# Net Art and the Fireflies of Eternity

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*Originally posted on netpoetic.com in 2010, I thought I'd lost this essay for good when netpoetic.com disappeared—but I found a copy on the Wayback Machine at archive.org in 2017!*

Imagine print without literature—just news and technical documentation, bills of lading, position papers, and so on.

Imagine the moving picture without art—just as surveillance and video-phone, etc.

Now imagine the net without net art.

To many people, the latter is much easier to imagine than the former two dystopias. We have had literature for thousands of years, and art has been a part of the moving picture since near its start in the nineteenth century. But net art has only been around since the early to mid 1990′s. The net is often treated as a spewing information pipeline that has to be managed and filtered for usable practical information, often of a consumeristic nature. Shopping information, banking info, calendar info, and so on. As an entertainment medium, it's mostly used for videos, online games, news, email communication, and so on. Not as a medium in which we seek out the art particular to the net. By 'net art' I do not mean video or text, (per se, although they can be part of net art) but art specific to the net, art that requires an internet connection and lives and breathes through a browser or because of its internet connection, if it's a desktop program.

What we lose with there not being as prominent an art of the net as there is of print and moving image is related to what we would lose were there not a prominent art of print or art of the moving image. That's what I want to convince you of by the end of this essay.

Some might object. They might say that the net without net art is no more difficult to imagine than the telephone without telephone art. Which is easy to imagine because the telephone hasn't developed prominently as a medium for art. Which isn't to say that there haven't been good telephone art projects. But name me five of them.

The telephone has developed as a medium primarily for conversations between participating parties. We don't dial up to listen to art, much. Or participate in an art project when we are actually on the phone. There's nothing to say we couldn't. And

perhaps we have, once or twice. Still others will say that the art of the telephone is the art of conversation. Which isn't specific to the telephone but is certainly different via telephone, in important ways, than it is face to face.

We imagine, then, a secret art of the telephone in which lovers and others really digging each other engage. Often not recorded but enjoyed and remembered personally, just the two of them. A private art without a prominent public face. Though telephone conversations and recordings play crucial parts, sometimes, in works of art for other media such as movies, drama, and music. The sound of a telephone voice, that distinctly lo-fi, identifiable sound, is a little other-worldly.

Telephone has not developed a prominent public art because it is so strong concerning private conversations. The possibilities for dial-up telephone art or interactive telephone art are completely overshadowed by the way we typically use the telephone, which is not a public art use or even an artistic use of any kind, for the most part. Also, we have trouble with fiction and pretend, often, on the telephone. The stakes are different than in reading a book or watching art because of the element of *trust* and personal disclosure. To say nothing of fraud, which we also are quite familiar with from the telephone.

The net is quite different from telephone, of course. It is not overwhelmed, currently, by live conversation. We have had many of them over the net but it is by no means all we do over the net. The net subsumes several media at once. All broadcast media. And some broadcasting that has not and cannot be broadcast otherwise. That'd be the net art and other net-specific broadcasts.

The net also subsumes private broadcasting: narrowcasting. The telephone—even all forms of radio—even the CB, eventually—can be net-based. The network is the frequency or set of frequencies. And the frequency or frequencies can be channeled around the world.

The net also subsumes certain dimensions of print culture. Publications have a net component or are entirely net-based. The range is quite broad. The web site may simply be a desolate info booth, devoid of interest, or it may rock the universe in every way.

Also, individuals publish their work on the net. Sometimes on their own sites, sometimes elsewhere. On journals, the sites of other individuals, into huge youtubish databases, and so on. The net is both about publication and communication. Broadcasting and interaction. We are struggling to understand how this changes the nature of publication itself. And the nature of communication itself.

One of the great powers of the internet is it's ability to carry a broad range of media and modes simultaneously or individually. By 'mode', i mean its type of interactivities or lack thereof. By 'media' i mean sound, visuals, text, and moving images.

It should be clear by now that the internet is going to play an increasingly important role in broadcast, narrowcast and communication media. And in knowledge storage and dissemination. And much else.

Consequently, an art of the net poetentially becomes too broad and diffuse a notion. The notion of 'digital art' is so vast it includes scans of photos of one's cat posted to flickr. There can be no art form called 'digital art' because 'digital art' is just any art that may even simply have been digitized from analog and shoveled unreflectively to the realm of bits and bytes. 'Digital art', typically, is simply art that has been digitized. Is 'net art', similarly, so broad as to not be a particular art form in itself?

Well, no, it's not. Different people look at it in different ways. My way is to specify an art in which the internet connection is crucial. Whether for two-way communication or the querying of databases (and the subsequent retrieval of dynamic information), or for other decisions relayed or processed meaningfully via the net. The art of the net is one of the most important envisionings of the possibilities the net holds concerning broadcast and communications media, publication, and the synthesis of media, arts, communication, technology, and science. The art of the net, ideally, is where we go to get and understand our most intense and fully realized visions of these possibilities–even when the art doesn't seem to be about these things at all, sometimes. But of course we do not need to scratch too deeply to understand that every painting is, in some sense, about painting, every media work is about its medium, in some sense, to the degree that it uses its media/um in media-specific ways. In its 'rhetoric of media', then. And, more deeply yet, in its philosophy of media. Stated or not. Present or implied or vacuous, a vacuum filled by the activity of the media/um all over it like water over the swimmer.

Net art encapsulates not only our deepest visions of the possibilities for meaningful change via or partly because of the internet, but our deepest visions concerning who and what we become via the existence of the net and electronic networks more broadly. Anything that involves important changes in who and what we are and how we live and enjoy life and learn and communicate and view and publish work is important for us to understand and explore with passion–if for no other reason, then because to understand these helps us know who and what we are becoming and maybe even already are. And where we are going. And just what it means to be alive in this particular age.

