You Are Here
Art After the Internet

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OurSpace:
Take the Net
in Your Hands

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'What else can be the result of this but that our paths toward the future—all our paths, political as well as cultural—are not yet charted? That they are yet to be discovered, and that the responsibility for this discovery belongs to no one but us?'
        —Aimé Césaire[1]

It is easy to forget that the internet is a physical thing; that satellites and fibre optic networks are but some of the necessary technologies facilitating the transmission of data between people and places. The online world is as real as the pipelines and electricity pylons that provide us with the energy upon which we have become dependent. The data centre's analogue equivalent could well be the power station. The internet is a vast network that connects localities within a global framework, textured by the surface layer of the World Wide Web and its web pages and browsers. It is a 'space' mapped out over material space—as Hito Steyerl once pointed out, it is a '… realm of complexity gone haywire.'[2]

Our spatial imagination of the internet has arguably shifted since protests erupted in late-2010 and early-2011 across the world, from the Middle East and North Africa to the Mediterranean and Europe. This was a transitional moment: when the 'public square'—a community focal point— went virtual, viral, and global. Take Bahrain, for instance, where the Pearl Roundabout became the site of protests against monarchic rule, which were violently supressed by the state (with the help of Gulf Cooperation Council troops sent in for support). Following the protests, the monument after which the roundabout was named (six large, concrete sails supporting a giant cement pearl) was demolished. It was survived by an online image that was multiplied, modified, and appropriated. As Amal Khalaf wrote on the subject, the physical erasure of the Pearl Roundabout and its virtual reincarnation took the battle for public representation off the streets and into the web. The internet became a popular space: a virtual civic 'square'—or *midan*— transformed into a polyphonic and contentious political battleground.[3]

Post-2011, the nature of the internet as an open battlefield has extended beyond the regions where internet freedoms have been limited. The NSA scandal of 2013, when Edward Snowden blew the whistle on PRISM (essentially a global surveillance system operated by the U.S. National Security Agency since 2007), was a moment that, like 2011, brought to light—or simply confirmed—things we perhaps already knew about how

information is being shared, managed and contained online. Pervasive state and corporate control of online space in the western world, where the virtual realm had been lauded as an open and public sphere, became an established fact. This further altered the popular conception of the internet as both a site of agency and a neoliberal apparatus of security, or global panopticon. Popularly, the net became characterized as both a tool of mass surveillance *and* popular subversion.

Today, the internet is an openly contested territory; a terrain upon which conflicts between varying interests—local, national, international, even meta-national—play out. This has ramifications in the physical world, too. Bernard Stiegler addresses this in a succinct observation on the World Wide Web:

> The impact of the Web is not only sociological but economical, political, existential, psychological, epistemological: it is total. The Web radically modifies public and private spaces and times— and deeply alters public-private relationships. This technological framework became a new public space and a new public time—with the growing danger to be privatized.[4]

By nature, the internet—like real space—is not public at all. It is negotiated, managed, contested, and contracted. A place where divisive lines between public and private are mediated, challenged, and even dissolved. It is a space that fits Michael Hardt's interpretation of Jacques Rancière's definition of the common (*le commun*):

> The common, of course, is not the realm of sameness or indifference. It is the scene of encounter of social and political differences, at times characterized by agreement and at others antagonism, at times composing political bodies and at others decomposing them.[5]

In short, the internet is a space of consensus *and* dissensus, convergence *and* divergence. It exists as a result of negotiations between various bodies of power, including the powerless. Of course, we know this. But if we lose sight of the internet's innately political character, we lose exactly what is at stake: a perception of the internet as a territory that is as 'live' and volatile as the fertile fields over which battles have been waged and social contracts drawn. It is a commons. An environment. As real and as populated as the 'real world'.

