

# Write, Rewrite, Backup: Piecing Together the Histories of Net Art

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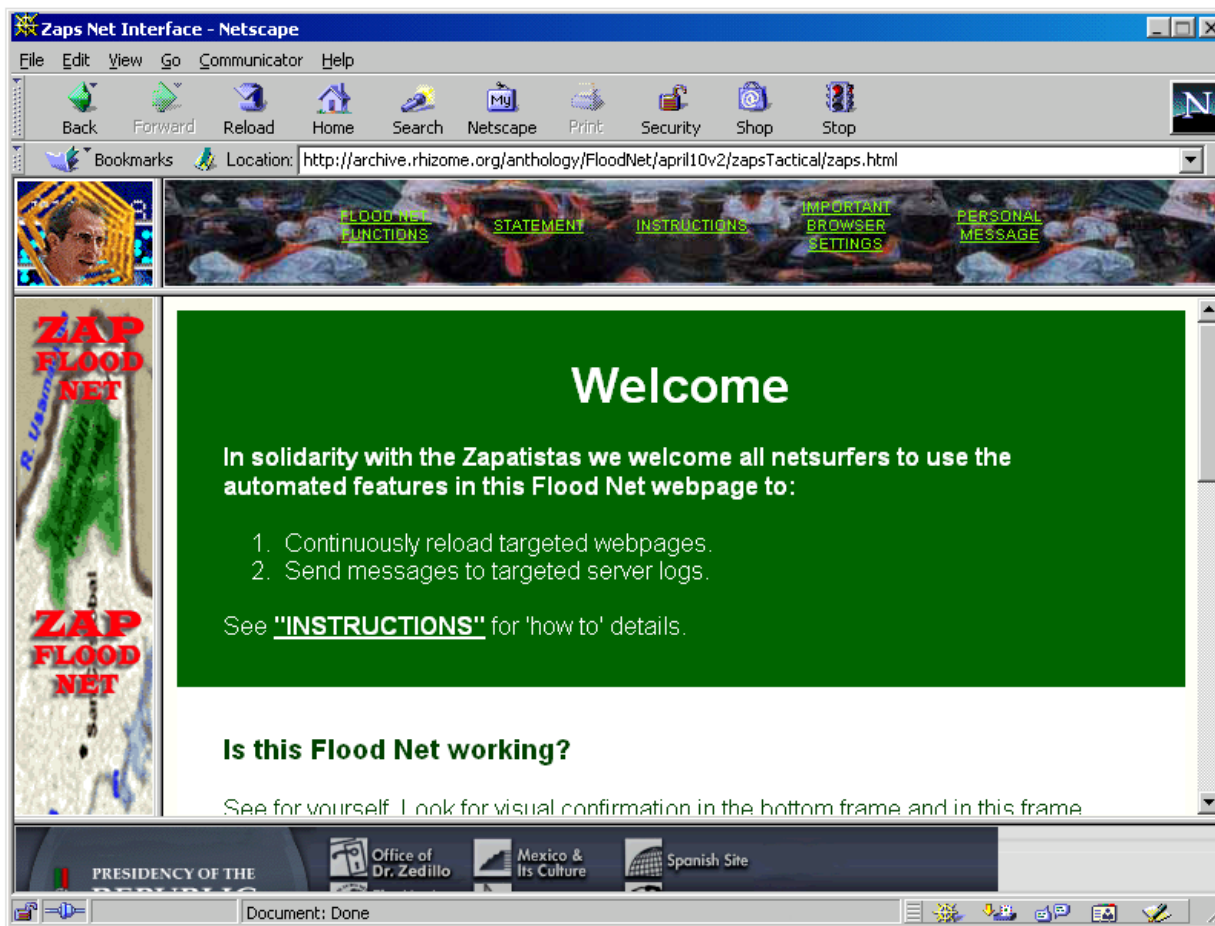
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Electronic Disturbance Theater, *Floodnet*, 1998. Restaging in oldweb.today emulator. Courtesy of Net Art Anthology.

