

meaning (which was identified as male and bound by conventional language). Further establishing its historical weight, the manifesto itself travelled as a graphic, inscribed in a circle defying linear trajectory – an allusion to the argument posed by feminist Alice Jardine that masculine aesthetics privilege linearity. In an interview posted to Netttime, Josephine Starrs described the group's goals and methods to Dutch art critic Josephine Bosma: 'We started posterizing cities in Australia with that manifesto. We wanted to work with technology, we're all from different backgrounds: writer, performance artist, filmmaker. I was from a photography background. We didn't have access to any particular new technology, but we had access to a photocopier, so we just started writing about technology, because we were worried that it seemed such a boys' domain at that time, in the artworld and so on.... We had this agenda of encouraging women to get involved if they want to look at their relationship with technologies, to get the[ir] hands on the tools and to have fun with it. Part of the project was to use humour in this process.... We tried to make it like technology isn't intimidating, it's fun to use.'

Another reason the 'cyber', 'sexual' and 'feminist' seemed so compatible in the hands of the VNS Matrix is that the group made optimistic theorizations of network technology popular in the mid-1990s. One of these was the 'cyborg', which referred to a cultural dependence on technology. Cyborgs were a key concept of the time, deployed by the VNS Matrix and advocated as a politically potent feminist aesthetic by Donna Haraway in her 1985 canonical essay, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century'. One should also note that in virtual net environments like Palace, popular in the mid-1990s, graphical representations of self were often thought of as alternative personae, or 'avatars'. That people could be liberated from the standard descriptive qualities of the day-to-day world gave way to theories that the net heralded new kinds of fluid identities, complete with altered hierarchies and unprecedented interconnections. True, these relied on making a distinction between 'real life' and online life, but it was a popular assumption around the time of this manifesto. The projected image portrays the internet as a utopia of fresh social formations and individualities. For women artists in particular, these possibilities held a great deal of aesthetic potential and freedom.



Eva Grubinger, *Netzbikini*, 1995. In this early work, participants download and print out a bikini pattern (a non-technological subject) and customize it for wear. As a result, Grubinger's web site hosts a profusion of hand-made, individualized swimsuits that make it difficult to focus on any one costume or participant. This project highlights an important aspect of the decentralized internet, through which a vast array of data travels easily to be recontextualized in subjective settings.



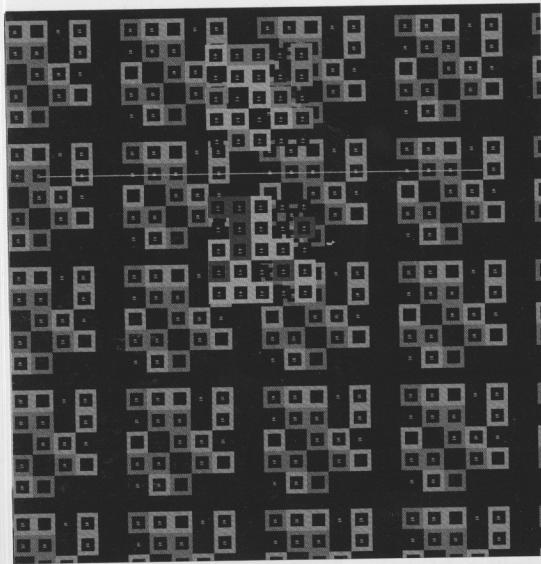
Corporate Aesthetics

Critical consciousness of power imbalances took many forms in net art circles, and one persistent articulation of political frustration online has been anti-capitalist sentiment. One strand of these politics took to claiming that internet territory was artistic, and was bolstered by critiques of the intellectual, creative and moral inferiority of commercial ventures. Dotcoms were often the focal points for this anger, as they were taken to be emblematic of the market-driven, utopian 'Californian Ideology'. The term 'dotcom', of course, refers to the semantic suffixes of new media companies generally founded in the 1990s with the aim of capitalizing on the rise of internet usage and culture by providing specialized tools or content. As providers of solely online-based services, Amazon and Yahoo! are dotcoms, whereas companies like Apple and IBM are not, though they also maintain an online presence.