What does this mean? As artist Jonathan Harris notes:

> I believe that the internet is becoming a planetary meta-organism, but that it is up to us to guide its evolution, and to shape it into a space we actually want to inhabit—one that can understand and honour both the individual human and the human collective, just like real life does.[6]

It is this human element that makes the internet a meta-organism. Since the internet is a human construct, it is organic and, most importantly, malleable. Take Harris's www.WeFeelFine.org, an applet created with Sep Kamvar that operates as a data collection engine. Since 2006, it has been automatically scouring the web every ten minutes to harvest human feelings expressed in blogs, and organizes these snippets of text through various interfaces into a series of coloured dots and squares that swarm on a black screen (the dots reveal text while squares show images paired with text). Each dot represents a single human utterance: a declaration of affect.[7] The accumulation of these statements recall Marshall McLuhan's conclusion that 'all media are extensions of some human faculty—be it psychic or physical.'[8] As Harris has noted, www.WeFeelFine.org is an art project 'about people'[9]—created by and for them. This is not only because the coding to create the applet is available on the website under the Creative Commons, but because the work serves as a mirror to a richly affective, organic, virtual world populated by sensing bodies reaching out for one another. It is an affirmation of Harris's view that the individuals who populate the internet—the 'users'—are the ones who can change and direct its function. As McLuhan once pointed out: 'electronic informational media involves all of us, all at once.'[10] This is *our* space, after all.

But change—especially the collective kind—is as difficult to achieve online as it is offline; a result, perhaps, of the tensions between individual desires and the needs of the collective. Yet, as McLuhan said, 'Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without the knowledge of the way media work as environments.'[11]As an environment, the web is a double-sided screen through which individuals, communities, and societies are expressed, represented, viewed, collated, and even conditioned. Take Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Skype, OkCupid—all these web applications we use to 'be social' (and some of which were hailed as the engines of revolution in 2010 and 2011 by media outlets in the western world)—are privately owned and run. By signing in, we sign away the rights to our private information. In the age of 'Big Data'—collections of information

so vast that traditional forms of data processing are unable to handle the massive dataflow—we are experiencing a reduction of our own agency. This is because, upon entering the online realm, we become consumers of a pre-determined online space: data subjects reduced to systems of categorization. Participants in a Leviathan—or a social contract—that we actually know very little about.

This recalls Stiegler's view that the web has become a trans-individuation space—'the articulation between psychic individuation and collective individuation, and the site of fights to control the latter.'[12] It is what he calls the last stage of a process that started with the 'upper Paleolithic'—the historical point from which modernity emerged and which ushered in what Stiegler refers to as a 'grammatization process' that allows for the 'discretization' (the mathematical process in which multiple variables or categories are fused) 'of behaviours, gestures, talks, flows, and moves of any kind and which consists in a spatialization of time.'[13] In the smooth space of the internet, this so-called grammatization is in effect a modification or reduction of human characteristics precisely so that they might fit into the digitized, online system. The question here is how this systemization might shape the way we commune, connect, and come together as individuals.

So where does creative practice come in? It is Stiegler's conviction that we are currently living a moment of 'significant organological change' in which the 'knowledge instruments' shaping epistemic environments are evolving. The internet is one such epistemic environment, populated by users who inhabit and affect the online space and its knowledge instruments that in turn shape—in part—the world itself and our experience of it. And how are we using this space today? Pablo Larios has said of young artists embracing the online strategies of the mega-corporation, that, 'Instead of choosing sides, these artists seem to embrace the catch-22 of living and working in a society whose contradictions are self-generating.'[14] In this complex virtual reality, have we become corporatized so as to fit the demands of the emerging global paradigm of the neoliberal economy and its evolving systems of labour and production? And, within this, have we come to accept a condition of the online space as described by Steyerl: 'A condition partly created by humans but also only partly controlled by them…'? Do we abide rather than resist, as if technologically bound to laws far greater than ourselves? Maybe this is the problem.

