

Hackers are Artists – and Some Artists are Hackers

Tilman Baumgärtel speaks with Cornelia Sollfrank.

10 September 1998

Tilman Baumgärtel: “Female Extension,” your intervention of the Net art competition, “Extension,” held by the Hamburg Galerie der Gegenwart (Gallery of the Present) aroused quite a bit of aTBention. What was the initial idea behind “Female Extension”?

Cornelia Sollfrank: Actually, I wanted to crash the competition. I wanted to disturb it in such a way that it would be impossible to carry it out as planned.

TB: Why?

CS: Because I thought it was silly that a museum would stage a Net art competition. For me, Net art has nothing to do with museums and galleries and their operations, their juries and prizes, because it goes against the nature of Net art. Net art is simply on the Net; so there’s no reason for a museum or for a jury that decides what the best Net art is.

TB: Do you still think that way?

CS: Basically, yes. But I’m afraid this development can’t be stopped. Net art is on the verge of changing completely. It still happens on the Net, but this need for completed, whole works which can be sold, which have a certain definable value, which can be aTBributed to an identifiable artist, and the establishment of authorities who do the evaluating and who deal in Net art — we won’t be able to ignore these developments. Net art will evolve in this direction, and away from what it was in the beginning.

TB: Where did the aggressive impulse to crash the competition come from?

CS: I simply am that destructive. I had the feeling that they didn’t know what they were doing. They just wanted to profit from the hype surrounding Net art without truly investing in it. That’s what I wanted to shake up, and with this disturbance, call aTBention to the fact that it’s not as simple as that. Net art is not just about cleanly polished Web sites; it might very well have something to do with mean, system-threatening actions of disturbance, too.

TB: The action was seen by many as a “hack”; “Die Woche” (a German newsweekly) even named you “Hacker of the Week”. Do you see yourself as a hacker?

CS: No, I'm an artist. But if you take a closer look at the term "hack," you very quickly discover that hacking is an artistic way of dealing with a computer. So, actually, hackers are artists — and some artists also happen to be hackers.

TB: What does the term "hacking" mean for you?

CS: There's something called the "Hacker Jargon Dictionary" (see sidebar) which is an attempt to define that term, among others. For me, an important parallel between hacking and art is that both are playful, purpose-free ways of dealing with a particular thing. It's not a matter of purposefully approaching something, but rather, of trying things out and playing with them without a useful result necessarily coming of it.

TB: Many spectacular hacks result in the destruction of computers, or at least, a crash. With this in mind, do you see a parallel between your destructive impulse and hacking?

CS: Hacking does not mean first and foremost destroying. Today computer hackers place the greatest value on the fact that they're well-behaved boys who simply like to play around and discover the weakest points of systems without really wanting to break anything. At the same time, hackers can induce unimaginable damages. But at the moment, it's really about the playful desire to prove to the big software companies just how bad their programs actually are. At least they're trying to push their image more in this direction.

Regarding my own action, it does have more to do with disturbance than destruction. I couldn't actually destroy "Extension" any more than I could inflict any serious damages to the Galerie der Gegenwart, but I was nevertheless able to toss a bit of sand into the works. Everything did not actually fall apart, but a few people did have to spend a considerable amount of time looking at a lot of trash/garbage... etc. This did disturb the trouble-free course of the competition.

TB: Another aspect of hacking is that it does seem to attract people who enjoy the intellectual challenge of creatively working around limits.

CS: Yes, hacking does have to do with limitations, but even more with norms. That's another parallel with art. The material that art works with are the things that constantly surround us. The only thing art actually does is break the patterns and habits of perception. Art should break open the categories and systems we use in order to get through life along as straight a line as possible. Everyone has these patterns and systems in his or her head. Then along comes art: What we're used to is disturbed, and we're taken by surprise. New and unusual patterns of perception offer up the same things in a completely new context. In this way,

thought systems are called into question. And only the people looking for this are the ones who are interested in art at all.

TB: Would you say that there are as many well-defined conventions involved in an art competition as there are in computer programs and that you have subverted these conventions with your action?

CS: Yes, that, too. The material I'm working with in regard to "Female Extension" is, on the one hand, the Internet, but also the traditional means of art distribution: the museum, the competition, the jury, the prize.

TB: If you wanted to disturb the competition, why didn't you hack the server the art projects were stored on and erase everything? Or disturb the awards ceremony, for example?

CS: That's "electronic civil disobedience." In a way, I did my demonstrating on the Net because it had a greater effect. My action wasn't truly destructive. I didn't break anything; on the contrary, I was actually very productive. Instead of destroying data and information, I used automatic production to see to it that there was more data so that the works sent in would be harder to find.

TB: Isn't it something of an affirmation of a system when someone tries to get into the system, whether it be a computer system in the case of the hacker or a competition in the case of an artist? Wouldn't it be more consistent to do the disturbing from the outside?

CS: No, you can disturb far more effectively from the inside than from the outside. Producing a flow of data has a considerably greater effect than standing out in front of the museum with a sign reading, "Down with Extension."

TB: One thing hackers emphasize again and again is that besides influencing social developments which only an elite group can follow anyway, access to sensitive information is really at the core of what they're up to. Is that also somewhat related to what you're doing?