In art circles, the aversion to dotcom culture and ethos was often marked by expanded uses of satire and parody – employing the intriguing limits of these models to provoke critical consciousness. While a web site called *@TMMark.com* would become an epicentre for this activity in the late 1990s, etoy – created by a group of European artists then operating out of Zurich, Switzerland – was the first to use dotcom aesthetics to reposition art in relation to daily practices. Incorporated in 1994, etoy fuelled its self-styled hybrid of business practices, foolery and confusion with ambitious, though ambiguous, radicalism.

The plan, as articulated on the web site, was 'to establish a complex and self-generating art virus and e-brand which reflects and digitally infects the nature of today's life and business at large: an incubator that turns the essence of digital lifestyle, e-commerce and society into cultural value'. Via identical costumes and highly regimented behaviour, based on detailed research and exhaustive discussions, etoy members brought office aesthetics into the more marginal scenes they inhabited in Switzerland and Austria. Online, their antics included surreptitiously confusing web users about the content etoy offered, and in 1996 a search engine hack called *Digital Hijack*, which redirected thousands of search engine users to the etoy home page. In 1999, etoy became embroiled in a remarkably complicated fight with a dotcom named eToys that brought the spectre of corporate mockery into the scope of American financial markets (see Chapter 3).

Anti-commercial sentiments posing a relationship of binary opposition vis-à-vis the 'artistic', 'pure' and 'progressive' were



Above left:
42 Ben Benjamin, *Bingo skills-building seminar and strategy workshop*, 1995



Above right:
43 Ben Benjamin, *Earman*, 1997

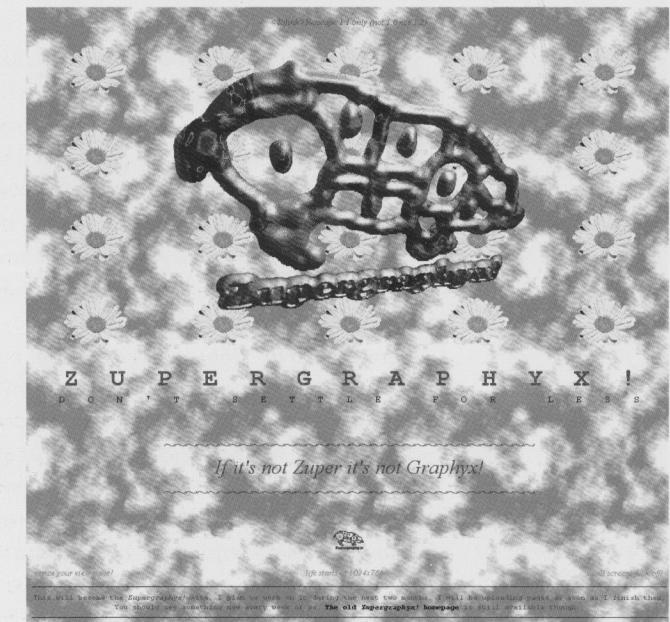
hard to sustain in such a mixed environment as the net. Within the context of new media art, the topic of dotcoms could illuminate various corporate behaviour and allowed artists to manifest rejection of market strategies or objectives. Progressive projects were almost always fraught with paradoxes: at this time most net artists were dependent on commercially produced tools like those of Adobe, Netscape and Qualcomm (free-software tools would later diversify the field), and all of them found their work distributed via browsers – which were then standard commercial softwares distributed by new media giants such as Microsoft and America Online. Most artists, including Vuk Cosic with his Net.art *per se*, or Heath Bunting with *_readme.html*, sought to traffic in these very contradictions but with their own intentions made clear.

It must be added, though, that in net art circles the term ‘commercial’ was considered as both positive and negative, and much commercially minded work was thought to exhibit exciting and constructive artistic qualities. This was as much a philosophical position as it was a realistic one, because many internet artists supported themselves as professional designers, producers or programmers in the new media. Especially in America, where governmental support for artists is limited, new media artists could often be found at work in the private sector. Michail Samyn (b. 1968) [44], a Belgian artist, and Ben Benjamin (b. 1970) [42–43], an American based in San Francisco, were two such designers/artists who began working online in the mid-1990s and

launched web sites with similar names, Zuper and Superbad (1995) respectively, to showcase art and design work. Both seem to have thoroughly absorbed the playful and joyous aesthetic capabilities of HTML, and their works recover a sense of the fun, unfamiliarity and wonder of digital aesthetics. *Superbad* in its early iterations seemed to disregard programming limits and standard spatial deployment. Highly visual, and underpinned by rich syntheses of games, pop culture, advertising and signs, *Superbad* used a range of aesthetics practices in interfaces, suggesting that the web was a diverse and multivalent medium. The grand spectacles these artists created as experiments were unable to reconcile the tensions between the aesthetic and commercial, but they isolated some of the net’s more desirable and glamorous possibilities.

