

What Can and Cannot Be Felt: The Paradox of Affectivity in Post-Internet Art

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the paradox of embodiment/disembodiment in virtual space, and on the recent history of Net Art, this article proposes to go back to Roy Ascott's metaphor of the 'telematic embrace' in order to examine different artistic and theoretical approaches to online affectivity. While the first generation of artists who founded the net.art movement was openly fascinated by the novelty of cyberspace as a medium, currently artists are adopting online tools to produce also offline works, revealing the presence of Internet culture in contemporary society instead of focusing on the nature of the medium in itself. In this scenario, marked by the current Post-Internet discourse, real and virtual worlds overlap, and hybrid artistic forms emerge. But are Net artists still reinterpreting the idea of virtual embrace? Or have they moved away from a romantic stance, highlighting the perils of the digital revolution in the so-called Post-Digital age? Adopting a phenomenological perspective, this essay aims to address these questions, exploring the paradox of affectivity in contemporary networked cultures through the analysis of emblematic artworks.

KEYWORDS

Net Art, Virtual Space; Disembodiment; Affectivity; Post-Humanism; Post-Internet Culture.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

"Therefore, dear friend, embrace your solitude and love it. Endure the pain it causes, and try to sing out with it. For those near to you are distant..." (Rilke, 1929/2000, p. 39)

In 1990, British artist and theorist Roy Ascott asked the question 'Is there love in the telematic embrace?' Besides being one of the first authors to associate *telematics* – a term coined by Simon Nora in the late 1970s to designate the conjunction of computers and telecommunications – with art, Ascott wanted both to praise and to rethink the metaphor of love in the context of an emerging and global network of creativity. At that time, when the World Wide Web had just been created and Internet connections were still taking their first steps, the idea of a *telematic embrace* could be considered almost premonitory. Inspired by the concept of *noosphere* developed by Teilhard Chardin (already in 1922), the perspective of a broad planetary consciousness was quite provocative and openly optimistic. The *telematic*

culture envisaged a symbiotic relationship between the human mind and the artificial intelligence systems, while triggering dynamic interactions among humans. Hence, through interchange and participation in the construction of cybernetic meaning, individuals formed a collective entity and therefore could never see, think and feel in isolation. In Roy Ascott's words:

"The telematics process, like the technology that embodies it, is the product of a profound human desire for transcendence: to be out of body, out of mind, beyond language. Virtual space and dataspace constitute the domain, previously provided by myth and religion, where imagination, desire, and will can reengage the forces of space, time, and matter in the battle for a new reality" (Ascott, 1990, p. 246).

In fact, the rapid development of information and communications technology over the last decades of the 20th century reframed the modern human/machine dichotomy, radically affecting our perception of reality, as a whole. Technology has always been part of human construction, moulding technological awareness – the sense of ourselves, of the others and of what surrounds us – part of *being-in-the-world*, to use Heidegger's expression. However, due to its historical evolution, technology has lost its primary essence (*Gestell*) and "threatens to slip from human control" (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 5). Nowadays, in view of the dematerialisation of technology promoted by the Internet, where software programmes and applications make contents flow, one could say that machines already dominate man's will and are escaping from human hands. The German thinker also adds to our reflections the idea that the role of art is to question technology, through the *unconcealment* of its layers in the process of discovering the truth. This notion of the mission of art is, at least in part, shared by McLuhan, who analyses it as a radar, acting like "an 'early alarm system' [...] enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them" (1964/2003, p. 16).

