Harvesting the Net: Memory Flesh

Interview with Diane Ludin

by Rachel Greene

Rachel Greene: *Harvesting the Net: Memory Flesh* is part of a series of works on genetics, and the new technological realities of bio-humans. Can you talk about how your earlier pieces informed what you wanted to do with this latest one? Clearly, it makes sense for you to have taken on the Genome proper... but what else?

Diane Ludin: About three years ago I started investigating what the human genome was attempting to make. I found it almost impossible to sift through the emerging public discussion around it; it was and still continues to be a subject that stages a certain type of information warfare. But it kept making the papers and getting a lot of media attention with inflated projections of its potential.

After 6-9 months of pretty focused research I was able to recognize some recurring themes. I had enough information to build proposals for online projects that would get funding from Franklin Furnace and Turbulence.org. These projects, at the intersection of performance, the body, computer technology and the Internet, gave me a more concrete understanding of the surrounding info-science. My projects became containers for reflecting recurring themes I was beginning to recognize. Some of the themes being: the economic inflation surrounding biotech companies; the invention of online software tools to help track information such as patenting on sequencing research for companies and research initiatives; the inflated projections by pharmaceutical companies and medical practitioners of biotech's potential.

Like any futuristic phenomenon it takes projections extremely well. It was very hard to get to some of the practical mechanisms and real-time processes behind the hype being manufactured.

So Genetic response system 1.0 was about imaginary visual projections from movies that would draw together a broad approach to biotech in general, and not specifically the human genome. It had a series of quotations from various sources (none of them scientific), invented terms, and links from friends' projects, all mixed with biotech companies and scientific research initiatives. I had spent a few years working in collaboration with artists such as Francesca da Rimini, Ricardo Dominguez, and the Fakeshop gang whose work projected critical, imaginary scenarios approaching technology and science in an art context. Genetic response system 1.0 became a disembodied structure framing my work with these practitioners in my (impulsive) reasoning at the time.

In 1998 I began studying with Natalie Jeremijenko. I found many commonalties in Natalie's critical view of science, technology and culture, with that of Francesca, Ricardo and the Fakeshoppers. However, Natalie had a different practical

relationship to the discussions of the designing of that technology and it's journey into culture and economy. Her ideas and work gave me a contrast for thinking about different cultural projects that technology and emerging sciences were bringing forward. I was able to modify my working practice and build my own investigations. This and financial support from Franklin Furnace and Turbulence.org allowed me to build some projects where I was responsible for the conceptual structure.

Genetic response system 3.0, commissioned by Turbulence.org, was more of solo meditation than Genetic response system 1.0. I decided to radically reduce the materials I was pulling together. I was chasing after computer companies advertising biotech and related sciences, and began archiving images of economic behavior through online news services like CNN. I mixed these still images with educational video on cellular behavior. It was a place for me to start conceptually mixing the imagery I was drawn to in a more focused manner.

When I finished working on Genetic response system 3.0, I was still feeling the need to go deeper. I had been considering trying to build a search engine, thinking that would be the ultimate way of tracking the shifting and large amounts of information on the human genome without spending much energy weeding through unnecessary information. I looked into what it would take to build a search engine, how they were programmed, and what their limitations were. I concluded that building a search engine kept me too far away from the information content I wanted to capture, and there would need to be some heavy duty filtering of that data to get the returns I was looking for. This, and the thought that I would be making temporary links based on information that other groups maintained, made me realize what I really wanted to build was a repository to record searches that I and other people I was working with could make.

So I proposed a database project whose contents I would gather and re-purpose for viewers over the course of a year. I then began working with Andrea Mayr to design a database that we could use to archive online materials I wanted to work with. We used MySQL with a php3 interface. MySQL is an open source database software, and php3 is a scripting language with html embedded in it. So *Harvesting the Net: Memory Flesh* is a more complete framing structure in that it contains the original source material discovered through my time-based searches online. As far as some of the differences in the type of collage this project makes, it is a relatively more permanent one. Its contents are more focused conceptually. The relationships between all the visual elements are clearer and more generalized. Part of what I accomplished with this project, which I was unable to reach with the others, was to capture what the laboratories that make the human genome look like. What are the tools of the scientists who are making history? What do the laboratory workers look like, and what is the type of imagery these new factories are manufacturing to tell their stories?

RG: How has Natalie has influenced you, and what have you learned from her? Not only am I a fan of her work, but I think seeing these exchanges/pedagogical relationships at work can be interesting. Especially since as women we are often discouraged from this kind of exchange, and or get caught up in, or held up by, the goal of technomastery.

DL: Amen, been talking a lot about this phenomenon with Shu Lea Cheang, Yvonne Volkart, Diane Nerwin, and Ricardo over the last couple of days. They are part of the show I presented some work in here (in Lucerne, Switzerland). We have been calling it technoformalism, but I like "technomastery" better.