Telepresence

A term derived from virtual reality describing the sensation of feeling in a different place or time by virtue of technologies of coordination, ‘telepresence’ is a characteristic of much internet behaviour, in the way that reading an email from an overseas friend produces a kind of intimacy that belies geographical distances. This sensibility has encouraged fantasies that internet industries and cultures are ‘virtual’, existing in ether or in an almost fantastic realm, with no impact on actual behaviour, natural resources, lands

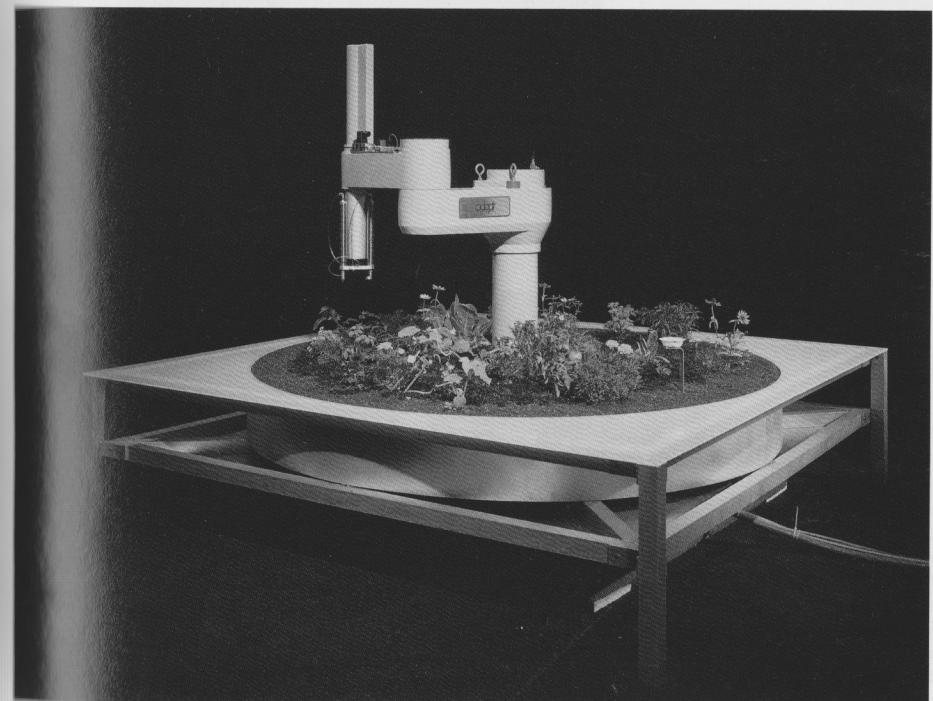
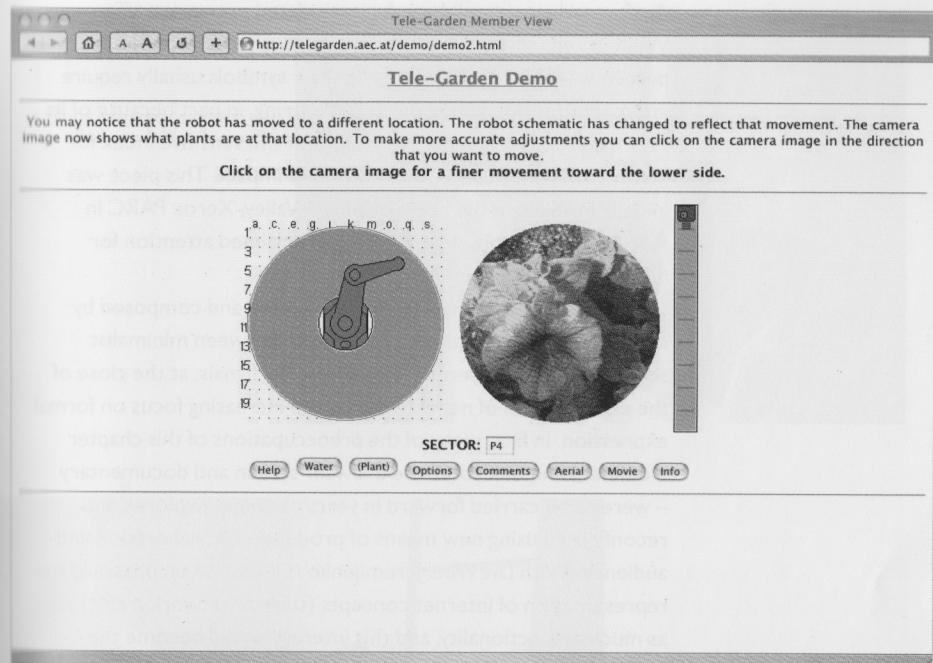