Along with this uncontrollable evolution, virtual reality is perhaps the most profound challenge facing us in the early 21st century. We can argue, as

Pierre Lévy noted, that we have always been constructed through virtualisation mechanisms, constantly being updated and self-actualised through the natural evolution of humanity in-between two apparently opposite worlds (Valverde, 2010, p. 40). Far removed from the enthusiastic positions of Lévy, McLuhan or Ascott, critical approaches developed in the wake of the Frankfurt School regard the impact of technology as being absolutely catastrophic. Baudrillard, for instance, remarks on our incapacity to distinguish reality from its simulation, reflecting about a *hyper-reality* – the space without origin – which reinforces the subversive power of body technologies. In discussing a supposed sense of involvement in computer-mediated communications, Paul Virilio stated that "interactivity is the equivalent of radioactivity in a cyberwar" (1999, p. 172) and wrote *Cybermonde, La politique du pire* (1996).

Virtual disembodiment appears as a crucial issue as new and powerful forms of global communication enable us to 'keep in touch' with acquaintances and strangers, friends and foes, breaking time-space limits, promising a sort of ubiquitous existence. By becoming Internet users, we may choose to open accounts and download apps for smartphones, tablets and other devices, in order to make everyday activities more accessible and faster. We may also choose to participate in social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp, to expound diaries in blogs, to check and share media files on YouTube, Vimeo or Instagram, to name just a few prominent examples. Although we may choose to disclose information, there will always be a gap, due to delay and displacement. As the Portuguese writer Gonçalo M. Tavares notes:

"The voice trembles, the writing hand can also tremble, but, after passing through the mechanical medium of the computer, the phrase stops trembling, it is no longer corporal. (...) The emotional muscle remains in the impermeable networks of the keys. The separation between word and thing, word and body, moves on yet another chapter. The keyboard is a machine of emotional neutralisation." (Tavares, 2013, p. 151)



Figure 1 | Paul Sermon, *Telematic Dreaming* (1992). DAT – Digital Art & Technology. Exhibition view. Ars Electronica Exhibition at the Singapore Science Centre 2007. Image: Ars Electronica. Courtesy of the artist and Ars Electronica.

Through interfaced technologies, the physical body is hidden and, consequently, the (re)presentation of identity is always reshaped. Whether to register an identification or to create a personal profile, to generate a credible identity or to build an invented persona, virtual activity is always about adjusting the image of the body to the screen and, therefore, it is indeed about a performed body. While it seems that our existence is no longer recognisable outside a networked society, since present-day society almost obliges us to live online, being in virtual space strengthens an incorporeal self – real or fake – but an ever abstract and virtual body.

Drawing on Roy Ascott's idea of 'telematic embrace' this paper discusses the embodiment/disembodiment dichotomy in Net Art, observing how different artists deal with the issue of networked affectivity, reinterpreting the motivations and processes behind emotional connections mediated through technology.

2 | A NEW MOMENT, THE SAME QUESTION

As Paul Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming* suggests, body is partly image, image is partly body (see Figure 1). This inevitable condition, closely associated with perception, shapes a challenging discussion that becomes more complex after the digital revolution and the resulting dematerialisation of the body in virtual reality. After the diffusion of the Web 2.0, with its focus on user-generated content and social interaction around virtual communities, the increasing sophistication of the Semantic Web and the evolution of artificial intelligence are also providing ground-breaking possibilities for new

artistic practices. Exploring the tensions between embodiment and disembodiment, artists are now using web tools to produce works not only online, but also offline, revealing the all-pervasive presence of Internet culture in contemporary society, instead of focusing on the nature of the medium in itself.

We may recognise here an important move away from the initial exploitation of cyberspace as a medium and creativity as a holistic embrace. It is definitely a different trend, when compared with the vision of the first generation, namely Vuk Ćosić, Alexei Shulgin, Olia Lialina and JODI, among others, who founded the net.art movement in the 1990s.

At this point, we should note that the term net.art is specifically applied to this artistic movement of the 1990s, while Net Art is a more generic designation that refers to "art that acts on the network, or is acted on by it", comprising "an expansive, hybrid set of artistic practices that overlap with many media and disciplines" (Rhizome, 2016). Furthermore, Net Art is an umbrella term covering several related expressions, such as: Internet Art, Web Art and Online Art (Brøgger, 2000).

