllPolitics', 'Technology', 'Music' and 'Style', formed a poetic announcement.

Like pop art's early herald the British Independent Group, which affirmed the banality of photo-generated images and the

Below and opposite:
30 **Vuk Cosic.** Net.art per se (CNN Interactive), 1996. Part of the web site of the 'Net.art per se' conference.
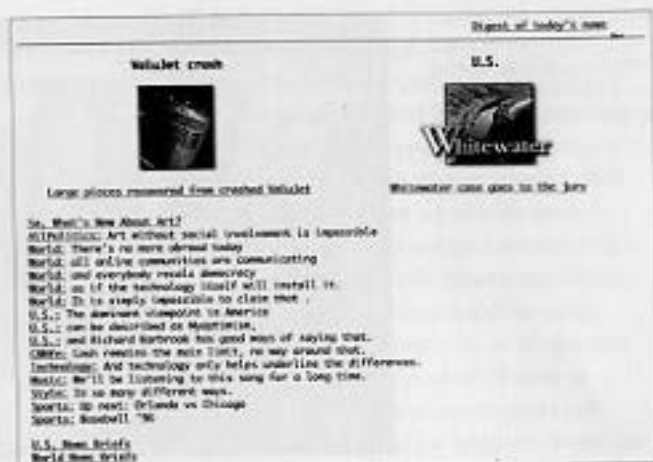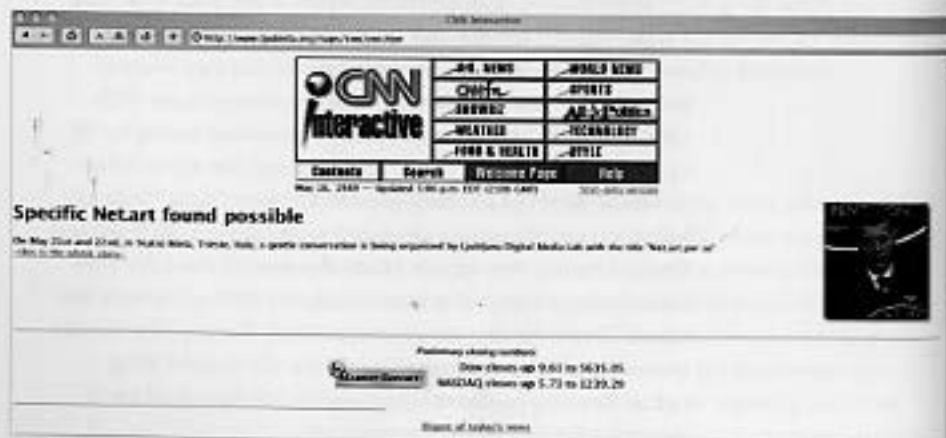
influence of Hollywood, fashion and television, Cosic's Net.art per se takes materials from fields of mass media. By shuttling between CNN news and the findings of 'Net.art per se', Cosic equates both as ideological and contingent with a brazen sensibility. Indeed, CNN, which was for many synonymous with sinister aspects of ubiquitous American media and propaganda after the first Gulf War, functions here as a celebration of artistic potential. The subversion of corporate web sites shares a blurry border with hacking and agitprop practices that would become an important field of net art, often referred to as 'tactical media'. Located within a field of mass media, Net.art per se is absorbed by the system of communication and distribution through which it is published, and which it addresses. There is another echo of pop art and Andy Warhol in particular at work – Net.art per se follows his idioms of tabloid fetishizing and self-aggrandizement. Indeed, if Warhol's Screen Tests marked the onset of a paradigm in which media attention is a focus of social identification, a mirror for individual self-perception, as suggested by German critic Ursula Frohne, Net.art per se begins a campaign for artistic authentication on a stage stolen from the heart of American media.
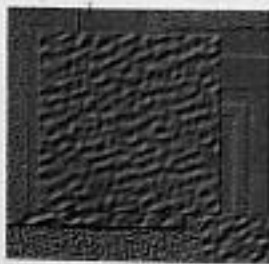
Finally, 'net.art', a neologism conjoining artistic and internet communication fields, did more than suggest an art practice that was rooted in net culture. The name – which Cosic coined after coming across the conjoined phrases in an email bungled by a technical glitch (a morass of alphanumeric junk, its only legible term 'net.art') – would come to stand for the contributions of that first wave of people working during the 1990s, Cosic, Shulgin, Jodi.org, Bunting and Lialina chief among them.