## WRITE, REWRITE, BACKUP: PIECING TOGETHER THE HISTORIES OF NET ART

“The real history, the underground story, has still not been written. I believe in the future and younger generations, and they surely will find it and exploit all those holes in space, negative entropies, and unexcavated archaeologies waiting to be recognized and brought into light.” Lynn Hershman Leeson, a pioneer of interactive and net-based art, expressed these expectations regarding the recognition of media art in a conversation that we had in 2012.<sup>1</sup> *Seducing Time*, a retrospective of her work, took place that year at the Kunsthalle Bremen (Germany), as part of the DAM Digital Art Award that she had received in 2010. Leeson was the last recipient of the prize, which had been established in 2005 by the Digital Art Museum (DAM)—led by gallerist Wolf Lieser—and which was awarded every two years to artists who had made exceptional contributions to the development of digital art.<sup>2</sup> Other recipients were Vera Molnar, Manfred Mohr, and Norman White, whose work was also the subject of corresponding retrospective exhibitions. Discontinued in 2012, the award was followed by the introduction, in 2014, of the Visionary Pioneers of Media Art, awarded by the Ars Electronica Festival (Linz, Austria). Both awards were motivated by the intention of digging into the “unexcavated archaeologies” mentioned by Leeson and shedding light on the history of media art by paying homage to the lifetime achievements of outstanding artists.

Since the 1960s, artistic practices related to science and technology have been continuously overlooked in the mainstream contemporary art world but at the same time, they have found their niche in media art festivals and academia. This particular situation has spurred continued efforts to highlight the relevance of new media art, be it by exhibiting, discussing, and awarding the work of artists exploring emerging technologies or by tracing its lineage. The International Conference Series on the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology, which started in 2005 with the REFRESH! conference in Banff (Canada) and has been taking place every two years since then, exemplifies the scope of what is assumed to be a shared mission of all members of the new media art community: to make these artistic practices and their history more widely recognized in the cultural field and to ensure the preservation and documentation of the artworks. An “International Declaration,” drafted in 2011, summarizes these objectives and denounces that media art “remains largely under-resourced in our core cultural institutions.”<sup>3</sup> In a sense, the myriad exhibitions, essays, publications, symposia, preservation projects, online archives and museums, and all sorts of documentation that have emerged over the last forty years, but particularly during the last decade, all point in this same direction. Still, in 2015, art historian Oliver Grau lamented that new media art continued to be almost absent from art museums and archives, and

that the mainstream art world seemed to pay little attention to it. At the same time, young artists using digital technologies were increasingly attracting the attention of the art market: exploratory sales, such as the digital art auctions that took place on the online platform Paddle8 in 2013 and 2014, as well as the emergence of Post-Internet art contributed to making new connections between digital art and the mainstream contemporary art world. In this renewed interest for the digital, the history of new media has been forgotten, and this can be seen as one of the factors fueling the current blossoming of initiatives that are shedding light on a neglected past.

Net art constitutes a particular case in the context of artistic practices collectively labeled as new media art. The accelerated technological evolution of the Internet and its unparalleled impact on our society and culture have forced this art form to respond quickly to a changing landscape. In just two decades, artworks have become milestones in digital art history, as well as obsolete web pages. They cannot blend into the user's distracted browsing (as many early net artists wanted their work to be experienced) but instead require a historical context to be understood and a browser emulator to be viewed. As art historians Dieter Daniels, Gunther Reisinger, and Julian Stallabrass have pointed out, net art has been ignored by most museums and archives partly because of its difficult relationship with the exhibition space and the art market, while the artworks are quickly disappearing due to their technological obsolescence.<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, although it is the art form that is most widely and easily distributed and that can be experienced in its original format on any connected screen, net art also tends to be the most easily forgotten.

In this context, Rhizome's *Net Art Anthology*,<sup>5</sup> launched in November of 2016, is an interesting and ambitious initiative that intends to preserve both the cultural significance of the artworks and their continued existence as networked objects. The anthology consists of an online exhibition that will present a total of 100 artworks over the course of two years, introducing a new project every week. It is structured in four chronological chapters (1984–1998: early

network cultures and early web; 1999–2005: Flash and blogs; 2006–2011: surf clubs, early Post-Internet art, and social media platforms; 2012–2018: mobile apps and social media saturation) and one final chapter, dedicated to “addressing gaps that emerge over the course of the project.” The anthology is therefore aimed at piecing together a history of net art based on a set of artworks that are considered particularly relevant or outstanding, opening the selection process to submissions and subsequent revisions. This is a sound decision, given that there is no consensus on which are the “masterpieces” of net art and in fact, as admitted by the curatorial team, this project implies “sketching a possible net art canon.” The selection is based on a set of criteria that consider the relative impact that an artwork has had on net-based artistic practices, as well as the possibility of reconstructing or re-staging it, but also includes vaguer references such as “[giving] expression to emerging subjectivities.” For this project, Rhizome has chosen to define “net art” as “art that acts on the network, or is acted on by it,” in order to broaden the scope of the anthology beyond browser-based artworks and to include, for instance, networked physical objects or performances. This is consistent with the current practice of many artists whose projects move away from the browser and into the gallery space, as is particularly noticeable in Post-Internet art.