As Josephine Berry points out:

"Net artists in the early '90s often combined an avant-garde rejection of the author's individuality and originality with the possibilities provided by computer mediated communication (CMC) to generate anonymous, parodic, shared, multiple and inauthentic identities. In other words, the possibility of being 'whoever you want to be' in cyberspace combined with the ongoing deconstructions of authentic identity endemic to postmodern culture." (Berry, 2000)

In this context, there are two historical moments which correspond to two seemingly opposite directions of Net Art: one that relies on dematerialisation, as it tends to leave the body behind, while seeking new virtual identities often related to Post-human theories; and the other one, playing with re-materialisation processes, and dealing with Post-Internet aesthetics. Today, artists are displaying and exposing the Internet mechanisms of power and surveillance, highlighting the reproducibility of digital materials and identities, and questioning the current paradigm of hyperconnection. Besides political and social issues

aroused by Post-Digital cultures, many authors are now focusing on paradoxical forms of emotional connectivity that develop within hybrid spaces in-between online and offline realities. Seen from this critical perspective, does Roy Ascott's question-metaphor still remain relevant? Is there (still) love in the virtual embrace?

3 | AN EMBODIED VIRTUALITY

The permanent tension between presence and absence of the body in virtual reality is a stimulating issue. What space or place does a body occupy in a non-palpable relationship? The virtual is not the opposite of the real, even though it carries the possibility (not yet achieved) of being it, of becoming it. As Bounia and Myrivili observe: "The 'virtual' is a mode of being that shifts its ontological emphasis away from the reign of 'presence'." (2015, p. 20). From this perspective, the idea that the virtual is placeless could refute the Heideggerian *Dasein* (*being-here*), by opening up the possibility of existing without a 'here'. In fact, the virtual, unlike the material, reflects the dream of being released from tangibility, and this might also explain the considerable success of Internet culture.

The virtual body is embedded in the collective imagination, having been liberated of any kind of hard limit. It is reduced to a fictional image, protecting the real body from the screen. Even so, we cannot afford to ignore the materiality of interfaces and their effect on ourselves. This idea eventually leads to the question of to what extent the human body has already become an extension of the machine, whereas our life is affected and modified in such a radical way that electronic devices have already become fundamental extensions of our physical existence. The boundaries are increasingly blurred, so that the traditional tension of embodiment/ disembodiment can no longer be addressed as a choice of either the one or the other, but as an effective and mutual existence.

Post-human discourse is based on the fact that living bodies are wrought by technology. To adopt Stelarc's disturbing perspective, the biological body has become obsolete and the skin as a physical barrier should be erased in order to leverage the

interface (Zylinska et al. 2002, p. 115). Post-human theories reach their utmost climax in *extropy* philosophies and in the idea of *transhumanism*, downloadable identities over virtual space.

How we became Posthuman by Katherine Hayles (1999), represents an important contribution to reconfigure human relations, in which screen frontiers are crossed. Here, the prefix *post* has a dual connotation "superseding the human and coming after it" (Hayles, 1999, p. 283). To Hayles, the human is an embodied being and "the complexities of this embodiment mean that human awareness unfolds in ways very different from those of intelligence embodied in cybernetic machines" (1999, p. 283). In other words, disembodiment is a false purpose, another way of sustaining the old Cartesian tradition by identifying subjectivity with the rational (male) mind (Valverde, 2010, p. 37). Bodies are actively involved in the construction of virtuality, as shown by authors such as Donna Haraway, Amelia Jones and Susan Kozel (particularly with her concept of *quiasma* as the space between bodies and their mediated images). Post-human and post-Cartesian embodied subjectivity moves away from an apocalyptic or radical vision and intrinsically participates in a phenomenological approach to technology. In this vein, we should talk about an *expanded reality*, rather than a virtual reality, which, in turn, brings a new *phenomenal order* instead of a new substantial order. As Echeverria observes:

"[...] we are not facing a substance but a corporal phenomenon, which obviously comes from flesh-and-bone bodies on which an electronic body has been superimposed. As they are phenomenal, the tele-relations they have with each other fully affect subjects on a perceptive, cognitive and emotional level." (Echeverria, 2003, p. 20)

In a first stage, the individual establishes a relation with an intelligent system with the attempt to be (re)presented in cyberspace, interacting with an artificial machine and reaching other individuals. This would be the main purpose of the 'mediation' in which human sensitivity is fed and enhanced: "When interacting, we trigger dialogues between technodata and biodata. Body and system are structurally coupled" (Domingues, 2004, p. 160).

Two Net Art projects by Eva and Franco Mattes, known as 0100101110101101.org, clearly illustrate this reciprocal affectation, showing both sides of the interface and participation. *Befnoed [By Everyone From No One Every Day]* (2014) is a crowdsourced performance recorded on webcam videos, in which the artists give instructions to anonymous workers around the world to perform several actions: “The resulting videos are then dispersed on obscure, peripheral or forgotten social networks around the world, in Cambodia, Russia, China, South Africa” (Mattes, 2014). *Emily’s Video* (2012) consists of an archive of viewers’ feedback while they are watching a mysterious video (Figure 2). The camera is pointed towards the audience, who thus become protagonist of the work. The artists explained how the process has occurred:

“The viewers are random volunteers who replied to our online call to watch ‘the worst video ever.’ We later destroyed the original video, which had been sourced from the Darknet. You will never know what they were watching. These second hand experiences are the only proof of its existence.” (Mattes, 2012).

Playing with seductive and perverse mechanisms, often linked with the abusive use of the Internet and social networks, Eva and Franco Mattes ‘waved a carrot’ of an ‘extremely violent video’. The reactions, from laughter to rejection, many of them covering the eyes to avoid having to see more, are real enough. Hence the artists explore how ‘liking’ and ‘disliking’ (or even ‘disgusting’) can be two sides of the same coin, subtly uncovering voyeurism,



Figure 2 | Eva and Franco Mattes, *Emily’s Video* (2012). Reactions. Screenshot composition. Courtesy of the artists.

violence and depravity in these kind of contacts.

Although these projects seem to act as a mirror of one another – the first turned to the action and the second to the reaction – they both enhance the broad participation of the spectators within their cultural context (their places, their homes). Through the virtual embrace, the viewers can participate in a global scale video performance, opening their private environments to an anonymous public worldwide.

Taking the logic of *expansion* reiterated by Echeverria (2003, p. 20), electronic and digital representations might compose a ‘very warm space’ for relationships regarding a mental-body liaison. Nonetheless, and despite bringing up the real face and real setting usually hidden behind the screen, the uncertainty of an affective connection persists.

4 | NETWORKED AFFECTIVITY

“Of course I can’t see your face. I have no idea what your face looks like. You could be anybody out there, but there’s gotta be somebody watching me. Somebody who wants to come in close to me... Come on, I’m all alone...” (Vito Acconci, *Theme Song*, 1973)

The idea of creating a network of affective interaction has always been recognised as an important subject-matter for online artistic practices. Although it has been significantly expanded and reconfigured over the last two decades, this research field is far from being recent. In fact, some of the ground-breaking works of Video Art already address the ambivalent notion of anonymous intimacy, questioning the possibilities of establishing an emotional connection with an unidentified viewer through the mediation of an electronic device. In his influential work *Theme Song* (1973), Vito Acconci uses video close-up to stage a seductive monologue which entails an implicit response from the viewer, thus suggesting the complicity of a half-anonymous dialogue (Figure 3). As Kamel Boukhechem remarks, the artist:

“[...] moves into the spectators’ space and invites them to come nearer, to get close to him. With a mixture of candour and manipulation, he protests his honesty and forces the relationship. The bewitching



