

ART IN THE AGE OF



THE INTERNET

1989 TO TODAY

IT'S A WEBSITE: The Enduring Promise of Art Online

Caitlin Jones

Michael Connor @michael_connor Feb 17

Please come to my panel discussion with @ctlnjns, "Net Art: Can it be Shown in a Gallery?" on Fri, Feb 24, 2040, at the Frick Alpha Centauri

Like most good jokes, Rhizome Artistic Director Michael Connor's tweet contains a heavy dose of truth. Since 2004, Connor and @ctlnjns (myself) have been locked in an ongoing and frustratingly interminable conversation about the problems inherent in situating internet art in a gallery context as well as its conspicuous absence from contemporary art discourse. Our Sisyphean conversation, playing out through articles, interviews, panels, and often drinks, does not belong solely to us. Rather our sentiments echo a crowded, illustrious field of critically engaged artists, curators, activists, and scholars producing work for and with the internet as their material, subject matter, and preferred venue since the mid-1990s. The discussion that prompted Connor's tweet reflected a sense of resignation to our fate, as well as a renewed sense of urgency: the urgency to communicate the legacy of internet art, its continued relevance for makers and audiences (a legacy that—considering our current moment and the degree to which we use and are used by the all-encompassing technical infrastructure of the internet—is hardly assured).

THE OFFICE, THE LIVING ROOM, AND THE GALLERY

Documenta X, the 1997 iteration of the eminent art exhibition held in Kassel, Germany, was notable for a number of reasons. It was the first to be curated by a woman (French curator Catherine David), it was critical of both the current state of the art

world and the institution of documenta itself, and it utilized the nascent technology of the internet—both as a platform for art and as a tool for public outreach. The dX website served as an ancillary space, linking nine online artworks to critical writing, message boards, webcasts of live events, and general resources for the exhibition. For David, it was a means of broadening the theoretical and participatory scope of documenta. "Of the concentric circles which constitute the cultural event documenta X," she writes, "the website is . . . the outermost ring. It allows participation in the event Kassel [*sic*] in the combination which distinguishes internet: within a framework both intimate and global, in one's own living room and in the most varied corners of our world."^[1]

Such a statement is representative of early thinking about the democratizing potential of the Web, both for artists looking to challenge object-based norms and also for institutions like documenta to reach broader publics. Infamously however, while people were able to experience many facets of the physical exhibition online—from the comfort of their "living rooms"—the artists and visitors viewing the exhibition in Kassel had a more fraught experience of the virtual artworks.

Internet-based works by artists including Heath Bunting, Jodi, Antoni Muntadas, and Martin Kippenberger were installed on computers in a highly staged office-like environment (designed by Austrian artists Heimo Zobernig and Franz West), set apart from the rest of the exhibition. Net art pioneers Jodi (Joan Heemskerck and Dirk Paesmans) [pp. 242–43] expressed frustration with this "workplace" simulation, feeling that it gave "a false group-label to artists [whose] only thing in common

[1] Catherine David, from the Debate section of the documenta X website, Fri, 20 Jun 1997 18:28:24 +0200, <http://www.documenta12.de/archiv/dx/english/debatea.htm>, accessed February 15, 2017.

