

Curating in the Rhizome:

The Role of the Curator in Exhibition of Web-based Activist Art

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Almost from the very instant the internet was available to the public, two groups of people, artists and activists, adopted its use, finding it a particularly useful tool for communal organization and activity. If the internet is viewed as a rhizomatic structure, utilizing the concept of the rhizome as articulated by Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari¹, the proliferation of activity online and the distinct advantages of its use for artists and activists stems from the structure of the rhizome, which is taken from the biological categorization of grass-like plants which spread outward through interconnection rather than being hierarchically dichotomized, growing upward like trees. Under the rhizomatic model, the internet provides, through its ability to host a multiplicity of connections and meanings, unique and important tools for the communication of activism, art, and the indistinct activity which combines both. This blurring of categorization of what constitutes either art or activism is more of a possibility on the internet than through other lines of communication and therefore strengthens an artist's message by placing it in multiple lines of discourse. Within the context of the internet, art activists are able to take full advantage of the ways in which the internet rhizome is infinitely connected and heterogeneous, subject and objectless multiplicity, asignifying rupture, and without center or entered through any point where all points are on the same plane.² Whether activist art on the internet remains in this context and is received through this context can either be negated by curators who attempt to undermine or break apart the medium or accepted and embraced by curators who place themselves in a curatorial position from within the rhizomatic structure itself.

¹ Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (London: Continuum, 1987).

² Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, 7-12.

Naturally, once internet artistic activity came to the attention of curators, they were eager to exhibit it in some way, often squeezing art activists into a singularly artistic mold, deemphasizing the activist agendas and political action that the artists were simultaneously trying to achieve. Categorization effectively reterritorializes elements of the rhizomatic internet and organizes them into arboreal structures flowing more or less from institution to curator to artists, limiting the multiplicity of the rhizome and limiting the scope of their audience and the mode of their reception. As capitalist elements attempt to reterritorialize the internet while simultaneously breaking down grouped elements online, art institutions and curators are attempting to build tree-like structures on the rhizome of the internet through individualizing the multiplicity of some art activists and transforming them into One Artist, One other Artist, and so on. The internet is far from impenetrable by economic forces, and capitalism has continually influenced the politics of internet art. According to Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism operates in a schizophrenic condition where it is necessary for this economic system to break apart institutions by deterritorializing and then reterritorialize once again. In *Anti-Oedipus*, they state:

As a corollary of this law, there is the twofold movement of decoding or deterritorializing flows on the one hand, and their violent and artificial reterritorialization on the other. The more the capitalist machine deterritorializes, decoding, and axiomatizing flow in order to extract surplus value from them, the more its ancillary apparatuses, such as government bureaucracies and the forces of law and order, do their utmost to reterritorialize, absorbing in the process a larger and larger share of surplus value.³

³ Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Althone Press Ltd., 1984) 34-35.

Where capitalism is involved in the internet, parts of the web are immediately reterritorialized by capital, literally creating “domains” which allows an individual to own a name with which to direct a browser to their site.

When art activist group Etoy (etoy.com) (Illus. 1) was sued in court by the toy seller Etoys.com in 1999 for having controversial material on a site with too similar of a name, Etoy was able to fight back using subversive hacks with the aid of RTMark, another art activist group, and their funds for activist projects. One tool they used was a program called Floodnet which was designed to send in too many requests to a server to load its pages, crashing the system. This program only operates well if many users are deploying it at once which demonstrates the significance of the operation of multiplicity on the web.⁴ Whether or not Etoy was responsible for the eventual economic collapse of Etoys.com soon after that is unclear, but the strength of the rhizome, even when faced with greater powers is evident. Capitalist power attempts to create conditions of the rhizome of the internet which are hierarchical and tree-like, but the operation of art activism remains a powerful force in its rhizomatic state.

When curators deal with internet art, they have, at times, imitated the schizophrenic actions of the capitalist machinery by deterritorializing and reterritorializing internet art for their own purposes of control over its reception. In the exhibition *PORT: Navigating Digital Culture* at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in 1997, internet artists were effectively commissioned to produce short-term works which were to be simultaneously displayed on the website which could be accessed from any internet connection and also in the gallery over large projection screens connected to computer

⁴ Stallabrass, 99.

terminals (Illus. 2).⁵ In this case, the curators of the show allowed for the deterritorialization of definitions of what constitutes artwork worthy of exhibition and then turned around to reterritorialize the work, gain control of it, and re-create it in a setting and display method which suited their purposes. The private, interconnectivity of the internet was therefore upset by the imposed apparatus of elaborate projection screens and the uncomfortable viewing of the pieces by those not directly interacting with them but rather watching someone else interact with them. The emphasis placed on the physical space of the gallery demonstrates that the curatorial team were perhaps nervous about allowing the internet projects to exist solely in their natural habitat of the web due to some instinctive desire to maintain control over the reception of the artwork and reassert the importance of the physical gallery space.