By addressing a time span that goes back to the 1980s, the anthology necessarily has to deal with issues of the preservation and re-staging of the artworks. This is an important part of the project, arguably more difficult than the selection itself, that calls attention to the fact that the artworks are actually disappearing. As Daniels and Rieslinger have pointed out: “Even if future art historians change their minds and [...] decide to rediscover this art fifty years after the event, there will not be much of it left.”<sup>6</sup> A project like this may avoid this situation from happening or at least save a representative sample of the last three decades of net-based art. Rhizome's Digital Preservation program, developed around the ArtBase (Rhizome's net art archive, created in 1999 and containing over 2500 works<sup>7</sup>), has carried out outstanding projects





VNS Matrix (Virginia Barratt, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini, and Josephine Starrs), *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 1991. Courtesy of Net Art Anthology.

devoted to the preservation of digital and net-based artworks. The *Net Art Anthology* provides a testing ground for two of them, the online tools oldweb.today and webrecorder, which respectively allow to view the web of the past and to preserve current websites for the future. Oldweb.today<sup>8</sup> is an online open-source software that emulates old web browsers in different operating systems and accesses the websites stored on the Internet Archive and other web repositories. It therefore allows the user to view a net art project in a very similar way to how it was originally conceived, including content that is not usually supported in current browsers. Most of the artworks presented in the first chapter of the anthology use this tool. Webrecorder<sup>9</sup> makes interactive recordings of any website: it acts as an intermediary between the user and the Internet, saving all the content that is being accessed as each page is built around the interaction with the site. In this way, it enables storing and sharing unique browsing experiences, which is useful for the preservation of dynamic net-based artworks. Both tools offer technical solutions to counteract the ephemerality of net art. Yet another important aspect of preservation is to underscore the cultural relevance of the artworks, which entails the somewhat subjective processes of selection and evaluation.

Rhizome takes on the task of determining which are the 100 net art projects that should not be forgotten, as part of its commitment to promoting this art form over the last two decades. However, this can also be seen as a statement of authority from an organization that has consolidated its status as a respected institution in the new media art community. A previous initiative in the same direction is the Prix Net Art, launched in 2014 and awarded to “artists who are committed to working online and who represent important directions in contemporary net art practice.”<sup>10</sup> Recipients to date include net art pioneers, such as JODI and Eva and Franco Mattes (previously known as 0100101110101101.org), and younger artists, such as Kari Altmann and Constant Dullaart. As with the Visionary Pioneers of Media Art award from Ars

Electronica (introduced in the same year), the Prix celebrates the contributions of significant figures in the history of net art, but also highlights the work of those who may shape its future. In this sense, the *Net Art Anthology* complements the Prix Net Art, since it already features works by awardees JODI and the Mattes and will probably add those of other recipients. Both projects contribute to creating a net art canon, whose gatekeepers are determined, to a large extent, by Rhizome. But this is not analogous to establishing, once and for all, the history of net art. A canon, as art historian Edward Shanken<sup>11</sup> points out, provides a common ground that is necessary to building an evolving discourse around a set of artistic practices. The anthology and the Prix will produce a list of names and artworks that, whether widely accepted or controversial, will be instrumental to keeping the discourse alive.

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- 1 Pau Waelder, “Lynn Hershman Leeson: Excavating Histories” *art.es* 51 (2012): 66–70.
- 2 DAM Digital Art Award, <http://www.ddaa-online.org/>.
- 3 “Media Art Needs Global Networked Organisation & Support – International Declaration,” *Media Art History*, <http://www.mediaarthistory.org/declaration>.
- 4 Dieter Daniels & Gunther Reisinger, eds., *Net Pioneers 1.0. Contextualizing Early Net-Based Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009).
- 5 *Net Art Anthology*, Rhizome, <http://anthology.rhizome.org/>.
- 6 Daniels & Reisinger, *op. cit.*
- 7 Ben Fino-Radin, *Digital Preservation Practices And The Rhizome Artbase* (2011), <http://media.rhizome.org/blog/8332/rhizome-digital-preservation-practices.pdf>.
- 8 Oldweb-today, <http://oldweb.today/>.
- 9 Webrecorder, <https://webrecorder.io/>.
- 10 Prix Net Art, <https://prix-netart.org/>.
- 11 Edward Shanken, “Historicizing Art and Technology: Forging a Method and Firing a Canon” in *MediaArtHistories*, ed. by Oliver Grau (Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2007), 55.