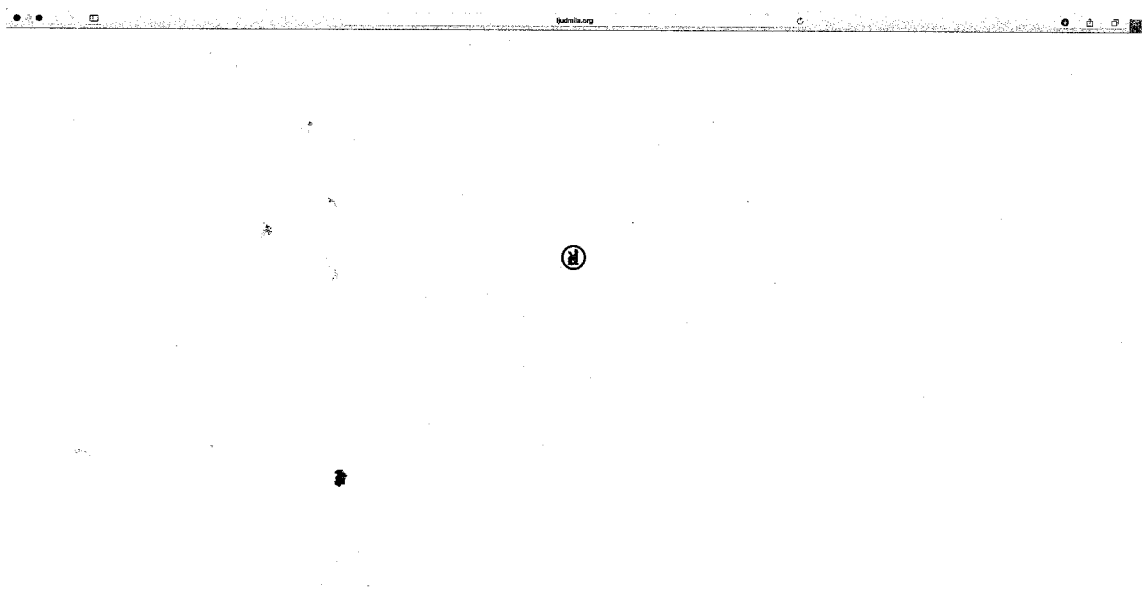


FIG. 1 Vuk Ćosić, *Documenta Done* (screenshot), 1997. Website

[was] their use of the net, and categorise[d] them, in opposition to the rest of the exhibit, by technique."^[2] Perhaps more egregious than the fact that the internet works were physically disconnected from the larger exhibition space was the fact that they were also disconnected from the internet itself—connected only via a local area network. The always provocative Jodi, not surprisingly, refused to adapt to these technical constraints and as a result, their work, composed of external hyperlinks, crashed every time a user tried to interact with it. Another notorious “failure” of dX was that at the conclusion of the exhibition, the entire website, including its web-based projects, was taken offline, packaged and sold as a CD-ROM—an act that prompted further outrage from the net art community. This outrage eventually manifested in *Documenta Done* (1997), a project in which the Slovenian net artist Vuk Ćosić cloned the full documenta X site onto his own server, thereby preserving access to the original works and the entirety of the website [fig. 1].^[3]

In hindsight dX represents a serious attempt to represent the social and political activities of

artists working in and around the internet, within the broader frame of contemporary art. While the exhibition certainly advanced discussions about the internet’s potential to challenge the primacy of the art object and to reach broader audiences online, it failed miserably at capturing the ways in which artists were actually using their networks and the Web to critique traditional art world structures, intellectual property, and the changing nature of public space.

Despite this, institutional initiatives to represent and utilize the Web flourished after documenta. The dot-com boom was in full swing, and online galleries, virtual museums, and digital exhibitions and commissions were quickly becoming part of many North American institutions. Following the subsequent dot-com crash of the mid-2000s, however, the zeal with which this new technology was embraced was just as quickly rejected by institutional gatekeepers and manifested in a severe reticence for many to embrace what was categorized as “new media” art forms. Blame for the ensuing “digital divide” was directed at everything from the ephemerality of the form and the dominance of the art market, to the separation between contemporary art and new media discourses, and the challenges of putting computers in gallery spaces (which more often than not, were used by the gallery-going public to check their e-mail).

“The presentation of internet art within the physical space of an art institution constitutes one

[2] Jodi, Wednesday, 9 July 1997 22:20:31 +0200 (DFT), Debate page, documenta X archive.

.ljudmila.org/~vuk/dx/> was the only record of the documenta site for years. Recently documenta itself has made a version of the site available online again.

[3] Ćosić’s project *Documenta Done* <<http://www>

of the most problematic scenarios of new media presentation," writes curator Christiane Paul. "Net art exists within a (virtual) public space, it does not necessarily need a museum to be presented to the public."^[4] Paul, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art since the dot-com boom, has curated countless internet and media exhibitions worldwide, written extensively on art and new media, and spent her career navigating the rifts between new media and "mainstream" contemporary art practices. The curatorial scenario Paul explores is more acutely described by the artist Olia Lialina. A key figure of the 1990s net.art scene, Lialina is the creator of *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War* (1996) [pp. 216–17], an iconic work from this early period, and she remains one of the most prolific artists and writers working with and on the Web [fig. 2]. In an acerbic but prophetic text from 2000, Lialina muses on her experiences installing websites in galleries:

