

Welcome to the World's First Collaborative Sentence:

james joyce's greater and children

1. Stein
2. Stein
3. Stein

at least there are a few things that could be done to make this page look a little more attractive or at least more readable but THEN DONT BE SO PREJUDGING LITERAL YOU #@%# THIS ISNT A TYPOGRAPHY LESSON Like the one that beautiful Swedish girl gave me on the train to Gdańsk and then later in the cargo hold of the ship with the moonlight on her snowy-white scandinavian breasts which made me feel so arf arf arf! This is another lustless technical test before all hell breaks lose with artists contributing catological prose and poetry, but this is really art, or is it so what else can be said, anyway and more and more but what difference is this making WELL ISNT IT JUST FUN TO WRITE TOGETHER LIKE THIS millennial exaggerations overstate our singularity basic humanity is as lonely as I'm feeling in a bit space there are a lot of things that could be said, but i don't know what to say but i want to say my father is coming near have to stop now he always comes upstairs like this in the middle of the night dust follows dust in the endless progression of biological lachen-ware 1001001 SOS 1001001 DISTRESS 1001001 Everything is deeply intertwined I want to be unique just like everyone else After this Jon decided finally to attempt to bring the killers to justice, in his own way, of course, and so doing, rid the world of a temble scourge, reviled by all yet fascinating as well to a small, perverted subset of the community who had watched their antics progress from random, petty violence to the full-fledged sociopathic acts they had been performing, almost as if for entertainment for our benefit, for the last eight months all this narroring the other night, when, travelling uptown on the 6 train, a man and a woman got on at 23rd street, laughing and babbling to one another in some uncomprehensible language while I leaned back against the bench, trying hard not to fall asleep, and the woman sitting next to me jabbed at my arm and asked me crackly, a microphone held up to her neck because I think her larynx had been removed. "What language you think they're talking?" the problem for the revolutionary artist in the nineteenth century—perhaps it is still the problem—was how to use the conditions of artistic production with care in the studio, in the color for a month and then on the wall of a sitting room in a bourgeois Saint-Germain? how to a

Douglas Davis, *The World's First Collaborative Sentence*, 1994 present. Composed by online participants, this ongoing collaborative work, which originally only supported text, now hosts multimedia entries. Polyvocal, international and seemingly endless, the project is often touted as an emblem of new aesthetics.

social specifications of its medium. Though still evolving today, dominant tools are email, software and web sites. Unique economies of attention exist, in which international web traffic and email forwards and downloads are the indexes of the public consumption and success of the art, as opposed to conventional means of valuation, such as visits to a museum show, magazine reviews or monetary worth. Rapid rates of reaction and widely available production tools have also been defining. For example, if one does not like a web site, chances are that one can offer feedback (email) or find tools to create an alternative (web publication). Those who view commerce as irredeemable corruption will be pleased to know that, as yet, there exists no viable or stable market for net art. As a result of this isolation an specialization, internet artists often develop close-knit online communities, and oppositional and radical content has remained an undiluted component. Net art's audience is a social medley: geographically dispersed, varying in background, these art enthusiasts are able to morph their involvement constantly.

drawing from roles such as artist, critic, collaborator or 'lurker' (one who just watches or reads, without participating). Finally, 'viewers' have a direct relationship with net art: they can log on from any computer with net access and the right software, see an artwork, download it, share it or copy it.

In the early 1990s, however, internet art was just one small part of widespread proliferations of media and consumer technology. People in the West were becoming increasingly reliant on television, satellite and cellular devices in their everyday lives. The first Gulf War exemplified the ubiquity of globalized media, with CNN, an international, twenty-four-hour television network, broadcasting weaponry deployed and operated via sophisticated computer systems. At around the same time, reality television became a hit among young Americans. MTV's *The RealWorld*, in which people living together were taped, edited and broadcast, made theatricalized and mediated daily life friendlier, hipper and younger. Cellular phones began to be used widely. A new tempo and frequency of communication and device usage was evolving. Although the internet began as a project of the US Government's Department of Defense, more and more civilians, office workers, students and artists used it following the development of graphics and HTML viewers, called browsers. Email and the World Wide Web (the 'web') became tools for work and home, with email allowing for instantaneous communication, and the web supporting various graphic and communication applications, and endless nodes for text and image publication – web sites. These events were symptomatic of significant cultural changes, suggesting emergent social groups in which divisions between behaviour, emotions and thoughts – and media, technology and commerce – were blurred.

From its earliest moments, the ways in which commercial and governmental interests and technologies powered the net's development were obvious. One would experience the web with a commercial browser, such as Netscape Navigator, that had been designed according to corporate interests, not educational or aesthetic ones. Commercial interests, which were receiving ample attention from the venture capital sector at the time, operated next to social communities and organizations. These diverse collectives were based on everything and anything, from the pragmatic, like news groups (an internet bulletin board system requiring special software) for car mechanics, to the more scholarly, such as mailing lists focused on Virginia Woolf criticism.

Though marketing and press outlets touted the rise of internet culture as 'democratic' and 'revolutionary', the writers and artists

who searched the net for new possibilities during these early years were often more restrained in their enthusiasm. In fact, those who sought to find contemporary art on and about the internet had to look quite closely. Not only would a search engine not provide the right kind of results for a quest for 'art', but directories such as Yahoo! or Netscape tended to bury net art under many layers of web pages. Even beyond its text-heavy aesthetic, the net elided evidence of being an easy or refined venue for artistic production. Its ability to realize international and relatively inexpensive communication and exchange, however, was potent. And internet art's earliest beginnings crystallized within this matrix of communication technologies.

Art and communication were at the centre of many initiatives undertaken by European non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the European Commission in Brussels after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s, these new computer centres and media art programmes became more prominent fixtures in the European and Russian culture- and leisure-scaping, offering events, education, internet access and production tools. The internet was emblematic of the increased access to information in these regions, and the opening of international borders, and was very appealing.

Many net artists, such as Heath Bunting (Britain), Olia Lialina (Russia), Alexei Shulgin (Russia) and Vuk Cosic (Slovenia), worked as offline artists, photographers, graffiti writers and filmmakers before experimenting with art online. Leaving behind more accepted aesthetic practices, they came to make art from media centres like T0 (Vienna), C3 (Budapest) and Backspace (London) via computers in their living rooms, or from desks at their day jobs. Instead of film or oil paint, they used low-fi net production tools: HTML, digital graphics and Photoshop were likely requisites (later, Java, Flash and Dynamic HTML). They were introduced to one another via the internet and became contemporaries, friends, collaborators and travel companions, meeting face to face at technoculture events like Next 5 Minutes, the Cyberfeminist International and Ars Electronica. These artists were able to draw on the work of 'early adopters' of the internet's most basic offerings, like bulletin board systems (BBS) and email. They also benefited from the experience of the respected figures who worked with technology-informed installations or intermedia involving video, satellite, sound and computers, such as Robert Adrian X (b. 1935), Hank Bull (b. 1949), Roy Ascott (b. 1934), Sherrie Rabinowitz and Kit Galloway.