Figure 3 | Vito Acconci, *Theme Song* (1973). Still image. Courtesy of the artist.

register of his voice as he sings and the slow movements of his body suggest possible encirclement. With this attempt at manipulation of an invisible spectator and its desire to make the screen disappear, making us forget technique and distance.” (Boukhechem, 1998)

If, as Vito Acconci’s video suggests, the endeavour to create an indirect affective connection tends to depart from the perception of being alone, what does that mean nowadays, after the Internet? “Is solitude the empty room you sit inside or is it the absence of human connection, whether virtual or in person?” (McNeil, 2014, p. 18).

Net artists have often explored this issue, namely by questioning the disquiet and contradictory forms of intimacy enabled by social media. Following a period of fascination with the construction of fictional characters and avatars, which eventually led to a wide range of artistic projects on Second Life and other similar online virtual communities, the globalisation of social media paved the way for a new focus on authenticity. In this context, exposing real identities and sharing real life information has become the new paradigm. More than a return to ‘reality’, this trend is part of contemporary networked cultures, with their hybrid spaces and discourses, in which virtual and actual dimensions converge and overlap, dissolving the boundaries between public and private spheres. Juan Martín Prada refers to this phenomenon of compulsive exchange and the display of personal universes as *extimacy*, explaining that “in the age of social media, the Internet user is asked to show his most private and intimate side, to share his choices and personal

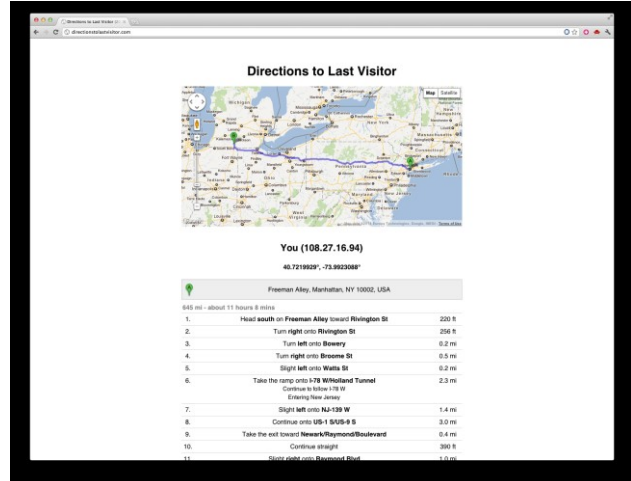


Figure 4 | Charles Broskoski, *Directions to last visitor* (2011). Screenshot from: <http://directionstolastvisitor.com/>. Courtesy of the artist.

preferences, to post his opinion, ultimately, to ‘perform himself.’” (Prada, 2012, p. 149).

An interesting example of a critical approach to this individual exposure, with the consequent loss of privacy by means of a networked complicity, is Charles Broskoski’s *Directions to last visitor* (2011), an online artwork which introduces the possibility of a physical connection between two consecutive users (Figure 4). Based on Google Maps, the work provides the exact location of the last two visitors, as well as the driving directions needed for them to reach each other, thus drawing attention to the hidden physicality behind the intangibility of the Internet.

The attempt to link two anonymous viewers is also visible in Mark Beasley’s *Peer to Peer Sunset* (2013) (Figure 5). Nevertheless, the idea of sequence is replaced here by a romantic simultaneity, as the artist implicitly invites two people to experience the same sunset. Moreover, the work also envisages the option of a shared moment between two observers with a real-life relationship, through their synchronised access to the website or by generating a custom URL. In any case, the work relies on the virtual and brief, yet unique, connection of two viewers somewhere in cyberspace. In the artist’s own words: “As an active removal of the hyper-mediated contemporary web, the only indication of another body is the progression of the sunset. If the connection is lost the site becomes grayscale” (Beasley, 2013). Despite its intangibility and abstraction, Beasley’s work produces an indirect physical complicity established by means of the simultaneous presence of two bodies, in front of two