RG: Cool! So what did you take from Natalie's work and teaching?

Many things... the most recurring phrase that comes back to me as I am working on this project and technowork in general (be it devices or the internet), is a phrase that I got from an essay of hers you published on RHIZOME.org called "Database Politics." She wrote: "...technologies are tangible social relations. That said, technologies can therefore be used to make social relations tangible."

I often ask myself whether or not I am making tangible the social relations I am interested in - apparent or not. It has become one of the standards I use to evaluate my output. I was curious as to what that meant when I read it. I was only able to imagine it partially. It seemed that a technological relationship had its own category, and very little social interaction within it, by the fact that it has only begun to move into public awareness in the last couple of years, (therefore having low contrast and only extremely minimal social experience could be accessed). It became an idea I understood more as I activated it, and layered it into my thinking.

RG: You said "... Natalie had a different practical relationship to the discussions of the designing of that technology and it's journey into culture and economy." Let's talk about that.

DL: Ricardo and Fakeshop did not work through the institution the way that Natalie does. Francesca began with a more organizing interface in Australia (and a background in corporate technological purposing), so there are specific differences that we in New York, outside institutions, had yet to access. Ricardo and Fakeshop were trying to mobilize their cultural activity through art, writing and activism and are more bound by these filters than Natalie. Natalie worked at Xerox PARC, and was doing her doctorate at Stanford in Silicon Valley, which I consider a social and developmental root of the computer industry. Stanford was where a lot of the industry stars were educated. It seems that it offered her interior access to the industry development that we as East Coast artists and activists were struggling to grasp. She was able to practice her work and social activity with access to the machinery that was, and still is, defining technomastery.

RG: I really like that for a number of your projects you use links, images, text, or often some basic, frames technology. In your statement you use terms like "search strings" "conceptual parsing engine" - you're using somewhat inflated tech terms to talk about your own subjective hunting, gathering, and filtering. Can you talk about that as a strategy?

DL: I think emerging or progressive technological distribution language contains inflated projections. It is a creative process that is accessed by various types of PR media machinery building it. The distribution language we are fed needs to be regenerated. It is often very sci-fi, and applies inflated technological language to simple software and Internet manipulations. This is a way in which I can locate the tangible social relation in whatever technology I am working with and behave

it. It is in the concept and creative manipulation of that language that I can move the fastest. Visualization technology and visualization culture move at a different speed in relation to text, and writing within computer technology. The part of my practice that is regenerating technological terms is often the most fun for me. Word-processing interfaces and text manipulation are closer to innate computer language. The database that we designed for Memory Flesh is a simple relational database.

RG: Tell me a little bit about what it's been like as an artist circulating through some of the institutional hallways of interactive art? New media art has been so trendy and privileged lately; it worries me! I worry that the elements I cherish most about it - hacktivism, tactical media, and its capacity for institutional critique and social engagement will be lost in favor of presentation or dumb technomastery.

DL: Part of the work I have been developing is possible because of the privilege that institutions are now affording to net-specific work. A major reason for my building on the net has to do with what I am financially supported to do. I have other work, both artwork and labor for living, but I am not paid enough to develop it, not to the level I am to work on the net. In some ways it makes my work as an artist easier, that I don't have to work as hard to promote myself, propose projects or convince institutions of its significance. The institutions are doing this for me. It is also helping me activate a practice that is more culturally motivated, as opposed to artwork that has a set relationship to culture, and a history of cultural expectations that categorize it.

There is currently a scramble to find work that utilizes the net in the way that I have been using it in the last few years. I don't know how long this will last, but I have been fortunate recently to propose ideas that institutions are willing to promote, and to fund. And last but not least, it is easy to translate my artistic practice into experience as a designer and technical consultant for companies wanting to use the net.

The institutionalization or trendiness of any emerging artistic or cultural movement of attention goes hand in hand with the weaving of standards that are driven by previous historical traditions of mastery. As far as socially engaged/politicized work being replaced by technomastery work, I think technomastery work is already given more attention. There is the entertainment industry driving novel visual affects, not to mention the speed with which technology companies are infecting the economy and popular culture with hardware and software. Such technology is framed as a "must-have:" cellphones, cellphones with email, palmtop's, wireless palmtops, beeper's, digital cameras, portable mp3 players, etc. These cultural mechanisms shape our expectations of computer technology's purpose. As a result so much attention and time are given to keeping up with the latest trends in devices and software that there is little left to consider the impact of them. So we are left

with a technology for technology's sake attitude in our culture. This is an agenda that drives a lot of institutional funding of art. Artists are great for manifesting what doesn't yet exist in culture at large. For me, when considering my recent projects, I think of what I want to do with people's attention. I assume that the

user of my sites will pay attention to all the choices I've made in assembling the elements of the project. This allows me to play with associations within the given set of text and images, and begin to interact with the expectations we are given when considering work on the net.

