



Dearest progressive scan loading, on victim's of Broadband

an interview with Olia Lialina

interview by Valeska K. Buehrer

Olia Lialina is one of the few net.art pioneers. In mid 90s she was one of the organizers of Moscow experimental film club Cine Fantom. From 1999 she's a Professor at Merz Akademie (New Media Pathway), Stuttgart.

Olia, your work 'My Boyfriend Came Back From The War' is ten years old now. In your articles and lectures you say that you never expected that it would be a successful work, but it is one, featured in all the recent books on net.art and media art, taught for art students and exhibited all over the world. How do you feel about that now?

I feel that the work is really old. Some weeks ago, while giving a lecture at an event, I was showing it again (did not make it for a while) and noticed that though the work is still as it was: same files, same address, links -- it is now more like a documentation of itself. Because everything else changed. First of all connection speed. I could now click through my work in one minute. Probably, I could do it even faster. And it is a killing speed for the obscure setting of MBCBFTW. If there is no delay in between phrases, no waiting for images, no Jpeg "progressive scan" loading -- the tenseness of the conversation is lost. Because it is a dialogue of two people, for whom is very difficult to talk. It can't go easy and seamless. It had to be slow. And the modem connection had to break, and browser had to crash to start this difficult conversation from the very beginning.

Do you mean, that slow connection and unstable software was a part of the story? I would like to say "Yes", but it wouldn't be the truth. In 1996 the slowness of the Internet and always dropping connections irritated me as a user and as an artist. At the same time, MBCBFTW belongs to that reality and modem speed. It was inspired by the current version of the browser Netscape 3.0, it was made for modem speed. If the WWW would have been a faster and seamless environment in 1996 there would not be MBCBFTW and all the other works. I would make a film and upload it to the server. It would be another story. Will-n-Testament I made in 1998 is another victim of broadband. Today this page is downloaded so fast, that you can't notice that every letter is a picture, DSL user will not see random waves of letters.

There are still a lot of people in the world who are on modem connection. Are they the ideal audience for early net.art? Ideal or not, experience they'd get would be more

authentic.

Last years it was discussed a lot, that not only actual projects, but also hardware and software they run on, should be preserved. Do you think that "modem emulators" slowing down pages and picture downloads are something what a new media archive should have in its storage? It sounds decadent, but not wrong and technically not that difficult. What is impossible to emulate or simulate is the feeling of looseness in between an online author and a user and to make user leave her or his feedback. Ten years ago twenty people a week would look at MBCBFTW and half of them would send an email from the last frame of the project, saying "thank you" or "what was this crap?" Today I get a lot of hits, but only students who had to write a paper about my work use this email address. And bots. Without feedback online work is not really alive.

Do you have to update the files in MBCBFTW so they work with new versions of browsers?

No, there are no scripts to update. Nevertheless, browser versions and the change in the browser look affected the work as well. Though it was meant to be just a frame, I found out that Netscape 3.0 is a more elegant frame than Firefox 1.0.7. And when I see an old screenshot of MBCBFTW in an old catalogue -- this static reproduction of lets say 1997 is more "original" than fully functioning work online in 2006. Just because of browser appearance. Back then I did not think that the way browser look can be of big importance. Functions and features were the sources of inspiration. And the sources of troubles: it could appear that what you saw as a feature was in fact a bug, that would be fixed (e.g. removed) in the next version of the browser. Some other works of mine were ruined this way and had to be reconstructed or deleted. It was never the case with MBCBFTW, but still every new version of browser was taking something away from the work. To make it short, ageing is not a nice process for an online art work. It is unnatural. MBCBFTW as a lot of other early web works is a set of web pages. And web pages can't stay the same for 10 years. If they do, they become artefacts.

On the first page of the Last Real Net Art Museum you write that all remixes of MBCBFTW can be changed, removed or deleted by their authors. You don't want

them to become artefacts? But won't you regret if they just vanish?

I will, of course. MBCBFTW reinterpretations and remediations are very dear "signs of life" to me. My museum was started in 2000 when external links were disappearing from the web. Big museums wanted to expose net.art, but were not able to make links. So this disclaimer was a reaction to that anti-web behaviour. Fortunately today the link culture is back. And people as well as institutions link to each other as never before. This disclaimer is sort of part of the history now.

After 10 years of working for browsers, how do you see the current situation? Is it still interesting to work for the browser and online public? Is there place for net art in Web 2.0? It is an interesting question. On one hand there is always a place for artistic expression, on another hand too many new services and fascinating "rich user experiences" are exposed to us, new standards and tools. Today's web is too convenient and very good arranged to stimulate users expressions of all the formats like videos, music or texts. And there is a right place and service providently prepared for each format. Difficult to be inventive or subversive in such a relaxing situation. There are not a lot of critical or innovative works appearing right now. My impression is that at this moment net art market is overloaded by mash ups and parodies.

Is it a reason why your new work "With Elements of Web 2.0" (with Dragan Espenschied) is a series of printed images? True, "With Elements" is an offline project. It is about the web, its aesthetic, history and present moment. We wanted to attract attention to particular visuals to the way they are and not to the way they are mashed up. Paper was the best medium for it.

The online fiction idea of 'My Boyfriend Came Back From The War', which gears towards a non-linear cinematic logic, is the counterpiece of another online phenomenon -- blogs. Do you blog? Blogs are nice as they are, however their practical but strict and imposing format should not be regarded as the great end point in the development of online expression. Together with Dragan we make Frozen Niki, a blog from a cryogenic box. The blog is not linear as well. The story we write and illustrate is assembled from odd memories of a cosmonaut travelling to a far away star. It is an experiment with narration.