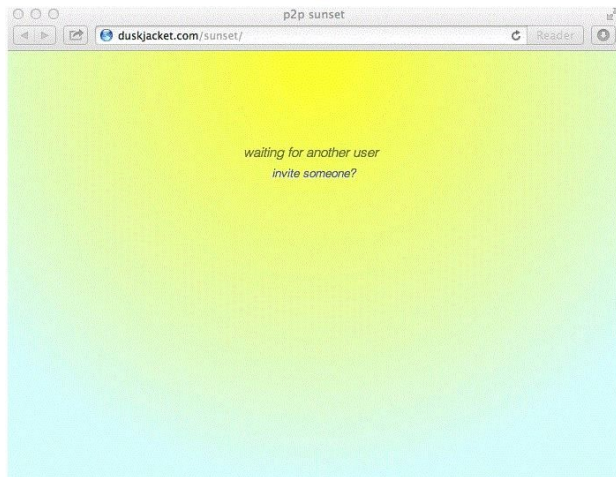


Figure 5 | Mark Beasley, *Peer to Peer Sunset* (2013). Courtesy of the artist.

screens, experiencing the visual sequence. In so doing, the artist clearly assumes the contemporary ambiguity of online and material realities, questioning the role of body and subjectivity in the construction of ephemeral, but meaningful, links.

5 | POST-INTERNET ART: ON AND OFFLINE BODIES

The current period has often been identified as *Post-Digital* and *Post-Internet*, even though these designations remain controversial. In an attempt to analyse a shift in the way users and creators deal with the Internet (they are increasingly aware of its mechanisms and downsides), critics, curators and artists employ these terms to illustrate contemporary cultural conditions. Some of them apply it generically to the practice of any artist born after 1985, as Christiane Paul (2015) has noticed, while others disagree about the effective meaning of the term *Post-Internet*. Rafaël Rozendaal, for instance, who describes himself as a “visual artist who uses the Internet as his canvas”, says that despite the fact that we live in a post-newspaper, post-TV, post-music industry world, it is much too soon for the designation *Post-Internet*. Apparently, the confusion lies in the prefix *post*, which points to a time frame, as if we are living beyond or after the Internet, and no longer have to deal with it.

The expression *Post-Internet Art* was first coined by Marisa Olson, in 2006, to refer to any type of art that is influenced by the Internet and by digital media. With the intention of labelling a new movement, or, at least, a new artistic state of mind, Olson wrote in her defence:

“So what postinternet taste like, the aesthetician might ask? The sense-experience of art that is postinternet, that is made and distributed within the postinternet, or that we might say is of the postinternet era is an ‘art of conspicuous consumption’. By sheer virtue of making things, the critically self-aware internet user makes postinternet art.” (Olson, 2011, p. 215)

Furthermore, writer Gene McHugh opened a discussion network on the *Post-Internet Blog*, and Artie Vierkant developed it further, pointing out that the term exists in the area between New Media Art and Conceptualism and that it involves “not the nature of the art object but the nature of its reception and social presence” (2010). New artistic strategies move conversely in the area between material and immaterial representations of Web contents whose substance or origin, lost in the network, can no longer be seen. Baudrillard’s simulacra is fulfilled and “becomes the image-object itself” (Vierkant, 2010). Since there is neither an original nor a copy, artists become interpreters, transcribers, narrators, architects or, as Hal Foster understood, ethnographers, by interpreting a set of data and defining strategies to display it.

