Claudia Herbst interviews Jenny Marketou
Sexing the Code: Subversion, Theory and Representation, 2008
Author Claudia Herbst

CH: *Could you comment on how technology entered your creative process?*

JM: Technology has always played an important part in every artistic practice. The question for me is how digital technology, such as the Internet, database systems, computer-based installations, digital video and wireless networks have entered into my creative process.

I became very interested in the Internet during my artist-residency in 1998 at The Banff Centre for the Arts. During that time, I had my first e-mail account (*thing.net*), which I still use. I sent my first spasm message, with the help of Heath Bunting, and joined my first on-line list, *www.irrational.org*. The residency gave me the opportunity to conceive and to co-produce my first net-based project, *SmellBytes*. The idea of the project was inspired by *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (1985), by Patrick Süskind, in which a serial killer is after young girls to capture their "body odor," and by ongoing research about beauty, body odor, symmetry and Darwinian classification, which was conducted at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Urban Ethnology in Vienna, and which I thought was very racist and arrogant. So *SmellBytes* was conceived as playful but, at the same time, as a critical response to the above pop culture and science investigations about subjectivity.

The main idea was to create *Chris.053*—a knowbot intelligent agent, who is driven by his insatiable olfactory desires, 'sniffs' out the Internet. *Chris.053* is on a hunt for peoples' smells: grabbing their images without their knowledge, by hacking through the IP addresses of their web cams connected to chat rooms. *Chris.053* analyses their facial structures according to their symmetry and breaks them down into bits and bytes—algorithms corresponding to "smells." The website consists of an odor lab (a stinky gallery) as well as a fan club where people can participate in the analysis of their face and smell. The participant would send their image to *Chris.053*, who would then send it back to her/him with the results in the form of a "digital smell card." The whole project was a strange coming together of the disembodied body of the

participant and of the machine. Looking back on this project, I feel there was something very symbolic and powerful about making the body unstable, public, and open to voyeurism. The project exhibited in major museums and galleries around the world. It was with *Smell Bytes* that I represented my country of birth, Greece, in the Biennial of Sao Paulo in Brazil.

CH: *Could you give an example of how programming is part of your creative process and how the conceptual and formal aspects of code inform your work?*

JM: To be a successful net artist, you only need a basic knowledge of HTML and the help of graphic talent, along with a few good programmers. I will always remember what the Capital Training Collective once said: DO IT YOURSELF is UNCOOL!

Code is a visual language, disembodied and pixilated, enclosed within a virtual system. When I think of code, I like to connect it with the abstract notion of language. It connects things and people. It proliferates and reproduces itself in the process. The trick is to get the connecting and reproducing sides of language to work towards the production of some kind of formal possibilities for the purpose of a creative expression, rather then as an end in itself. Obviously, the kind of things that can be done with code and the re-sampling / re-combining of archived data, are definitely further extensions of a process which is not new, a process that has roots in Cubism and gets to the dominant aesthetics of Minimal and Conceptual Art. I consider the code as a major mechanism for the production of the online work. The process of exposing it through the interface reminds me of the illusionist special effects in cinema, which sometime are visible and sometime, are quite hidden.

I like this idea of Open Source, where the source code is available to any user, who thus becomes the co-author of the work. It is not interactive but participatory, and functions as a collective artifact with endless possibilities and unstable identities. From the open accessing of data, through the participation of its users, a continuous and unpredictable mass data archive and transmission of information is generated in its wake. When it all works like this, a utopian fantasy park is built!

Both of my projects *http://smellbytes.banff.org* and *www.taystes.net* were designed as open source multi-user web tools that gave unlimited access to the intimate world of web cams and chat rooms, and encouraged the user to convert data into visual experience. I made a new version called *www.taystes.OS.net* in 2002, for the exhibition *Please Identify,* held at ESC im Labor, in Graz. I added a sound component to the project and different programmers and artists living in Austria developed the source code over time. It started well, but after a couple months, it required a lot of server administration. People lost interest and eventually I decided to shut it down.