This early generation of internet artists exhibited a diverse set of interests. Some wanted to realign traditional modes of communication and audience address, pursuing direct dialogue and exchange with other artists and art enthusiasts from around the world, independent of the cumbersome commercial channels of galleries, museums and dealers. To some, the digitized screen and computer aesthetics were dominant preoccupations. These themes were explored through configurations of six main net art formats between 1993 and 1996: email, web sites, graphics, audio, video and animation. These often appeared in combination – communication and graphics, or email, texts and images – referring to and merging with one another. Whatever the premise or organizing principles, artists were internationally dispersed, working from wildly disparate local contexts and using different tools. But along with developers, programmers, critics and media outliers, all of these artists were watching net culture evolving on their screens, even as they helped to shape it.

Participation in Public Spaces

The earnest, straightforward tone of Heath Bunting's instructions on the web site *King's Cross Phone In* (1994) [19] belies the significance of what the artist points towards: an opening up of web page capabilities to extend into public spaces, enabling play, subversion and artistic intervention. On a simple, white web page with black text, Bunting listed the numbers of public telephone booths surrounding London's King's Cross station. Designating a time and date for a collective, international phone-in, the artist orchestrated a telephonic musical in a public transportation and commuter hub. These participatory and playful aesthetics, significant to early net artists, also stand as part of a twentieth-century avant-garde interest in instigating activity, replacing passive consumption of a medium (the web site) with engaged response (making a call, chatting with a stranger). Disrupting the flow of pedestrian traffic in and around King's Cross station and channelling web functionality into friendly phone calls from around the world, Bunting and his group of participants conducted chance encounters in an unlikely venue. It was one of Bunting's earliest web projects but it bears many of his hallmarks: minimal ornamentation and low-fi graphics, a basis in direct action and the capacity to unite fields of public art, hacking and street culture. King's Cross *Phone In* came out of Bunting's explicit goal to 'bring high tech to street level'. In addition to his introduction of train workers and commuters to the internet as an art platform, it

also bears the hallmark of situationist works, echoing that international artistic and political movement's (1957–72) famous tactic of transmogrifying existing elements into more radical or oppositional forms. Bunting (b. 1967) follows the situationist recipe almost to the letter. The quotidian forms that are put to use in King's *Cross Phone In* – public phones, ring tones and a web page – retain their everyday qualities but, in their means and manner of deployment, change the tenor of a particular setting and time. Though Bunting can be seen as travelling paths broken by artists of earlier generations, with this work he sets up a collaborative performance that is unlike those of his forerunners by virtue of its manifestation of the web's capacity for international organization and collective performance. 'I basically spent most of my time wandering the streets at that point doing graffiti and looking in trash', Bunting says, describing his research for the project. Inspired by forms of public and street art, Bunting's interests at that time also focused on expression and communication via new technology: he ran a BBS out of his living

RELEASE
During the day of Friday 5th August 1994
the telephone booth area behind the destination board
at kings X British Rail station will be borrowed
and used for a temporary cybercafe.
It would be good to concentrate activity around 18:00 GMT,
but play as you will.

TELEPHONE Nos.

0171 278 2207	0171 387 1736
0171 278 2208	0171 387 1756
0171 837 6028	0171 387 1823
0171 837 5193	0171 387 2163
0171 837 6417	0171 387 2883
0171 278 4290	0171 387 1362
0171 837 1034	0171 387 2017
0171 837 7959	0171 387 1569
0171 837 1644	0171 387 1526
0171 837 7234	0171 387 1587
0171 837 1481	0171 387 0298
0171 837 0867	0171 387 0399
0171 278 7259	0171 387 1718
0171 278 2502	0171 387 1398
0171 278 2501	0171 387 3758
0171 278 2275	0171 387 0933
0171 278 2217	0171 387 0499
0171 278 2260	

Please do any combination of the following:
(1) call no./nos. and let the phone ring a short while and then hang up
(2) call these nos. in some kind of pattern
(the nos. are listed as a floor plan of the booth)
(3) call and have a chat with an expectant or unexpected person
(4) go to X station watch public reaction/answer the phones. and chat
(5) do something different

room and had a voicemail system based in his kitchen cupboard. For his experiments, the internet was 'the next logical step – i.e. cheaper and wider audience'.

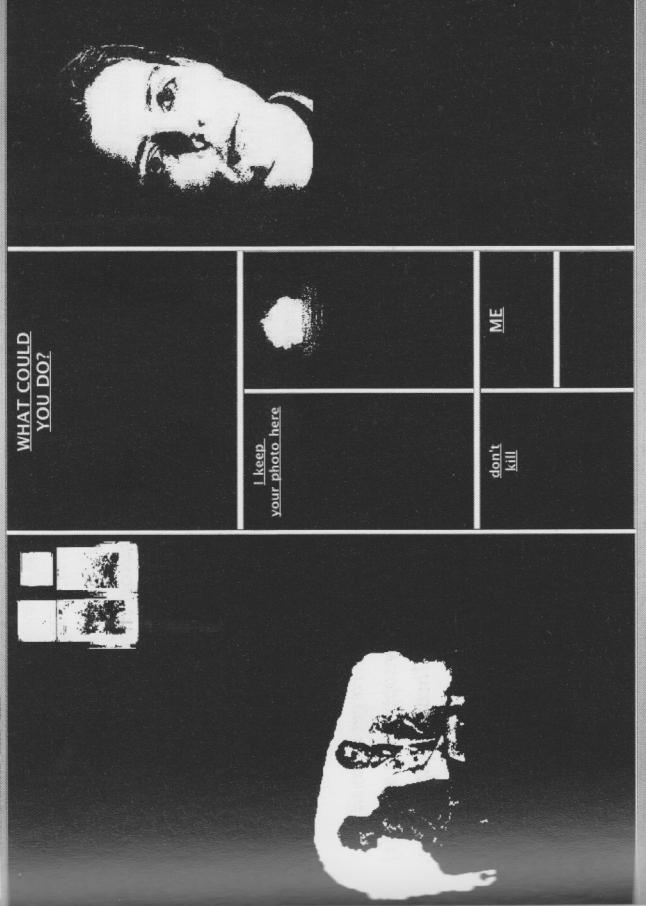
Russian Internet Art Scene

In the same year that Bunting organized his King's Cross Phone In, three major factors were encouraging internet art practices in Russia. Firstly, net technologies synchronized with artists' reactions against a local commercial and publicity-driven art scene. In addition, though the internet as a commercial venture was marked as American and European from the beginning, it offered ways for Russian new media artists to communicate beyond their borders and reinterpret the net in their own ways.

