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The Internet as Ruin: Nostalgia for the Early World Wide Web in Contemporary Art

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Abstract:

The Internet appears as a romantic ruin in the new media installations of several international contemporary artists. Engaged in a quasi-archaeological excavation of the early history of the medium, these artists today manifest the desire to recover the transformative possibilities offered by the network in its heydays. This paper looks at the romantic discourse surrounding artistic and social practices. What to make of artists and activists' desire to retrieve obsolescent software (e.g. early gif animation) and hardware (e.g. early personal computers) and to elevate them as ruins? Does the nostalgia at work in the practices of contemporary artists today problematically gloss over the past — in other words: is it another instance of the persistence of the myth of 'technological determinism', so heavily criticized by Raymond Williams? Or can we found a critical and positively utopian element in the nostalgic impulse at work in contemporary artistic and activist practices?

Keywords: Post-Internet Art; Utopia; Technological Determinism; Nostalgia; Obsolescence

An interest in recovering the transformative possibilities offered by the World Wide Web in its heydays has become prominent in contemporary art. Artists appropriate and deploy 1990s web aesthetic, gif images and midi music files, and other out-dated software and, in so doing, they transform fragments of obsolete communication technology into ruins. In their works the new medium emerges as the allegory of a mythical Habermasian public sphere or an ideal *Gemeinschaft* that supposedly existed not so long ago. [1] As a consequence, an "archaeological impulse" can be said to animate contemporary art as more and more practitioners make works that "excavate" the beginnings of the Internet. [2]

The allure of ruins in modern art and culture is hardly a new phenomenon. From the nineteenth century onwards, poets and artists have dwelled on the contemplation of classical ruins to the point that it is fair to say that the cipher is central to the understanding of the Romantic imagination. Yet, the fascination for ruins is by no means a thing of the past. In fact over the last twenty years a growing interest in exploring the history of modernism has become prominent in contemporary art. Modernist architecture and avant-garde experiments are retrieved and represented through the motif of the ruin. Consider for example the popularity of photographic books filled with melancholic images of the remnants of industrial Detroit, the almost fetishistic obsession for early cinema's celluloid fragments in much moving image installations, or the plethora of exhibitions and publications devoted to ruins from within the context of contemporary art (Makarius; Dillon; Roelstraete).

The current nostalgia for the early World Wide Web might be seen as perhaps one of the most bizarre components of this broader cultural tendency. Communication technology seems to be the dialectical opposite of the concept of the ruin for obvious reasons. Firstly, communication media have symbolized for a long time the notion of the utopian or dystopian future rather than the idea of a bygone past (think

of much science-fiction). Secondly, the traditional phenomenology of classical ruins evokes a dense materiality which new media do not seem to possess. The Romantic concept of the ruin has its origins in the idea of fallen stones and crumbling monuments. Unlike them, digital media are too dispersed, de-localized and almost transparent things: indeed, it is hard to imagine the abstract numeric sequences of bits travelling across the globe that runs through the Internet as static classical ruins. Nevertheless, digital technologies can be turned into ruins due to their quick obsolescence, which, as Michael Roth has pointed out, is a decisive factor in the phenomenology of ruins. Drawing from nineteenth century art historian Alois Riegl, Roth argues that objects can acquire the status of ruins only when they hold what Riegl called "age-value." This, in turn, depends on its use; that is to say, it is only those objects which are not useful anymore that can trigger the contemplative and intellectual pleasures of ruins. "It becomes important that the ruin appear as an anachronism: as a message from the past more than as an active site of life in the present" (Roth 8). The fast pace of obsolescence of Internet technology – dramatically accelerating over the last fifteen years – invests the Web with "age-value" regardless of its actual recent age. It is the unexpected anachronistic quality of the early World Wide Web that artists feel fascinated with. In their practices, 1990s web gif images, video games and midi music files appear as messages from a better past.

