

Folio

Trans | Meta | Para Art & Culture at Network Speed Stephanie Owens

“Bottlenecks are always in the middle. Being in the middle of a line is the most uncomfortable position.”

Much has been said about how the collapse of space and time as a result of global communication technologies has fostered a network-based society, perhaps even a network-generated society. Less has been said about how this fundamental change in the way we communicate has challenged the value of representation as the undisputed grammar of art. At the core of the art-representation relationship is the thought that art is a sensuous reproduction or “second presence” of a perceivable aspect of the world whose distortions, interpretations, and nuances form the narrative of artistic expression and stylistic historical divisions. Yet the representational balance between perception and art has always been precarious—being at some periods too textual, too illustrative, and at other periods too materially literal. But the representational impulse has remained constant even when art has been ephemeral or conceptual, since through the documentation, titles, or reviews of such work we never lose sight of the author—the authority of the subject in the subject/object equation.

But art built for communications networks and technologies presents the greatest challenge to the notion that art is the practice or subject whose sense perceptions and cultural interpretations constitute the work of art. This challenge is no longer limited to the mechanical way that it can be or has been reproduced, but takes aim at the fundamental assumption that art exceeds its composite, material parts. It is this excess or separation between material and art which cannot account for the interactive, generative, and real-time engagements of network-based art. Often in work that has multiple users, occurring in multiple time zones and forms at the same time, there is neither artist nor artifact but merely action and context. This kind of “just-in-time” interface, assembled at the moment and site that it is requested, asserts art as something outside of the classic subject-object discourse of representation. It demands an aesthetics of the present—an ontology of phenomenal forms and techno-social distillations where we encounter an undifferentiated subject/object.

“Grass has its line of flight and does not take root.”¹

For many contemporary artists and theorists, the role of art has changed in step with the liquidity of the notion of the subject and the horizontality of form merged with content. Much of what is termed “relational aesthetics” has moved in to fill the gap of a representational aesthetics that cannot account for the hybrid and inter subjective experiences whose mix of directly perceived, remotely sensed, and fabricated realities are not easily parsed, were it still a critical project to do so. Often, art that seeks to define relations is an art informed by a subject in time—an event or exchange—rather than a subject in space. Within this event-based or transactional understanding of art, where art is merely one of many possible constructions of experience, the role of the artist is, to borrow from Bourriaud, “no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real.”

By extending Bourriaud’s “models of action” into the space of networks, where form is a synthesis of multiple identities, *what* is made is the frontier of *how* it is made. The real is as the real does. We increasingly rely on, and accept as a part of our reality, remote presences whose form/voice via email or text message has a corporeality that is not as much signified as deferred. It is not a construct of representation but of time and scale. The scale of data visualizations, particularly those that aggregate use patterns or filter online behavior, shows how the contemporary visual parts ways with representation as an interpretive act. It takes a multitude of actions, by a vast multitude of connected users, to produce the shape of our collective intention. Yet somehow this shape is more than quantitative. Participating in this vast “shaping” casts our awareness in a peculiar form—one that is simultaneously intimate (private singular actions made from laptops) and distant (actions seen within the larger gesture of others), which magnifies our immediate perception. Through the network—itself a network of networks—what we “perceive” is not an extension of our senses per se, but a hybrid of computational order and human intention that results in a tangible, plural subjectivity that neither precedes nor follows any singular creative act.

Each semester, the Folio section is the province of a guest editor, chosen from among the visiting and resident faculty at AAP to provide a perspective on the college’s activities and also to offer a glimpse of his or her own interests and areas of expertise. This issue’s guest editor is **Stephanie Owens**, visiting assistant professor and director of programmatic initiatives, Department of Art.

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Through this immersive plurality, functioning somewhat like a material base that is manifest in myriad figurations, what is visible or visual is merely symptomatic of singularly illegible political and social formations. So much of what we incorporate into our daily understanding of the world is produced by this plurality that we absorb it into our awareness as if directly perceived. This is why such immaterial, yet omnipresent things such as global warming, our human genome sequence, and vast global migrations take shape as a real part of our visual and cultural vocabulary. Given this expansive “eye,” which defines our experience as a visceral, functional contraction of “I” and “we,” artists are confronted with a new model of experience that is trans-subjective, where art practice is more culturally and aesthetically diffuse.