CH: *In a 2000 interview with Cornelia Sollfrank, you have described yourself as an "artist hacker" who is interested "in operating as a culture hacker."[1] Could you explain what that means and if, seven years later, you still identify as such?*

JM: As an artist, I am immediately connected with the culture of my time. Therefore, it is easy to define my art as a form of cultural practice. In reference to the terms hacker and hacking, I do not use this term in relation to stereotypical geeks and computer freaks. I define the term hacking as described by McKenzie Wark new media theorist in his book *A HACKER MANIFESTO,*(2004) where hacking has an abstract, double meaning. Everyone is a hacker and everything in culture can be hacked. I find his ideas to be very intriguing, and here would like to quote from his book: "Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colorings, we create the possibility of new things entering the world. Not always great things, or even good things, but new things. In art, in science, in philosophy and culture, in any production of knowledge where data can be gathered, where information can be extracted from it, and where in that information new possibilities for the world are produced, there are hackers hacking the new out of the old. While hackers create these new worlds, we do not possess them."

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[1] Jenny Marketou, interview by Cornelia Sol frank, July 25, http://www.jennymarketou.com/ (accessed May 15, 2007).

Obviously, under the above description of a hacker, I find myself very comfortably connected to this idea of performing a function that is strategic, tactile, and operates in different contexts. However, I myself do not like the label hacker, because this can be easily misunderstood.

CH: *Together with Steve Dietz, and in collaboration with Anne Barlow, you have co-organized an exhibit titled Open_Source_Art_Hack at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City, in 2002. What motivated your involvement in this exhibit at the time?*

JM: I have always been involved in the history of Media Art and, as I have mentioned before, am particularly interested in artists who are subverting the intended usage of technology, instead of glorifying it.

Steve and I previously co-organized a smaller project called *Open Source Lounge* for the 2000 Medi@terra Festival, in Athens, Greece. This project was very popular and we decided the following year to propose the idea for *Open_Source_Art_Hack* to Anna Barlow at the New Museum. The concept behind this curatorial project was an expansion of our previous collaboration. Our intention was to show the work of a group of artists (mostly unknown to the New York art public) that participate in the critical debates surrounding the practice of hacking and the ethics of open-source development. The exhibition invited visitor participation and demonstrated the process of information gathering, which subsequently inspired contemplative thought on Internet culture and the public domain.

In the panel discussion that followed the opening, we addressed questions such as: How do you create a motion and an explosion from this open source movement? How do you turn the audience to a hacker? How can art subvert and re-appropriate existing technology and what does this mean for culture in general? Certainly, we did not consider any consequences. What followed the exhibition was far from what we had expected.

The web based installation *Minds of Concern* by Knowbotic Research, an artists collective from Zurich, was targeted by the administration of the New Museum and was forced to shut down under the pressure of the museum's server provider. In addition, the performance *GenTerra* by

Critical Art Ensemble ran into legal problems because it is illegal to release an "organism" in public space, even if it is safe. The exhibition was broken up, condensed and filled with fragments of artist's projects. Texts from angry artists against the museum and petition from us curators were posted on blogs, and on-line lists looking for a server to host the project developed as well. From that point on, it was very clear to me that cultural institutions are not able to balance artistic freedom, if that freedom openly analyzes and subverts their hypocrisy.

CH: *Hacking and the Open Source Movement fuel critical social, political, and economic debates. Would you say that a feminist perspectives factors into the discourses surrounding code? (Do you see a need for one?)*

JM: In a post 9/11 landscape, the terms often used in conversations surrounding hacking, hacktivism and electronic disobedience, are now linked to threat, criminality, and cyber terrorism. In addition, in recent times LINUX has emerged as a popular and powerful operating system, which poses a serious challenge to profit-driven giants like Microsoft, which recently filed with the US Securities and Exchange Commission to warn that its business model based on control through licensing is now under challenge by the open-source model. From my perspective, the above debates are mainly male orientated.

However, in pursuing my interest in hacking, I have noticed that although woman are not interested in illegal computer hacking, they are amply represented in the field of New Media Art, when it comes to the experimental—code area of digital art. To mention a few, Jodi is a masculine/feminine couple, and the same goes for Eva and Franco Mattes (a.k.a. 0100101110101101.org) in addition to mez/ Mary Ann Breeze and the code for the Zapatista Flood Net, which was written by a female member of the Electronic Disobedience Theater (E.D.T).

