

Interview of Natalie Bookchin by Matthew Fuller originally for the BBC's "Art on Networks"
2000

Some months ago you published online 'a story of net.art (open source)'. I'm interested to know a few things about this. Firstly, why did you feel that it was useful or necessary at that point that a story of net.art be produced?

What kinds of powers are invoked by using the term 'story'. Secondly, you use the term 'open source' which is taken from a movement in software programming geared towards collaborative authorship of programs - how does this work in the context of producing a history of net.art?

Bookchin I initially put together the 'story of net art (open source)' in mid 1999 because I wanted access to a basic chronology of art production and critical writing about art on the Internet for a class I was teaching, and there was, surprisingly, as far as I knew, nothing like that in existence.

I was also responding to a number of events taking place at the time. This was right before the opening of net. condition at ZKM in Germany, the first large-scale attempt to show net.art in a major museum. For the occasion, ZKM had commissioned a number of curators to write histories of net.art. The exhibition and these commissions solidified what I saw as the beginning of the end of a particular type of art production on the Net, one that was largely self-sustaining and self-reliant, having developed largely outside of, or in the margins of, the institutional art world. I thought that a less authoritarian, more open history archiving this practice would be more in keeping with the spirit of the work. This is why I called my chronology "a story" and not "THE History" of net.art.

Also, I thought it was important to acknowledge my own obvious selection biases. My history is not by any means all inclusive, and there are gaps and errors.

I wanted a history generated from someone who was more-or-less inside the scene. For me, one of the more inspirational aspects of art production on the Net is that artists haven't had to deal with the same power play that so pervades the mainstream art world, where collectors, critics and curators have - in my opinion - way too much power. The Net allowed producers, rather than consumers, archivists and judges to take matters into our own hands.

Relying on an "open source" model was a way for me to try to make the production of a history more of a collaborative one. I have openly solicited suggestions for ways to improve or correct the history both on the site and on various email lists. The term "open source" hopefully also points to the fact that much net.art itself is collaborative. Actually I think all creative work is fundamentally collaborative, but generally this idea doesn't sit well in a museum or curatorial setting where figures such as masters and geniuses must be created to keep the system going. Curating outside of the Museum

Fuller Why did you choose this particular format for the work - the entire thing is composed of links?

-----Bookchin It seemed logical to me to keep the story of net.art on the Net. I thought it was a more appropriate location than a book (or an art magazine, for example ArtForum Summer 2000), where the material is permanently fixed. Links act as pointers.

I suppose someone ought to archive the material before it all disappears, but that's someone else's project, not mine.

On the subject of location and format, museums have had such trouble figuring out how to display net.art in their buildings, but this is a problem I have no sympathy for. I don't understand why the work should be displayed there, when it can be just as easily and much more comfortably accessed at home, at school or at work.

The Whitney Biennial is a good example. I think it was a fairly disastrous attempt to display net.art: one computer, five or so projects projected in a room as if they were video tapes. Why go to the museum to see the work? I don't think the access argument works here because the crowd that visits the museum is not going to be the same group that doesn't have home or work access. Why not just give out cards with URLs that the curators want to associate themselves with?

This situation seems to be the first time that the museums have needed to chase down contemporary artists rather than visa versa, because unlike object makers, artists who work with the Net do not need museum or gallery space in order to make their work visible.

On the other hand, I think it's positive that museums recognize the Net as a viable form for artists to be working within - I just think that so far the work's display seems more of an afterthought, with institutions relying on models used for older forms.

Fuller This piece of work was generated as part of your work teaching in the School of Art and Integrated Media at Cal Arts in Los Angeles. Tying together your activity as an artist and as a teacher so publicly is quite unusual at the moment - how has it worked?

Bookchin It has happened by itself, without any planning, with a project known as 'Homework'.

I was teaching a class 'Introduction to Computing in the Arts' at University of California, San Diego in the fall of 1997, and posted a homework assignment online for my students. Heath Bunting, then a net.artist, found the page because I had linked it to an art project of his, as an exemplary example of work that fulfilled my assignment. Bunting posted my URL to a small net.art mailing list called 7-11. The list members found the assignment both amusing and disturbing as they thought it precisely described what they had been doing for the last two years - a practice they saw as underground and subversive. And here it was, being given as a homework assignment by someone they had never heard of in some remote university in southern California!

After some online discussion, I agreed to accept and grade homework assignments from anyone - worldwide - and to grade and post the work along with my students on my site.

For me this project was such a beautiful example of the potential for using the Net to blur and cross boundaries, to break down separate spaces that were previously clearly marked and delineated, and to shake up traditional lines between so called public and private spaces.

Fuller And I guess before we go any further, we should ask, not necessarily what net.art is, but in what ways you have used the term to describe your own work. Why is it a useful tag?

Bookchin Actually I don't usually describe my work as net.art or myself as

a net.artist although when pressed I will acknowledge that I have - usually in collaboration with others - produced some net.art.

It may just be a personal aversion to self-labeling, but I have never wanted to define my practice around a specific form or tool.

That said, I do think it is a useful term to describe a particular type of practice from a particular period of time, when artists began to work with and play with the materials of the Net. From email to search engines to browsers, they worked against the grain of mainstream commercial developments on the Net. Student work

Fuller If people wanted to find out more about the kind of work done by your students, where would be a good place for them to start looking? Bookchin Here is a class-produced project from last fall (1999). The class

formed a collective that we called AKSHUN. Here is a site - in progress - that was named after all of the gallery spaces at CalArts - by real estate mogul and now CalArts alumni, Josh Caffrey.