The very nature of the internet is one of interconnection, endless connection, untraceable webs of connection, and new connections increasing exponentially. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "...any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order."⁶ There is no central location where the internet originates and no one who produces internet and distributes it around the world. There is no one point where all internet sites are created but rather they form an amorphous fluxing mass of information. New connections are constantly being formed and broken through hyperlinking. Realizing these characteristics of the internet, early internet art communities quickly formed these links to each other through e-mail, message boards, groups like Jodi.org, and platforms like THE THING and Rhizome.org, which took its

⁵ "PORT: Navigating Digital Culture," Robbin Murphy and Remo Campopiano, curators. MIT List Visual Arts Center. 25 Jan.-29 Mar. 1997. <<http://artnetweb.com/port>>.

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, 7.

name from the writings of Deleuze and Guattari.⁷ These methods of connection combined people in a status-blind manner so that there is no one method of communication, no one language or set of signs which each of the sites or components of the rhizome must homogenously use.

Perhaps one of the most useful ways in which the internet operates for art activists is through its subject and objectless multiplicity. This characteristic of multiplicity is what allows so many anonymous collectives to operate without the need of individualization or names. Groups like RTMark work to subvert oppressive influences of capitalism through often humorous acts of hacking or sabotage such as swapping the voice boxes of talking Barbie and GI-Joe toys and spoofing the WTO website and the George W. Bush website (Illus. 3) on similar domain names.⁸ Still others such as Jodi.org formed a collective which explored ways in which the system itself could be deconstructed or crashed.⁹ The unknown aspects of these collaborations is that the average visitor who comes upon their work or is presented with their work does not know how many individuals are involved, which is important in that it creates an obsolescence in individualization. Both the curator who curates internet art and the author who writes about it are tempted to individualize internet artists in the same way as artists of other mediums are individualized. Creating art stars is an activity which works contrary to the rhizomatic medium. While some names such as Olia Lialina, whose piece *My Boyfriend Came Back from War* is often touted as ground-breaking early internet art, and Vuk Cosic, who coined the term Net.art and the projects related to it in early internet art, are

⁷ Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004) 39-40.

⁸ Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003) 91-2.

⁹ Tilman Baumgartel. *[net.art 2.0]: New Materials towards Net art* (Nurnberg: Verlag fur moderne Kunst Nurnberg, 2001) 166-7.

identified as individual internet stars, this individualization devalues the importance of the connections they had with each other, especially in the early years of their work.¹⁰ Rather than imposing hierarchy, the curator can effectively join the rhizome through any entry point and form lines between himself or herself and the multiplicity or the community. Rather than building arboreal structures on top of the rhizome, the curator becomes part of the rhizome itself in order to exhibit not only the individual artworks but also the structure which holds them and which is inextricable to their existence as multiplicity.

The property of rhizomes as asignifying rupture allows for the survival of political organization in the face of much more powerful, larger entities such as the government. According to Deleuze and Guattari, “A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines. You can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed.”¹¹ In the same way, you can never get rid of art activists because they are decentered and multiple. The internet allows for networks of art activists to work together from various aspects of globe, forming cells of operation which are interconnected. There are no headquarters of operation, no central location. If one part of this rhizome of art activism is destroyed or removed by the force of a greater power, it is not completely destroyed but rather will live on and repopulate. There is no central nervous system which, once destroyed, will prohibit the workings of the rest of the body, but rather a fluxing rhizomatic connection. This characteristic is very useful, especially

¹⁰ Greene, 30-31.

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, 10.

for those minority political groups to the far right or far left who have not found a forum for their activity in mainstream, offline politics.¹²

As any other institution which exists outside of the internet space and in a world of forced reterritorialization, art institutions and curators are tempted to pull internet art out of its natural rhizome and into a hierarchical structure, no longer in a multiplicity where art and activism can co-exist and be communicated through multiple lines of discourse but rather forced into the sterile, inactive world of art objects. In the 2000 Whitney Biennial, RTMark was chosen for the exhibition. Instead of showing the usual content of their website, they instead opened it up to the public and showed a rotating view of any and all web pages sent into the collective via e-mail, including porn sites, boy band fan sites, and even the site of the Whitney Museum itself. RTMark expressed their desire, through this act, to allow anyone who wanted to be part of the exclusive exhibition their chance to be a part of it for a brief time period. While they did not notify the Whitney that it would be doing this activity, the Whitney allowed the work to remain because RTMark had never signed the agreement given to all exhibiting internet artists which stated that “all other links to the works of others will be removed prior to exhibition date.”¹³ Although the motivations for the agreement may have seemed purely practical, this statement shows that the Whitney was attempting to break down the connections of the rhizome in order to create an arboreal structure between museum and discrete work of art. While it seems to make sense that the Whitney would not want to promote extraneous artworks, it would be unheard of for perhaps a video artist to be asked to present his or her work in still frames rather than motion video or for a sculptor

¹² Stallabrass, 84.