GIF graphic [crew.gif 347x282x256]
File   Edit   View

Net.art per se's headlining conclusion that a specific 'net.art' was possible galvanized discussions about internet art taking place online. In fact, nodes for discussion sprouted up internationally. One well-known Eastern European list was Syndicate, which started to connect media art practitioners in locations such as Sofia, Belgrade, Albania, Sarajevo and Estonia in 1995. Three other projects were based in New York: THE THING (1991) [31], which was launched as a BBS for artists and enthusiasts in New York and Cologne, äda'web (1994) and Rhizome.org (1996). THE THING was started by artist Wolfgang Staehle (b. 1950), originally from Germany, after a curiosity-driven impulse buy in a computer store led him to set up a large modem. After logging online, Staehle made the pleasant discovery that information-sharing and camaraderie were the dominant characteristics of most BBS exchanges, and he decided artists would benefit from their own version of an online communication channel. Staehle's reputation as an intellectual artist attracted an exceptionally gifted group of artists, curators, intellectuals and kindred spirits to post on THE THING's boards. During the mid-1990s, they would dial into the text-based hub to trade ideas on art, technology and politics. THE THING hosted discussions, reviews and art projects, and was for a long time a standard-bearer for many art platforms. Besides being the first to sell and distribute art online – Staehle put digital files by Peter Halley [32] up for sale and a year later published images and sound files by the likes of Japanese artist Mariko Mori [33] – THE THING was the internet service provider (ISP) of choice for many artists based in New York and Germany. Capitalizing on its strong European ties and Staehle's history on the gallery scene, THE THING built itself into an innovative arts lab, sticking to the web as its basis through most of the 1990s (as opposed to email or print publication formats, for instance).

Rhizome.org, founded on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a 'rhizome' as an anti-hierarchical, decentralized network, leveraged the archive model and email lists to form what its founder Mark Tribe has referred to as a social sculpture, an interconnected, collaborative platform run by new media artists, curators, critics and viewers. It is now commonplace to talk about networks and communities online, but Rhizome.org was singular for using models of free-form discussions as strategies for an art-focused public forum. An unmoderated email list hosted all kinds of discourse, from high-minded theoretical posts to patent self-promotion or friendly chatter. Criticized for being too 'American' in focus, or for lacking critical rigour, Rhizome.org as a venue for art discourse welcomed the changing conventions of electronic art criticism and consumption by refusing to be above its participants' preoccupations. At the time of its formation in Berlin (Tribe later relocated to New York), Rhizome.org intended to be a for-profit venture and started off as www.rhizome.com. Such was the mood in 1996 among Tribe and other new media visionaries, including those behind editorial ventures like Telepolis and Word, that they thought the 'new economy' taking shape would serve to value new kinds of content, like Rhizome.org's mix of chatter and theory. By 1998, it was clear that Rhizome.org had to become a non-profit organization to stay afloat.