In thinking about our collective agency in the online world (and thus, also in the offline world), let us turn to Daniel Ross's writing on Stiegler's view of the political question as an aesthetic one:

> … the question of living together, of becoming together, of living in common with the other through a process of common becoming, is something which can only occur through an understanding of, and a feeling for, one another, and which can therefore only occur via a medium which makes this possible, that is, an aesthetic medium.[15]

Ross notes that, for Stiegler, the term 'aesthetics … is to be taken in the widest sense, that is, as sensation in general, not only "perceptibility" but taste, feeling, sensibility.'[16] In terms of how we might use the internet creatively and in all its multi-faceted modes, perhaps it would serve us well to consider the online space as mediatory one. As Steyerl has noted: 'networked space is itself a medium'—'a form of life (and death)'.[17] Thus, if we were to also perceive the internet as an aesthetic and therefore sensual space that has the potential to produce real and meaningful interactions and relations, we might then push the idea of the internet as a (social) medium further. We could continue to explore its potential as a space within which forms of relational practice might develop across the virtual and the real, so that innovative and *tangible* social networks might evolve IRL.

Maybe it is time we move beyond discussions around the production of public space, both online and off, given just how private and corporatized both the virtual and physical realms have become. This does not mean we are to give up on the view of the internet as a collective medium. Nor are we to discount the internet as a potent site of knowledge production and information exchange that could potentially serve both collective and individual needs. We might instead turn our thoughts to the long-cherished view that, as Steyerl writes, 'computation and connectivity' could produce 'building blocks for alternate networks,'[18] while considering McLuhan's assertion that 'We can no longer build serially, block-by-block, step-by-step, because instant communication insures that all factors of the environment and of experience coexist in a state of active interplay.'[19]

For some, the politicization of the internet will hardly be a novel concern. Still, this is one conversation that demands further debate so that all the internet's users might perceive and utilize the web as a site of public, social, and civic potentiality. The stakes have never been higher. Only in recent years has the public and governmental battle for the internet gone mainstream, from China to the Middle East, in that it has only just entered into the popular consciousness. Saying that, the worldwide expansion and availability of the internet's networks is not even complete. Thus, as the internet continues to evolve, it might be worth admitting that its so-called 'age' is not yet 'post-' because it has only just begun. Its future therefore remains, to some extent at least, in our hands.

1   Aimé Césaire, 'Letter to Maurice Thorez', Paris, 24 October 1956, tr. Chike Jeffers, published on *Hydrarchy*, 24 May 2010, http://www.hydrarchy.blogspot.co.uk/2010/05/letter-to-maurice-thorez.html.

2   Hito Steyerl, 'Too Much World: Is the Interent Dead?', *e-flux journal #49*, November 2013, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead.

3   Amal Khalaf, 'The Many After Lives of Lulu: The Story of the Pearl Roundabout', *Ibraaz*, Platform 004, 28 February 2013, http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/56.

4   Interview with Bernard Stiegler for the World Wide Web Conference, Lyon, 16–20 April 2012, http://www2012.wwwconference.org/hidden/interview-of-bernard-stiegler.

5   Michael Hardt, 'On Production and Distribution of the Common: A Few Questions of the Artist', courtesy of Foundation Art and Public Space, http://classic.skor.nl/article-4111-en.html.

6   Jonathan Harris, statement on artist's website, http://www.number27.org.

7   With thanks to Lloyd Wise for his invaluable editorial input into this text and particularly this paragraph.

8   Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*, (London: Penguin, 2008) 26.

9   Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar, *We Feel Fine FAQ*, http://www.wefeelfine.org/faq.html.

10   McLuhan, 53.

11   McLuhan, 26.

12   Interview with Bernard Stiegler for the World Wide Web Conference, Lyon, 16–20 April 2012, http://www2012.wwwconference.org/hidden/interview-of-bernard-stiegler.

13   Ibid.

14   Paul Teasdale, 'Net Gains', *frieze*, Issue 153, March 2013, https://www.frieze.com/issue/article/net-gains.

15   Daniel Ross, 'Politics and Aesthetics, or, Transformations of Aristotle in Bernard Stiegler', *Transformations Journal*, Issue 17, 2009, http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_17/article_04.shtml.

16   Ibid.

17   Steyerl, op. cit.

18   Steyerl, op. cit.

19   McLuhan, 63.