"When we frame an object as a ruin," Roth argues, "we reclaim that object *from* its fall into decay and oblivion and *for* some kind of cultural attention and care that, in a sense, elevates its value" (1). Likewise, several contemporary artists invest fragments of obsolete web design aesthetic with affect and value. As such, it is fair to say that a nostalgic impulse pervades their artistic practices. What to make of this pervasive desire to retrieve obsolescent software (e.g. early gif animation) and hardware (e.g. early personal computers) and to elevate them as ruins? Does the nostalgia at work in the practices of contemporary artists and activists today problematically gloss over the past – in other words: is it another instance of the persistence of the myth of "technological determinism," so heavily criticized by Raymond Williams? Or can we find a critical and positively utopian element in the nostalgic impulse at work in contemporary artistic and activist practices? This phenomenon demands critical attention: why remember the times in which digital technology was still a slow and imperfect medium?

Instead of presenting a general survey of digital art engaged with the archaeological excavation of Internet history, I want to consider the work of just three artists: the Dutch Richard Vijgen and the English duo Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead. Their approaches to the transformation of the Internet are different and manifest different levels of critical awareness. Despite the specificities of their approaches, nevertheless, these artists share the same dilemma: that of celebrating the alternative, utopian possibilities offered by the new technology without hypostatising it as an autonomous force located outside of capitalism.

The Deleted City

Included in the database of the magazine *Rhizome*, one of the most prominent journals in the field of digital art, the computer installation *The Deleted City* (2011) is introduced as an act of digital archaeology by its author, Dutch designer and artist Richard Vijgen. The project was intended to be a touch-screen installation which would be exhibited in a gallery setting. [3] It is based on a graphic interface programmed and designed by Vijgen that allows viewers to explore Geocities, a now abandoned web hosting service – and, according to the artist, a powerful symbol of the utopian potential of the 1990s Internet. Launched in 1994, Geocities became the third most visited website by 1999, when it was bought by the multimedia company Yahoo! for $3.57 billion. A decade later, Yahoo! decided to shut down Geocities, after most of its users had moved to other platforms. Vijgen used a back-up file of the hosted websites to produce an interactive video that visualises the dismantled online community as the map of an imaginary city. In the artists' own words, the work aims "to revisit a previous incarnation of the Internet and allows you to see how the technology, the aesthetics, the metaphors, and the values that underpin it have changed" (Vijgen 6). The melancholic landscape of classical ruins – so adored by nineteenth century Romantic poets and artists – is evoked by the author. "The Deleted City is an interactive visualization which I call a digital Pompeii" (Vijgen 4).

Geocities allowed its users to produce and design independent homepages which were arranged according to "neighbourhoods" (named "Hollywood" for homepages about movies or, say, "Athens" for

pages on Greek mythology). At its peak, Geocities had 29 neighbourhoods for all its homesteaders to congregate in. Vijgen devised a computer programme that translated each neighbourhood into phosphorescent squares whose size depends on the number of homepages it contained. As a consequence, the old online community appears as a labyrinthic structure composed of green squares on a black background. By using drag and pinch gestures on a multi-touch screen, the viewer can navigate around the city in a manner reminiscent of Google Maps. Starting with a zoomed-out view, the entire city emerges as an abstract image, a constellation of large squares surrounded by small dots and large empty areas. Zooming in on a neighbourhood, the computer slowly reveals the sub-neighbourhoods, blocks and individual homepages of Geocities. Zooming in even further reveals more and more detail: individual HTML pages and the images they contain become gradually visible, and, like a ghostly echo of times gone by, nearby MIDI files are played as you browse.

