

Conversions

by Alex Galloway

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"BitStreams" and "Data Dynamics"

Whitney Museum of American Art (New York)

March 22 - June 10, 2001

"010101--Art in Technological Times"

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

January 1 - July 8, 2001

Net art is about **conversions**. Why conversions? Perhaps because net art needs data like paintings need pigment, and converting data from one form to another gives net artists the basic materials they need for artmaking. The conversions stem also from our fascination with transformation, a type of digital alchemy where the use of an intermediary substrate (ones and zeros) lets artists convert IP addresses to colors, video to ASCII text, HTML to animation, and so on. In recent months net art has become more and more focused on this "phase shift" process whereby one data mode is translated into another. Let's have a look.

A member of the ASCII Art Ensemble, Vuk Cosic has focused on converting various media formats into the dots and slashes of the ASCII character set (<http://mail.ljudmila.org/~vuk/>). His "ASCII History of Moving Images" is a video-to-ASCII converter which transforms clips from films such as Hitchcock's "Psycho" and Antonioni's "Blow Up" into full motion green-tinted text. In "Instant ASCII Camera," which premiered at the Dutch "Next 5 Minutes 3" festival in 1999, the ASCII Art Ensemble created a small machine to take passport-style photographs of passers-by. But instead of printing a photo, the machine returned a small scrap of paper imprinted with the user's ASCII portrait. In a more absurd piece titled "ASCII Art For the Blind," Cosic uses a text-to-speech converter to read aloud the text characters in ASCII images, with the ostensible goal of making ASCII images audible to blind art-goers. The result is a monotone recitation of garbled punctuation marks as a computerized voice phonetically reads ASCII images left to right, as if the images were words. The focus here is precisely the concept of conversion itself--there is little narrative, form, or other traditionally aesthetic qualities.

A variety of current projects also rely on data conversion. The new Rhizome logo, designed by Markus Weisbeck and Frank Hausschild (<http://www.surface.de>), is a conversion piece that translates IP addresses into a dynamic visual icon. A very literal conversion happens in "Time As Color," an elegant net art piece from Christopher Otto (<http://rhizome.org/object.rhiz?2144>) that converts seconds,

minutes and hours into RGB color values. Andy Deck's "Barcode" (<http://rhizome.org/object.rhiz?2230>) does something similar. It translates works of literature into visual symbols. Vinyl Video (<http://www.vinylvideo.com/>) makes art out of the conversion between the video format and vinyl record format.

The art of conversion figures also in the curatorial philosophy behind the Whitney museum's new exhibition "BitStreams" (<http://www.whitney.org/bitstreams>). For, the story goes, since much new art practice hinges on the intervention of digital technologies at crucial steps in the production process (such as when a photograph is touched-up using Photoshop), the digital world as a whole has infected artmaking through a forced conversion to ones and zeros, at some basic if invisible level.

"BitStreams" is not strictly a new media art show. There is video, there is photography, there is sculpture and painting and installation. A few computers are tolerated here-and-there for variety's sake. In particular work from Leah Gilliam, John Klima and John Simon stands out. The Whitney should be applauded for showcasing digital art, but this exhibition proves once and for all that Photoshop does not new media art make. "BitStreams" falls short in that respect. It's too hesitant, too technophobic. Consider for example Warren Neidich's banal photograph "Remapping 2" (where's the bit stream?), Sally Elesby's silly doodles (where's the bit stream?), or Robert Lazzarini's sculptures of skulls (where's the bit stream?).

To be sure, several "old" media artworks stand out in this show. Jason Salavon's "The Top Grossing Film of All Time, 1 x 1" is captivating. The piece takes the entire film reel from the top grossing film of all time (whatever that may be) and resamples it such that each frame from the film becomes a single pixel on the canvass. Stripes of color appear left to right as the film's scenes play themselves out in miniature.

Another sleeper is Jim Campbell. In two fascinating artworks, Campbell uses low resolution LED screens to explore the thresholds of our sensory perception. Instead of trying to make technology invisible (which ultimately may be "BitStreams"'s biggest crime), Campbell looks to the liminal point between clarity and confusion--that point of "flicker fusion" where our eyes grab legible images out of pure static. Writer Marina Grzinic has identified this phenomenon in a recent essay where she notes that "delays in transmission-time, busy signals from service providers, [and] crashing web browsers" are not simply the undesirable side-effects of technology, but are in fact the very aesthetic of that technology. Campbell understands this, while many others in the exhibition do not.

Running in parallel at the Whitney is a much smaller exhibition called "Data Dynamics" (<http://www.whitney.org/datadynamics>). While not all the pieces in this show require the web to function, this is essentially a net art show, and an exciting one indeed. Curator Christiane Paul (formerly of the pioneering but now defunct tech art magazine "Intelligent Agent") met an interesting challenge: how to stage a net art show using Americans when net art has historically been very *non* American. Thus, the art stars of Europe are decidedly not in this show-- people like Jodi, Knowbotic Research or Etoy--such is the personality of the Whitney. Instead

Paul picked from the New York net art scene, hanging recent work from Mark Napier, Maciej Wisniewski and others.

Perhaps the most successful piece in "Data Dynamics" is "The Apartment" (<http://www.turbulence.org/Works/apartment/>), an artwork by Marek Walczak and Martin Wattenberg that hinges on a conversion between words and spaces. First, the user types sentences on the keyboard. Next, each word is converted into a room in an imaginary apartment building. An invisible dictionary performs the translations. Words like "you" and "love" become the bedroom, while "book," or "sentence," become the library. The semantic connections between words and spaces was arrived at by the artists themselves, who created a mini-dictionary of the couple hundred most common terms they were likely to encounter. Finally, the artwork renders the imaginary apartment in 3D, creating a warped domestic space wallpapered with a collage of images.

3000 miles away, in the SFMoMA's exhibition "010101" (<http://010101.sfmoma.org>), a new work from Entropy8zuper! titled "Eden.Garden 1.0" (<http://eden.garden1.0.projects.sfmoma.org/>) is also based on a fundamental conversion. In this piece, a three-dimensional landscape appears on the screen. At the same moment an HTML page is fetched and parsed word by word for its component mark-up tags. Using a special reference chart created by the artists the HTML tags are converted into animals, plants and other objects within the virtual landscape. For example, line and paragraph breaks appear as bushes and flowers, while images become butterflies, and fonts become small bunnies. Using the Eden.Garden, the user can quite literally "visit" a webpage--walk around inside of it and seeing what it might *look* like converted into a virtual space.

Mark Napier's "Feed" (<http://feed.projects.sfmoma.org/>) does something similar. Webpages are fetched via the Internet and converted into various charts and graphs. As the artist writes, "FEED reads HTML and images, reducing web pages to a stream of text and pixels. That stream is fed to nine displays that chart, graph, and plot the data." Where Entropy8zuper's conversion is lush and organic, Napier's is statistical and analytic. The qualities of pure data are brought to the fore, unbuffered and indifferent in this cold interface.

<http://010101.sfmoma.org/>
<http://www.whitney.org/bitstreams>
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<http://www.vinylvideo.com>
<http://www.turbulence.org/Works/apartment>
<http://eden.garden1.0.projects.sfmoma.org>
<http://feed.projects.sfmoma.org>