It is true not that many women are influencing the development of hardware and software. The question is whether we as women are willing to go deeper with technology, to be able to influence the technological development and to be part of the surrounding discourse and power structure. Currently, there are many women media artists, who like myself, do not feel excluded

from this discourse. We do not see the need to get into power structure by becoming stereotypical geek girls. However, there is a big need for the vocalization of the feminine perspective, but this must not be done not only through cultural and aesthetic practice. It must be acted simultaneously on various levels, and with different systems, to create cooperative working forms that offer room for difference. My sense is that the feminine perspective will be powerful if it is organized as a network structure. This is the challenge for me: how to extend and empower myself by engaging diverse communities in both virtual and real spaces that have a transformative impact on the production of culture in our society.

CH: *I would be interested to know, based on your experience as an artist-hacker, if the hacking and Open Source Movement is becoming more or less inclusive?*

JM: I think there are a lot of artists and collectives that are looking to Hacking, to the Electronic Disobedience Movement and to Open Source from a new historical consciousness that was not present 10 years ago, when the Critical Art Ensemble, @mark and the Zapatistas Flood Net were forming. What is happening is very rhizomatic. I would like to answer your question not in terms of inclusion but in terms of rhizomatic contradictions. Collective authorship and complete decentralization ensure that the work is not vulnerable to the usual corporate form of attack and assimilation. One good suggestion comes from the new media theorist, Alex Gallaway, who points out that "the structure of the www should not be taken to be some rhizomatic utopia"; it will not be difficult for a government agency to shut down the web with a few commends."

I have noticed that many people who were involved in Hacking and the Open Source Movement have stopped making work within the above social contexts, and I believe that the reason for this disappearance has to do with the fear that whether or not the above movements are relevant as an artistic medium in the current cultural climate. What is becoming evident though is that terrorist organizations are one of the most vigilantly opportunistic exploiters of the above strategies used years ago by hacktivists, and that they already have a big impact on what is called the aesthetics of terror.

CH: *Surveillance is a topic in several of your works, including "taystes.net," which samples network activity in real-time. The project's documentation includes the following description. "By logging on, the user's presence is automatically made visible on-line and, although lurking behind the veil of his or her on-line persona, inevitably becomes part of the database, part of the viewed."[2] Surveillance as it is encountered on the Internet is facilitated via, or controlled by, programming. Programming is male-identified and the he gaze is reportedly male. Do you see a correlation between gender, the act of surreptitious looking (voyeurism, Big Brother), and programming?*

JM: *"Our time could be among the most culturally confused and conflicting era in recent history considering society's mass fascination with reality TV programs, web cams on the one hand and on the other the ever-present obsession with security, fueled by global fears of terrorism" -- Michael Rush curator of "Power and Control: Surveillance and Performance in Video Art"*

This is an interesting issue because in my work, I do not focus on gender and I would say that I never set out to make work about it. Sometimes you probably find a few feminine signifiers but they are not intentional. I do not see any correlation between gender and visuality in my work.

In regards to *taystes.net* I think both women and men are objects of desire and both are aware of their performance in front of the web cam. As soon as you log on, all of your actions are made transparent and you also become the subject of being viewed and archived in the data, leaving your electronic finger prints and IP addresses behind. Gender in *taystes.net* could only be associated with the camera's gaze, which is impersonal and invisible. However, within this, there also can be signifiers for the feminine, but this is not a part of my intentions.

As an artist, I am interested in the paradox of creating intimate relationships with impersonal power structures. For this purpose, the systems I work with are CCTV, biometrics, tracking devices, web cams and aerials surveillance. Most recently I am interested in wireless

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[2] Jenny Marketou, installation documentation, http://www.jennymarketou.com/

technologies because they create an odd combination of distance and intimacy, which seem to be immensely seductive to use as a tool in my work. They all function in a distance from an aerial perspective, equalizing everything and erasing any individuality. I am particularly fascinated with the potential of surveillance technology as an instrument to maintain power, but at the same time, used as an instrument of entertainment. It is intriguing how they are invisible but have an authoritarian and controlling position in our culture. I would say that I am particularly interested in turning surveillance into a tool for power and for play that is accessible to the public. My aim is to give access to the process of information and to shield the evils of surveillance with aesthetic playfulness.