The potential we are losing in the transfer of art that is technologically based/interactive to being evaluated for it's technomastery is the possibility to reach audiences that may not have been looking for socially engaged or politicized work, or even the opportunity to encounter it. It seems to me that the committed, politically motivated and socially active types will always find each other as will their work. And yet the Internet offers a new layer of communication continuum that can help motivate or mobilize groups of people quickly.

Then there is the sensational nature of issues connected to the Internet, which has been promoted as being more than it is, offering more than it delivers. Perhaps this is the result of wildly successful distribution and advertising campaigns by star computer industry companies like Microsoft and Cisco. Not to mention the inflated, economic impact venture capital injects into the system via companies and jobs. I have faith that there will always be artists who redirect our attention to social issues, and discussions around social issues, to see the limitations of authoritative representation we are fed. And there will always be a parallel group of artists who are uninterested or uninspired by what is behind what infotainment tells us is happening in the world. For them technology for technology's sake will allow an easy transition to new discussions of aesthetics made possible by new media.

RG: Your work takes on quite a weird industry sector. Have there been any conflicts or issues you want to mention? Have any biotech companies/webmasters/publications objected to how you have been using their material?

DL: I think they are way too busy trying to develop, expand and distribute their industry and its potential economically to be aware of the way in which someone other than themselves would be using their imagery. Last year at this time I wasn't able to find the imagery I now have. Most of the imagery in the database was loaded in the last six months. This suggests to me that the speed with which they are currently operating doesn't allow for careful examination of a sophisticated advertising/company representation campaign. Plus they, as biotech companies, aren't expected to put forth an advertising campaign that compares with older more traditional companies.

RG: One of the central phenomena your project points to is the homogenization of rhetoric and language around the Genome Project and biotech more generally. And I think you effectively undermine some of the bureaucratic, marketing-speak of the current discourse with your projects. But did you ever worry that the barrage, remix of images and text (what you explained as your own process to "drive conceptually and mix imagery you were drawn to"), would create more confusion for the user?

DL: I don't think it could be more confusing than the way in which the human genome and biotech in general is represented. This media mess allowed me to take

a simple approach, combining the language around economic distribution and promotion with images of the tools and the environment the tools exist and operate in. The interjection of phrases like "genetic landlords" and "point and click genes" are little bits of spin that nonscientific types can interpret and more easily understand when considering the battle over the human genome.

RG: I wasn't sure if you were just showing how the genome discourse reproduce its masters' images - or if it was your experimental aesthetic in effect. What do you think?

DL: It starts in my experimental aesthetic. But when placed on the content of the human genome, its press, generative environment, and tools - these elements lead to the larger issue of how "the genome discourse is using technology to reproduce its masters' images."

RG: what do you think is powerful about the tools of new media? Compared to the tools and mechanisms of euro-corporatism?

DL: It is a space that is open to interpretation in a way that older media has been defined. There is more room to work, more work to do to translate the drives that various groups find in it. It was originally designed as a communication and research source for computer geeks and research scientists to share their findings. This communications nature and the audience it was originally designed by and for still remains at its core. The distribution and buzz from computer companies to wire the world and create stable ecommerce markets still has yet to be fully realized. The business models used to try and make it profitable are not working. We are seeing the limits of artificially generated economic value that venture capital creates with recent NASDAQ crashes, and ecommerce companies dropping out of business. In order for the net to be successful as a commerce circuit, it would have to be as prevalent in our individual homes as television currently is. It is not and I can't imagine how long it would take for this to be a reality. The mainstream media attention it is given creates an opportunity for attention redirection on a global scale, potentially.

RG: You spoke about deflating some of the projections and claims of technology and the rhetoric of "distribution" and "network," but let's end in a place where you encourage folks to use tools.... ;)

DL: It is important to me, always to translate what I am given into my own terms. In this way I examine the limits of what is distributed via mainstream media representation. In this process I find various strategies that wrestle with the same questions and varying strategies for how to deflate the rhetoric of distribution. It is a beginning, a reintroduction to allow a more realistic view of what is happening behind the hype. I can't imagine coming up with a sound strategy to build work on without this more realistic view of practical mechanisms within a given industry, be it new media or biotech. Since the culture at large are rushing to also go through this process of translation, new media has a cultural currency that other forms of media do not. As a result, reflections on translating net-specific topics like the Human Genome are a beginning that I look forward to seeing expand. And I am optimistic that the route that this expansion takes will be unexpected, and not defined by companies distributing for monetary profit.

http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/ludin/
http://turbulence.org
http://www.franklinfurnace.org

Harvesting The Net: Memory Flesh is the latest iteration of a series of projects by Diane Ludin. This work was commissioned by Gallery 9/Walker Art Center with funding from the Jerome Foundation.

Rachel Greene interviewed Ludin via email in March 2001