The Deleted City possesses significant affinities with Vuk Cosić's well-known intervention *Documenta Done* (1997). A pioneering work in Net art, this was a mirror of the website of Documenta X – the prominent international exhibition held in Kassel every five years, claiming to present state-of-the-art contemporary art to a wide public. Documenta X was also the first important event where Net art was showcased. When the organisers announced that the website was going to be shut down and sold as a CD-rom, Cosić created a pirate copy and spammed a counter-announcement saying that the website was still available. *Documenta Done* can be interpreted as a statement about the importance of keeping digital art accessible and free from institutional mediations. It aimed to return Net art to its authentic location, that is, cyberspace: a communal, equalitarian space, antagonistic to the market and the mainstream art world. Vijgen's work seems animated by the same spirit of Cosić's famous project: *The Deleted City* is not only an act of digital archaeology but also a gesture of defiance against large business decision to wipe down Geocities. But why, we may wonder, preserve Geocities and not another website? In other words, why would Geocities today represent a model for an alternative Internet?

As Vijgen explains, Geocities was shaped according to the model of the public library. This model does not pertain any more to the Internet. Unlike its contemporary counterparts such as Facebook and MySpace, Geocities seemed much more focussed on hosting actual content than on allowing the exchange of personal and biographical information between its users. It offered a wealth of information on a variety of topics, which were not controlled by the service provider and which were not previously accessible to users. In a sense, Geocities was closer to Wikipedia than Facebook: its aim was less the expression of a narcissist and exhibitionist culture than the free sharing of information. Furthermore, unlike contemporary social media, Geocities did not posit rigid limitations on the format and content of the users' homepages. The lack of conventions allowed for the possibility of experimentation with different designs. "Home-page culture," Vijgen says, "developed in tandem with the medium itself, incorporating new technical possibilities (audio, moving images) as they became available" (2). Thus, he argues, the "under construction" sign so typical of Geocities homepages was not simply an index of the shabbiness of webmasters but instead a powerful symbol of the Internet's flux and radical incompleteness. The same remarks have been made by important Net art pioneers such as the Russian-born Olia Lialina. [4] Lialina's recollections of 1990s Internet do well to capture the sense of excitement triggered by the new medium and allow us to understand the widespread nostalgia for the 1990s.

> Ordinary people came with their tools and used the chance to build their own roads and junctions, work was everywhere and everywhere there was something that wasn't ready. The Internet was the future, it was bringing us into new dimensions, closer to other galaxies. So the look of the internet had to be an appropriate one like in Star Crash or Galaga. It had to be like the inside of a computer or somewhere out there. Space wallpapers made the Internet look special. This was obviously a space with a mission that other media could never accomplish.

Both Vijgen and Lialina lament the privileging of high production values in today's web design; they praise the amaterial status of the early Internet. "Geocities," Vijgen explains, "provided a page wizard that allowed you to get started quickly using configurable templates, but many decided to build their home pages by hand using html" (2). "What do we mean by the web of the mid-90s and when did it end?", Lialina writes. "One could say it was the web of the indigenous ... or the barbarians ... it was a web of amateurs soon to be washed away by dot.com ambitions, professional authoring tools and guidelines designed by usability experts". For contemporary artists, the 1990s represents the time when

the Internet was still a pure, esoteric medium, untainted by the logic of the capitalist market. "The space that we've researched as a new medium, for the last ten years has turned into the most mass medium of them all".

The obsolescence of the Internet is thus invested with utopian connotations in both Lialina and Vijgen's works. Interestingly, their discourse has significant resonances with important precedents in the history of avant-garde cinema and photography. Consider, for instance, the fascination for the first decade of cinema history of 1970s experimental filmmakers such as Ken Jacobs, Ernie Gehr and Michael Snow. Or consider another well-known celebration of medium obsolescence: Walter Benjamin's *Little History of Photography*. Writing at the beginning of the 1930s, at a time when photography was not a new medium any more and was beginning to be accepted as an art, Benjamin extolled the 1840s as photography's best period. He described the technology's history as one of rapid and inexorable decline, due to the rapid commodification and professionalization of the medium.