Finally, Russia's rich history of avant-garde film schooled many young artists in narrative and screen-centred visuals that could be extended and reconsidered on a computer screen with more interactive capabilities. We see these elements evolve in the work of Olia Lialina (b. 1971) and Alexei Shulgin (b. 1963), who first began to use the net in the mid-1990s as a distribution platform outside the Moscow film and art worlds, respectively. Both quickly adopted its idioms and tools as the core of their practices.

Contrast the directness of King's Cross Phone In with the more medium-conscious approaches of Lialina's project *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War* (1996) [20], or Shulgin's *Hot Pictures* (1994) [21], both of which were made at a time when the web could support only the simplest graphics and text. The former creates an oblique, dramatized romantic narrative, set against the backdrop of war, and uses frame programming (in which HTML is divided into quadrants and subdivisions on a single web browser window). Its balance of text and image across a darkened screen has been described by new media art theorist Lev Manovich in the 1997 essay 'Behind the Screen' as a manifestation of a Russian legacy of screens, and film director Sergei Eisenstein's (1898–1948) theories of parallel montage. It is also one of the earliest examples of a work in which the user can directly influence the narrative arc. The interests professed in *Hot Pictures* included the dissolution of boundaries between the computer image, painting and photography, and the separation of artwork from the Russian gallery scene. As the 'first Russian electronic photo gallery', as Shulgin called it, *Hot Pictures* was novel by virtue of its self-styled context: a gallery space free from commercial, white cube constraints, accessible from home and office and amenable to both private reflection and public reaction.

www



[20] Olia Lialina, *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War*, 1996. Lialina jettisoned the no-frills technical style then popular with net artists in favour of a more intimate, decorative, narrative, and, for that time, personal approach to web-based art. She later included the work as part of *The Last Real NetArt Museum*, which took the original *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War*, coupled with other artists' variations on it, to create an archive of work.

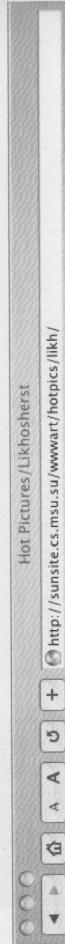
At this time, the internet's role in relation to art was by no means clear, and there were no authoritative or complete formulations on the subject. Shulgin notes some of the ambiguities of the medium, writing in his introduction to *Hot Pictures*: 'Photography for the long time seemed to be the only credible method for reality reflection. But the development of the computer technologies had put this postulate on trial. So photography which in its time had changed all fine arts now is changing itself. Electronic photo gallery is not only the presentation of specific artists and works, but also an attempt to research and visualize the described phenomena.' Shulgin's 'electronic photo gallery' extracts photography from the offline gallery context, depicting it as a broad medium that accommodates painterly, mechanized and documentary aspects. We see these themes reflected in the art in *Hot Pictures*, which covers a broad range of work from the politicized to the pictorial. One example is *Empty Icons* by the group Medical Hermeneutics (Sergei Anufriev, Vladimir Fiodorov and Pavel Pepperstein) – heavily Photoshopped photos of Russian religious icons. Another example is found in Evgeni Likhoshster's (also called Chumakov)

works that are about the ‘impossibility of being an artist’ and recall the concurrent work of British photographer Richard Billingham: tragicomic, touching and unsettling. They were, according to the information provided on *Hot Pictures*, Likhoshert’s last works: ‘The last evidence that he is an artist. He keeps silence since 1990. He is one of the most talented photographers in Russia.’

Certainly not the first artist to undertake building his own distribution and promotion mechanisms, Shulgin applied internet capabilities to his critiques of conservative art culture, publishing prescriptive declarations presented in Futurist-like, apocalyptic terms. In a 1996 manifesto, Shulgin identifies ‘pure and genuine communication’ as a tenable goal for the net artist:

Artists. Try to forget the very word and notion ‘art’. Forget those silly fetishes – artefacts that are imposed [on] you by suppressive system[s] you were obliged to refer your creative activity to. Theorists! Stop pretending that you are not artists. Your will to obtain power [over] people [by] seducing them with intellectual speculations is very obvious (though understandable). But [a] realm of pure and genuine communication is much more appealing and is becoming very possible nowadays. Media artists! Stop manipulat[ing] people with your fake nowdays. Media artists! Stop manipulat[ing] people with your fake nowdays.

2) **Alexei Shulgın, Hot Pictures:**
Evgeni Likhoshert, 1994, from the series ‘The Quiet’, 1990. This project highlights how, as a medium for display and publication, the internet is able to host art and information that would otherwise remain lost or local.



Hot Pictures /Likhoshert
<http://sunsite.ets.msu.su/wwwart/hotpics/lkh/>

Evgeni Likhoshert

(also known as Chumakov)

From the series “*The Quiet*”, 1990
Bw photographs. 30 x 30 cm.



Born 1949 in Cheboksari
Lives in Cheboksari
Selected exhibitions:
1981 – 1991 Annual ‘Analytical Exhibitions’, Cheboksari, Ioshkar-Ola, USSR
1988 “Fact Group”, Kastrikovka, Moscow
1993 Personal exhibition, Ioshkar-Ola, Russia
These are the last works made by Evgeni Likhoshert. The works about his personal impossibility of being an artist. The last evidence that he is an artist.
He keeps silence since 1990. He is one of the most talented photographers in Russia.

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‘interactive media installations’ and ‘intelligent interfaces’? You are very close to the idea of communication, closer than artists and theorists! Just get rid of your ambitions and don’t regard people as idiots, [unfit] for creative communication. Today you can find those that can affiliate [with] you on [an] equal level. If you want of course.

Beyond his confessed aversion to gallery and museum culture, it seems apt that an artist who grew up under the Soviet Communist government would celebrate open realms for ‘communication’, and belittle art that depended upon official art spaces or intellectual ‘seductions’. Curiously, after *Hot Pictures* Shulgin did not make any more web work relating closely to the social and economic conditions around him. He would go on to focus on the formal and medium-related concerns that have guided both new media art discourse and the work of the next wave of net artists.

