INTERNET EXPLORERS

Ceci Moss

I'm still wondering if the Internet is a representational medium, or whether it will be more about having an experience. Probably the Internet will seem to disappear because of its growing transparency and ubiquity. Then 'Internet artists' will gradually be perceived as 'artists.'
—Harm van den Dorpel, "Interview with Harm van den Dorpel on Club Internet's 'Free Fall,'" Rhizome, October 17, 2008

Within the first ten years of the 2000s, the media landscape underwent a tremendous shift. The internet, in particular, drifted far beyond the screen and the stationary computer work station, finding its way into every aspect of our lives, a process accelerated by advances such as faster bandwidths, smart phones, and social media.

The following brief timeline of product launches is illustrative: 2002, Friendster; 2003, Myspace; 2004, Facebook; 2005, YouTube; 2006, Twitter; 2007, iPhone and Tumblr. An increasingly mobile, networked world arose alongside these developments, resulting in a new phase for contemporary art, one that witnessed artistic practices becoming more fluid, elastic, dispersed, and expanded. Internet artists began to make art *about* informational culture using various online and offline means, no longer determining their practice solely by an online existence. This essay examines a micro-history, from roughly 2005 to 2010, in which an international network of artists, many of them millennials, working on the internet turned their focus to mainstream user-generated content as a form of popular culture following the rise of social media. This anthropological approach to the popular culture of social media subsequently developed into a larger desire to excavate the web's involvement in the everyday, at a moment

John Michael Boling, *Lord of the Flies*, 2006 (still).
Web-based video. Courtesy the artist

when the internet became more mobile and integrated into daily life. Turning to art practices (such as surf clubs, or artist-run, collaboratively authored blogs for artistic experimentation) and artist-run curatorial platforms active during this short, rapidly paced period, this essay will elaborate a perspective in which self-identified "internet-based artists" simply became "contemporary artists" engaged with a thoroughly informational world and milieu.

The introduction of social media opened the gates for an explosion of user content online. Artists, drawn to the cultural relevance of this material, began to sift, navigate, and respond to everything from Yahoo! Answers to Myspace introductions. During this same period, the experience of browsing became dramatically more self-customized and streamlined, guided by the links shared on one's own social networks, RSS feeds, and Twitter subscriptions, as well as a continually optimized, personalized search. The collaboratively produced artist-run blogs known as surf clubs became a way for artists to develop a visual vocabulary

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in conversation, to share the fruits of their searches, and to experiment with those findings in the form of blog posts. Exploring the diverse ephemera of web culture, contributors to these surf clubs created a visual dialogue, scrapbook, and archive of their discoveries online alongside their own creations, such as found YouTube videos and animated GIFs.

In 2006, curator Lauren Cornell organized an online exhibition for Rhizome entitled "Professional Surfer," thus coining the term in a project that boldly considered web browsing an art form, and assembled a few of these websites as works in themselves. The artists/bloggers behind exhibited projects like Supercentral, Cosmic Disciple, Nasty Nets, and Chillsesh—such as Kevin Bewersdorf, Marisa Olson, Joel Holmberg, Guthrie Lonergan, Charles Broskoski, John Michael Boling, Chris Coy, Michael Bell-Smith, and Travis Hallenbeck—approached massive user output like an amateur ethnographer or anthropologist, interpreting this content through a lens cognizant of its cultural weight. A single post to Nasty Nets, for example, often generated a flood of posts and related imagery by its members, such as Michael Bell-Smith's "The post where ... we share awesome gradients," which collected animated gradients from all over the web, or Guthrie Lonergan's suite of YouTube videos of users demoing the opening and closing of garage doors. Posts such as these were attempts to draw attention to the artistic merit and value of user content, from the weird to the banal. Another work in the "Professional Surfer" exhibition *Lord of the Flies* (2006) by Nasty Nets member John Michael Boling, but hosted on his own website 53 o's, loops a video depicting an anxious swarm of mouse pointers hovering over the Google search page as a low-fi midi version of the *Twin Peaks* theme song plays. As goofy as it is ominous, the work gets at the underlying desire for information driving the millions of users searching the web every day.