That is an important part of what we treasure about the art of the past. The art of the past is one of our best ways of understanding life in the past. We wonder if net art will enjoy that sort of status in the future because of the issues of obsolescence of technology. Will net art last long enough to have that sort of use to futurity? Or will it be continually of the moment? Firefly media of the moment that is burned quickly in the fire of techno-time.

Well, the jury is still out. Certainly much, most, almost all will perish and does so, so far, about every decade as browser technology changes and networks expand into other, non-browser technologies and some protocols fall out of use, eclipsed by brighter suns. But some net art persists. It takes special engineering, often, a savvy knowledge of what's a good bet to work with and what isn't.

The serious work will survive for some time. Long enough to have that sort of use to futurity. We're just not sure how far that futurity extends.

But, you know, it's never the thing beyond the grave that we want in this life. Except if it be peace or happiness or a like reward. And it is our joy to find these in this life as we proceed. Which is a way of saying that whether net art now has a use to futurity later is not the only criterion to measure its importance now. In fact, it's a terrible criterion because we don't know the outcome now. The more important issue is what it does for us now. And what it does for us now is help us understand the wired life now and where it is going and how that changes us. And that's important to understand who we are.

Which implies that if net art fails as an art form then we lack artistic ways to understand who and what we are via the introduction of the internet into our worlds. This, in turn, would imply a sort of telephone-like usage of the media/um of the net, a failure of imagination in the presence of overwhelming homogenization of discourse. Or a fundamental unfitness of net worlds to provide an environment that can support art. Permanence/impermanence of media is a consideration. But so is monetary economy.

Let's not forget that the monetary infrastructures that support art as business are crucial to non-digital and digital art alike. The economies of attention and valorization have strong ties to the monetary economies of print, visual art, music, and so forth. The circles of 'high art' typically have ties to the economic opportunities in the art. There is a sense in which art has nothing to do with art but with marketing, public relations, corporate or institutional sponsorship, friend networks, and other such factors which–more than the quality of the art itself–determine the standing of the art in society.

Net art has not been particularly prominent in ecommerce. Quite the contrary. The idea is basically do what you love and the rest will follow.

It doesn't necessarily follow, of course, with any financial reward. This is a hurdle net art has to navigate by hook or by crook. Currently it is a very tough proposition. Net art has been a follower in this regard. The artists have not really developed good economic models. Or have not followed through on them, when they have been imagined.

I remember reading what a New York artist wrote about mail art. He said it was dead and wasn't of much account as art. Isn't this sort of foolish attitude simply a consequence of mail art remaining at a distance from the galleries and a significant monetary economy? Does his attitude have anything to do with the art itself or familiarity with it? Not likely. The excitement people feel about art works or an art itself is often not about the art itself but the value of the art as commodity valorized, ie, marketed, in appealing ways. We like to think of art as the house of what really matters in life and relationships and thought and the meaning of life and the creation of beauty, truth, and justice. And it is, in important ways. But it is very much a house in this world, with all the troubles of other houses. Will net art continue to exist as mail art does? Basically outside the institutions? I think it's fundamentally a question of whether it develops a significant monetary economy. It's not fundamentally a question of the quality of the art itself.

Another impediment to net art is the depth of art experience it can support. What is the emotionally deepest Flash work you've experienced? Did it change your life? Art needs to be capable of being taken as seriously as revelation. Revelation and transformation are key aspects to our most important art experiences. Firefly media might do it, but not likely. What is at issue here is the ability of net art to really help us understand who and where we are, as opposed to merely our being given caricatures and cartoons of existence–though they can be much more meaningful than we usually admit. But, still, it's possible for media to lose or never find its way to our deepest experience. Net art seeks its way to our deepest experience via the wire to inner worlds, outer worlds, and their interpenetration.

Net art must succeed for the internet to be as significant a human venture as print or cinema. For if it fails, that means we cannot really feel it and think in it in the ways we associate with art. And these are important to the ways we understand ourselves and the world, and come to be articulate and expressive and formulate what worlds we want to make now and for the future. The failure of net art would be a massive failure of imagination that would give unto the forces of dullness an unbearable lightness of media, too complete a capacity for forgetting, and a medium without an inner world.

Net art seeks the human in the post-human, the post in the human, the human in the post, and the post-human in the post-human. To know what it is to be human now, and wired. No net art means the wired is tired. A tired wired is wired working for the man, is corporate complete, is shop till long after you have dropped, is dronification wired to the grind of slaves, the energy of slaves, the no poetry zone, no imagination but in products, no ideas but in products, the triumph of consumerism and perfectly thoughtless media.

Accordingly, net art is important to the well-being and futurity of any possible wired world, and to our understanding of our current situation and capacities, even, as fireflies of eternity.

So we see what we lose with there not being as prominent an art of the net as there is of print and moving image is related to what we would lose were there not a prominent art of print or art of the moving image. Those dystopian possibilities seem very remote, as possibilities, because the media have such rich histories attached to them that we see the very existence of print and moving image implying the growth of the artistic cultures that have grown up with the media of print and the moving image, respectively.

Will we have a similar sense of the richness of history of net art in a hundred years time? I think it will be a history fraught with more changes in the technology than we associate with the history of print or the moving image. So it will be more fragmented a history, consequently. The net art media species, as it were, will evolve and change and mutate in ways we associate with hyperspaces. But it will have known histories, nonetheless, contentious and mysterious, almost, as the present, for anyone who looks closely into the fire at the contradictions of even the moment of art.