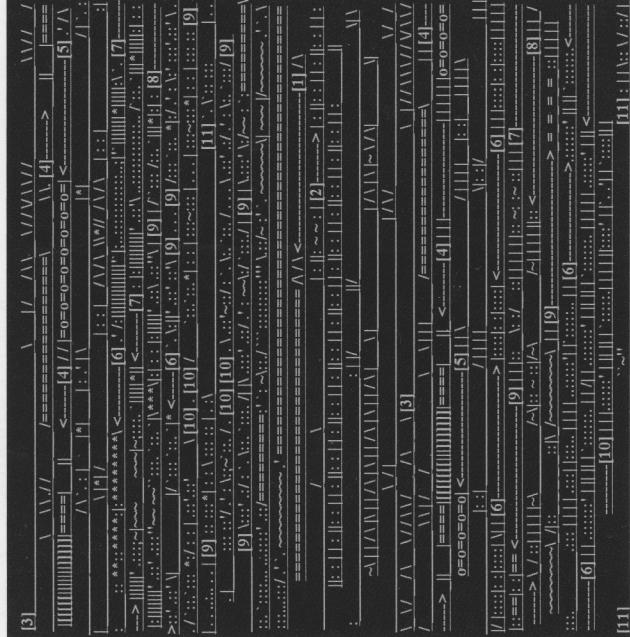
New Vocabularies
If disdain for the channels of the art world offered one route into web-based modes of art-making, another was provided by the constantly evolving vocabulary of internet protocols, or usage standards. Because of the net’s casual climate of constant development, information sharing and communication, deriving in part from its use as an academic tool and large-scale message board in academic settings, new terms often sprung up in the vernacular. As a result, much internet formal rhetoric has a sociable, friendly tenor. The ‘handshake’, for example, is the noisy process that occurs when two modems interact; it establishes mutually beneficial transmission speeds and other related information exchange metrics. German artists Joachim Blank (b. 1963), Karl Heinz Jeron (b. 1962), Barbara Aselmeier and Armin Haase allude to this term with their 1993 web project *Handshake*. *Handshake* is a visually and organizationally basic work with a small inventory of low-fi images split up among sections called ‘Rorschach Test’, ‘Symbols and Interpretation’, ‘Life and Work in Eastern Europe’ and ‘Electronic Art or Electronic Aided Art’. The combination of user-generated content, social commentary, discussion of conceptual and media art histories and awareness of their own artistically impure context (and consequently, what was at stake in claiming web territory for art) shows this group as both knowing heirs to art-historical traditions and forebears of online social spaces and art platforms like THE THING and Rhizome.org. And in light of the rigorous discussions about the cultural role of the internet that would later

take place across email lists and web communities, Handshake appears as a prescient example of net art's self-aware tendencies.

Tools servicing internet protocols provided inspiration for artists, propelling them towards more medium-specific work, work dependent on and inseparable from its location online. As site-specific sculpture operates vis-à-vis the particular components and ideologies of a place, so do many works of internet art derive in significant ways from their location within a networked public field of vision and consumption. Taken together with Handshake's manifestation of its process of development and its tools, its site-specificity indicates a quality shared by some of the earliest web projects: the capacity to merge effectively with its discourse and self-awareness. Such works lack the nonchalance or sneakiness of Bunting's approach; instead they evoke minimalist ethics in which process is valued over product, and objects (here, the web site) are almost leftovers or 'leavings', as writer and photographer Max Kozloff (b. 1933) described them.

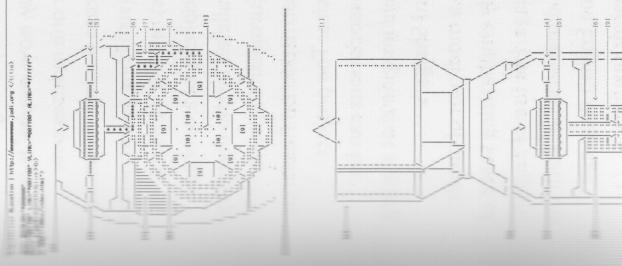
In contrast to works containing readable discursive content, there were also early projects that appeared muddled, impersonal and impenetrable. Through the collaborative Jodi.org (both a web address and the moniker by which its creators are known), Joan Heemskerk (b. 1968) and Dirk Paesmans (b. 1968) were among the first to venture fully into pure technological abstraction. Their experiments began in around 1994, while the couple were working and living near Xerox PARC's engineering-driven community in Palo Alto, California. During the first few years, across multiple projects, the duo created aggressively technical interfaces, ignoring coherent content in favour of desultory representations of code, protocols and operating system (a computer's central application, on which all other software runs) aesthetics turned inside out. Some of these intentions can be seen in <http://www.jodi.org> (1995) [22]. The front page is confusing, repetitive, discordant and alphanumeric, but the compositional effects are not what they seem: for behind this web page lies source code (the statements written in a particular programming language, here the markup language HTML), which reveals a cascade of traditional images and diagrams that are almost scientific or astrological. (To view source code, look in the menu of most browser applications, select 'View' and then 'View Source'.) Hiding coherent images in source code seems playful and riddling, a means of separating instructions (the HTML) from the completed task (the front page). This surreptitious divide of the browser is accomplished by radicalizing the source

Right and below:
22. Jodi.org.
<http://www.jodi.org>, 1995



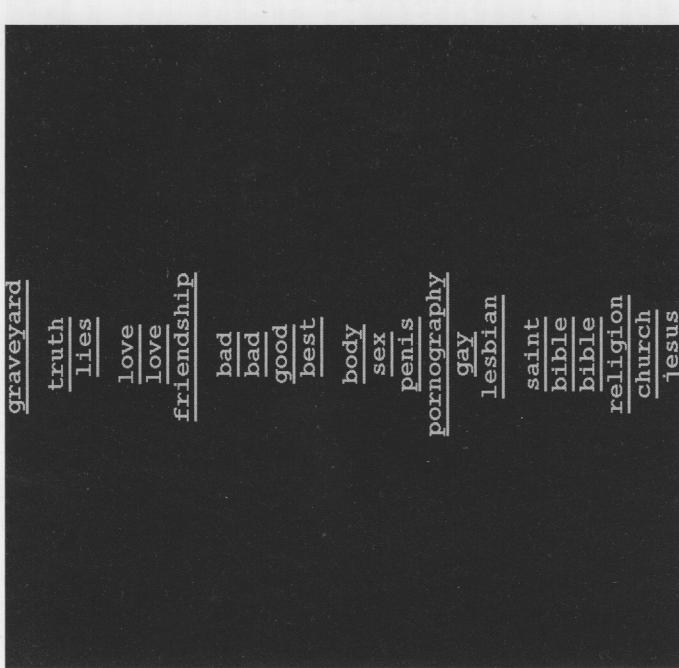
code into the pictorial, and radicalizing the executed task into the unreadable.