CS: It has less to do with the information itself and much more to do with just how open systems are. The information itself is constantly changing. There's always new information. Much more important are the hierarchies of systems, what's accessible to whom. Hierarchies are established with passwords and codes and so on. These have to be broken by hackers again and again. Because of this, hierarchies have to be restructured over and over, and vertically structured systems are rebuilt horizontally. This is also the decisive difference between the distribution of art and Net art. Art distribution is a hierarchical system, so it's

vertically structured. I can't just hang my art work in a museum. But I can go to the Net and "hang up" my Web site, for example.

TB: Of course, that's precisely what so many artists found so interesting about the Internet in the beginning. But in the meantime, it's even the people who deal with it professionally can't keep an overview of everything that's going on in the field of Net art because there's so much of it. A paradoxical situation has developed: Precisely because "everyone is an artist" on the Internet, it's especially important that Net artists establish some sort of relationship with art institutions in order to gather some sort of recognition...

CS: The only function of an art museum I can accept on the Net is that of establishing a context. Which means that I don't just put my Web site out there where no one can find it, but rather, I place it within a certain context, for example, an art server. Presuming that it's a Web site at all, because besides the World Wide Web, there are many other services and levels on the Net where art can take place. But the art server shouldn't be an art institution with a curator.

TB: In a way, an art server is the Internet's equivalent for producer's gallery. That is, there are artists who run a server themselves and fill it up with their own oeuvre. This is fine for the artist, but it may well not be of any general interest to anyone else. And that's what curators are for: To be a "gatekeeper" that only allows Net art through which will have a certain value for the general public and not just for the artist who made it. In my opinion, this filter function is extremely important for the art public...

CS: Of course there are people who need this filter function because they don't have the time or the desire to look around for themselves. But with regard to "Extension," for example, there was nothing there that interested me. One should always be aware of just how elitist and questionable the choices made by a museum actually are.

TB: There is the historical example of video, where the processes of canonization and the induction into museums took place, processes which are probably on the verge of occurring with Net art. What's actually so bad about the fact that museums are dealing with Net art and trying to evaluate the various works? After all, that's the job of an art museum, to contribute toward the creation of context and the formulation of a canon.

CS: The motto for the museum is: Collect, protect, research. A museum that seeks to deal seriously with Net art would have to collect Net art and seriously consider all the consequences of just how this art form is to be preserved and researched.

TB: Aren't you contradicting yourself? On the one hand, you're saying that Net art only takes place on the Net and that's where it should stay and the museums should leave it well enough alone, and yet, on the other hand, you're saying that museums should be collecting Net art...

CS: If a museum were to seriously take on the challenge of collecting Net art, I could accept that. But I doubt that that's what they actually have in mind. And what happened at the Galerie der Gegenwart is a prime example. They simply wanted to quickly swim alongside the net.art hype, to sample a bit of the cream topping on all things cyber and Net. But they've shown that they had absolutely no idea what that would actually mean in that ever since the competition, there have been no more efforts in this direction whatsoever. Since the awards ceremony in September 1997, the Web site hasn't been updated.

But if competent people were to work with a significant museum on the idea of seriously collecting Net art, I'd approve. It'd be an incredible challenge, because not only would the collection of works and the formulation of theory be involved, but also a tremendous amount of hardware and software would be necessary in order to be able to read the data according to technical standards which go out of date within the shortest periods of time. So technical specialists who could handle the inevitable repairs and maintenance would also be necessary. But the museums are hesitant when faced with such a huge task. Such a collection would have to have a very broad range and gather as much material as possible, which would also necessarily mean that a certain evaluation and hierarchy of the individual tasks would have to be created.

TB: What you accomplished with your action is that the Galerie der Gegenwart won't be dealing with Net art at all anymore. Would you consider this a success?

CS: The idea of starting a collection of Net art with "Extension" was put into cold storage, in a way. Now they've offered Stelarc a residency. This compromise, that is, working with a single artist whose work is quickly comprehensible, is much more consistent, I think. With Stelarc, in terms of content, they are venturing out onto a new terrain, but it's still nevertheless compatible with a museum.

TB: Your "Female Extension" reminds me of the contextual art or the institutional critique of the early nineties. In the art world at the time, there was also this idea of focusing on and calling into question the conventions, the mechanisms of the creation of norms and canons. These were questions which only interested those who had anything to do with art. Could it be said that your work was essentially aimed strictly at the jury?

CS: The jury was, of course, most immediately effected, although the members didn't realize at all that "Female Extension" had anything to do with art — all the beTBer. As for how much other people, for example, the artists participating in "Extension," were effected by my action, I don't know. But I got a lot of feedback from people who weren't directly involved and for whom I drew aTBention to an important problem, namely, the aTBempt to make Net

art museum-ready. Many Net artists don't know themselves just how they should react to this and careen back and forth between the underground and the professional world. I don't have this problem because my work was the aTBack on the structure of the museum itself.

Published on nettime-list, 1998

Hactivism, Network Art Activism, by Electronic Disturbance Theatre, publ. Autonomedia, New York, 2001