

With Galleries Closed, a Moment for Net Artists to Shine

Shuttered museums are rushing to create meaningful interactions online, but artists have been doing this since the 1990s.

By Andrew Dickson

May 6, 2020

LONDON — In early March, the artist Olia Lialina was installing a solo retrospective at the Arebyte gallery in East London, feeling anxious about whether anyone would be able to attend: Italy had already announced quarantine measures and other European countries looked likely to follow. Sure enough, by the time of the opening a few weeks later, Britain was in lockdown. She had to make the event online-only.

The story will be familiar to artists, musicians and performers whose work has been interrupted, or simply obliterated, by the pandemic. But in Ms. Lialina's case there was a lucky twist: As one of the first so-called "net artists" to gain a profile in the 1990s, she is used to showing work online. Much of it isn't even designed to be exhibited in a gallery.



Installation view of "Best Effort Network" Ms. Lialina's exhibition at the Arebyte Gallery in London. Artworks pictured: "Hosted" (2020), left, and "Summer" (2013). Max Colson

"Of course it's sad about the show, but we didn't have to cancel," she said by phone from her home in Stuttgart in southwestern Germany. "The internet is my primary location. It is where I meet my audience."

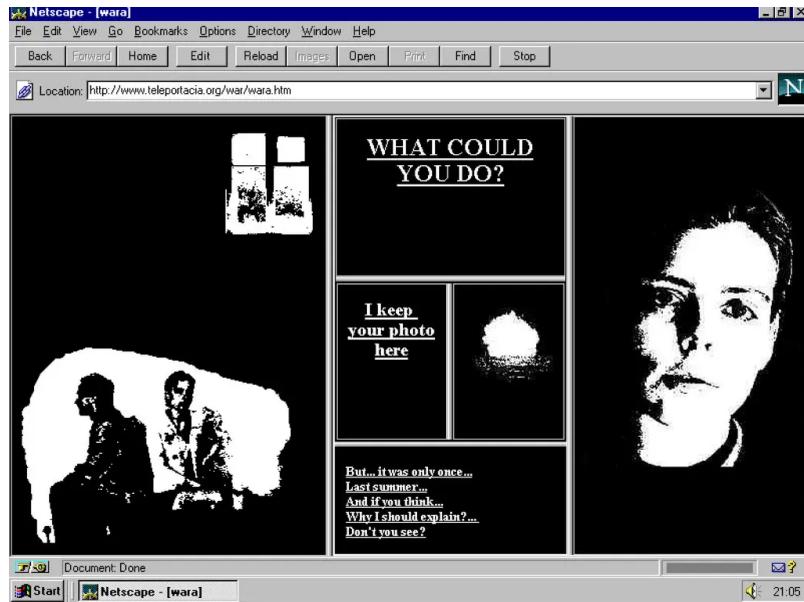
The pandemic may have forced much of the global economy to a halt, but in the art world it has produced a frantic rush online. After years in which galleries and museums hemmed and hawed about digital — a poor imitation of the "real" experience, many curators and administrators felt — they now have little option but to try everything they can. Artists have been encouraged to show their work online or offer Zoom studio tours; coders been hired to conjure new platforms almost overnight.

But as institutions have clamored to recreate the experience of the gallery online, there has also been a spike of interest in art designed for the internet first and foremost. Scrappy and subversive, net art has often been written out of conventional art history, relegated to outsider status. The people who practiced it weren't regarded as "serious," still less worth collecting: Who wants to put a beige PC on display in your gallery?

While many of us have grappled with how to have meaningful engagements with visual art through our screens, it's become clear that some artists were creating those decades ago. It was just that the art world wasn't really paying attention.

"It's nice to be recognized," Ms. Lialina, 49, said dryly, adding that she noticed something was up when web searches for her name picked up in mid-March. "It's not the first time you think, 'Oh, you didn't know this stuff exists?'"

In fairness, curators haven't been entirely blind to net art's significance. New York's New Museum excavated key works for a retrospective last year, and the expanded MoMA has given an entire room to a work by the pranksterish Dutch duo JODI entitled "My%Desktop": a frenzied "desktop performance" that shows a Mac in meltdown, alerts pinging and windows opening and closing at random. The museum also recently acquired Petra Cortright's seminal video piece VVEBCAM (2007), in which we see the artist gazing glassily at the screen while animated flowers and cats crawl over her face — images that will resonate with anyone stuck at home and fiddling with Snapchat filters these last weeks.



