

Interview with Igor Stromajer
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[It can be quite nice to see the different approaches to art in computer networks. Have you ever sung your html code? Igor Stromajer has. He lives in Lubljana, Slovenia, and he is a net artist. I met him in Moscow last May, where he did a presentation of his work that was rather unusual to some. He had Jodi and Frederic Madre sing at his command, using the vibration of a mobile phone to signal them when to start.]

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Josephine Bosma: How long have you been making net art?

Igor Stromajer: Since 1996. That is when I first saw the net at a friend's apartment. I am a theatre director by education, and at that time I had been working in a theatre for three years. I found out that theatre is not the right medium for me. I wanted my work to be more intimate. I wanted to be very personal. I wanted to go one to one in artistic communication and I couldn't do it in the theatre. Maybe I did not know how, or the theatre is just not the right place for this. When you are part of a theatre audience you are sitting in the darkness usually, depending on the type of theatre, and nobody cares about you. If you would not be there at this performance, then someone else would be at your place, but the performance would be the same. When I discovered that the internet is much more intimate then the theatre I knew it was the right medium for me. Here I can talk one to one; me as a creator of something on the net, and the person sitting behind the computer somewhere is usually sitting there alone.

JB: Does it in this case matter then who is behind the computer, who is the audience?

IS: It matters that the audience is a single person. As a single person you can go through the project as you like it; with the speed you like, the options you like, you exit the project and come back the next day... you very much decide how you watch the project. As a group audience you do not have this opportunity.

JB: What do you think of internet art works exhibited in larger spaces then?

IS: As far as I have experience it I do not like it. I think that virtual or digital art should stay on the net. There is no need to put it in a gallery or real space, because it has nothing to do with it. You can--translate--the work though. I was trying to translate a net art piece into the real space when I was singing the HTML structure of one of my projects. That is what I would call a translation of one medium to another, but you have to keep in mind it is just a translation: you then have two separate pieces which are completely independent.

JB: That is how you see it; that they are independent. It does not sound very independent to me...

IS: A net art piece or any other art piece could be just an inspiration to do another work of art. The translation made the project so different that only the basic topic was the same: a kind of intimate communication. Otherwise all the structures I used for the singing and everything else was completely different.

JB: Can you tell me more about this particular work in which you sang HTML code?

IS: It came out of the form of presentation at all conferences and festivals. It is always; if you click here you go there, if you click there you go there.. a technical explanation of what is going on. This is very uninteresting to me. I decided I would just try to draw some attention. That is why I printed the HTML source, the structure, and then I sang it the way it was written. It was a presentation of my project called 'Baltica'. I did it in Skopje and in Berlin at Transmediale 1999. The next thing I did was asking the artistic manager of the national opera in Ljubljana if he could give me the stage for one night, so I could sing the theory of the internet. It was possible, and the ministry of culture agreed to pay for it. The title was 'Opera Theoretica Internetica'. The realaudio is on the net.

JB: How do you work towards this intimacy you mentioned inside a project?

IS: It is my wish to create a project on the net that the visitor can emotionally communicate with. The project would have to inspire an emotional response, so he or she would not think about what is on the screen or in the speakers. I feel like a sculptor. It is really emotional for me to write HTML code. I do it manually. I do not use special software for this because I really feel so romantic creating something with my fingers. I put a lot of energy in it and sometimes it comes out also--laughs--. It depends on the user or visitor how he or she approaches the project. Many times there are several possibilities what to do inside a project. It is up to the visitor how far to go. There is of course also the feedback communication like emails, ftp or different protocols that are included in the project. It is not just someone sitting behind a computer watching something, it is always a two way communication.

jb: What is the background of 'Baltica'?

Baltica is about a virtual state or country, on the other side. It is something about the line between the living and dead world. It is about what happens after death.

JB: But why call it 'Baltica' then?

IS: There is no logical explanation.

JB: Do you see the Baltics as a place of death?

IS: I have been there once after I did the project. It is not meant as a real geographical place, but the word Baltica sounds for me like something that is not of this world. I did it in 1997, when my father died. I needed a place to put him, somewhere. So that I could imagine: where is he now? There. I chose Baltica because it sounded emotional to me, far away. I later discovered a beer is called 'Baltica' in Moscow --laughs--, I bought it. They have a light version and a normal version.

JB: What was the project that you wrote to Rhizome about, where people could not navigate? It caused some discussion about good and bad web design... What was your impression of the discussion that followed, and what was the title of the project?

IS: The title was GPS art. I try to use different machines now, especially mobile machines, to transfer art. I do not want to quite the internet, but I want to try other possibilities. I did a GSM project with mobile phones, and WAP art--wireless application protocol--for mobile phones as well, and I experimented with this GPS--global positioning satellite navigation--art. It is about realtime data processing and so on. It started like an idea, how to navigate with satellites in a global community. I discovered that the main moving force is the mistake. We discover new things and we progress by making mistakes. A GPS system is of course used for navigation; you have it in your car, in your yacht. The basic thing first time users on the net have to deal with is also how to navigate. We are used to click on words or images to go somewhere. If you remove this option, if there is nothing to click on, you have to think about exploring other ways of navigating the net. That is why I removed all the links and I put some suggestions how to navigate there. You had to find the names of the files. It is always structured like this; you have a map, and then there are several files inside this map. They are connected usually so you can get from one file to another. There is also another way, which is when you type the name of the next file manually in the location bar of the browser. This turned out to be problematic to some. When I published this work on Rhizome I got many emails saying: there is nothing to click. People were also looking into the source code if there was a link, but there was nothing. The discussion helped me a lot. Some of it went into a direction I am not interested in. Like 'good and bad design'. I don't think that has anything to do with me. I will of course use this discussion in the further development of the project. The ministry of culture bought me this GPS machine now, so I have it at home. I have to learn how to use it for this realtime data processing. Now I have some simulations inside the project, there are six options what to do, and there is an open section where other people can contribute their content to the project. It is a work in progress. It is the first work that I have done that I have created online from the beginning though. Everybody can see how it is developing. I used to finish a project and then I put it online. That is much safer; you can remove all the mistakes, you can polish it and so on. If you do it in an open way everything hurts; people have the opportunity to see inside the process which can be very painful. This is good. I learned a lot this way.

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