Curator Benjamin Weil was also interested in hybrid forms made possible by online formats. Weil had cut his internet teeth with THE THING, but was interested in working closely with artists to create online experiments that explored new territories of production and distribution in the tradition of the Bell Labs-sponsored EAT. In 1994, Weil teamed up with the arts-minded British businessman John Borthwick to found äda'web, an online art platform that complemented Borthwick's other web site, a guide to Manhattan called *Total New York*. Like New York's Dia Center for the Arts, which had a similar programme for collaborating with blue-chip artists on web-based projects, äda'web produced its first art site in 1995, Jenny Holzer's *Please Change Beliefs* [35]. The work divides itself into three parts, each named for one of the title words, *Please*, *Change* and *Beliefs*. *Please* refreshes unsettling aphorisms, such as 'Humanism is obsolete' and 'Murder has its sexual side' across a web page. *Change* allows users to modify these aphorisms, and *Beliefs* aggregates the now modified truisms. Occasionally one comes across a video-formatted version of an aphorism. Holzer's long-term interests in spatializing information in public spaces, using items such as T-shirts or more commercial formats including billboards, are well matched to the mixed context of the commercial and communitarian web.

Āda'web would develop around twenty other projects and collaborations before shutting down in early 1998 when parent company Digital Cities, owned largely by America Online (which acquired Digital Cities and äda'web in 1997), withdrew funding. While there is no way to group the wide-ranging projects undertaken at äda'web conveniently without seriously
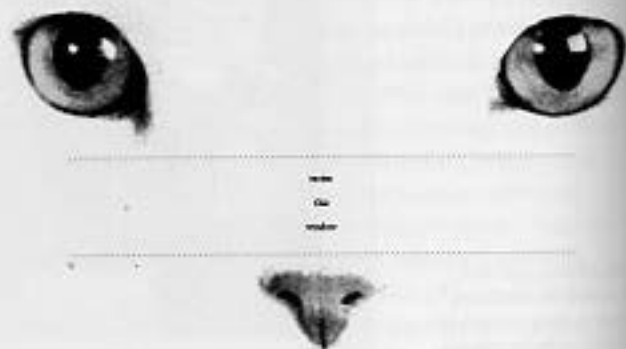
34 **Group Z, Belgium** (hosted by äda'web). Home. 1995. A simple project that called attention to the variability of browser windows by proposing, pictorially, a specific width and height.

