ART

The New Museum Hits "Save" on Net Art

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Frani O'Toole   2 days ago

Reconstruction of Eduardo Kac, "Reabracadabra" (1985), animated poem for Videotexto (photo courtesy the artist)

In 1995, nearly a tenth of the internet was net art. Artists were early to join engineers on the web, entering via the first public browser in 1993. Most net art from this period is irretrievable, never modified to be compatible with newer software. In theory, the internet should age as a perfect archive; in practice, its record of the past is patchy, tearing wherever ambitious futures have stretched the network too thin.

The Art Happens Here: Net Art's Archival Poetics at the New Museum restores selectively from the internet's history. The exhibition takes place mostly offline; with only five of its 16 objects displayed on computers, *The Art Happens Here* favors the less-technical definition of net art, as material based in or on internet cultures. The internet culture of Olia Lialina's slideshow *Give Me Time/This Page is No More* (2015-ongoing), for example, is GeoCities, a popular hosting service acquired by Yahoo! in 1999 and dismantled a decade later. Lialina projects a diptych of screenshots of GeoCities pages, with bloggers on the left promising to revive their pages' activity and those on the right renouncing their efforts altogether. Both sides profusely thank ("THNX!") and apologize ("SORRY!") — an example of internet etiquette extended to an unknown, where a stranger's attention should be acknowledged but never presumed.
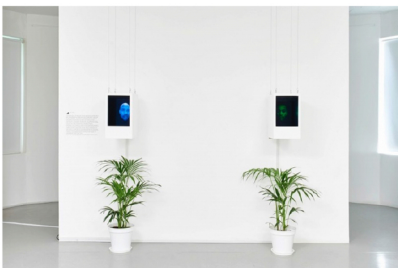
Bogosi Sekhukhuni, Cõñśćìõúśñèśś Eñǧìñè 4>aḇsèñṭfaṭḥèṛ̇ḅõṭ (2014), two-channel video installation (courtesy the artist)

Net art addresses a similarly phantom audience. Elevated to the status of museum objects, the works in *The Art Happens Here* receive public recognition they were not made to expect. Active all day (and perhaps all night?), their host devices labor and hyperventilate: *Give Me Time/This Page is No More*'s projectors overheat, their fans cooling frantically as they shutter through the show.

Tellingly, of *Give Me Time/This Page is No More*'s 160 slides, only one — a fanpage retired along with the rest of Pamela's Backstreet Boys phase — is bilingual; with over half of today's websites written in English, the internet remains inordinately Anglophone. Language

Alexei Shulgin, "386 DX" (1998-2013), street performance, Graz, Austria, 2000

biases on the internet can be more deliberately enforced, as inscribed in Miao Ying's "Blind Spot" (2007), a hardcover dictionary of banned search terms in China. Not only does the internet recognize borders, but it internalizes them, operating with country domain names like those referred to in Brian Mackern's compendium of Latin American net art *netart latino database* (1999-2004) and Aleksandra Domanovic's "printable monument" "Grobari" (2009). Born in the former Yugoslavia, Domanovic finished the PDF files for *Grobari* on the Yugoslavian (.yu) domain a year before its decommission. ".yu" had outlasted Yugoslavia by 17 years, remaining active until ICANN — the international body governing internet services that, at the time, had yet to disaffiliate from the US Department of Commerce — cleared the domain in 2010, wiping away any websites that had been stranded. Early .yu pages, witness to the NATO Bombing or the Kosovo War, appear to have never existed at all.

Meanwhile, the domain for the Soviet Union (.su) remains active today. At six percent, Russian is the second most popular language on the web. As revealed in *The Art Happens Here,* the internet is impossible to extricate from its Cold War past: ARPANET, the internet's precursor, was invented to link Pentagon-funded research institutions in the late 1960s. The web's public debut in the 1990s coincided with the end of the Soviet Union, with .su opening 14 months before the state itself collapsed. As the nationality of many artists in *The Art Happens Here* reflects, the former Eastern bloc became one of the most active locales for net art, powered by a chain of media labs funded by billionaire George Soros. Soros's labs were openly plugged into an American postwar plan, connecting the former Eastern bloc to democratic principles of open access and free speech, free markets, electronic superhighways, and a single superpower.

Bunny Rogers and Filip Olszewski, Sìṣṭèȓ Uññ̦ṣ (2011-2012), installation and website (courtesy the artists)

The United States is the subject of the projection on the back wall of the exhibition's second room, which loops footage from 9/11. As part of his show at Postmasters Gallery in September 2001, Wolfgang Staehle live-streamed feeds of a TV tower in former East Berlin, a Benedictine monastery in Germany, and the Lower Manhattan skyline. Then the planes hit. Although the cameras had been stationed along a Cold War axis, what they inadvertently captured was an unthinkable reorientation of the meaning of the West. Post-9/11, the West stood for those values that al-Qaeda had attacked. "The West" positioned itself in opposition to a new "East," specifically the Middle East, and the radical direction which Westerns believed that East was moving.

In front of the 9/11 projection is a case with Morehshin Allahyari's 3-D-printed replica of an ancient figurine destroyed by ISIS in 2015. It is one of three Allahyari artifacts included in the exhibition. Countering what she calls "digital colonialism," Allahyari prefers to situate her work in institutional archives in the Middle East. The inclusion of her work in *The Art Happens Here* associates the wiping of internet archives by corporate (Yahoo! of GeoCities) and political (ICANN of .yu) agents with dangerous
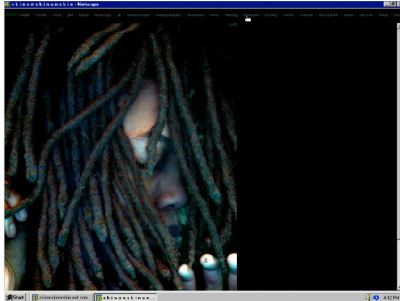
Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, "freezing" from Entropy8Zuper! skinonskinonskin (1999), website. Screenshot, 2017, Netscape Communicator 4.7 for Windows98, entropy8zuper.org/skinonskinonskin/rhizome.

histories of cultural erasure. The web is host to countless cultural artifacts — artifacts that *The Art Happens Here* insists are dated by time and specific to place, resisting easy notions of the internet as somehow transcendent. The internet can be collective, the exhibition suggests, but it is experienced individually. Where a user is located matters. The internet she connects to is neither universal, nor complete, nor impervious to ends.

The Art Happens Here: Net Art's Archival Poetics *continues at the New Museum (235 Bowery, Manhattan) through May 26. This exhibition is curated by Michael Connor with Aria Dean.*