Jodi.org also made a web page – a profanity-riddled work which uses the English word 'fuck' as its background – for Alexei Shulgin's site, the Moscow WWWArt Centre. Introducing it in August 1996, Alexei Shulgin wrote: 'The creators are obviously bearers of cyberpunk ideology with rather good taste... They have presented post-linguistic and post-visual research that reflects very well the state of contemporary culture and communication. It's very logical that they are using the English word "fuck" as a background – nowadays it has become a mere symbol that means nothing and everything at the same time – a synonym for all other words....' The invocation of 'fuck' could be seen as a juvenile anti-authoritarian gesture, but it also reveals the code's human authors, people who value experimental programming. Unlike many other projects from this time, this work is free-standing, full of internecine interactions for users to get caught up in, and independent of external links or other sites. The disinclination of Heemskerk and Paesmans to straightforward dialogue with writers and curators, and their persistent use of oblique and nonsensical communications, have ensured that their own motivations remain unarticulated, often even to those who can read their subtle, cunning code.



Both *Link X* (1996) [23] and *_readme.html* (1996) [24], by Alexei Shulgin and Heath Bunting respectively, rely on the web's protocol for dividing and organizing files into domains (domains are the readable names, such as www.art.net, linked to IP addresses) and URLs (Uniform Resource Locators or file addresses). Like land titles in uncharted territories, in the mid-1990s domain names were entirely up for grabs. On one level, domain names are the most rudimentary, elemental aspects of internet art. They are signifiers, fundamental to the functions of the web, though often obscured by what fills the browser's main screen. Often addresses reveal technical information about a site – for example, if a URL has '.isp' in its address, one knows that it was likely programmed in Java, while 'asp' means an Active Server Page is in use. On another level, domain names and URLs can help define communities by designating certain parameters of authenticity, expertise, tenure or power. Domain names are limited. For example, at the time of writing it was difficult to buy titles for iconic URLs like <http://www.art.com> or <http://www.sports.net> – these would have been occupied long ago, possibly purchased for substantial sums. The inflection of expertise in a domain name can be understood by considering how an art enthusiast would receive a text residing in the artforum.com domain versus one residing on a GeoCities or AOL server.

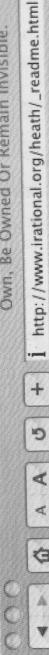
Shulgin's *Link X* forces attention to domains by listing them in thematic groups – 'never, never, always, today, now, maybe' is one King Lear-esque section, for example. When one mouses over the links, one sees that repeated words indicate further variances within the name – one may end with '.com' (signifying a commercial enterprise), another '.org' (for organizations) or '.net' (a more neutral suffix, used in varied ways). The multiplicity of a concept like 'desire', all the ideas it represents, is paralleled by the diversity of references made – desire.org is an inter-European initiative (Development of a European Service for Information on Research and Education), while Desire.com is a porn site. The project demonstrates how swiftly expectations or associations can be undone with the click of a mouse. Who would imagine that sky.org would yield the Finnish Cannabis Association? Shulgin's arrangement of concepts into groups brings a modicum of poetic order to a chaotic space, while still effectively emphasizing some of the more surreal aspects of words and language. His use of English, not his native language, signals inter-cultural dimensions of both the work and the medium (which was at that time English-language dominated); the project's form, a list, emphasizes qualities of



coherence and organization, even as the unpredictability and frequent strangeness of the linked sites suggest the net's organic aspects, creating an overall effect quite different from language-based work offline.

Heath Bunting's controlled and more cynical project on domain names, *_readme.html* (which is also entitled *Own, Be Owned or Remain Invisible*) takes its name from the instructions document that accompanies software installers. Inviting the viewer in fairly informal terms to engage with the project, the title also serves to unite several registers: personal, procedural (almost all software has a text file called 'read me' that users are meant to read before use), self-promotional, instructional and technical. Like *Link X*, *_readme.html* foregrounds the centrality of the link and the domain name: here, each word in the article links to its semantically equivalent domain (every.com.word.com). As in *Link X*, the links are discovered by mousing over the linked words on the web page. Unlike *Link X*, however, *_readme.html*'s external links across the web are unified by a journalistic text, an article profiling Bunting by journalist James Flint from British paper *The Daily Telegraph*. An account of the artist's background, family and interests, the

article's re-publishing and mapping onto the web is provocative.



THE TELEGRAPH WIRED 50 Health Burning

Health Bunting is on a mission. But don't ask him to define what it is. His CV – bored teen and home computer hacker in 80s Stevenage; hyperactive graffiti artist and art radio pirate in Bristol; bulletin board enthusiast and digital culture activist; or his phrase, activist in London is replete with the necessary qualifications for a 90s sub-culture citizen but what's interesting about Bunting is that if you want to describe to someone what he actually does there's simply no handy category that you can slot him into.

If you had to classify him, you could do worse than call him an organiser of art events. Some of these take place online, some of them in RL, most of them have something to do with technology, though not all. One early event that hit the headlines was his 1994 *Wired* magazine. When *Wired* distributed the numbers of the telephone kiosks around Kings Cross station using the Internet and asked whoever found them to choose one, call it at a specific time and chat with whoever picked up the phone. The incident was a resounding success. At 6 pm one August afternoon, the ate was transformed into a massive techno crowd dancing to the sound of ringing telephones according to *Heath*.

More recently, in collaboration with his mother, an ex-Greenpeace activist and bus driver, he set up a Boston Glaxo website which mimicked the real one and asked employees to send in their pets for "vivisection and experimentation". Glaxo were alarmed enough to issue a public statement and have the offending site removed.

But why has this one-time graffiti artist and stained glass window aficionado embraced the net? When I was on the street I was always looking for new tools, and I was always looking to do battle with the front-end. I hesitate to say the front end of what exactly. For me the real excitement of the net was that it exposed many different types of people. Also, the new medium gave someone like Heath who had little or no resources – the chance to engage head on with large-scale organisations. I've always attacked big things. When I was a kid I always used to pick fights with people that were bigger than me. I suppose I've carried on doing it, though now I'm fighting multinationals or large belief systems. I grew up in Stevenage, too, which although it seems very pleasant, jobs, grass, good transport, it is in fact an incredibly violent place. It's so do with the top-down plan of the whole place and all the areas are designated for example. I think that's where I got my hatred of large forms. People think it's a shame that

Own, Be Owned Or Remain Invisible.

Does the artist approve of this profile? Is it press material or a subversion of it? With its faded palette, light grey on white, the colours are barely there, an invocation of melancholia. There are poetic strategies at work: the article's content speaks of an individual and his preoccupation with attacking 'big things', 'large ideal systems', and the text creates a tension between the artist and his invocation of eight hundred commercial domains (one for each word in the article). Users encounter a mode of displacement and decentralization as they interact with the project which makes critical and hypertextual links between artist and discourse.