Opposite:
35 **Jenny Holzer**, two screenshots from *Please Change Beliefs*, 1995
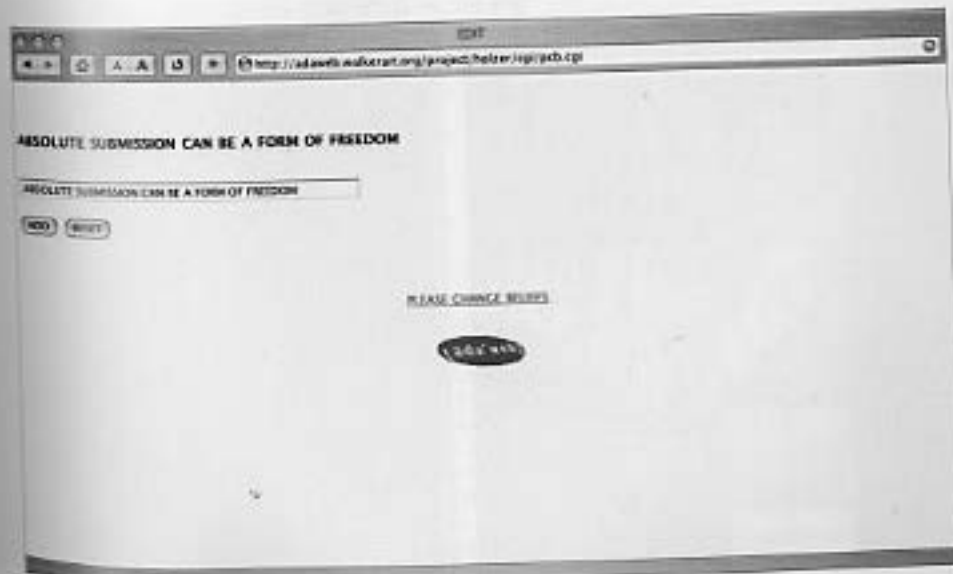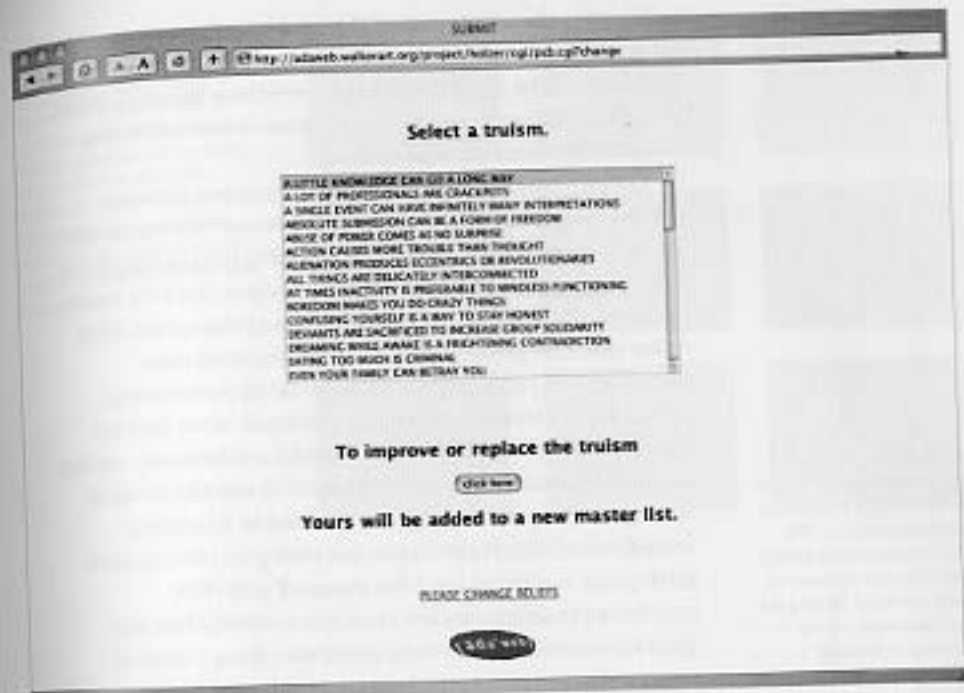
undermining the artistic goals of Weil and his collaborators, many of the well-known artists with whom they worked, such as Holzer, Lawrence Weiner (b. 1942), Julia Scher and Doug Aitken (b. 1968), were able to explore their signature idioms or interests during their affiliation with the organization.

Online nodes like äda'web filled important gaps between artists and established institutions and audiences of art enthusiasts in a variety of ways. More than simply enabling the promotion and distribution of new media art projects, they gave users the means to communicate, develop critiques and amuse themselves. With online chat a persistent activity, these forums could often resemble variety-show stages or spoken-word performances. And, unlike the traditionally influential channels of art criticism – print magazines such as Artforum, Flash Art and Art News – mailing lists enabled artists, critics and enthusiasts to stand on an equal footing, with the email setting making an end to discussions virtually impossible. Furthermore, the small group of interested participants, numbering just a few thousand until 1999, contributed to an intimate and close-knit sensibility. Not that these communities or networks solved everything – internet artists still lacked inclusion in broader art discourse and, even if they considered institutional acknowledgment to be dubious, there were shared concerns about how artists could support themselves. Indeed, the net had many shortcomings.

36 **Vivian Selbo**, Vertical Blanking Interval (left) and Consider Something Intangible (right), from Vertical Blanking Interval, 1996. This äda'web project establishes hybridity between internet and television aesthetics by using the web as a framework for the presentation of televised commercial data. Featuring commercials emptied of their contents and reduced to obtuse communiqués, Selbo's screens might also be read as visualizations of what is normally hidden from the television viewer.