44 Michail Samyn, *Zuper2*:
going from Zuper, 1995

or existing systems. And to the extent that internet networks, especially amidst media and economic hype, seemed to occlude the realities of life offline, literally and figuratively, there were artists who immediately recognized the net as just one 'network' next to many others, such as those found among natural phenomena. Articulating a link between natural processes and communication networks in symbolic and mechanical terms is *The Telegarden* (1995–present) [45] by Ken Goldberg (b. 1961), Joseph Santarromana, George Bekey (b. 1928), Steven Gentner (b. 1972), Rosemary Morris, Carl Sutter, Jeff Wiegley and Erich Berger. In this installation work, internet users worldwide are able to tend a living garden (physically located in Linz, Austria) by giving commands to a robotic arm, which is controlled through *The Telegarden's* web site. The project highlights a sense of community by getting visitors in dispersed locations to manage the garden (by watering it or planting new seeds, for example). Although viewer requests are carried out in turn, several users can care for the garden at one time, and it is also possible to see the identity of fellow-users along with their position in the garden. Interactivity between participants is further encouraged through the so-called 'village square', a public chat system.

The other side of 'telepresence', cannily alluded to by *The Telegarden*, is the physical, vital reality easily missed in the context of new media culture. The haze of press about the revolutionary capabilities of the net, and the relentless attention paid to the stock prices of internet-related businesses occluded, for a time, certain realities. In fact, most of the world's cargo continued to travel by sea (not high-speed internet access lines), packed and accompanied by people, and the production of computers and related equipment followed the same patterns as other electronics; the toxic materials that form these devices were moulded by factory workers in Third World countries. These issues underwrote the work of the artist group Bureau of Inverse Technology, which is headed by its engineer Natalie Jeremijenko (b. 1966) and, like etoy, set out to emulate the anonymous nature and brand ambition of companies trading on the stock market, bringing representations of less-visible information into artistic zones. *Live Wire* (1995–present) [46] was an early internet-related project set up by Jeremijenko, which elided the standard activities of the internet (browsing web sites, sending an email), making use of a local network to visualize activity with a string that wiggled according to local computer usage. The dangling sculpture increased the peripheral reach of

45 Ken Goldberg, Joseph Santarromana, George Bekey, Steven Gentner, Rosemary Morris, Carl Sutter, Jeff Wiegley and Erich Berger, *The Telegarden*, 1995–present



the formerly inaccessible and unarticulated network traffic. While screen displays of traffic are relatively common for practical purposes (e.g. air-traffic systems), their symbols usually require interpretation and attention, and the string, in part because of its very banality, was an unusual, sculptural and sensitive index for activity, allowing aural, spatial and visual impact. This piece was initially installed in the heart of Silicon Valley, Xerox PARC in Palo Alto, California, where its wiggles claimed attention for neglected information.

In *Live Wire*, a formal element is vitalized and composed by network activity, creating an association between minimalist sculpture and the internet. The work also signals, at the close of the earliest years of net art practice, an increasing focus on formal expression. In fact, many of the preoccupations of this chapter – online communication, the browser screen and documentary – were to be carried forward in years to come, explored and reconfigured using new means of production, collaboration and audience. With *Live Wire*, Jeremijenko is intent on emphasizing the representation of internet concepts (such as network traffic) just as much as functionality, and this interest would become the foundation of much net art that followed.



46 Natalie Jeremijenko, *Live Wire*, 1995–present. The more recent installations of *Live Wire* in offices and cafés are characteristic of Jeremijenko's interest in juxtaposing the formal functions of technology and its standards with everyday or natural settings and topics.