<http://www.calarts.edu/~lshaped>

<http://www.calarts.edu/~main>

<http://www.calarts.edu/~lime>

<http://www.calarts.edu/~mint>

<http://www.calarts.edu/~dtrehun>

<http://www.calarts.edu/~dtreone>

<http://www.calarts.edu/~afoduece>

The Integrated Media Program's end of the year show (May 2000) is here:

<http://www.integr8.net/> From photography

Fuller A good deal of people working in digital media arrived at it through photography, partly through investigations of the mutability or fallibility of the digital image, sometimes veering off into virtual reality, related to debates on 'simulation' and so on, feminist investigations of the ideologically loaded nature of photo-images, and coinciding with the publication of the first widely available image manipulation software, Photoshop.

What invited you to jump from the one to the other?

Bookchin Photography as you mention - and film - are as laden with ideological and political positions as they are with truths. Originally this combination made these media exciting and risky forms for me to work in and to teach.

In (art) photography it is very difficult to deny the photograph's connection to real life. There also has had to be a careful and fragile construct built up in order to define one photograph as art and another as not art. For me that construct was a worthwhile one to interrogate. I think that the documentary nature of the Net can be seen as an extension of and more contemporary version of at least a few of these same issues. It is often hard to separate the art from the non-art and it is very difficult to keep out real life.

I have always been interested in working in those areas that are the most contentious and lively - not in the art world but again - in the real world. Photography and film were precisely that in the 20th century as is now the digital arena - one that of course collapses all media unto itself - photo, film, painting, video etc. So, of course, that's where I jumped!

-----Fuller It seems that what appears as 'contemporary art' is going through a period of formal diversity in the 'work' that it contains. This is obviously welcome, but perhaps also works to mask something else.

There appears to be a massive wave of rigidification of the available roles

within this art matrix. Artists are artists. Critics are critics. Curators are curators. Galleries are galleries.

Artists, for instance, very rarely speak now and don't think in public about the work they are doing. Under the cover of formal diversity, a series of very strict apportioning of roles is occurring. This seems to be the opposite of what happens when the most exciting and inventive work is being produced - all the categories get muddled or abolished. Yet at the same time, contemporary art seems to be undergoing a process of massive popularisation (at least in the UK).

Why do you think this might be, and what currents do you consider to be pointing beyond it?

Bookchin I don't follow the art world these days very closely as I'm much too busy doing my own work and am lucky enough to be surrounded by and sometimes working with those whom I consider some of the most interesting artists working today.

But I imagine that what you describe as the rigidity of positions is necessary for the perpetuation of that same system - those roles need to appear fixed in part because of their general irrelevance outside of their self-generated system.

This specialisation of labour seems to follow the same logic as Ford and Taylorist models, breaking down production into separate parts, and like those paradigms, also serves to alienate individuals, who feel responsible only for their own link in the chain of production, and ultimately serves to perpetuate and increase (financially) valuable production at the expense of humans.

I also agree with you that this type of specialised labour tends to produce the least interesting work. As in the case of the so-called critic, if she or he is also an artist in the field she is criticising, she is more likely have a more complex understanding of the context and complexity (or not) of the work. And I think the same can be true for the artist as curator etc.

I can only speak for myself here, but prior to organising the series I put together last year in Los Angeles, I never intended to or had any desire to be a curator.

Instead, as an artist living in LA I felt a big lack of discussion and activity around a particular set of topics that I found crucially important at the moment. So I fell into curating as a way of getting people together to begin a discussion of these topics.

It was not a career decision that turned me to curation, but instead a rather urgent sense of an need in my own community.

As for massive popularisation of art, it will never happen in the States.

The US is unique, I think, in its strong suspicion of and disinterest in contemporary art outside of a few major metropolitan centers. It has always been that way, and I see no reason for that to change.

What has changed is that there are some (art) groups working today that don't label what they are doing as art, and instead of targeting the limited audience of art viewers, go straight for the media, thereby reaching far more people. The Net has made this fairly easy and cheap to do.

This gets back to the idea of the museum, and where to display contemporary art. I think that as soon as art is produced solely for a museum it has a minuscule chance of making any impact, that is of changing anything or anyone.

In order to have an impact, it seems that one must have a much broader conception both of audiences and distribution. I think the museum is a

place for art when it is finished making (or trying to make) a broad social impact. It is (in a sympathetic reading of the museum minus any critique of status, privilege or class) more like a library - a useful place for an archive of past or finished actions or works. Artists, object and user Fuller I suspect that this apparent 'populism' is actually a way of disciplining people within the art world - 'the stakes are high now, so play along boys and girls'.

Following on from this, I'm interested in how you see artists working in the contexts of the Internet have developed or attempts to break down the separation between artist, object and user? These are aims common to many currents in culture, not simply in art, but have a useful residue in accounts of art or anti-art groups and movements.

What sources have you found useful in finding methods and ideas from the past to reinvent in the present day and in the context of the networks?

pages:

Bookchin I don't subscribe to early utopian ideas of the Net or of interactivity as automatically creating to a more democratic, less alienated or Taylorized form of cultural production in and of itself. I think those ideas were dangerously techno-deterministic and relied on a belief in the machine and not people to do the work.

But I do believe that, because of the ease in which one can make something on the Net, join a discussion, distribute work etc., tactically used, traditional categories of viewer and viewed, or object and user can be transgressed. For example, on the RTMark site, one can move quite easily from being an audience member to becoming an active participant. The structure of the page as well as the concept of the project invites movement from passive to active. Links: 'The power of the line' Introduction to net.art (1994-1999) Homework Whitney Museum of American Art's 2000 Biennial Exhibition