Although art has traditionally used material objects to produce representational and subjective work, doubling of experience in this way (perception of the world plus the perception of the object that represents that world) loses its potency when that perception is tripled, quadrupled, and so on, until the resonance that plays between sign and signified is no longer the work of the individual interpretive mind but rather the result of multiple, independent minds operating simultaneously. Recent art projects like *We Feel Fine* (Jonathan Harris & Sep Kamvar, 2006) and earlier insights like *Listening Post* (Ben Rubin & Mark Hansen, 2004), which form visualizations from the discreet text and media sentiments of Web users, show how often current art creates an aggregate form that *manifests* the world at the same time it *perceives* the world.

It is this multiplied, ordered, aggregate perception—by nature of its scale and reach—that conveys the possibility of art as a transformational form, what some have labeled an “aesthetics of immanence.”² Yet as we have lived for the last 20 or so years with art that assembles affinities and models through dialogic exchanges rather than objects, it remains unclear how this can be translated into a replicable practice as art. A form that is in a constant state of becoming resists the perimeters that would give this “becoming” pause long enough to be caught in time or space so that as art we can subject it to judgment or critical assessment. This lack of a space of critical reflection is felt most acutely in new media education, where teaching a set of inherited skills or aesthetic axioms cannot be the foundation upon which to support a transmission of formal knowledge or cultural authority. The most urgent question, therefore, for artists and educators of new media is this: How do we apprehend or evaluate a form that is in constant flux, not only in shape, but in content and scope? Defining an aesthetics of immanence or becoming thus requires a liquidation of the authority of visual as the beginning and end of the creative process. It is a call for the articulation and valuation of activities in the middle—the *meta-*, *trans-*, *para-* consciousness of a threshold.



“We have grass in the head, not a tree: what thinking signifies is what the brain is, a ‘particular nervous system of grass.’”

Recent theoretical and curatorial interest in transformational or phenomenal forms (“Making Worlds” was the title of the most recent **Venice Biennale**, and “Build Your Own World” is the current title of the upcoming **01SJ Biennale** of digital art) is evidence that the practice of art is increasingly a practice consistent with, rather than separate from, the practice of life. Macro-level or meta-level engagements, where the objectives of creative aims are speculative and organizational, may be the one way to get out in front of our cultural storm of images, films, apps, emails, and games which can easily swallow us up in an overwhelming, indecipherable sea of information. In this sense, anticipatory forms or actions are not necessarily the uncritical mirroring of algorithmic computational programs, as is sometimes suggested, but a way to work with and against an informational tide that does not stop for or because of some necessary critical reflection.

Network-based art, in a way that is more intentional than derivative, looks to scientific, computational, and social practices as models of a poetics in speculative form. But because they precede or exist outside of fixed notions of representation, organic data visualization, generative algorithms, social media applications, and human computation and other forms of “live” or “real-time” digital interactions still pose difficult questions about the material production of art. To admit these computational, real-time life forms into the discourse of art, artists and educators of new media must grapple with the idea of an *enduring present*—a plotting, summarizing, conjecturing, testing, framing, filtering, idling—that operates as form only by giving up any territorial ownership, whether disciplinary, professional, or aesthetic.

This idea of an *enduring* but transformational *present* is in part network art’s attempt to forge a distinction between ourselves and the networks we use. Contrary to those who feel we have lost some fundamental humanity with the virtualization of society, the networks in question are not fibers of electrical impulses running independent of humanity, but rather the genesis and exchange of human intention, sentiment, and activity. Given that 500 million people are regularly connected to each other via the vast, open “internetworking architecture” of various protocol networks,³ it seems clear that we are not made immaterial by the networks we use but that we have merely networked our fundamental materiality. And having done so, we have collectively manifested, or manifest daily or yearly in multiple ways, an architecture of our shared consciousness that conveys who we are and what we value. Or as Geert Lovink of the Institute for Network Cultures recently stated, “the network, not the church, is the dominant form of our time.”⁴



“One begins again through the middle.”

Network art practice is a field that operates in a paradoxical way between technological or industrial institutions and a critique of those institutions. Given that open and widely accessible technologies have government origins or are products of corporate interest, using existing systems is not necessarily to be complicit with them. Although most consumer technologies that permeate our culture and extend human sense perception (phone, TV, fax, etc.) were generated by the same ideological matrix of interests, the information network seems to be more inherently defined by (and critiqued for) the ideological subtext of its sphere of operation. This may be because much of the standardization is still unsettled, and that as global citizens we are deeply invested in its potential to remain a neutral or “open system.” But while it may be possible to define the future network more openly, outside of the logic of the current networking protocols it has inherited, these rules of operation have for now structured a common language of use that makes us alert to volumes, traces, rhizomes, and clouds as large patterns of activity that “speak.” In many ways, the popularity and reach of networks—scalable both horizontally and vertically to some degree—are what gives emergent media the metabolism it needs to sustain itself as form.