As *The Deleted City* suggests, nostalgic projections onto outmoded media continue to have traction among artists and cultural critics today. Despite its high-tech touch-screen software, Vijgen's computer installation mimics the simple design of early computer interfaces: the monochrome lines and squares that delineate the thematic neighbourhoods and sub-neighbourhoods of Geocities are reminiscent of old computer screens. Vijgen's nostalgia for the 1990s demonstrates the incredibly fast evolution of digital media. While it would be easy to deconstruct it as a naive fantasy, it nevertheless must be considered as a symptom of a wider dissatisfaction with contemporary society's modes of cultural production. The nostalgic cult of obsolescence implies a critique of modernity, but, interestingly, it seems to consider technology as both the cause *and* the solution to the problem – be that capitalistic reification, social inequality or lack of freedom. In fact, *The Deleted City*'s emphasis on the DIY quality of the 1990s Internet seems to propose that the amateurial embrace of tools and technologies could *per se* guarantee the kind of personal and political liberation that it is missing today; and this perhaps marks one of the main limits of Vijgen's project (a point to which I will return).

A Live Portrait of Tim Berners-Lee (An Early Warning System)

As in Vijgen's archaeological project, an undercurrent of nostalgia pervades Thomson and Craighead's installations. Among the pioneers of Net art in the UK, Thomson and Craighead have produced a large body of work that explores how the network shapes our experience and knowledge of the world. A central strategy of their practice is the appropriation and manipulation of information drawn from the Internet. The artists have appropriated graphic elements from the web (*CNN Interactive Just Got More Interactive*, 1998; *Weightless*, 1998), news feeds (*Decorative Newsfeeds*, 2006), weather data (*Weather Gauge*, 2003–2005), web-cams (*Horizon*, 2009; *Six Years of Monday*, 2013), online videos (*Several Interruptions*, 2009; *October*, 2012; *Belief*, 2012), Flickr photographs (*A Short Film about War*, 2009; *My Contacts*, 2008) and Twitter posts (*London Wall*, 2010–2011). Captioning, subtitling, repetition and split-screens are among some of the devices used by Thomson and Craighead to bestow a high degree of self-reflexivity on their practice. Instead of using digital media as a transparent recording technology, they highlight the mediated, manipulated nature of information and acknowledge the material quality of digital networks against the commonplace trope of cyberspace as a virtual, disembodied and imaginary world. Thomson and Craighead's detached analysis of our electronic landscape has thus been praised by critics for its capacity to eschew exaggerated claims about new media's alterity and capacity to transcend the real. "Thomson and Craighead's interest in data as material," argues Michael Archer, "stands against the romantic, would-be revolutionary view of the internet that can be referred to as *cyber-idealism*" (11).

Nevertheless, I think we should not put the matter to rest so quickly. I would argue, against the reading of Thomson and Craighead as sceptical structural-materialist filmmakers, that there is an element of romantic techno-utopianism within their practice, despite its ironic and self-reflexive tone. Thomson and Craighead's work does not fit comfortably within either the camp of theorists and artists that consider digital technology as inextricably linked to late capitalism and power, or the camp of the ultra-optimistic cyber-idealists who treat the Internet as an idyllic space of becoming immune from the contradictions and limitations of "meatspace," that is, the world outside the Internet. The ambivalence of Thomson and Craighead's video installations is evidenced by the coexistence of apparently opposite themes and aesthetics. On the one hand, the artists adopt the language of conceptualism with its emphasis on

seriality, repetition, systems and rules; this language could be interpreted, among other things, as a nod to the idea of technology as a homogenising and alienating tool, which constrains and oppresses subjectivity. On the other hand, Thomson and Craighead insist on the trope of the sublime, the infinite and the contingent, that is to say, on themes that are typically associated with romanticism and the valorisation of individual expression and subjectivity.