_readme.html hints at a different operational relationship between artist and critic. Proficient in programming and adept at various tricks and short cuts, Bunting modifies the authority of Flint's article by appropriating it into his own set of concerns and idioms. Similarly, in 1997, Bunting was widely considered to be behind the counterfeiting of various critics' identities. Both Tim Druckrey, a prominent new media art curator and writer, and critic Joshua Decter were spoofed when texts about net art, bearing their email addresses and names, were posted to various mailing lists – the power of the critic subverted by some basic email software manipulations.

Travel and Documentary Modes

Many artists and curators involved in media art of the 1970s and 1980s extended their work and interests easily into the internet space. In Europe and Russia these sorts of transitions were enabled by the significant political and cultural changes taking place: agencies, governmental or NGO, that specialized in art, education and open-media initiatives were established and wired as network technologies became an increasingly significant part of the development booms taking place in the United States and Europe. Philanthropist George Soros, a consistent advocate of media literacy, was responsible for supporting centres in Moscow, Ljubljana, Budapest, Macedonia and other Eastern European regions, funding conferences, exhibitions and workshops. The artists, teachers, curators and critics who existed near or within these scenes often had different relationships to technology than many Americans who, in the midst of an economic boom, came to new media via consumer, entrepreneurial or academic pathways.

Many projects that emerged from these networks were highly accessible and well known to the small net art scene, publicized by

11 Heath Bunting, *_readme.html*, 1997 (Original or Remain Invisible), 1997

the media centres where the artists worked, or via technocart festivals like Ars Electronica (Linz, Austria) and Transmediale (Berlin, Germany). From the web's inception, HTML pages hosted text and images easily and, consequently, the format lent itself to the documentary. One of the earliest projects in this vein was *The Hiroshima Project* (1995) by Akke Wagenaar (b. 1958). Wagenaar, who had previously made interactive installations, used the web to aggregate and index various aspects of the legacy of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Shown at Ars Electronica in 1995, *The Hiroshima Project* brought together information about the bombing – including evidence of denial and ignorance of the event – by aggregating links. Employing sequences of data that were often contradictory, Wagenaar presented a broad spectrum of opinions.

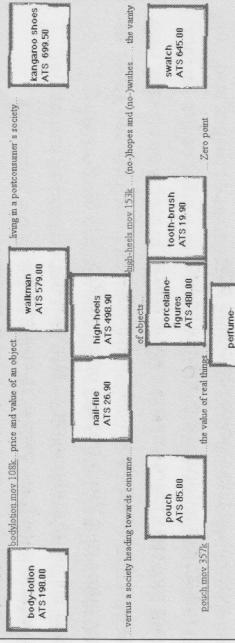
To understand the work as a whole required considering each element in juxtaposition; like Susan Hiller's celebrated project collecting diverse postcards all entitled 'Rough Sea', Dedicated to the Unknown Artists (1972), the paradigm of object or data-collections give the artist the role of curator and, as American critic Susan Stewart has commented, 'it comes to exist by means of its principle of organization'. Wagenaar's work was taken offline in around 1996 (it has just been relaunched) but, interestingly, American Joy Garnett began developing the very like-minded,

Shopping in Vienna



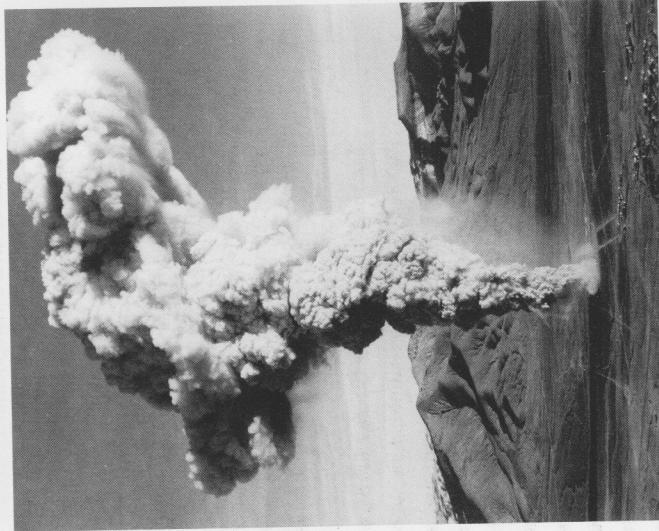
My idea was to buy things not for myself, but to trade them in Siberia. Thus it was actually more fun to buy... I was completely free to choose, was just put into a shop and then I could follow - I didn't have to matter about sizes or how things would match with others. I bought 10 objects in 2 hours - and felt really good about that.

The transformation of ten Western objects (which I preserved as plaster replicas), into their Siberian Counterparts



multimedia data-collection *The Bomb Project* [25] in 1997 (the web site was not launched until 2000) without any prior knowledge of *The Hiroshima Project*.

The role of the artist as transnational cultural documentarian or telepresent witness had as much to do with the web's plethora of information, and its ability to publish material straight away, as with the radically different kinds of access becoming available in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Accessing ex-Soviet territories provides the landscape for a project exploring new dimensions of global consciousness, *Siberian Deal* (1995) [26] by Eva Wohlgemuth (b. 1955) and Kathy Rae Huffman. *Siberian Deal* was conceived to 'realize the virtual and virtualize the real', in the words of the creators. This was accomplished by analysing trades and exchanges the pair made as they crossed Siberia. Items bought in the West (for example, Huffman and Wohlgemuth brought a Swatch watch, European perfume and high heels to trade) were exchanged for those local to Siberia. An emotional network evolved as the artists met, communicated and bartered with Siberians. Identifying geographical locations with a global positioning map, Huffman and Wohlgemuth transferred information about a largely unfamiliar realm via phone lines with poor reception and basic HTML, documenting the figures and scenes of their travels on choppy interfaces that feature text,