An interesting example of this kind of approach can be found in Internet books. Olia Lialina, a pioneer of the heroic net.art phase, celebrated the early Internet years in a series of illustrated essays called *A Vernacular Web: The Indigenous and the Barbarians* (2005), where she also condemned “the more truncated forms of online expression offered by the centralised services of the Web 2.0 era” (Connor, 2013). Cory Arcangel, an artist known for hackerism and videogame modifications, edited *Working On My Novel* (2014), published by Penguin, based on the homonymous web-based project: a Twitter Account where he has re-tweeted profiles using the phrase “I am working on my Novel” (Figures 6 and 7). The apparent simplicity of the project - a selection of posts taken from people who were supposedly “working on a novel” - elucidates a culture ever more linked to social media interactions. It also ironically points the essence of Web contents as always being a reference among other references. If, on the one hand, when those ‘writers’ were tweeting they were not necessarily writing their novel, on the other hand, when Cory Arcangel was collecting, choosing and re-tweeting their sentences



Figure 6 | Cory Arcangel, *Working On My Novel* (2012-2015) Twitter feed.

he was actually creating an appropriated, yet original, novel, published as an illustrated edition.

Similarly, the social media poet Mira Gonzalez became famous with her book *I will never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together* (2013), followed by *Selected Tweets* (2015), co-authored with Tao Lin.

Rhizome curator Michael Connor stresses that the conditions of the Internet have changed profoundly since Olson's initial formulation. According to him: "There was no after the Internet, only during, during, during" as, at the same time, "Internet culture is increasingly just culture" (Connor, 2013). Connor gives the example of the exhibition *Brand Innovations for Ubiquitous Authorship* (2012), in which the artists were invited to design an object, using custom printing services, and to send it to the gallery. The project resulted in a YouTube video series of the gallerists unpacking each work. This challenge focuses attention on the contribution to digital economies made by both artists and products: "highly organized systems of authorship, production, and distribution that brought these objects into existence, and brought them to the gallery" (Connor, 2013).

One of the most radical views on this problem is probably that of the artist, filmmaker and thinker Hito Steyerl, through her theories about the post-representational paradigm. Although we would not claim that the Internet is everywhere, just as we should not limit ourselves to a western perspective and ignore problems that go beyond the question of access, its expansion into material reality is

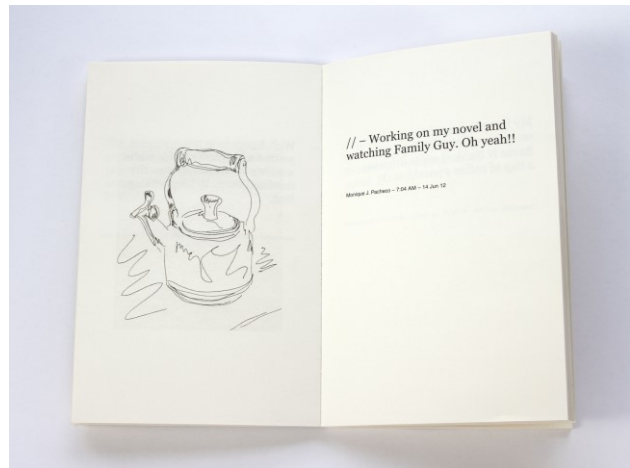


Figure 7 | Cory Arcangel, *Working On My Novel* (2014), paperback, 144 pages, published by Penguin Books Ltd.

unquestionable. Steyerl explains how and why the Internet started to move offline, relating it to the neo-liberal globalisation agenda and to the circulation of people and information. Public relations are bubbling across social networks or within an "Internet of things all senselessly *liking* each other" (Steyerl, 2013, p. 4). As there is "too much world" on these powerful mechanisms, Internet contents overflow:

"They surpass the boundaries of data channels and manifest materially. They incarnate as riots or products, as lens flares, high-rises, or pixelated tanks. Images become unplugged and unhinged and start crowding off-screen space. They invade cities, transforming spaces into sites, and reality into realty. They materialize as junkspace, military invasion, and botched plastic surgery. They spread through and beyond networks, they contract and expand, they stall and stumble, they vie, they vile, they wow and woo." (Steyerl, 2013, p. 4)

On the cutting edge of this intricate constellation, art practices would please the broader public, feeding pop culture and a fanciful lifestyle. *Murmur Study* (2009), by Christopher Baker, is a wise perception on the accumulation of *data junk*. Composed of a live Twitter visualisation and archive, the installation presents 30 machines constantly printing a paper waterfall full of micro-messages with emotional utterances such as *aargh*, *grrrr* or *ewww* written all over the world. The mechanism acts as a web crawler, registering date, nickname and the expression that was sent. Ambiguously enough, the work also questions: is this poetry or vacuity?