Through experimentation with technologies new to their time, artists have always sought to frame the *social/aesthetic* relationships enabled by pervasive technologies rather than simply to adopt wholesale their embedded agendas or instrumental logic. Historical “misuse” or modification of print, photographic, radio, sound, video, and satellite technologies has been one way that artists have sought to discover the underlying social desire masked by the electronic lure of the new. Degas and Monet, having to contend with the camera in their time, “produced a photographic way of thinking that went well beyond the shots of their contemporaries.”⁵ Artists seek essences where others seek techniques. It is therefore the responsibility of artists and instructors working with new technologies to write themselves into the system—not as a means of servility to dominant modes of industrial logic, but as a way to start from a middle space where art can supercede the inevitable trends and cycles of industry. It was the alternate use or experimentation with communication technology and optical media that inspired the Fluxus to create phone/fax events and Paik to use satellite TV to express how changes in perception are tantamount to changes in human awareness.

Any subjectivity inherent in network art is not produced by the transport of messages or media from endpoint A to endpoint B, but in harnessing, or intervening in the collective manifestation of its form. It is by making legible the limits of net accessibility—the hidden aim and goal of “free” online content, the exchange of privacy for customizable functionality, and the legacy of military war games—that

sustainable virtual communities and related existing social/aesthetic templates can be challenged and changed. And in this act of exposure, where subject/object distinctions no longer anchor critical and cultural spaces, artists can help define the threshold where our interpretation of the world can match the speed at which it now moves.

“Not only does grass grow in the middle of things, but it grows itself through the middle.”

Studio Research in Middle Spaces

This AAP Folio is in many ways an example of the uneasy status of the visual in an era of both ubiquitous imagery and communication media. While it is common to translate work made primarily for computers and screens into print as documentation and record, I found it impossible to relay the interactive work and net-based investigations central to my observations in static pictorial form. So it is precisely at this threshold—the middle space that neither begins nor ends the experience of the projects I share with you here—that the Folio operates.

What I hope to frame, by both the content and form of the Folio, is the shared interest in recent art and architectural classrooms in identifying a cultural and pedagogical space where art, architecture, urbanism, data visualization, imaging technologies, media, and network communication converge. Because the site of this convergence is itself emerging and transforming, the structure of new/emerging media education and its discourse must create expansive learning environments oriented less toward recapitulation of known forms in favor of experimental projects that define the contemporary social, aesthetic, and technological conditions that inform the present and future of our practices.

The Folio specifically brings together two studio courses and their corresponding projects which typify how the site of creative inquiry, as it is formalized and taught in the classroom, is reforming to emphasize process over product, context over content, as we move toward an increasingly immaterial culture. Both projects are research initiatives—one in architecture and one in art—situated within their respective departments as studio laboratories at the edge of their fields.

Art in the Age of Networks is an art research studio that investigates the shift in art practice and the role of the artists in society as a result of the ubiquity and presence of networks. Through ongoing research, technical experimentation and collaborative projects linking faculty and students, Art in the Age of Networks develops ideas at the threshold of network technologies, social critique, and aesthetics. Both this studio and the Technologies of





Place studio, also taught in the Art Department, are intended as laboratories for emerging forms and hybrid practices which blur the aesthetic, social, and computational realms, often projecting the students and their work into multiple disciplines outside of the traditional discourse of art.

Surface Cities is a research and teaching initiative established to study the changing images of cities in the context of a new visual culture developing around information technologies. Initiated by Visiting Lecturer Yanni Loukissas and Associate Professor John Zissovici, both in architecture, Surface Cities is a project that brings faculty and students together in a collective environment that cuts across numerous fields (architecture, information science, and urban studies) in order to challenge traditional conceptions of the city that are static, depersonalized, and focused primarily on built form.

The idea to bring both of the studios together here was inspired by the fact that both studios, independent of but in tandem with the other, have created propositions and generated projects using Google Earth. Although the separate studios have unique aims and methods, both sought, through use and misuse of an application positioned “from outer space to in your face”⁶, to point to new cultural configurations at the overlap of information systems, human experience, and human-computer interaction.