To illustrate my argument further I want to discuss their recent gallery installation *A Live Portrait of Tim Berners-Lee (An Early Warning System)* (2012). The work was commissioned by the National Media Museum in the United Kingdom, in occasion of the 2012 exhibition *Open Source*, which examined the importance of sharing and equal access in the regulation of the Internet and the World Wide Web. [5] It is dedicated to computer engineer Tim Berners-Lee, who is widely considered as the inventor of the World Wide Web. Yet, *A Live Portrait* is not a documentary about Berners-Lee's life and genius; rather, the work is a computer installation which contains many of the components common to Thomson and Craighead's practice: the emphasis on the geographically displaced quality of Internet information, temporal simultaneity and liveness, and, last but not least, the tension between chance and repetition, control and unpredictability. Occupying an entire wall of the gallery, the work consists of a gigantic silent screen projection divided into multiple windows. On the left side, a large black-and-white drawing of Berners-Lee faces the viewer; a highly pixelated image, the portrait recalls the low-tech aesthetic of early computers and thus hints at the current widespread nostalgia for the early days of digital technology; the right side of the screen comprises two quadrants that show live feeds from two web-cams located on opposite sides of the world and 11 time zones apart. The first one, occupying the top-right corner of the projection, monitors the tarmac of an airport; the second camera, occupying the bottom-right corner, offers a bird's-eye view of a coastline of a nondescript location. Captions and digital clocks indicating the exact time and date of the two places where the live video feeds are recorded appear under each camera feed. For its use of Internet webcams, the installation may recall one of Thomson and Craighead's most frequently cited works: *Short Films about Flying*. The film was built from live online feeds from a camera on the perimeter of Boston's Logan Airport and intertitles generated from random results of Google searches alternately using the terms "He said" and "She said." The result was a series of short inconclusive and fragmentary scenes showing airplane landings on the tarmac and hangars viewed from afar; in *Short Films* the live quality of the clips, the muzak and the intertitles helped to dramatise otherwise banal and repetitive visual material. *A Live Portrait* takes the minimalist style of *Short Films* to an extreme: the absence of textual supplements and sound completely evacuates the screen of any narrative content. Therefore, the work demands a patient viewer and an existentialist, almost Heideggerian attitude of being open towards the world. In Thomson and Craighead's projection, however, the hypnotic experience of boredom is enhanced by the presence of multiple screens.

But why place the web-cams next to the drawing of Berners-Lee? And why is the work entitled *A Live Portrait*? Indeed, if one keeps watching, one notices that the image updates every 60 seconds, changing its luminosity slightly. One also notices that the three elements in the installation are connected. Through a computer program, the artists linked half of the image's pixels to one webcam and the other half to the other. As the earth rotates and orbits the sun and night becomes day in one camera and day becomes night in the other; every 12 hours the picture inverts tonality. After a cycle of 24 hours the image resumes its original composition. The portrait of Berners-Lee is indeed live – but not because it is a real-time recording of the engineer's face but because it acts as an interface between the two widely remote webcams.

Originally borrowed from chemistry – where it means "a surface forming a common boundary of two bodies, spaces, phases" – the term "interface" is now widely used in computing and denotes a device that links software and hardware to each other and allows users to dialogue with computers and other individuals through digital networks. Since the mid-1990s new media artists and art museums have deployed sophisticated computer interfaces in order to promote a benignly inclusive aesthetic of audience involvement. One of the consequences of the celebration of new media interactivity has been the simplistic conflation of technical interaction with equality and democracy. As the interface devised by the artists does not enable viewers to control any of the elements in the installation, *A Live Portrait* shies away from too facile a celebration of human–computer interaction. For its implicit critique of the dream of interactivity, *A Live Portrait* may recall Bruce Nauman's dark live-taped video corridors of the 1970s. In her engaging analysis of the American artist's seminal body of work, Janet Kraynak has suggested that

Nauman's environmental sculptures simultaneously beseeched and thwarted viewers, evoking a form of "programmed" and "constrained" interaction (228).

