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SOCIAL CURRENCY

HOW DOES ART INFLUENCE SOCIETY?

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EVA AND FRANCO MATTES

Carroll / Fletcher, London

You have to wonder what Tim Berners Lee – the humble creator of the World Wide Web – thinks about the sprawling mess of information that his invention has become. But memes, tweets, blogs, porn and trolls are not the Internet's sum total. Running parallel to the development of our socially networked present, emerging with the file- and life-sharing boom of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s, was the more sinister reality of a ruthlessly efficient net-based capitalism, and the surreptitious eradication of online (and, by extension, offline) privacy, liberty and autonomy.

While novice users bumbled around the vernacular web, a small group of artists began to create online works designed to deconstruct the experience of this virtual platform. Net.art was the catch-all term, coined in 1995 by Berlin-based artist Pit Schultz, used to order these disparate practices. Alongside artists like Vuk Cosić, Jodi.org, Olia Lialina, and Thomson and Craighead, some of the most ingenious work in the field came from Italian-born, New York-based duo Eva and Franco Mattes – provocateurs and so-called hacktivists also known as 0100101110101101.org.

'Anonymous, Untitled, Dimensions Variable', the pair's first solo exhibition in London, brought together a selection of old and new works set within the virtual and physical realms. A thread of prankish interventionism ran through the two gallery floors, but behind each provocation lay serious questions of authorship and authenticity. *Catt* (2010) – a work comprising two taxidermied animals: a cat inside a birdcage and a canary perched

outside looking in – was once exhibited as a sculpture by Maurizio Cattelan. Inman Gallery in Houston fell for the hoax. The same trick was pulled with *Rot* (2011), a small glass jar, corked and quarter-filled with dead flies, which the duo claimed came from Dieter Roth's 1960 installation *Staple Cheese (A Race)*. This time a St Louis gallery named White Flag Projects fell for the ruse, exhibiting *Rot* as a Roth work in their 2011 summer show. Such exploits remind us there are cracks in the thin, brilliant white walls of value and authenticity supporting transactions, both monetary and social, in the art world.

In a reversal of *Life Sharing* (2000–03), a work in which the duo opened up the contents of their hard-drives to the public, *The Others* (2011) is a slideshow of 10,000 photographs stolen from hacked computers. Soundtracked by cover songs, sung by and poached from the subjects' hard-drives, two realizations flatten the sense of voyeuristic indulgence: that peoples' ideas of life, the pornographic, the intimate, and the spontaneous are depressingly similar; and that the concept of Internet privacy is, or will definitely become, the 21st-century oxymoron. Another important lesson these works demonstrate is that the virtual is the physical; what happens online – by virtue of its having at least a psychological correlate in the subject – is necessarily a physical reality. *Colourless, Odourless and Tasteless* (2011), a customized arcade racer that spews carbon monoxide, also enacts this continuum of experience, linking the virtual activity of driving with the emission of real exhaust fumes. In *My Generation* (2010), degraded footage captures adolescents smashing computers, and raging into sudden paroxysms of gaming frustration. One teen, filmed covertly after his mother cancelled his *World of Warcraft* account, deteriorates into an incandescent rage. Even if the ensuing meltdown is staged, delirious abandon pushes him to ululating fits of self-abuse (attempted sodomy with a remote control), and *butoh*-like contortions that make actionism look tame.

It's a shame the critical promise of Net.art, hampered by curatorial Luddism as well as by pointless arguments about platform-specificity (a conundrum this exhibition easily sidestepped by using both computers and wall projections), dissolved into the apolitical link culture of surf clubs, youth TV pastiche and 'online galleries' like the woeful Paddle8. Though pioneers of the form, the Mattes never wallowed in the narrows of a single medium. Other works in the exhibition, from a merry-go-round to a performance in *Second Life*, not only showed the breadth of their oeuvre, they revealed the Mattes' enduring combination of critical sharpness and ludic subversion – rare bedfellows in these dour and desperate times.

MORGAN QUAINANCE

1
Florian Roithmayr
'Like Plugging In',
2012, installation view

2 & 3
Santo Tolone
'Three Times Once'
2012,
installation views

4
Eva and Franco Mattes
*Colourless, Odourless
and Tasteless*, 2011,
customized arcade game
and motor,
185×137×86 cm