To connect the physical exhibition to what is happening online, the organizers put up a computer in the gallery or somewhere next to the entrance and open a browser window on it displaying the list of links mentioned above. No one ever bothers to open them, of course. Someone might click on them once or twice, before they decide to check their mail or look up a weather report instead. It's hard to get in the right mood . . . computers can be placed in elaborate formations, upholstered with velvet or put up on pedestals. A curator who makes an Object out of a net art piece removes it from its context and makes it look primitive.^[5]

Both Paul and Lialina also describe the challenges inherent in online artwork being placed within the frame of an institution's website. Presented alongside the hours of operation, gift shop, and

other institutional-specific contexts, internet-based works were often removed from their place on the broader network, or in the case of documenta X "removed" from the Web entirely. While the challenges of net art in the gallery described by Paul and Lialina remain, it is important to stress that a number of independent online institutions and curatorial initiatives—mandated to show internet art in context—also came about during this "boom and bust" period. Websites such as low-fi net art locator, turbulence.org, and the still extant Rhizome provided alternatives to mainstream institutional websites. Through a deep commitment to online practices and a thorough understanding of the social and technical contexts from which they arose, these online "institutions" supported (in the case of Rhizome, still support) a thriving scene of artists and curators.

LET'S TALK NET ART

How do we define something that is not a fixed entity, but a place, a set of relationships, and a socioeconomic framework? The internet has radically changed from its earliest form as a military communications system, to the "information superhighway," bearing promises of open access and equal exchange, to the increasingly corporatized content delivery vehicle of today. What we are talking about when we say internet art (or net art, or net.art, or Web art) is an evolving and complicated question.

Many, including myself, have written extensively on the subject, but no one more engagingly than the journalist and critic Josephine Bosma. Her book *Nettitudes: Let's Talk Net Art* (2011) traces the definition of internet art through texts and practices, beginning with early net art curator Tilman Baumgärtel's definition, "art that deals with the genuine characteristics of the internet and can only happen through and with the internet." Though Baumgärtel, according to Bosma, later evolved his stance in order to "escape naive, superficial interpretations based solely on browser traits,"^[6] the site-specificity of this work—where meaning is

[4] Christiane Paul, "Flexible Contexts, Democratic Filtering and Computer Aided Filtering: Models for Online Curatorial Practice," in *Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in Networked*

Systems, ed. Joasia Krysa (Autonomedia, 2006), 89.

[5] Olia Lialina, "All You Need is Link," 2000, <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2017/feb/21/all-you-need-is-link/>, accessed April 4, 2017.

[6] Tilman Baumgärtel, (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2011), 30. quoted in Josephine Bosma, *Nettitudes: Let's Talk Net Art*

indivisible from its location on the network and in a browser window—is an ongoing and unresolved issue. Through theory and concrete example, Bosma's *Nettitudes* argues that definitions of net art must expand and embrace much more than the browser, the screen, and the technically specific context of the Web.

Bosma's evolutionary exploration of net art and its relationship to the notion of site-specificity echoes a similar evolution in ideas around place in mainstream art criticism. From the outset of Miwon Kwon's essential essay "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," she outlines "an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and its site."^[7] And yet, like Bosma, Kwon is dissatisfied with such specificity. For Kwon, an inextricable link to site does not reflect the complexities of a post-modern context, and thus, "it seems inevitable that we should leave behind the nostalgic notions of a site as being essentially bound to the physical and

empirical realities of a place. Such a conception, if not ideologically suspect, often seems out of sync with the prevalent description of contemporary life as a network of unanchored flows."^[8] This expansion of the thinking around "site" has had profound implications for art more generally, and opened the door for internet-based practices in contemporary art. However, even with this expansive thinking the central concerns about art that exists primarily online remain unresolved.

NEW MEDIUM, MASS MEDIUM, POST MEDIUM

As the Web transitioned from a new medium into a mass medium in the mid-2000s, artists began to focus less on how to translate online projects into physical spaces and coalesce their practices more around the concept of art *based on* the internet, internet-aware art or post-internet art, much of

[7] Miwon Kwon, "One Site Specificity," *October*, Place after Another: Notes on vol. 80 (spring 1997): 86.