And yet the outcome of the artists' use of electronic media is less a sense of gloom and coercion than the evocation of technology as a springboard for play and chance. Writing at the emergence of cybernetics and structuralism were George Perec and the members of literary movement Oulipo, which is often mentioned by Craighead and Thompson as one of the cultural references that influenced their practice. An acronym for "Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle," meaning "Workshop for Potential Literature," the movement was founded in 1960 in France and included novelists and poets such as Raymond Queneau, George Perec, Harry Mathews and Italo Calvino. The group predicated a method of writing based on a set of rigorous rules, inspired by mathematics and cybernetics. The Oulipo is usually discussed as an anti-chance literary movement whose goal was to neutralise the subjectivity of the author and to tame randomness (Perec famously described the rules of his *La Vie mode d'emploie/Life: A User's Manual* as "a programming of chance"). Such interpretation has come under pressure most recently from the publications of literary scholars such Alison James, who have pointed out that the philosophical issue of chance was central to the writings of many of the members of the group. Perec, for example, used constrained compositional techniques to play with contingency and court the imponderable and the unpredictable. "The creativity of Oulipian constraints," James has remarked, "depends precisely on this capacity to generate the accidental and the unexpected – to enable the writer to take chances – at the same time pointing the way to order and aesthetic closure" (*Constraining Chance* 131).

A similar dialectical exploration of chance and necessity is at the heart of Thomson and Craighead's practice. In their installations, the artists deploy the automatic quality of computer interfaces as regulatory systems or a set of instructions in a way that resembles the literary experiments of the Oulipo's writers. The embracement of computer interfaces involves the partial abdication of authorial control in favour of accident, chance and unforeseen circumstances: computers are treated as devices that make something happen rather than describing or imposing a given state of affairs and subject position. *A Live Portrait* exemplifies Thomson and Craighead's Oulipian method: here, the rigorously simple, almost binary image of Berners-Lee is linked to web-cams whose purpose is to monitor ephemeral and unforeseeable entities such as the weather and the highly regulated but nevertheless ever-changing space of the airport. The transience of these feeds contrasts with the rigorous impersonality and timeless quality of the interface. The use of low-resolution images can also be read as another self-imposed rule or constraint that further enhances the sense of the contingency of the representation.

The Oulipo's emphasis on rules and impersonal techniques was part of a wider critique of the romantic notion of the author as innate genius, which was prominent among French intellectuals, including Foucault and Barthes, in the 1960s. The use of arbitrary constraints tended to foreground the role of language and the reader in the construction of the text against conventional readings that reduced meaning to the expression of the author's inner self and his or her unique vision of the world. However, despite the absence of clear stylistic marks of individual authorship, the Oulipian text did not empty the work of expressive elements (James, *Automatism, Arbitrariness and the Oulipian Author*). The same can be argued in regard to Thomson and Craighead's constrained appropriation techniques. The degraded quality of Berners-Lee's image as well as the blurriness and low speed of the live video feeds may suggest the prospect of an imminent breakdown or interruption of the Internet connection. Thislow-tech aesthetic may be read both as a formal constraint and as the expression of the provisional quality of the Internet. In an interview the artists have declared that the low-tech aesthetic of *A Live Portrait* reflects the imminent dangers to the survival of the Internet due to the possible elimination of the principle of Net neutrality and the relentless commodification of the medium over the last decade. In addition, Thomson and Craighead's aesthetics of noise and error may suggest the blurring of the boundaries between the human and the machinic. Commenting on the expressive function of the computer glitch, new media theorists Olga Goriunova and Alexei Shulgin have written, "Dysfunctional machines are not only those that are broken, they are also those that do not comply with the general logic of machines, by acting irrationally and sometimes even turning into humans" (114). To be clear: I am not suggesting that Thomson and Craighead deploy a low-tech Internet aesthetic to humanise the computer interface. Rather, I want to propose that Thomson and Craighead's playful aleatory poetics challenge Frankfurt-school-inspired images of progress and technology as the expression of modern instrumental reason gone wrong. *A Live Portrait* stages the Internet as a tool for play and enjoyment, rather than de-humanising control and surveillance. By linking the changes of Berners-Lee's picture to the changes of

daylight of the web-cam feeds and therefore the natural rotation of the earth, the installation invokes the image of a mediated, technologically complex world that seems to flow together and become a kind of organic whole.