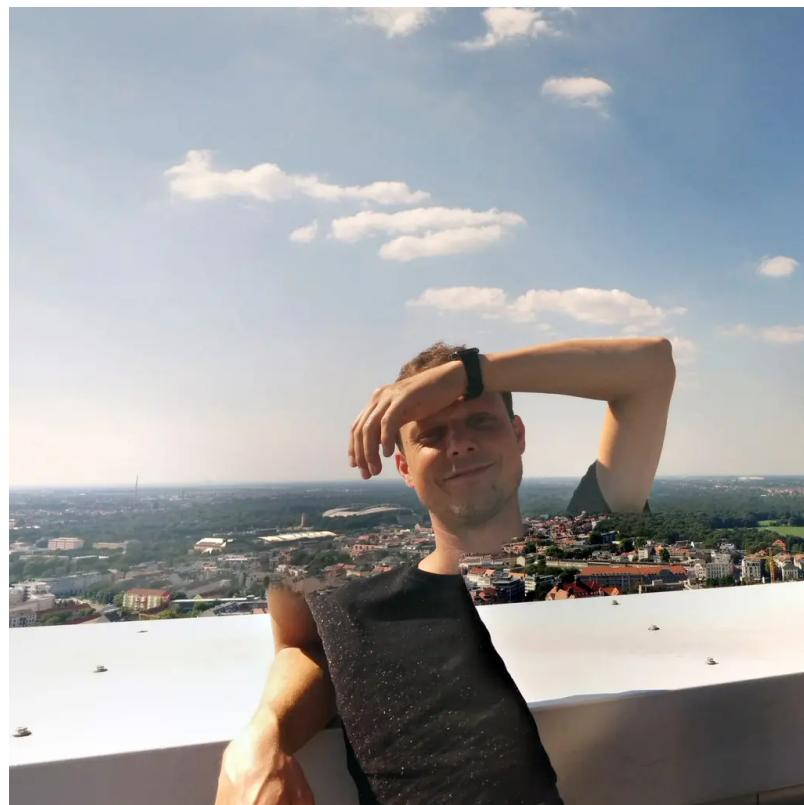
Ms. Lialina's "My Boyfriend Came Back from the War" (1996), a weblink-based "netfilm" that tells the fractured, enigmatic story of a woman reuniting with her lover after he returns from conflict. Olia Lialina

Part of the problem is that no one agrees what net art really is. A child of the 1990s, it came into being in the Paleolithic era of Netscape and Windows 95. Early artists coded directly in browsers; later practitioners were drawn to the possibilities of web-relayed video.

"Some people prefer to use the term 'online-based art,'" Ms. Lialina said. "Personally, I think that phrase is very sedating."

Ms. Lialina was one of many artists who thrived to the web's new freedoms; as a student in early-1990s Moscow, she could suddenly make and exhibit work without having to go through the gallery infrastructure. Her breakthrough piece, now regarded as a classic, was "My Boyfriend Came Back from the War" (1996), a hyperlink-based "netfilm" that tells the fractured, enigmatic story of a woman reuniting with her lover after he returns from conflict. Employing low-fi text with scratchy black-and-white visuals, it prefigured the confessional visual narratives that became common on blogs and, later, Instagram.

In the years since, Ms. Lialina has made hacked versions of newspaper websites, designed web comics and created self-portraits as animated gifs — well ahead of Gen-Z, it might be pointed out — as well as writing and teaching energetically.

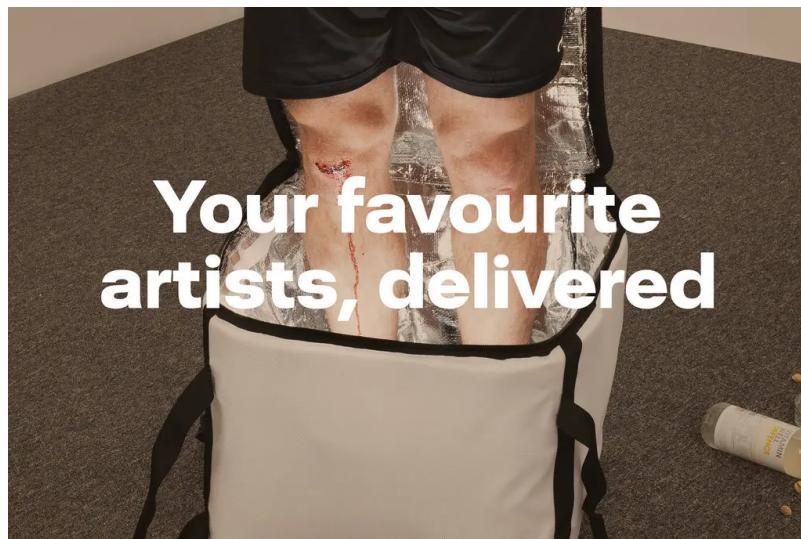


Sebastian Schmieg in an undated photograph. The German artist's work has explored the intersection of high technology and casual labor.