37 **Peter Halley**, Exploding Cell, 1997. The Museum of Modern Art in New York undertook a brief exploration of internet art, commissioning projects such as Halley's Exploding Cell. An online adjunct to the artist's offline exhibition, this collaboration and those like it were nonetheless significant and helped to introduce internet aesthetics to artists and art enthusiasts.
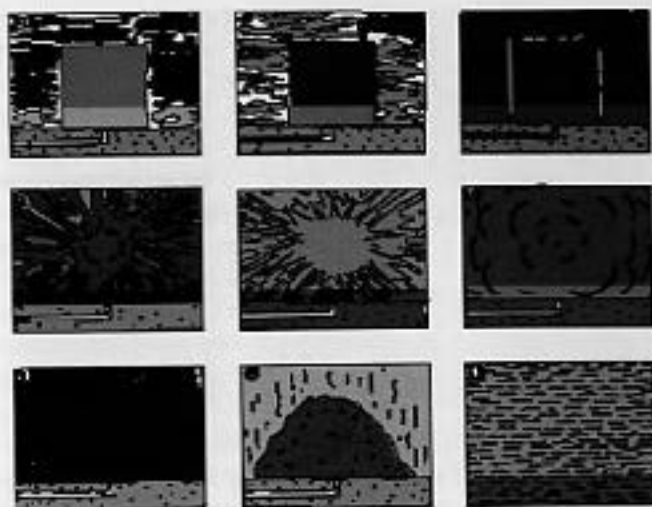
38 **Barbara London** for the Museum of Modern Art, illustration from Stir-Fry: A Video Curator's Dispatches from China, 1997. Media curator Barbara London used the net to document a curatorial research trip to China. Somewhere between a demystification of the curatorial process and an introduction to contemporary art in China, this mode of documentary has a hybrid nature.

ON THE WAY

We are the loyal sons of distance

Every morning we depart, the mind ablaze

The heart weighed down with care and bitterness

We go, according to the rhythmic love

While the songs escaped backward

Footfalls echo in the memory.

No privacy here, the installation "Visible and Invisible Lives" makes clear. Arrayed within a framed outline are a set of monitors, a window on one, a door on another, a foot entering on a third, all of which can be understood as details of a room. The trio were thrilled that viewers took their room as something real, and acknowledged its implications.
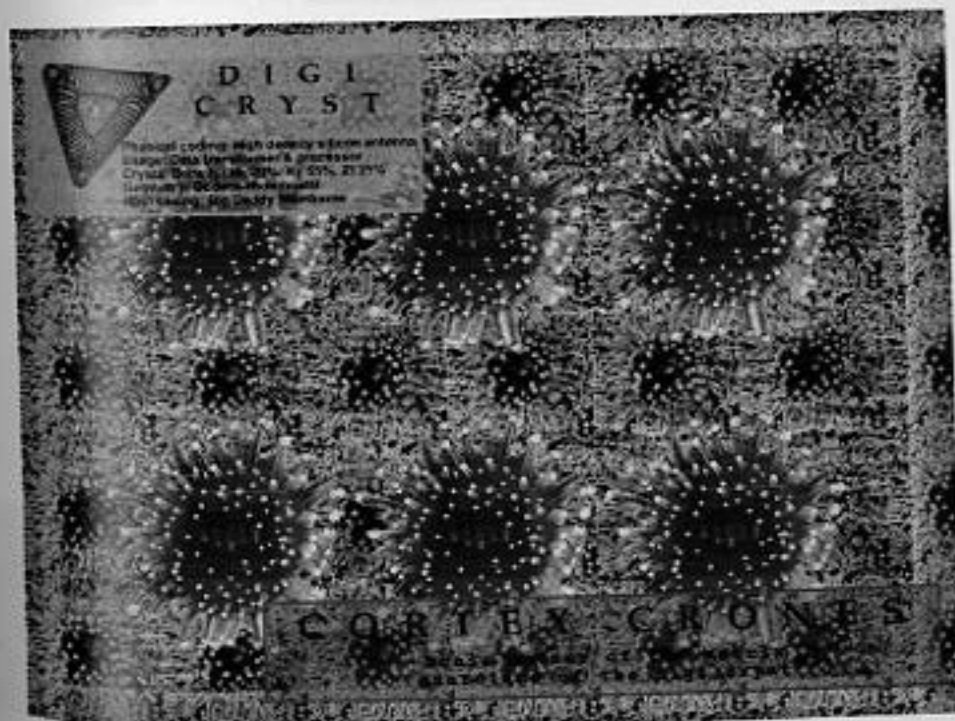
Cyberfeminism