The Limits of Ruins

How can the democratic utopia of the Internet be reinvented without falling into the uncritical boosterism that was typical of popular 1990s discourse surrounding the medium (think of the journal *Wired*) – a discourse that unconsciously chimed with the celebration of individualism and *laissez faire* economics of neoliberalism? Vijgen's glorification of Geocities "homesteaders" as creative amateurs possesses striking affinities with the rhetoric of making and tinkering underpinning the US counterculture's embrace of digital hacking and home computing. Epitomized by the writings of influential figures such as Stewart Brand and Nicholas Negroponte, this rhetoric overlapped with the neoliberal conception of digital media that dominated the Silicon Valley around the 1980s and 1990s. Within this discourse, the figure of the hacker as creative tinkerer, capable of thinking "outside the box," came to resemble the myth of the individual as self-employed entrepreneur, moving flexibly from place to place, building his knowledge bases in a process of constant self-education. As historians have pointed out, the celebration of the hacker-tinkerer underwrote the neoliberal ideology of work "flexibility," self-employment and individualism that have been brilliantly discussed by Luc Boltanski and éve Chiappello in their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

A second important limit of Vijgen's Internet archaeology is that its emphasis on Geocities amateurial form and lack of organized structure risks to neglect the actual content of the information retrieved. Browsing through Vijgen's software installation, one realises that the kind of knowledge circulating through Geocities was not as subversive as the artist suggests: photographs of fashion catwalks, trips to Paris, cemeteries and graveyards, and websites selling old guidebooks about United States coins are the objects buried under each of the squared blocks of the Geocities virtual map. Vijgen's *Deleted City* draws its criticality from the noble aim of preserving popular memory against the destructiveness of the culture industry. Now, does the heterogeneous content of Geocities qualify as subversive collective memory? And if so, does Vijgen's computer interface allow for that memory to coalesce into a clear and overarching narrative? I would say "no." Viewers need to zoom in through the interface to find the millions of individual homepages contained in Geocities. Ultimately, they are plunged into an immersive digital waterfall and exposed to the pleasures of the data sublime, that is, the unthinking immersion in a chaotically complex and immensely large configuration of data. There is a fundamental disparity between Vijgen's evocative language – presenting Geocities as a collective space – and the individualistic and mundane nature of its information. Indeed, there seems to be no agora in the Geocities virtual city, no centre where political life and discussion could take centre stage. Instead, the city appears as a chaotic constellation of individual homes. If anything, Vijgen's visualisation reveals the atomisation of popular, collective memory and the relentless privatisation of the American public sphere.

Like Vijgen's, Thomson and Craighead's installations appeal to a broader fascination with obsolete information technologies and echoes the romanticism of 1960s American counterculture. As Thomas Streeter remarked, against the commonplace notion of romanticism as a backward-looking and nostalgic philosophy opposed to industrialisation and mechanisation, romantic ideas played a crucial role in the development and promotion of computer technologies and cybernetics in the post-World War II era. Central to certain aspects of the counterculture imagination was the idea that computers could be harnessed to explore the fortuitous and unpredictable.

> Used interactively, computers can become in a specific way, unpredictable machines ... The experience of drifting while interacting with a computer offers an experiential homology to the romantic sense of exploration, an experience of a self-shaping process that unfolds according to its own logic, that cannot be mapped to some external grid. That homology becomes particularly active socially, however, when it is mapped on to resistance or skepticism towards efforts to predict, rationalize, and control human behavior. (Streeter 172)

Streeter further suggests that the 1960s romantic discourse about cyber-culture gave legitimacy to the spread and triumph of the personal computer, supporting the Internet's explosion of the following decades.