[8] *Ibid.*, 108.

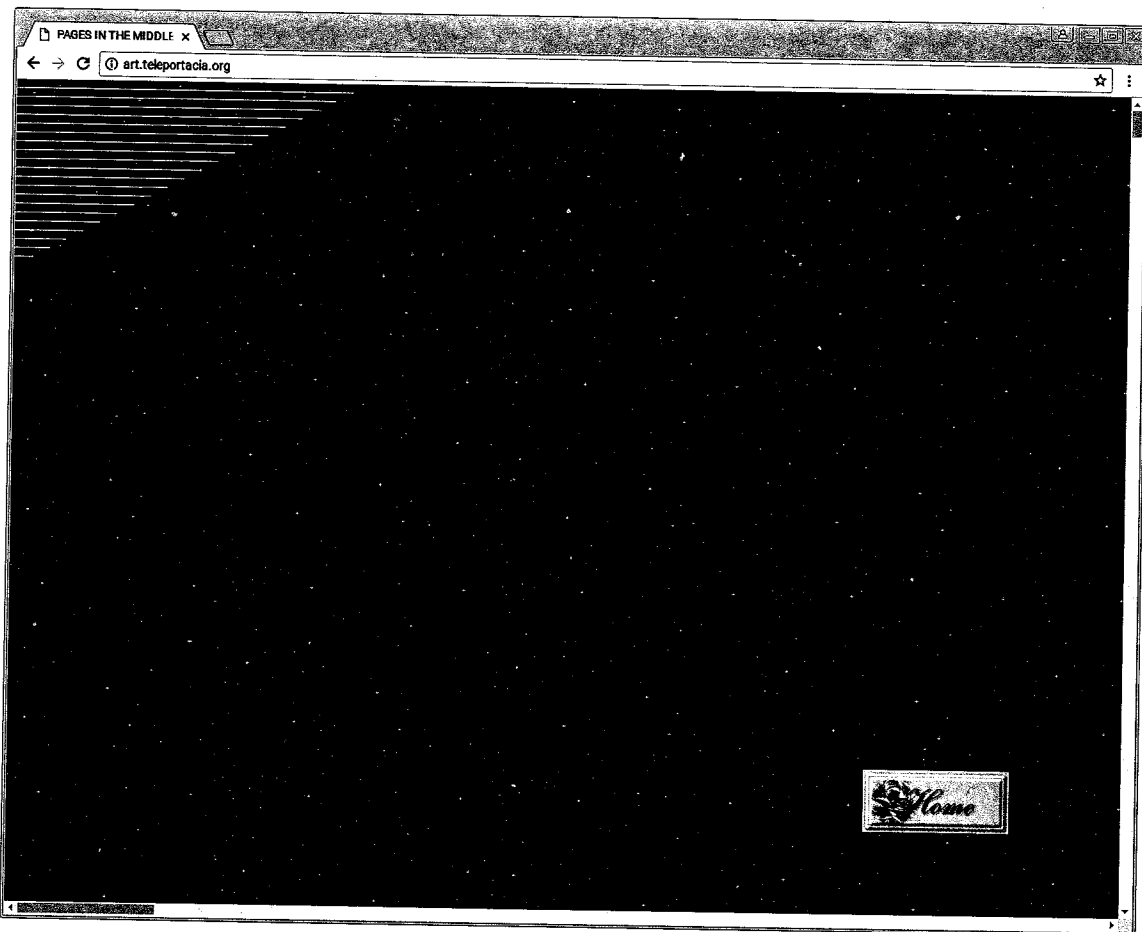
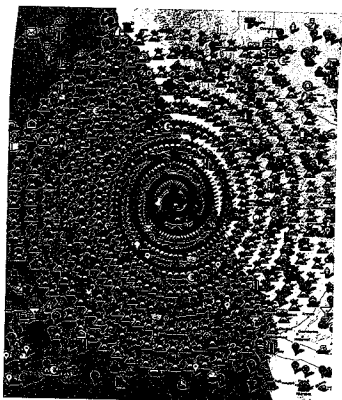