Surf clubs championed the idea that searching was equivalent to making, a form of craft. Artist Kevin Bewersdorf, with the launch of the surf club Spirit Surfers with Paul Slocum in 2007, aimed to push the findings associated with searching into something more significant by reflecting on the spiritual and psychological space of the web. In the *Spirit Surfing* manifesto, he states: "Perhaps finding is making, but finding is not enough."[1] Envisioning his posts as "jewels publicly removed and reset,"[2] Bewersdorf sought to elevate the act of web surfing, and his findings, into something greater—a pathway to a spiritual realm. The quasi-spiritual aspect of the blog was set against the deeply commercial space of the web, and the reality that users produced and consumed content. While others used the web for shopping and entertainment—a group of people Bewersdorf termed "INFObrats"—some turned their attention to the "boons" and "wakes" of the surf, not as customers but as "INFOmonks" who lose themselves in the

infinite horizon of information, or the "INFOspirit." The power was in Spirit Surfers' intention and in the care behind the framing of the group's finds, a gesture that Bewersdorf compared to Joseph Cornell's boxes. While other surf clubs took content found online out of orbit and into a sort of détournement, indexed and cataloged within the context of the blog, Bewersdorf aimed to assemble his finds like beads on a prayer necklace. Bewersdorf asks, What does a surfer seek, what does it mean to find, and what can a frame do?

The "professional surfers" of this period participated in a type of reframing, and reorganization, of their finds, activities informed by the software that regulated these experiences. As users blindly or expertly navigated the web, populating it with comments, animated GIFs, or mash-ups, artists teased out and picked up on their interaction with software, especially its automatic settings, or defaults. In his 2009 text for Rhizome, "After the Amateur: Notes," Ed Halter argues that internet artists absorbing or mirroring mass user-generated content in their work present a different turn, that of the "sub-amateur."[3] Halter was particularly interested in the status of the "amateur" practitioner and how artists have assimilated such a designation over time, from avant-garde cinema to art photography. Unlike the amateur photographer in decades past who aspired toward professionalism, the user is interested in the pure and immediate functionality of his tools, often realized through defaults. Internet artists responding to the user or "sub-amateur" prefer function over form, favoring the "raw instrumentality" of images. For example, Halter points to Petra Cortright's *VVEBCAM* (2007), which features the artist staring blankly at the camera while activating a series of default effects that crowd the screen, such as dancing pizza slices and lightning. The artist's concentrated expression contrasts with the lighthearted nature of the animations, an effect that is both humorous and disarming. As Halter argues, artists like Cortright are specifically attentive to software's functions, a move that draws up the vocabulary and register of these functions as absorbed by the web's mass audience.

While Halter's essay is specifically concerned with how artists adopt the amateur vernacular on the web, his attention to defaults in the essay touches on software's widespread influence on culture itself, the subject of Lev Manovich's 2013 book *Software Takes Command.* Here Manovich argues that the computer's permanent extendibility through software disrupts "medium" by transferring the techniques and interfaces of *all* previous media technologies to software.[4] Drawing a comparison to ecology, Manovich argues that media techniques start acting like a species in shared software environments, interacting, mutating, and making hybrids of themselves.[5] This, in turn, influences how and what users can create in endless combinations, translating software into culture. Manovich's