Among these discursive networks, the scrutinizing of politics and the analysis of how gender, race and class informed technoculture often took place. 'Cyberfeminism' was one of these fields of practice. With a decentralized, connection-dependent matrix as the crux of net culture, theorists like Sadie Plant (b. 1964), with whom the Australian collective VNS Matrix [39–40] coined the term 'cyberfeminist', found the net to be inherently female and feminizing. Other feminists, such as Faith Wilding (b. 1943), noted that feminism's migration into information-technology fields was part of 'Third Wave' feminism's occupation of diverse platforms for public action and rebellion. As well as supplying a term of identification (i.e. 'I am a cyberfeminist artist'), cyberfeminism covers three areas, generally speaking. It describes the position of women in technological disciplines and labour, including gender-based divisions of labour within these fields and industries. It also addresses women's experiences of technoculture, including its effects on work, domestic life, social life and leisure. And finally, it comments on the gendering of various technologies, possibly their feminization or eroticization.

VNS Matrix was formed in 1991 in Australia by members Josephine Starrs (b. 1955), Francesca da Rimini (b. 1966), Julianne Pierce (b. 1963) and Virginia Barratt (b.1959), who left the group in 1996, as a technoart group with the stated goals of using and manipulating technology to 'create digital spaces in which identity and sexual politics can be addressed'. In its communiqués, or the frequently referenced A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century [39], the Matrix flaunts strategically changing identities and spectrums of sexual power, as well as the combination of sexual and technical languages. The presence of its members at conferences and on email lists underscored how the intellectual, male-dominated net could be seen as just the latest in a fairly long history of male-dominated media. Where Nettime offered up versions of net users as dupes, often unknowingly deprived of various freedoms or lacking in critical ability, the VNS Matrix took a different approach – overriding accepted net behaviour with sexual and creative personalities, and searches for fun and knowledge.

Their Cyberfeminist Manifesto is at once sexual, graphical and technical and, with its explicit language, evokes the 'cunt art' of the 1970s. It can also be identified with 1980s French feminist concepts like jouissance and écriture which posit, respectively, pleasures and writing that exist beyond discourse and fixed

39 VNS Matrix, A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century, 1991

40 VNS Matrix, Cortex Crones, 1993. Still from All New Gen computer game. The post-binary gender cyborg was the central theme of this science-fiction-based game by the VNS Matrix. Never realized, it does predate the vogue for game art in the first few years of the twenty-first century.

we are the modern cunt
positive anti reason
unbounded unleashed unforgiving
we make art with our cunt we make art with our cunt
we believe in jouissance madness holiness and poetry
we are the virus of the new world disorder
rupturing the symbolic from within
saboteurs of big daddy mainframe
the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix
VNS MATRIX
terminators of the moral code
mercenaries of slime
go down on the altar of abjection
sucking the visceral temple we speak in tongues
infiltrating disrupting disseminating
corrupting the discourse
we are the future cunt

DIGI CRYST
CORTEX CRONES

meaning (which was identified as male and bound by conventional language). Further establishing its historical weight, the manifesto itself travelled as a graphic, inscribed in a circle defying linear trajectory – an allusion to the argument posed by feminist Alice Jardine that masculine aesthetics privilege linearity. In an interview posted to Nettime, Josephine Starrs described the group's goals and methods to Dutch art critic Josephine Bosma: 'We started postering cities in Australia with that manifesto. We wanted to work with technology, we're all from different backgrounds: writer, performance artist, filmmaker. I was from a photography background. We didn't have access to any particular new technology, but we had access to a photocopier, so we just started writing about technology, because we were worried that it seemed such a boys' domain at that time, in the artworld and so on…. We had this agenda of encouraging women to get involved if they want to look at their relationship with technologies, to get the[ir] hands on the tools and to have fun with it. Part of the project was to use humour in this process…. We tried to make it like technology isn't intimidating, it's fun to use.'

