"Protocol"--Excerpt from Chapter 7 "Internet Art"
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- **Type:** discussion

"Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization"
Excerpt from Chapter 7 "Internet Art":

Let me now take a closer look at Internet art by examining some of its specific aesthetic qualities. The Internet's early autonomous communities were the first space where pure network aesthetics (Web site specificity) emerged–email lists like 7-11, Nettime, recode, Rhizome, and Syndicate.

Primitive signs were seen in early net.art projects, such as Alexei Shulgin's Refresh, an art project consisting of nothing but links between Web pages. Refresh involves many different organizations working together, using many different computers all around the world. In Refresh a chain of Web pages is created. Each page is programmed to link automatically (on a 10-second delay) to the next Web page in the chain. Shulgin describes the project as "A Multi-Nodal Web-Surf-Create-Session for an Unspecified Number of Players." Anyone can collaborate in the project by slipping his or her own page into the link of refreshes. The user may load any Web page in the chain, and then watch as a new Web site appears every several seconds like a slide show.

In this way, Refresh was one of the first works to render the network in an artistic way–as a painter renders a landscape or a sculptor renders a physical form. The art exists "out there" in the network, not on any individual Web page in the chain. Refresh made visible a virtual network of collaboration that was not based on individual content. Shulgin's work spatializes the Web. It turns the Internet, and protocol with it, into a sculpture. [...]

While Shulgin's work is highly conceptual, more formal work was also produced in this period. Perhaps the best example of formal work is from the European duo Jodi. For several years Jodi has refined a formal style by making computers both the subject and content of their art making. Focusing specifically on those places where computers break down, Jodi derives a positive computer aesthetic by examining its negative, its point of collapse.

For example, in Jodi's work 404, which alludes to the Web's ubiquitous "file not found" 404 error code (which is built into Berners-Lee's HTTP protocol), the artists use the default fonts and simple colors available to primitive Web browsers. 404 is a collection of pages where users can post text messages and see what other users have written. But this

simple bulletin board system becomes confused as the input text is pushed through various distorting filters before being added to the Web page for general viewing. The result is a rather curious collection of bathroom-wall scrawl that foregrounds the protocols of the Web page itself, rather than trying to cover over the technology with pleasing graphics or a deliberate design.

The 404 error code has also been used by other artists. Lisa Jevbratt's "Non-Site Gallery" opens up the dead end of the 404 error page. She transforms the 404 message into a generative doorway, where the requested page is generated on the fly, as if it had always existed for the user and was not the result of a mistake.

The 404 error code was also used in a more conceptual sense by the EDT. As part of its virtual sit-ins the EDT have created software that sends out Web requests for nonexistent Web pages on remote servers embedded with special messages–addresses in the form of www.server.com/__special__message__. Since the Web pages do not exist on the remote server (and were never intended to exist), an error message is immediately generated by the server and returned to the EDT software.

However–and this is the trick–since Web servers record all traffic to their Web site including errors, the error acts like a Trojan horse and the "special message" is recorded in the remote server's log book along with the rest of its Web traffic. This accomplishes the difficult task of actually uploading a certain specified piece of information to the server of one's choice (albeit in a rather obscure, unthreatening location). As the messages pass from the protester to the protested site, a relationship is created between the local user and the remote server, like a type of virtual sculpture.

While the artwork may offer little aesthetic gratification, it has importance as a conceptual artwork. It moves the moment of art making outside the aesthetic realm and into the invisible space of protocols: Web addresses and server error messages.

As work from the EDT suggests, Internet conceptualism is often achieved through a spatialization of the Web. It turns protocol into a sculpture. As the Internet changes, expanding its complex digital mass, one sees that the Web itself is a type of art object–a basis for myriad artistic projects. It is a space in which the distinction between art and not art becomes harder and harder to see. It is a space that offers itself up as art. [...]

The Web Stalker is also a good example of the conceptual nature of Internet art. It is an alternate browser that offers a completely different interface for moving through pages on the Web. The Web Stalker

takes the idea of the visual browser (e.g., Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer) and turns it on its head. Instead of showing the art on the Web through interpreting HTML and displaying in-line images, it exhibits the Web itself as art through a making-visible of its latent structure. The user opens a Web address, then watches as the Stalker spits back the HTML source for that address. In a parallel window the Web Stalker exhaustively maps each page linked from that URL, exponentially enlarging the group of scanned pages and finally pushing an entire set of interlinked pages to the user. The pages are mapped in a deep, complex hypertextual relation.

The Web Stalker doesn't produce art but, in Matthew Fuller's words, "produces a relationship to art." The Stalker slips into a new category, the "not-just-art" that exists when revolutionary thinking is supplemented by aesthetic production.

Let me now propose a simple periodization that will help readers understand Internet art practice from 1995 to the present. Early Internet art–the highly conceptual phase known as "net.art"–is concerned primarily with the network, while later Internet art–what can be called the corporate or commercial phase–has been concerned primarily with software. This is the consequence of a rather dramatic change in the nature of art making concurrent with the control societies and protocological media discussed throughout this book.

The first phase, net.art, is a dirty aesthetic deeply limited, but also facilitated, by the network. The network's primary limitation is the limitation on bandwidth (the speed at which data can travel), but other limitations also exist such as the primitive nature of simple network protocols like HTML. Because of this, one sees a type of art making that is a mapping of the network's technological limitations and failures–as the wasp is a map of the orchid on which it alights, to use Deleuze and Guattari's expression. Examples include Jodi, Olia Lialina, Heath Bunting, Alexei Shulgin, Vuk Cosic, and many others. Net.art is a very exciting aesthetic, full of creativity and interesting conceptual moves.

Yet this first phase may already be coming to an end. Baumgartel recently observed that it is "the end of an era. The first formative period of net culture seems to be over." He is referring to a series of years from 1995 to 1999 when the genre of net.art was first developed. In this period, due to prominent technical constraints such as bandwidth and computer speed, many artists were forced to turn toward conceptual uses of the Internet that were not hindered by these technical constraints, or, in fact, made these constrains the subject of the work. All art media involve constraints, and through these constraints creativity is born. Net.art is low bandwidth through and through. This is visible in ASCII art, form art, HTML conceptualism–anything that can

fit quickly and easily through a modem.

But this primary limitation has now begun to disappear. Today Internet art is much more influenced by the limitations of certain commercial contexts. These contexts can take many different forms, from commercial animation suites such as Flash, to the genre of video gaming (a fundamentally commercial genre), to the corporate aesthetic seen in the work of RTMark, Etoy, and others. My argument is aesthetic, not economic. Thus, it is not a question of "selling out" but rather of moving to a new artistic playing field. As computers and network bandwidth improved during the late 1990s, the primary physical reality that governed the aesthetic space of net.art began to fall away. Taking its place is the more commercial context of software, what may be seen as a new phase in Internet art.

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by Alexander R. Galloway
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