One of her former students at the Merz Akademie in Stuttgart is the German artist Sebastian Schmieg, who has sought to bridge digital-only experiments with physical ones. One of Mr. Schmieg's pieces, "Search by Image," begun in 2011 and later displayed at the Photographers' Gallery in London, used Google Images to create bemusing streams of only-just-related pictures.

One of his more recent projects, "Gallery.Delivery," is a droll take on apps such as Seamless and Deliveroo. Instead of pizza or Mexican on demand, a courier brings to your door a bag containing contemporary art works, installs them in your home, then takes them down again a few hours later. The tagline is: "Your favorite artists, delivered."

Mr. Schmieg said in a Skype interview from Berlin that he was fascinated by the ways in which technology and casual labor had become intertwined, both in the art world and the rest of the economy. "It seems sort of appropriate now," he said.



A promotional image for Mr. Schmieg's project "Gallery.Delivery," a droll, take on apps such as Deliveroo and Seamless. André Wunstorf

That playfulness — sometimes connecting with wider artistic culture, more often subverting it — courses through the history of net art. Like Ms. Lialina, the Italian-born artist duo Eva and Franco Mattes discovered the web in the mid-1990s, when they were in their late teens. In 1998 they started operating under the name "010010110101101.org" — a semi-ironic symbol of their commitment to digital.

In 2006 they moved to Brooklyn and continued to make art, increasingly obsessed by the ways digital connectivity had infiltrated "real" life — from the dark web to cat memes, photo-hacking to digital surveillance.



"Ceiling Cat" (2016) by Eva and Franco Mattes. Eva and Franco Mattes; Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Katherine Du Tiel

As early as 2000, the Matteses had put the contents of their hard drives online, for anyone to pick through ("Life Sharing," 2000–3). A far bleaker work, "No Fun" (2010), was a performance in which Mr. Mattes faked his suicide on the webcam-sharing site Chatroulette. Out of several thousand people who saw the live feed of this apparent death, only one called the police.

"People thought it was strange then to make that sort of work," said Mr. Mattes said in April, speaking via Skype from Milan, where he and his partner have been trapped by Italy's lockdown. "But we understood it would be the future, and we wanted to be there as early as possible."

Shunted to the margins, net art often tried to capitalize on its renegade status, Ms. Mattes added. "It hasn't broken any sales records," she said. "But my main measure is long-term influence. Net artists intuited before others that all this would shape culture."

Both the Matteses and Mr. Schmieg said they were in two minds about whether the pandemic-stricken art world was handling the shift to digital successfully.



An installation view of the Matteses' "Riccardo Uncut" (2018) installed at Fondation Phi pour l'art contemporain in Montréal. Eva and Franco Mattes; via Whitney Museum of American Art; Melania Dalle Grave for DSL Studio

"If you're just rushing your existing shows online, that's not so interesting," said Mr. Schmieg. "3-D models of your galleries and that's it, who cares? It has to add something more."

Curators should be bolder and more imaginative, Ms. Mattes said. "I would love to see these new settlers explore the peripheries, go underground and not just sit on the surface," she said.

Mr. Schmieg said he hoped that lockdown might inspire younger artists to make works for purely digital spaces, as well as encouraging museums to acquire key net art pieces from the past. "It helps move the discourse," he said. "These works might finally get attention."

Back in London, the Arebyte gallery remains shuttered, but Ms. Lialina's exhibition "Best Effort Network," is on through the end of May and may be extended. A video feed connects viewers to the deserted gallery, where they can watch screens replaying video works.



Ms. Lialina swimming while recording "Hosted" (2020), a sequence of 70 frames the artist describes as a "network performance." Adrian Schmidt

Even so, a new piece, "Hosted" (2020), is best viewed online: Described as a "network performance," it requires you to click on a series of links, each of which connects to a static photograph of the artist swimming — when you tab through them, like a web-based child's flipbook, she appears to move. An image of both freedom and constraint, it seems touching right now, when pools in many countries are

closed.

Mr. Schmieg, however, acknowledged that making art in the current circumstances has been tricky. He registered the domain name “quarantine.gallery,” soon after lockdown started in Berlin but, juggling child care and remote teaching engagements, hasn’t found time to put anything up there yet.

Likewise, a socially distanced version of his “Gallery.Delivery” project — a project whose moment has surely come — still doesn’t seem feasible, even as Germany cautiously reopens.

“Like everyone else,” he said, “I’m finding it hard to get any work done.”