¹³ Matthew Mirapaul, “Now Anyone Can Be in the Whitney Biennial.” *The New York Times*, 23 Mar 2000. 20 Nov 2005. <<http://www.rtmark.com/legacy/more/articles/whitnymirapaul.html>>.

to find some way to exhibit his or her piece in two dimensions, but internet artists were effectively asked to do a similarly ridiculous thing which was to break down the interactivity and connectivity of their medium for the sake of the museum's concept of a discreet work of art.

Meanwhile, RTMark was not finished demonstrating its disregard for the prestigious Whitney exhibition. The group proceeded to sell 4 tickets to the preview reception of the exhibition on the online auction site Ebay for a sum of \$8,400. A spokesperson for RTMark made it very clear how the collective felt about the art world when he or she said, "If you're trying to be an activist, don't bother spending any time in the art scene. It doesn't have any significant effect on the real world. No politicians look to the art world to see what to do. Artists who want to be activists should spend their time on the world."¹⁴ It becomes clear in further interviews that RTMark, although now wholly institutionalized as early internet art pioneers, continue to reject the static position they are placed in when curators adapt them to an art context. In another interview, a member of RTMark was asked how the group felt they were changing people's perceptions through their acts. Their response to this question was: "...But to have this kind of thing being spoken and reported about is a success. With that we reach a large audience. It is not an art audience that we are addressing; it's the general public. RTMark is not an art project. It goes much further."¹⁵ The role of the curator then becomes a very difficult position. In the case of activist art on the internet, the curator of a major exhibition like the Whitney Biennial, as well-intentioned as he or she may be, becomes a hindrance to the agendas of the artists. While curators may see themselves as merely

¹⁴ Mirapaul.

¹⁵ Baumgartel, 111

exposing young or underexposed artists to the art-viewing public and engaging in new visual experiences as brought about by new media such as the internet, they are often working against the artists' intents and against the very nature of the medium itself.

Taking this into account, it is not impossible to curate internet art without divorcing the projects from some significant characteristic of themselves. The curator instead constructs somewhat of a glorified links page, thereby entering into the rhizomatic structure itself. Beyond putting an exhibition from a gallery into an online site or linking randomly to sites on the web, curation on the internet entails a filtration or selection process as well as some sort of justification or comment on the works included in the list.¹⁶ When curators place themselves within the rhizome, creating new lines in all directions, some toward activist artworks, they are risking politicizing themselves. It is possible, however, to recognize the artistic quality that is inherent in online activist artworks such as RTMark and Etoy without robbing them of political potency. Museums are often sensitive to being associated with projects or linked to initiatives they do not support, but this is hardly avoidable in a network such as the internet. The curator's role then becomes one of selecting for exhibition works which demonstrate conceptually or formally artistic qualities within a certain theme which exists as an unprivileged piece of cyberspace. Steve Dietz, an experienced web curator and active commentator on web exhibition, has said, "As for curating, we have no choice. We will go where the artists lead us."¹⁷ Dietz's wording is interesting in that he does not see himself as choosing and placing artists for exhibition but rather watching lines forming between himself and

¹⁶ Steve Dietz, "Curating (on) the Web," Museums and the Web 1998. 26 Mar. 1998. Online. 1 Nov. 2005. < http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/papers/dietz/dietz_curatingtheweb.html>.

¹⁷ Steve Dietz, "Curating (on) the Web," Museums and the Web 1998. 26 Mar. 1998. Online. 1 Nov. 2005. < http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/papers/dietz/dietz_curatingtheweb.html>.

artists and following along those lines. Dietz does not hint at having a power position over the artists, controlling how their work will be seen or received, but rather he sees himself as an observing participant, helpless yet curious to what developments may arise in the internet artistic community.

Although it may be true that all activist art loses some portion of activist potency when it is placed in an art context, it is a particularly interesting problem for internet art activists whose projects are not clearly defined by either art or politics and often flow into multiplicity due to their placement in a quintessential rhizome, under the definition of Deleuze and Guattari. Curators, often unwittingly, attempt to create hierarchies on top of this rhizomatic system by placing these internet artworks into a museum or art institutional setting. In the process, they depoliticize the projects, making them into discreet, canonized art pieces which are elevated above their political affiliations and devalued in their activist urgency to a large extent. Rather than bringing internet artworks to the systems in place outside of the web, the curator achieves a more successful exhibition if he or she is able to join the network and create lines of connection rather than arboreal structures of power which limit the multiplicity and scope of internet activist artwork. When curators such as Steve Dietz have connected themselves into the rhizome, activist art on the internet has safely remained in the various discourses in which it communicates. Just as artworks do not function in the same way through the internet as they would as physical objects in the gallery, curators can not curate for the discreet artistic meaning of internet art. Instead, the medium of the internet calls for curation for the multiple functions that information art takes.

Illus. 3



Screenshot of RTMark George W. Bush site spoof

Source: <http://www.rtmark.com>

Illus. 1



Screenshot of Etoys.com

Source: <http://www.etoys.com>

Illus. 2



View of gallery during PORT exhibition.

Source: <http://artnetweb.com/port>

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