Another reason the 'cyber', 'sexual' and 'feminist' seemed so compatible in the hands of the VNS Matrix is that the group made optimistic theorizations of network technology popular in the mid-1990s. One of these was the 'cyborg', which referred to a cultural dependence on technology. Cyborgs were a key concept of the time, deployed by the VNS Matrix and advocated as a politically potent feminist aesthetic by Donna Haraway in her 1985 canonical essay, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century'. One should also note that in virtual net environments like Palace, popular in the mid-1990s, graphical representations of self were often thought of as alternative personae, or 'avatars'. That people could be liberated from the standard descriptive qualities of the day-to-day world gave way to theories that the net heralded new kinds of fluid identities, complete with altered hierarchies and unprecedented interconnections. True, these relied on making a distinction between 'real life' and online life, but it was a popular assumption around the time of this manifesto. The projected image portrays the internet as a utopia of fresh social formations and individualities. For women artists in particular, these possibilities held a great deal of aesthetic potential and freedom.

41 Eva Grubinger, Netzbikini, 1995. In this early work, participants download and print out a bikini pattern (a non-technological subject) and customize it for wear. As a result, Grubinger's web site hosts a profusion of hand-made, individualized swimsuits that make it difficult to focus on any one costume or participant. This project highlights an important aspect of the decentralized internet, through which a vast array of data travels easily to be recontextualized in subjective settings.

Corporate Aesthetics

Critical consciousness of power imbalances took many forms in net art circles, and one persistent articulation of political frustration online has been anti-capitalist sentiment. One strand of these politics took to claiming that internet territory was artistic, and was bolstered by critiques of the intellectual, creative and moral inferiority of commercial ventures. Dotcoms were often the focal points for this anger, as they were taken to be emblematic of the market-driven, utopian 'Californian Ideology'. The term 'dotcom', of course, refers to the semantic suffixes of new media companies generally founded in the 1990s with the aim of capitalizing on the rise of internet usage and culture by providing specialized tools or content. As providers of solely online-based services, Amazon and Yahoo! are dotcoms, whereas companies like Apple and IBM are not, though they also maintain an online presence.

In art circles, the aversion to dotcom culture and ethos was often marked by expanded uses of satire and parody – employing the intriguing limits of these models to provoke critical consciousness. While a web site called @Tmark.com would become an epicentre for this activity in the late 1990s, etoy – created by a group of European artists then operating out of Zurich, Switzerland – was the first to use dotcom aesthetics to reposition art in relation to daily practices. Incorporated in 1994, etoy fuelled its self-styled hybrid of business practices, foolery and confusion with ambitious, though ambiguous, radicalism.

The plan, as articulated on the web site, was 'to establish a complex and self-generating art virus and e-brand which reflects and digitally infects the nature of today's life and business at large: an incubator that turns the essence of digital lifestyle, e-commerce and society into cultural value'. Via identical costumes and highly regimented behaviour, based on detailed research and exhaustive discussions, etoy members brought office aesthetics into the more marginal scenes they inhabited in Switzerland and Austria. Online, their antics included surreptitiously confusing web users about the content etoy offered, and in 1996 a search engine hack called Digital Hijack, which redirected thousands of search engine users to the etoy home page. In 1999, etoy became embroiled in a remarkably complicated fight with a dotcom named eToys that brought the spectre of corporate mockery into the scope of American financial markets (see Chapter 3).

Anti-commercial sentiments posing a relationship of binary opposition vis-à-vis the 'artistic', 'pure' and 'progressive' were