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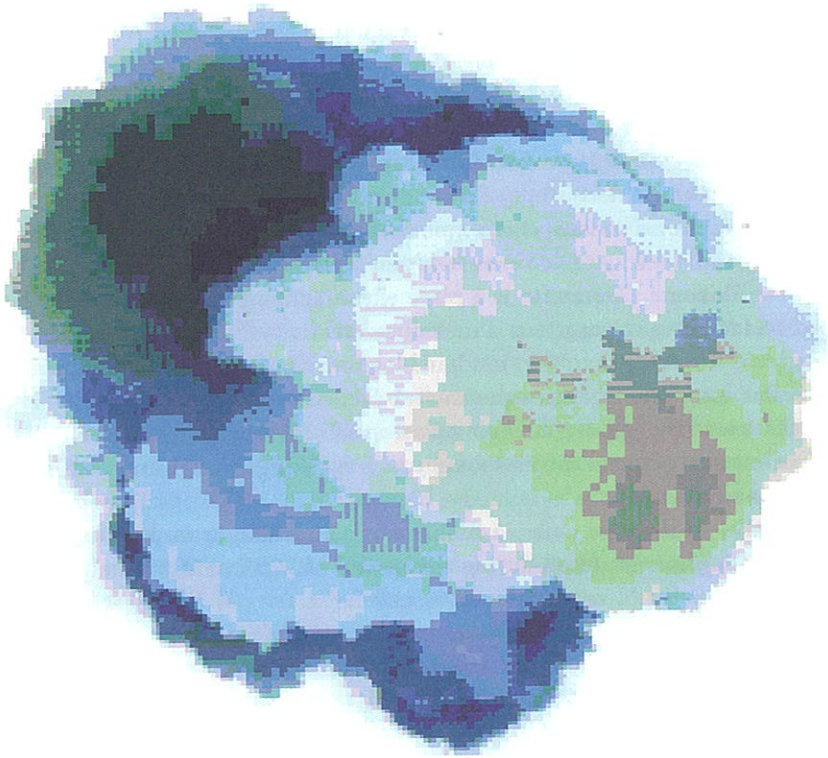

Marcin Ramocki for Spirit Surfers, *blue explosion*, 2008 (screen capture). Animated GIF. Courtesy the artist

observations on user behavior in *Software Takes Command* in some ways sets the stage for the artistic shifts that occurred in the mid-2000s. While the book focused on how programmers and users were creatively producing or hybridizing new software, many of the internet artists working in the mid-2000s were in turn concentrating on how users navigated these platforms, the default being one example. Some artists—like Ryder Ripps—started programming their own platforms, taking the concept of a surf club in a new direction. Ripps's 2009 project dump.fm is a visual chat room that allows participants to share images from the web, their hard drive, or web cam instantly. As Ripps stated in a blog post for Rhizome, "Dump.fm is a place where content is hyper-transient and used to facilitate connections and induce creativity."[6] More ephemeral, fast-paced, and unwieldy than the standard blog format of a surf club, dump.fm has cultivated a community through visual conversation. In many ways, surf clubs foreshadowed the popular blogging platform Tumblr, which, by the 2010s, became a key part of mainstream web culture as speaking through and with images became a new norm.

Parallel to the surf clubs, a number of compelling artist-initiated online curatorial projects surfaced during the period of 2005 to 2010 that, through selected themes and custom formats, pondered the psychological and philosophical impact of informational overload. These projects were attentive to the drift-like experience of surfing the web and were engineered to complement that environment. From 2008 to 2009, artist Harm van den Dorpel organized exhibitions for Club Internet around loose themes, often with fifteen or more artists. The rotating exhibitions functioned like a surf club in that van den Dorpel viewed exhibiting artists as "members"; however, the site itself was designed as an online gallery, not a blog. These busy, populous shows invited the user to float through the exhibition; for instance "Tag Team," curated by Guthrie Lonergan, riffed on the surf club by asking artists to submit "non-art" links, while in "Reverse Engineering: the Uncurated Reunion," members of Club Internet were asked by van den Dorpel to create a new work on the spot and within a four-hour time frame. The curatorial platform of artists Parker Ito and Caitlin Denny, JstChillin (which operates under the tagline "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract. Time doesn't exist when you're...jstchillin!"), focused the user's attention through bimonthly rotations of single online artworks that reflected on the time and space of the web environment from 2009 to 2011. In lieu of a manifesto or mission statement, Ito and Denny recorded and looped an Instant Messenger conversation titled "An Essay about Chillin'," time-stamped at 3:25 a.m., which considers the metaphysics of web surfing. Accompanied by a choral soundtrack, Ito makes the observation that: "The net is all around us,