Similarly to the cyber-romanticism of the counterculture, Thompson and Craighead's aesthetics of chance may imply a defence of the Internet as a space of freedom and the need to preserve it from government and corporate attempts to constrain it. However – and this truly marks one of the major limits of their artistic practice – the artists' ambivalent work could also evoke that selfish individualism at the heart of much countercultural discourse surrounding new media. Nowhere is this more evident, and more ironically so, than in *A Live Portrait*. The artists define the project as a tribute to Berners-Lee's democratic concept of the Internet; however, the monumental size of the English computer engineer's picture in the installation seems to underwrite the romantic myth of the solitary inventor and to forget the importance of institutions and society in the development of technologies. Moreover, rather than erasing authorial expression, the ingenious quality of their interface may function as a marker of authorship; that is to say, as much as an homage to Berners-Lee, the work can be read as an allegory of the artist as a brilliant and uniquely talented hacker.

But is there a kind of Internet romanticism that can be mobilised to promote collectivity instead of individualism and does not always pull in a capitalist direction? Despite their problematic ambiguity, Vijgen, Thompson and Craighead's practices may help us to reflect on the significance of Internet's recent development. It is fair to say that we now live in a post-Internet age. Digital media are not the novelties they used to be but constitute the quotidian landscape, they are part and parcel of our everyday experience to the point where they have become second nature. Events such as the Wikileaks scandal and Edward Snowden's revelations about the US government's eavesdropping operations have somehow laid bare the geo-political and economic structures of power governing the Internet. The technology seems less and less an empowering and revolutionary tool than an instrument entirely controlled by businesses and national security agencies; less a platform for aspiring artists and talented amateurs than an outlet for celebrities to promote themselves through Twitter or Facebook; in other words, less an utopian elsewhere and alternative future than our dismal present. Portraying the Internet as a ruin, contemporary artists remind us of the different possibilities that digital media could have offered and invite us to reflect on our hyper-technological present.

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Endnotes

1. The nostalgic fascination for the primitive and provisional quality of early World Wide Web is not merely an artistic fad. In fact, it informs the practice of several groups of Internet activists that in recent years have fought against the shutdowns, shutoffs, and plain deletions of abandoned old websites platforms and portals through sophisticated media campaigns and hacking strategies. One example of the significance of the relevance of this archaeological impulse in Internet culture is the Archive Team: founded in the US in 2009 the Team defines itself as "a loose collective of rogue archivists, programmers, writers and loudmouths dedicated to saving our digital heritage," the team, founded in 2009, has preserved millions of WebPages that were going to be erased from the web by their owners – usually, large media corporations such as Apple, Google or Yahoo! "History is our Future", reads the title of the homepage of their website (<archiveteam.org/>).

2. Here as elsewhere I am using the words "World Wide Web" and "Internet" as synonyms for convenience, although I am aware that they are different technical concepts.

3. Vijgen's work in *Rhizome*'s art database is available at <rhizome.org/artbase/artwork/53493/>. The installation has been shown in contemporary art museums and new media art festivals such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) (2013), the Digital Revolution exhibition at the

Barbican Gallery in London (2014), the Festival Cultura Digital de Rio de Janeiro (2011) and the Screengrab International New Media Arts Prize in Townsville, Australia (2013).

4. Lialina has produced an extensive archaeological work on early Internet homepages.

5. The idea for the show arose from recent threats to the telecommunication principle of Net neutrality, or the notion that everything on the web should be treated equally regardless of the type of content or who produced it. Net neutrality is currently under attack in the USA and Europe due to proposed legislations that would allow Internet service providers the right to build special lanes with faster connection speeds for companies and special customers.

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