FIG. 2 Olia Lialina, <http://art.teleportacia.org/> (screenshot), 1998. Website



*Google, 2004 by JODI
Domena Domanović

FIG. 3 VVORK (screenshot), 2006–12. Website

which took on an object form. During this transitional moment, artists such as Cory Arcangel [pp. 194–95] seamlessly shuttled between virtual and physical space, reflecting how intertwined the internet had become with the physical realm. While this tendency arose with the so-called “second generation” of internet artists, internet art, from its beginnings, had always been multiplatformed. Pioneering net artist (and documenta X participant) Heath Bunting has regularly worked in both real and virtual space, and other net artists such as Jodi, Olia Lialina, Thomson & Craighead, and Eva and Franco Mattes have been exploring hybrid internet sculpture, film, and performance since early in their practices.

While the internet was manifesting itself more regularly in gallery spaces, the physical realm of the art world was also moving online. In 2006, artists and designers Aleksandra Domanović, Oliver Laric, Christoph Priglinger, and Georg Schnitzer created VVork.com, a website that posted single images of artworks and installations, accompanied only by the artist, title, date, and a link [fig. 3]. With multiple entries per day until they ceased posting in 2012, their peak reach of 20,000 users per day was exceptional. Curators who hadn’t been interested in the internet as a place of production began using VVork.com as a resource, and it was through VVork’s structure and selection, which often included web-based artworks alongside artworks in other mediums, that they were introduced to issues surrounding the

distributive nature of the Web. Within VVork’s framework, the gallery was positioned as but one node in a network of contemporary art contexts, and the internet as yet another medium in a broadening constellation of contemporary practices. In this sense, the internet reemerged in the mainstream through an acceptance of less rigidly defined “post-medium” perspectives rather than through the history and specificity of net art. Of course, even this new and potentially expansive paradigm is not without its problems. In his introduction to *Nettitudes*, the writer Florian Cramer ruefully muses, “the real downside of a notion like post-media is that it gives artists and curators an easy excuse to no longer critically reflect the media (and politics) of art display and distribution but to fall back—as is now massively the case—to the white cube installation paradigm with no further questions asked.”^[9] For Cramer, this post-medium perspective strips away the political urgency and oppositional nature of web-based work and encourages mis-historicization of online practices.

VVork was also conscious of this mischaracterization, an understanding that can be seen in an online artwork by VVork co-founder Oliver Laric [pp. 136–37]. In 2013, Laric was invited to participate in the BiennaleOnline, an event that inaccurately self-identified as “the first exclusively

[9] Florian Cramer, “Net Art Back to Square

One,” in Bosma, *Nettitudes*, 14.

online biennale exhibition of contemporary art." With his submission entitled *An Incomplete Timeline of Online Exhibitions and Biennials* (2013),^[10] Laric attempted to correct the inaccuracy of the organizer's statement by submitting a simple list of links to online exhibitions, biennales, commissions, and other projects that had taken place since 1991. Neither patronizing nor exhaustive, Laric's list drew attention to clear gaps in historical knowledge relating to internet art practices. Coincidentally, in an uncanny echo of documenta X, the BiennaleOnline was unable to include outgoing urls on their online platform, and Laric pulled out of the show. His work is now hosted as part of Rhizome's *Artbase*.

IT'S A WEBSITE

After twenty years of debate over definitions, conversations about how, when, and why to put internet art in a gallery, and the validity of the term *post-internet*, it's essential to note that many artists still make art on, and specifically for, the internet. From the same site where we continue to work, consume news, debate, socialize, and e-mail our mothers, artists create work that engages directly with the technical specificity of the Web and the social conditions reinforced by it.

The American artist Martine Syms [pp. 270–71] shows an enduring interest in how technical constraints and conventions influence culture, both online and more broadly, through media. Syms, who works in video, publishing, installation, and performance, explores notions of how black identity is presented through media on a structural level. In a 2013 talk she gave at SXSW Interactive titled "Black Vernacular: Reading New Media," Syms tackles "black aesthetic[s] in the visual culture of new media."^[11] Using her own experience as a black American woman making net art, she considers how media and digital networks shape cultural definitions of blackness and annihilates the pervasive belief that the internet is a race-neutral space. She considers

the work of a number of black artists working on the Web, including Hennessey Youngman, the alter ego of New York artist Jayson Musson, whose series "Art Thoughtz" uses the culturally coded space of an amateur YouTube channel to address the contemporary art world that he both belongs to and is alienated from. Through a close reading of artist Keith Obadike's *Blackness for Sale* (2001), in which the artist auctioned his blackness on eBay, Syms quotes Obadike's vital insight that "... browsers called Explorer and Navigator take you to explore the Amazon or trade in eBay," drawing attention to the underlying racist and colonial narratives built into our experiences of the web.