References

- 1 "It is never the beginning or the end that are interesting; the beginning and the end are points. What is interesting is the middle. The English zero is always in the middle. Bottlenecks are always in the middle. Being in the middle of a line is the most uncomfortable position. One begins again through the middle. The French think in terms of trees too much: the tree of knowledge, points of arborescence, the alpha and omega, the roots and the pinnacle. Trees are the opposite of grass. Not only does grass grow in the middle of things, but it grows itself through the middle. This is the English or American problem. Grass has its line of flight and does not take root. We have grass in the head and not a tree: what thinking signifies is what the brain is, a 'particular nervous system' of grass."
- 2 Quoted from *Dialogues II*, by Gilles Deleuze in discussion with Claire Parnet, (translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam), Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 1987.
- 3 Joy James, *Mind the Gap*, from special LEA Issue “Dispersive Anatomies,” Volume 16, Issue 4–5, *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, 2009.
- 4 The Internet Society (ISOC), www.isoc.org/.
- 5 Spoken by Geert Lovink at Spatialized Networks & Artistic Mobilizations Conference held by the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University, October 2009.
- 6 Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. © Les presses du réel, 1998.
- 7 Quote from Autometric President Dan Gordon, whose Edge (Whole Earth) Viewer visualization tool, presented to Silicon Graphics in 1996, led to the development and distribution of what is now Google Earth.
- 8 Jack Burnham, “System Aesthetics,” *Artforum* 7, no. 1, September 1968.

Grass Flows Project

In its inaugural semester, Art in the Age of Networks collaboratively conceived and developed a network project for Google Earth called *Grass Flows*. *Grass Flows* is a dynamic visualization project that revisits the project “Grass Grows” by Hans Haacke included in the now infamous 1969 Earth Art exhibition held at Cornell University.

Haacke’s work, as well as most of the dug, hauled, poured, cut works done outside the museum, if closely read, was less about the environmental elements that came to characterize the works as “earth art” than about a radical revision in perception where nature is seen as a rational organized system. He said of his project at the time, “the shape of this mound is of no relevance. I’m more interested in the growth of plants—growth as a phenomenon which is outside the realm of forms, composition, etc. and has to do with interaction of forces and interaction of energies and information.”

Although these so-called “earth artists” were brought together by the curator because of a perceived shared interest in using elemental materials and natural processes to make sculptural works, their individually expressed intentions focused more on what they saw as a “transition from an object-oriented to a systems-oriented culture.”⁷ The awareness of systems, despite the dirt, ice, rocks, and salt that the artists used, was no doubt a result of the simultaneous development of human-computer interfaces and cybernetic theories circulating close to the artists at the time. In the few years leading up to the exhibition, Nicholas Negroponte founded the Architecture Machine Group at MIT (whose projects were featured in the Software exhibition by critic Jack Burnham in the same year, and which later became the MediaLab), and Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) was founded to adhere to Rauschenberg’s call “to close the gap between art and life,” through the incorporation of technology as an element of an artwork, since technology was thought inseparable from life.

It was this attitude toward perception, where experience is organized and neutralized as information, which inspired our own exploration of how new technologies, particularly geospatial web applications which are tied to specific locations on the earth, influence the relationship we currently have as artists to the planet, and how art in an age of accelerated economic, environmental and social change can reflect that relationship.

The proximity of art to life, although there have been pendular swings between the two at different historical times, is less a radical change in our time given the depth at which we depend and use the communication technologies and networks for functioning in both worlds. *Grass Flows* takes the entire sphere of the planet as seen in Google Earth as the site for artistic intervention. In a sense, the Google Earth browser itself is the site at which we hope to generate a sense of shared responsibility and ownership of the vitality of the planet.

Surface Cities Studio

Visiting Lecturer Yanni Loukissas and Associate Professor John Zissovici, Department of Architecture

The projects developed in this studio are preliminary explorations of images of the city informed by the ever-expanding range of (simulated) experiences that Google Earth provides. The premise underlying their production is the inverse of the one that motivated Kevin Lynch’s seminal study, *The Image of the City*. Lynch assumed that understanding the mental images of cities we create based on our experiences would help designers propose better, more legible cities. We believe that today, half a century after Lynch’s book was first published, that our pervasive “experiencing” of the city through its images on Google Earth already informs the way we perceive and use the city. With the expansion of Google Earth, experiencing the city first through its image will increasingly shape the way we understand and use cities, and the subsequent mental images we form. The designer’s work on the city can already take place through understanding and manipulating the images and the means for experiencing them in Google Earth. Google Earth’s constantly evolving navigational tools and modes of representation, supplemented by a densely layered strata of user-generated information, constitute a richly complex virtual experience of the city. Exposing the city’s unique structure and patterns of use in Google Earth’s gravitationless, layered environment is, like Lynch’s studies in the *Image of the City*, not only a necessary precondition for manipulating its image, but in fact can already reveal existing alternative images.