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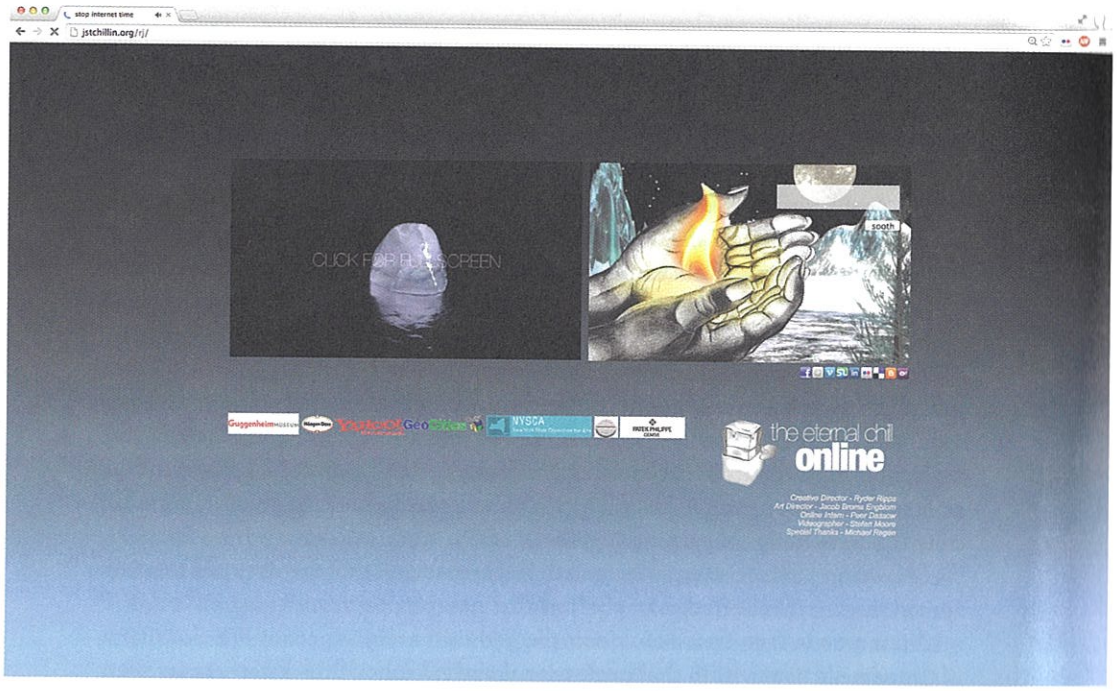
an indescribable feeling, soaring, tumbling, freewheeling, through an endless diamond sky." Exemplifying this sense of free-floating space is Mitch Trale's otherworldly virtual environment *Analog Environments* (2009) or Michelle Ceja's *Silicon Velocity* (2009), with its looped, roller coaster–like descent—presented full screen—into a gridded tube. Jacob Broms Engblom and Ryder Ripps's *Stop Internet Time (The Eternal Chill Online)* (2009) is more explicitly contemplative; the website features a video of a slowly melting ice cube next to an animated GIF of hands outstretched whose search button promises to "sooth." A voiceover declares: "The internet is like a well, used but never used up, it is like the eternal void, filled with infinite possibilities."