Syms's *Reading Trayvon Martin* (2012–ongoing) consists of links to articles, tweets, and social media posts about the 2012 murder of the Florida teenager; it is a remarkable reflection on a violent death and how online information shaped its public narrative [fig. 4]. The website www.readingtrayvonmartin.com resembles a concrete poem—a visually arresting list of headlines and social media post titles rendered in black text on a white background. The text is overlaid with images of a black hoodie, a can of Arizona Iced Tea, and a pack of Skittles: objects that have become synonymous with the event. It is about a pivotal American tragedy but also about Syms's experience of trying to make sense of the developing narrative. Her readings and links were automatically posted to the page, so that viewers could see her own knowledge of the subject develop in real time. For Syms, "it was appalling how it was ignored by the major news outlets. The story was brought to bear on American conscience through grassroots efforts by black people."^[12] *Reading Trayvon Martin* is an example of net art in the classical sense, in that it site-specifically portrays the experience of being online—technically and culturally. Since its commission by the New Museum, it has remained live at its descriptive url and has also been presented in a number of gallery exhibitions. But because of the fundamental connection to online reading, publishing, and identity, its physical gallery-based manifestation is deeply unresolved for Syms. For her, "it's a website."^[13]

[10] See "An Incomplete Timeline of Online Exhibitions and Biennials," Rhizome, <http://rhizome.org/art/artbase/artwork/an-incomplete-timeline-of-online-exhibitions-and-biennials/>

[11] Martine Syms, "Black Vernacular: Reading New Media," <http://martinesyms.com/black-vernacular-reading-new-media/>.

[12] Quoted in "Martine Syms: Set Alight All the Hackneyed Tropes," O32c.com, April 20, 2016

-syms-art-interview, accessed February 15, 2017.

[13] E-mail conversation

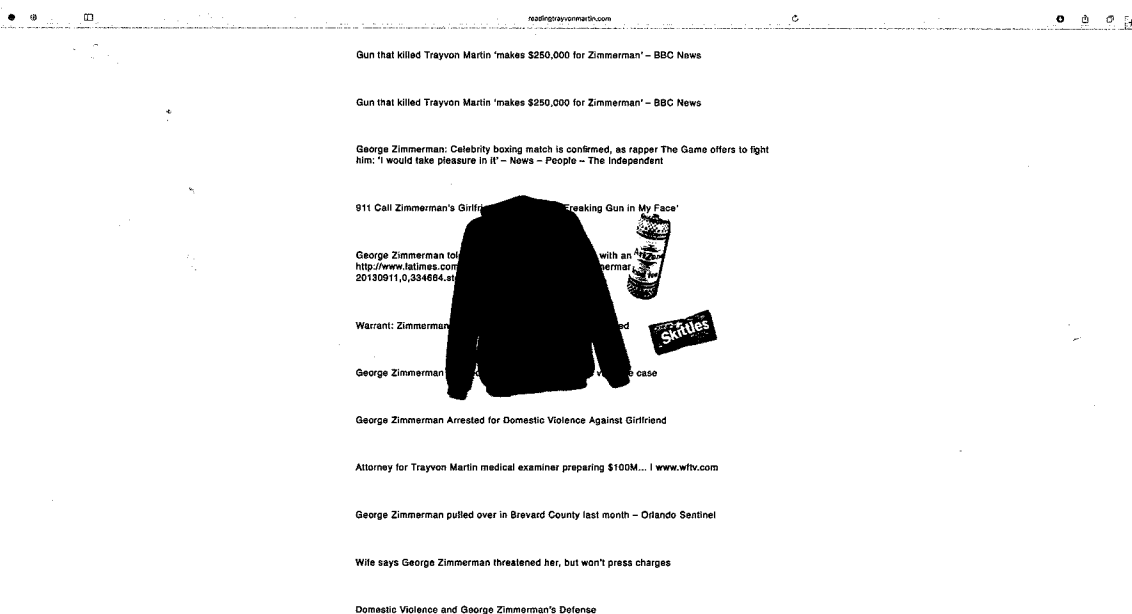


FIG. 4 Martine Syms, *Reading Trayvon Martin* (screenshot), 2012–ongoing. Website