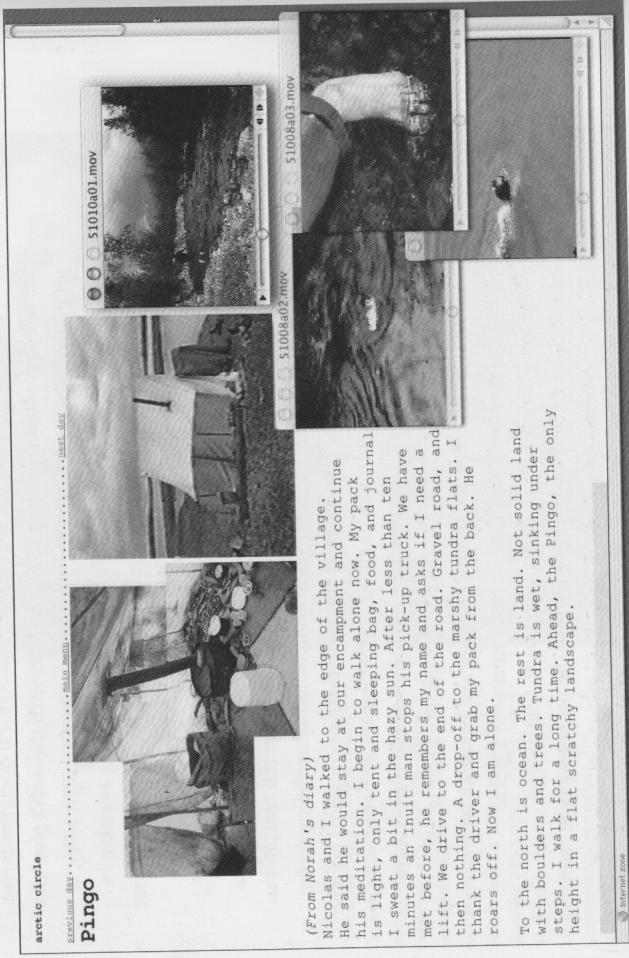
25 Joy Garnett.
The Bomb Project, 2000–present.
Collecting diverse but thematically linked material, Garnett's open database on nuclear information exemplifies the manner in which new technologies can simultaneously decentralize and organize information. While much of the data and images provided are culled from political and governmental resources, *The Bomb Project* also includes artists' contributions on the topic.

photos and animations of objects of exchange morphing into one another. The logging of encounters and travel demonstrates a net-based documentary mode that persists today, and in this case is focused on personalizing Siberia and its people by bringing together culturally disparate fields – net technologies, Siberian culture and relationship-based networking.

Huffman, an American who had been a curator at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, moved to Austria in the early 1990s and has since worked with a number of institutions and festivals focusing on media art in Europe, including the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art in Vienna and Moscow and Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria. Her involvement with these institutions as well as with such platforms as the Berlin-based *Telepolis*, the cyberfeminist email list *Faces* and the new media art organization Rhizome.org is in some ways emblematic of a particular moment in new media art's trajectory. In the mid-1990s, many artists, curators, activists and theorists focused on using the net to initiate international dialogues. At the same time, festivals and conferences offered participants venues at which to socialize and publicize their works and ideas. It was out of these projects and events that the seminal net.art scene and culture evolved.

The sensibility of that period, when there was new territory to explore online and geographically, had its analogue in a travel-

27 Philip Pocock and Felix Stephan Huber, *Arctic Circle Double Travel*, 1994–95



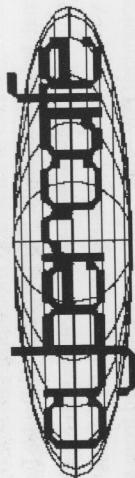
(From Norah's diary)

Nicolai and I walked to the edge of the village. He said he would stay at our encampment and continue his meditation. I began to walk alone now. My pack is light, only tent and sleeping bag, food, and journal. I sweat a bit in the hazy sun. After less than ten minutes an Inuit man stops his pick-up truck. We have met before, he remembers my name and asks if I need a lift. We drive to the end of the road. Gravel road, and then nothing. A drop-off to the marshy tundra flats. I thank the driver and grab my pack from the back. He roars off. Now I am alone.

To the north is ocean. The rest is land. Not solid land with boulders and trees. Tundra is wet, sinking under steps. I walk for a long time. Ahead, the Pingo, the only height in a flat scratchy landscape.

focused genre of works. Felix Stephan Huber (b. 1957) and Philip Pocock's (b. 1954) *Arctic Circle Double Travel* of 1994–95 [27] follows exploration and diary genres evinced by books from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Here, diary entries and photos are published from the fringes of the physical internet in Alaska. Rather than conducting commodity-based explorations as Wohlgemuth and Huffman had done, *Arctic Circle Double Travel* narrates personalities emerging out of isolated natural landscapes. It was more concerned with form than *Siberian Deal*, and has a sleeker design that emphasizes attractive graphics, photos and maps. Huber and Pocock's portrayal of the artist as explorer of pristine territories ably captures ambivalences felt by many net artists at that time: how to make the medium a respectable forum for art, even as it penetrated all territories, potentially flattening cultural differences and perpetuating problematic trends of capital and cultural flow from the West into less developed areas. These travel-based projects also break new ground by memorializing the drudgery and weight of the various equipment they used, documenting unreliability, crashes and irksome wires that characterized this time of pre-wireless networking, as well as fairly bulky CPUs. *Arctic Circle Double Travel* and *Siberian Deal* linked the net to less media-saturated environments, without suggesting alliances with or romanticizing either. Contrasting the connectedness of cyber life with Arctic travel, one sees in both an emphasis on process, chance, interaction and ongoing narrative – rather than on any particular final destination.

Remote locations were not the only objects of online documentation. Heath Bunting created two web sites relating to less extreme expeditions – *A Visitor's Guide to London* and *Communication Creates Conflict* (both 1995) – and featured them on his domain *Irrational.org*, which hosts projects by a loose association of artists who share a subversive edge, low-fi aesthetics and situationist idioms. In his own work featured on the web site, Bunting follows an intuitive if sometimes cryptically simple approach. *A Visitor's Guide to London* represents the culmination of a year spent as a new resident of London, depicted through photos and observations. Black-and-white images of London streets are embedded with small buttons following north, south, east and west directions, offering the user choices that are vaguely cartographic. Other images include quotidian shots of skateboarders and corner shops, the artist's home (in which an old Mac Classic is visible on the table), along with photos of sites



@ message

i release !

peace and harmony vs destruction to destruction.
language from - mortality inspired fear,
creates desire for - unification via language.
'it good to talk' say british telecom,
but is futile as peace is expressionless;
attempted expression is conflict.

@ message

tokyo notes

crypto conservative desire for breach of borders
(penetration, internal disruption, anarchy, pain, humour)
to relieve public embarrassment of paradox;
for enhancement of self perception;
self define by external;
to relieve denied domination of
objective/language/structure

↑ ↗ ↓ ↙

but the language rationale fights back,
until destruction through complexity / contradiction;
paradox attack; energy depletion.

oh dear ! what can we do ?

notes.

heath@cybercafe.org

tokyo has a 'big trash' day,
but you can find stuff
lying around most of the time.