If Jstchillin contemplated the realities of time spent together online, artists Mark Brown and Kari Altmann's curatorial platform *Netmares/Netdreams* (2007–09) seemed to mine the web's dark subconscious, pointing toward collective fantasies. Begun originally as two separate image blogs—"Netmares" and "Netdreams"—the project developed into a more formal curatorial platform that allowed users to scroll through a curated selection of artworks that seemed to hold together through dream logic. Exhibitions were mysterious; stripped of a descriptive introduction, the artworks were linked in the navigation bar by letter Zs, which would gradually fade in and out. The works themselves were equally cryptic. For example, Damon Zucconi's *Shining (Ghost)* (2006)—which was included in the online exhibition "v 2.0" in 2008 —features an obscured figure in white set in a white room with a strobe light flickering along to an ecstatic techno track; presented in the same rotation was Nathan Hauenstein's animation *Pillars* (2008), which depicts two totem poles advancing and retreating into a black abyss. In an interview with Brian Droitcour for Rhizome, in which Droitcour makes the observation that *Netmares/Netdreams* almost functions as a larger, layered work unto itself, Altmann notes in response that all artworks are increasingly operating as an open structure, stating, "As we've expanded our view of the relationships and voids between everything from databases or networks to dataclouds and holograms, we've arrived at a better realization of the virtual and physical properties inherent in everything. Everything becomes matter, energy, and representation, and is connected to everything else."[7] The dreams and nightmares illuminated in *Netmares/Netdreams* might indicate a collective consciousness or groupthink, but as Altmann suggests, there's a greater, scalable connection holding everything together.

Altmann's observations articulate a perspective that became more widespread during this period, namely that the internet, far from being an isolated medium, was in fact a powerful force filtered into every aspect of life. For many of the same artists within the "professional surfer" cohort, the internet was seen

Ryder Ripps and Jacob Broms Englom, *Stop Internet Time (The Eternal Chill Online)*, 2009. Web-based project from Jstchillin.org, October 2009–February 2011. Courtesy the artists



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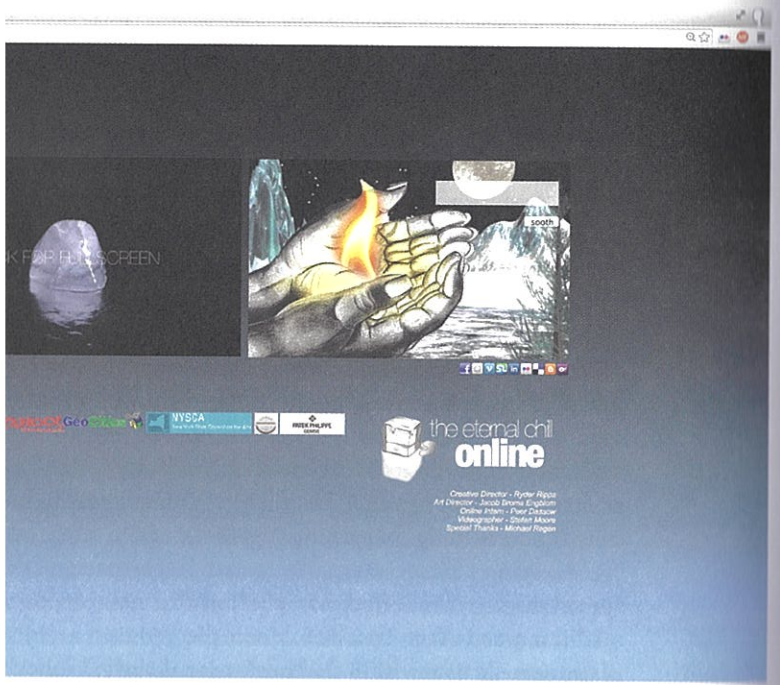

not as the sole platform for the production of a work, but instead as a crucial nexus around which to research, assemble, transmit, and present data, both online and offline. In an often-quoted Rhizome interview from 2008, internet artist and Nasty Nets member Guthrie Lonergan described a move in his practice toward "Internet Aware Art" by saying:

