

## **Art was only a substitute for the Internet**

The *Wrong Biennial*, has been dedicated exclusively to on-line art and that alone makes it a very relevant. For this fifth edition I invited artists who I felt were convinced that internet and what it provides was art and for whom networks had been critical for the development of their thinking and their work.

For many internet is a daily routine of checking social media, listening to podcasts or music and researching material. Every living artist aware of the unlimited resources provided by communications networks is influenced by internet. Many have associated a major part of their art process with internet.

This exhibition is a place where art can be playful and challenging. I believe that an on-line exhibition platform should always have some interactive content that ranges from an entrance page, to a possibility of scrolling or changing the size and perspective of a work or to an invitation to explore a particular work further through embedded links.

Artist Vuk Ćosić's statement "Art was only a substitute for the Internet" reflects that in 1997 internet was a magical place where a kind of art could exist outside of established institutions and where artists could work from anywhere and be relevant. The words suggested that computer networks and art were one and the same.

One definition of "art" that I retain is what an art teacher once confidently wrote on a blackboard: "Art is an idea made manifest through a medium". Rooted in formalism, the phrase seemed innocuous. Some years later I came across, "Art was only a substitute for the Internet". Ćosić's words were annoyingly challenging everything I thought I knew about art. Internet is simultaneously an idea and a medium. And what is a substitute? It's a thing acting or serving in place of another. Words like, counterfeit, pseudo, makeshift, acting, proxy or sham are associated with "substitute", a perfect description of a system that addresses only itself through interlocked spheres of material production, institutionalization and commoditization.

Ćosić, reflecting on his statements said that for artists, internet was initially a place to authentically exchange feelings, senses and ideas with the limited number of people that actually understood the implications of the networks. This was both in terms of making art and equally in the social life and friendships established through the process. Artists spoke with artists and others genuinely interested in the dialogue. Technology was certainly discussed, but so was identity, society, politics and a myriad of other topics posted on bulletin boards like *Nettime*. Internet is universal communication and art is universal communication. It became clear that making art unaware of internet as both a material and medium was anachronistic.

Artists have always been free to create outside of established hierarchies but it is difficult and lonely within a generalized environment of consumption and entertainment. Artists who work with and exhibit on internet,

sometimes feel ostracized from the gallery scene, their work perceived as an anodyne sideshow. Institutional recognition of on-line creation as an adjunct to old media such as film, performance or video is exasperating to on-line creators yet they continue to innovate as internet evolves. Artists initially produced content through a fascination with coding and networking. Internet art was interactive and performative from the beginning. Coding became a professional activity as hardware quickly expanded to accommodate new proprietary devices. Internet content was increasingly commodified for general consumption, so art suddenly began to use these moderated commercial platforms. Social internet sites merged, evolved or disappeared and art moved on. Most recently, with the market for non-fungible tokens, art is fused with currency generating virtual objects that mirror the speed and attention-span of an internet generation. Internet produces money and is money. Culture and currency become the same thing and suddenly internet art is interesting. Still, such art remains subversive in the mind-set of structured sociocultural systems. Many features that defined early net-art, such as independence from the art world, an ability to make work without feeling marginalized and being able to address a wider audience are still a preoccupation for many of artists in this exhibition. Electronically produced art defines, imitates and creates in virtual space using its own aesthetic, technical and material means. It can also exist comfortably outside of traditional art venues. At the same time, internet art is highly influential in conventional art venues and art-historically be comfortably associated with conceptual art.

Artists working on the network use both traditional and more recent means to solicit interactivity and collaboration. Code-based works invite direct interaction with the machine itself that reorganizes the interface with the viewer to produce a new computer-generated visual experience. There are works that reference their origin from a machine to their destination as machine language in the form of a blockchain. In other works the viewer is an invited guest to a private world that comments on or contrasts the commercial landscape of celebrities and influencers using the same methods, such as click-bait that are exploited by mercantile interests. Social media as a platform for advertising is inverted to where the advertising becomes the main trope converted into art work to be perceived critically. On-line artists also use the language and attraction of gaming culture. Gaming code and aesthetics are reshaped into art objects that mutate through viewer participation.

Some artists take advantage of formal shapes and use colour as a path toward interaction with the art work. The viewer is invited to leave the private space of their laptop and visit new places and experiences through methods controlled by the artist through coding and links. The computer monitor becomes both a mirror and a receiver. The process is about the intersubjective; that is, being mutually involved in communication and experiencing a kind of physical switch-around; exchanging each other's body, thinking, conversing and simultaneously reading into each other's expressed thoughts. The world we see on a computer screen is a conceptual performance reflected through works that interact with the abundance of sounds and images where the noise itself becomes the subject.

Several projects in the exhibition use cinematic techniques to talk about our relationship with screens. But traditional narratives are interrupted by sounds and images drawn directly from the activity of internet browsing, transforming the film experience or comparing it with the intimacy of a private viewing device. Subtitles, texts, tags and pictures become self-referential, reflecting the randomness of internet or relating the artist's fascination with the screen as a contemporary abstraction of life.

The evolution of the narrative in time-based media such as video to the brief looping moments in an animated gif brought with it a rethinking of cinematic aesthetic, as well as an awareness of our bodily relationship with networked devices. Technically challenging animations that respect the limits of internet file size appear in the form of videos, gifs or narratives that become a perfect vehicle for expressing concise opinions. These compact files shuffle through appropriated images, reference the look generated by the software used for their production or are simply aesthetic objects that can be freely posted, manipulated or redistributed.

As long as we use internet there is a necessity for exhibitions such as *Art was only a substitute for the Internet*, for the network must always remain a possibility for the language of art. When there is no institution there are no parameters. Browsing internet is a different kind of existence. Internet is the mind of society, with no body, no beginning, no end. It is free-flowing potentiality from which creative minds access an openness where boundaries are non-existent and where modes of expression can come to be.

The art world is also subject to the discontinuity and sudden transformations that network technology initiates and although some institutions have tried to adjust, the form that art on internet assumes is problematic within the existing physical and conceptual structures of galleries, the market and museums. Brick and mortar spaces tend to present contemporary art responding to a highly theoretical polemic and often showcase clever ways that invited artists support a particular curatorial hypothesis based on institutional standards. Practicality dictates that themes invariably fit into pre-established models of material objects.

Art is continuous human expression that describes the world and internet is an essential part of our reality. Internet cannot be ignored because it describes the world and as such is no longer a material subject. It is integral to the structure of perception and language itself.

Andres Manniste, curator, Montreal, 2021