Figure 8 | Constant Dullaart, *Jennifer in Paradise* (2013-ongoing). View of the exhibition; Stringendo, *Vanishing Mediators*. Carroll/Fletcher Gallery, London, 2014.

In parallel to this, Constant Dullaart plays with the terms of service of browsers and their veiled power structures while talking about the history of the Web. In *Jennifer in Paradise* (2013-ongoing) (Figure 8), he recovered, printed and re-distributed the first digital image ever Photoshopped and wrote a letter to the “white lady, topless, anonymous, facing away from the camera” (Dullaart cited in Comstock 2014) about the way in which her personal moment, at some time in 1987, became part of public history. Thinking of the windows analogy, intrinsic to software language, and of the alleged transparency of the Internet, the artist applies different kind of frames and glasses to the same photo, deforming it as if he wanted to shape the way we look upon the Web.

To summarise, we can conclude that Post-Internet Art refers to a period subsequent to the net.art movement, rather than a period after the Internet and, above all, it does not happen online nor offline, but at the crossroads between the two. Beyond that, Lev Manovich stated that most theories related to New Media Studies privilege informational and cognitive dimensions of culture over performative and experiential levels. After all, “if in our society data streams move our brains and our bodies, perhaps informational aesthetics will eventually learn how to think about affective data as well” (Manovich, 2001). It is within this scope that Manovich and authors such as Josephine Berry and John Ippolito highlight the urge to define new categories and concepts, and to reflect on the new behaviours, relationships and sensibilities forged by post-media aesthetics.

6 | CONCLUSION - EMBRACING THE PARADOX: A VIRTUAL SETTING FOR A REAL LOVE?

Drawing on Roy Ascott’s question – ‘Is there (still) love in the virtual embrace?’ – we have tried to re-contextualise it in the light of our contemporary situation, considering the so-called Post-Internet condition. Moved by a different awareness of networked connections and by a different relationship with Internet devices, artists naturally expose the social and technological realms in order to express their main challenges and problems. The present moment also corresponds to a movement of images and objects which were made *after* or, at least, *outside* the Internet. Instead of interpreting it as reaction to the initial attraction for a disembodied connection, we have proposed a phenomenological perspective, where the body is never left behind, regardless of its being in virtual or in physical mode.

Today, when interaction goes beyond the simple act of *clicking*, contemporary digital art defies the disembodiment/embodiment paradox, making real and virtual worlds converge and collide. On the other hand, these recent art practices explore the tools and possibilities offered by the online world to unveil the forces of control and power covered by Internet systems and culture, overcoming a romantic view of the virtual embrace:

“The Internet does not exist. Maybe it did exist only a short time ago, but now it only remains as a blur, a cloud, a friend, a deadline, a redirect, or a 404 [error]. If it ever existed, we couldn’t see it. Because it has no shape. It has no face, just this name that describes everything and nothing at the same time. Yet we are still trying to climb onboard, to get inside, to be part of the network, to get in on the language game, to show up on searches, to appear to exist. But we will never get inside of something that isn’t there” (Aranda et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, by raising a question, Ascott’s metaphor of love still plays a central role in the reflection, enveloped in its complexities and contradictions. More than ever, the idea of a virtual embrace can meet the desire for a balance between technology and affectivity, encompassing new territories for subjective expression. Actually, Net artists are reconfiguring the paradox from which the virtual appears, at the same moment, as something

that cannot be felt, and yet cannot be anything other than felt.

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