> I'm scheming how to take the emphasis off of the Internet and technology, but keep my ideas intact. Objects that aren't objects. I got a couple of books and a t-shirt in the works. Right now I'm really into text (not visually/typography...just...text...), and lots and lots of lists.... "Internet Aware Art."[8]

Lonergan's statement regarding "Internet Aware Art" can best be understood as works that depend on the internet for their transmission and, in some instances, reflect on that process itself, but do not need to reside completely within that environment, and often go offline. A few weeks after Lonergan's interview was published on Rhizome, artist and Nasty Nets member Marisa Olson echoed a similar shift in an interview with *we make money not art* blogger Regine Debatty, stating:

> There doesn't seem to be a need to distinguish, any more, whether technology was used in making the work—after all, everything is a technology, and everyone uses technology to do everything. What is even more interesting is the way in which people are starting to make what I've called "Post-Internet" art in my own work (such as my *Monitor Tracings*), or what Guthrie Lonergan recently called "Internet Aware Art." I think it's important to address the impacts of the internet on culture at large, and this can be done well on networks but can and should also exist offline. Of course, it's an exciting challenge to explain to someone how this is still internet art.... If that really matters.[9]

For artists and curators at the time, these two interviews expressed a change in how internet artists were approaching their practice in a way that resonated strongly within the community. Under the designation postinternet or internet aware, internet art was not required to be online, but rather referred to art enmeshed within an informational culture, online and off.

The capture and transmission of digital information is now a defining characteristic of our environment, a fact that is apparent all around us, in everything from car design to ATM machines. All art regardless of medium becomes, on some

level, legible as data to computers and a network. Theorist Benjamin Bratton describes the omnipresence of this informational reality as "The Stack," explaining:

> Instead of viewing the various scales of emergent ubiquitous computing technologies as a haphazard collection of individual processes, devices and standards (RFID, cloud storage, augmented reality, smart cities, conflict minerals, etc.), it is more illuminating to model them as components of a larger, comprehensive, meta-technology. The Stack is planetary-scale computation understood as a megastructure. The term "stack" is borrowed from the TCP/IP or OSI layered model of distributed network architecture. At the scale of planetary computation, The Stack is comprised of 7 interdependent layers: Earth, Cloud, City, Network, Address, Interface, User. In this, it is an attempt to conceive of the technical and geopolitical structures of planetary computation as a "totality."[10]

Software is one through-line and mechanism within The Stack, but computation as a whole is shifting everything around us. Given this complex contemporary reality, terminology that references internet artists moving offline suggests much more than internet artists simply making objects, but rather indicates how artists engage the widespread epistemological and ontological change due to the rise of a deeply informational culture.

This essay was commissioned in 2014 for the present volume.

NOTES

1. Kevin Bewersdorf, *Spirit Surfing* (Brescia: LINK Editions, 2011), 24.
2. Ibid., 23.
3. Ed Halter, "After the Amateur: Notes," Rhizome, April 29, 2009, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/apr/29/after-the-amateur-notes/>.
4. Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 180.
5. Ibid., 164.
6. Ryder Ripps, "Introducing: Dump.fm," Rhizome, March 5, 2010, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2010/mar/5/introducing-dumpfm/>.
7. Brian Droitcour, "Turn On, Tune In, Zoom Out: An Interview with Kari Altmann," Rhizome, March 13, 2009, < http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/mar/13/turn-on-tune-in-zoom-out/>.

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ttp://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/mar/13/turn-on-tune-in

8. Thomas Beard, "Interview with Guthrie Lonergan," Rhizome, March 26, 2008, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2008/mar/26/interview-with-guthrie-lonergan/>.

9. Regine Debatty, "Interview with Marisa Olson," *we make money not art*, March 28, 2008, <http://we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2008/03/how-does-one-become-marisa.php>.

10. Metahaven, "The Cloud, the State, and the Stack: Metahaven in Conversation with Benjamin Bratton," Tumblr, December 16, 2012, <http://mthvn.tumblr.com/post/38098461078/thecloudthestateandthestack>.