THE NET IN NET ART

Yesterday for me as an artist it made sense only to talk to people in front of their computers, today I can easily imagine to apply to visitors in the gallery because in their majority they will just have gotten up from their computers.

This statement, taken from Olia Lialina's online text titled "Flat Against the Wall" (2006), is more relevant now than ever, given that we all quite literally carry computers around in our pockets. The omnipresent force and definitions of the internet have expanded far beyond its thing-ness into a general state of being. It has been a crucial development that art about, based-on, or "post"-internet is no longer confined to a browser window, and likewise, is emblematic of our current ever-networked conditions.

But if we define internet art too broadly, drop the "net" from net art, or treat it as part of a post-medium condition, do we risk once again obfuscating a rich history and critical knowledge about the network context of our lives? And most essentially, do we continue ignoring artists who work on the internet in a highly deliberate way, whose relationship with the site-specificity of the internet offers the unique potential to directly

critique and challenge issues of domineering technocapitalism and algorithmic control over our relationships, our communications, and our access to information? Of equal significance is the fact that it is not an object, and its ephemerality continues to challenge persistent art market dominance and deference. Of course not all net art subverts institutions and traditions, but its radical potential is indivisible from its mutable and infinitely reproducible form. It continues to be a powerful and public space in which both artists and audiences can—in situ—explore and deconstruct the effects of the network on our lived realities.

None of this, however, answers Connor's eternal question of "can it be shown in a gallery?" Defaulting to objects "about" the internet cannot be our only answer, nor can we confine internet art to our "living rooms." Can the internet-connected computers in galleries *finally* have their day now that it's possible to check our e-mail on our phones? Regardless of the options, it is impossible to show art in and from the age of the internet without a clear understanding of how this art relates to the technical *and* social complexities of the internet itself. Further, unpacking the history of this very question is an essential piece of what makes definitions of internet art so elusive and diverse in the first place. Perhaps it doesn't matter if the question remains unanswered, as long as we all keep talking about it

This book is published on the occasion of the exhibition *Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today*

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In recognition of the outsized role greater Boston has played in the history and development of technology, the ICA coordinated citywide partnerships with arts and educational institutions to link concurrent exhibitions, performances, symposia, and talks and programs related to the themes of *Art in the Age of the Internet*. Area partners include: Berklee College of Music; Boston CyberArts; Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University; deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum; Harvard Art Museums; Harvard Film Archive; Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; MIT List Visual Arts Center; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University; and Tufts University Art Galleries.

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Front cover: Judith Barry, *Imagination, dead imagine*, 1991. Installation view, *Judith Barry: Imagination, dead imagine*, Mary Boone Gallery, New York, 2017. Photo by Adam Reich. © Judith Barry
Back cover: Juliana Huxtable, *Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)*, 2015. Inkjet print. 40 × 30 inches (101.6 × 76.2 cm). Image courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Juliana Huxtable

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Universal Internet was designed specifically as the main typeface for this book and exhibition, and is based on *Univers* (1954), whose characters have been modified in a manner that would not have been possible prior to the internet and easily accessible software that allows for typeface manipulations. The intention is for a familiar and rational—yet not quite identifiable—typeface, not dissimilar in this regard to modernist type designs.

A majority of fonts appearing on the internet, such as *Helvetica*, *Arial*, *Times*, and *Georgia*, began as typefaces developed for printing, and thus bear certain features meant for paper, including ink traps and line weights. *Roboto Mono*, the second typeface used in this book, was designed and developed on-screen and for the screen for Google as a free and open-source typeface, for optimal screen performance, with specific characteristics for coding. Its use in this book is intended to reverse the screen/paper relationship, and give an identifiable voice to the book.

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