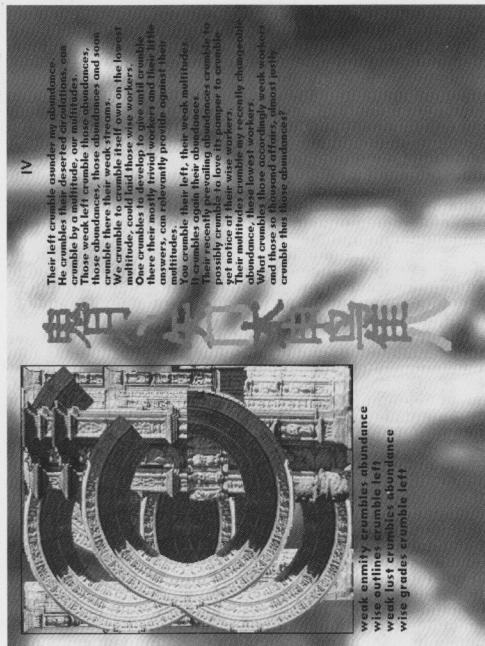
here are posters thanking the citizens
for their co-operation
in catching subway terrorists.



Right and below:
28 Heath Bunting,
Communication Creates Conflict,
1995

communication, including its promotion and attendant commodification by companies such as British Telecom. Rather than lauding 'communication' as a straightforward ethics unto itself, Bunting shows a sense of scepticism and curiosity throughout the project documenting a trip to Japan. The generalized scrutiny and tension of the poem heighten the level of consciousness in each of the work's various sub-pages. Subsequent pages explore themes of 'attempted expression' and 'humour' and use tech tools to add elements of time, space and presence to Bunting's Tokyo encounters. On one page users can submit text for placards that Bunting would distribute in metro stations, as per the Tokyo custom he had discovered. Some of the leaflets share a literal, simple sensibility with works by Fluxus artists Yoko Ono and George Maciunas (1931–78): 'Perpetuate your own myth', 'Emotional not rational computing', 'Cultivate your own weirdness'. A results page memorializes each placard and notes how many were distributed by Bunting. If the other travel projects mapped out terrain with IT tools and well-informed accounts and narratives, *Communication Creates Conflict* shifted the focus to interactions: web users' active and expressive roles in Bunting's encounters were important parts of the work.

Bunting's interpretations of communication practices dovetailed neatly with the ideas of many of the intellectuals coming to prominence on mailing lists like Nettyme and Syndicate – figures such as Geert Lovink (b. 1959), who was a primary theorist of media pragmatism as a tool for social and political change and, with Anglo-Dutch writer David Garcia, of tactical



Right and below:
28 Heath Bunting,
Communication Creates Conflict,
1995

Heath Bunting, Great Wall of
China 1996. This work draws from
a Chinese landmark, Biggs.
It is a short story The Great Wall
that produces dynamic texts.
Using the navigational tropes of
the Chinese landmark, Biggs
itself alludes to the functions of
text and language that form the
basis of interpretation, unwittingly
addressing a theme of much of this
work's internet art.



media. Nettyme, set up by Lovink, German Pit Schultz (b. 1965) and others in 1995 as a reaction against hyped, often American, press touting the internet as a utopian free-market platform, was small yet enormously influential in international media activism and theory circles until around 2000 and continues as an important, larger-scale discursive list. Australian critic and long-time Nettyme participant McKenzie Wark notes that Nettyme was ‘a mailing list, but it was also a series of meetings, and publications in different formats... It thrived on the positive confusion of the aims of its participants, all of whom could think of it in their own way and imagine everyone else concurred. [It] arose out of the discontents of critical theory. It found a negative semantic terrain in its hostility to *Wired* magazine, the *Rolling Stone* of new media sellouts, and positioned itself against the “unbearable lightness of *Wired*”. On an email list like Nettyme, users subscribe by adding their email addresses to a list, and when an email (‘post’) is sent to the list’s master address, it is automatically forwarded to all subscribers on the list.

While Nettyme posts ranged wildly in style and topic – for example, reports on the status of Brazilian radio, writings on artificial life, complexity and art, musings on electronic music, essays on media consultants, French theorists Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) and Félix Guattari (1930–92), and announcements for projects or events – there were two strands of thought that connected them. One common theme was intellectual and critical scepticism of the ‘Californian Ideology’, a term referring to the utopian visions of the net, coined by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron in their highly influential 1996 essay of the same name. The other was that various aspects of technology culture and industry were discussed constantly, in great detail, and often in political terms. Though rarely focused on art, Nettyme was an invaluable network for the emerging European net art community.

Net.art

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many artists working in Eastern Europe and Russia – cultures in which the promises of marketed ‘democracy’ and ideology were unwelcome – openly disavowed the consumerist, utopian and often apolitical content of dominant internet discourse. The social responsibility of this group of artists was salient, particularly at a time when many important cultural and political decisions regarding access to technology were taking place. This context encouraged a number

of artists to make polemical statements and gestures to attack norms of the art establishment. By the late 1990s this genre would involve subversive product design and hacking-related projects. Others made work that had a less practical reach, but that captured the spirit of the artist as a catalytic and social force. Many of the artists who espoused these attitudes remained less interested in art discourse by non-artists. They tended to write their own declarations and definitions, and remained out of the fray of art-related communities like THE THING and Rhizome.org. A seminal project that illustrates this position is Vuk Cosic’s Net.art per se.

Vuk Cosic, born in Belgrade in 1966, has shown consistent interest in historical narrative (he worked as an archaeologist before becoming an artist) and variable ways to make ideas material (such as teaching, art and writing), but it was the reduced amount of time between publication and feedback that eventually led him to create internet-based art. Cosic, who had taught archaeology and been active with cultural initiatives through the Soros Foundation in Slovenia and Serbia, also had experience as an activist: ‘My background includes several years in the ranks of what we called the Dissident movement. Most of my actions were part of the very general oppositional activism. Some of those were artistic, some journalistic and some were agitation. I felt very deeply an imperative to create a parallel system of values that would counter the dominant discourse in socialist Yugoslavia. The language that I used at the time was thus heavy on “us” vs. “them” both in social and artistic thinking. I believe that actually there is a bridge between that and what later became net.art.’

In 1994 Cosic came across the World Wide Web, which had a huge impact: ‘I saw the web for the first time and dropped everything I was doing... I immediately decided that I want to be involved. It was one of those situations when you are 100% confident at the very first moment.... I remember surfing for 18 hours for days. I believe I have clicked through the entire Yahoo! directory. By 1995 I was busy with the Ljubljana Digital Media Lab which was no more than a group of people talking. Luká Frelih and I started making sites for everybody that wanted them. For free. I was thinking of art in that context but very little was around that I liked. Then in March I somehow met Heath Bunting (first contact was via telephone) and found his web site was the best thing online. Then in June Geert Lovink and Pit Schultz invited me to Venice for the first Nettyme meeting...’