

Plataforma Hall (1st Floor).
Roberto Aguirrezabala.
Project: "Net·art, 1998-2008".
Curators: Roberta Bosco and Stefano Caldana.
1 March - 6 April (2008).

© An orchestra director and his web surfers
by Roberta Bosco (avatar) and Stefano Caldana (easybot)

With the aim of pulling children away from television, that was becoming more and more hypnotic; the first interactive books were born at the end of the 70s. They had nothing to do with the computer or digital medium, computers still did not exist and only a select few owned one of the first games consoles that can now be considered to all intents and purposes as archaeological finds of a playful past. Those were true books, aimed at preteens and naming them interactive added to the confusion that always accompanies the term. Its peculiarity consisted in its unforeseeable development, thanks to a nonlinear narration that provided the reader the possibility to meddle in the destiny of the characters, taking decisions that allowed them to continue the story in another chapter and courses. They did not last long but they had their period of discreet success and already form part of a generation's collective memory that also developed in conjunction with information technology.

A reflection of all this can be found in the Interactive Fiction that came out in the 80's, when the world of home computers came out of the Palaeolithic era of the games consoles, through the BBS's (Bulletin Board Systems), which can be considered the forerunner to Internet and the current online chats. This genre was successful until the 90's. The story, usually in English, was literal to the old radio serial style and the users had to contribute to the story with textual commands through which they described their actions or words. The arrival of graphics at first and *point and click* interfaces later signalled the end of interactive fiction and the birth of videogames, Internet and personal computing, as we know it today.

The 90's, again with the introduction of another technology, in this case the Internet, opened new fields of artistic experimentation. This gave way to the appearance of net.art, art on Internet, which appeared when the dilemma on the significance of artwork was considered for the first time, in reference to an immaterial product that only exists on the web. The artists' need to tell stories through their work, on the one hand there exist superfluous works -where the enjoyment of the product, no matter how multimedia it is, is always linear-, and on the other there are more complex works like those that make up the exhibit dedicated to Roberto Aguirrezabala, one of the most interesting artists of net.art international.

Although it is not his first work, the art from Bilbao became known in 1999 with *what:you:get*, a net.art work produced by net_condition, the first exhibit held simultaneously in the physical space of a museum (three to be exact) and on the

Internet. The exhibit, commissioned by Claudia Giannetti and Peter Weibel, who had just finished debuting as director of ZKM (Centre for Art and Media of Karlsruhe in Germany), became a milestone in digital art history. *What:you:get* is a project that spies on the user and analyzes the identity signals that he/she generates while surfing on the net, by way of a tale of two fictional characters that tell the story of their own experiences. It is structured in two different parts; the common denominator is the game between reality and fiction. In the first part, as the user learns the characters' way of thinking and their conflicts, the programme registers all his/her movements in a database where his/her identity profile is created. In the second, the user accesses a virtual community where the system will permit him/her to contact Internet users whose profiles are most similar to their own, uncovering all the clichés surrounding intelligent search engines.

Although there are slight differences, all of Aguirrezabala's works revolve around two fetish themes: the concept of identity and interpersonal relationships in the Internet era. His projects are not the stereotypic websites; they do not have banners, headlines or real menus and manage to orient the user towards unforeseeable thematic developments. The artist becomes an orchestra director that places instruments in the hands of the surfers that allow them to meet the other users and mix with them. By means of tools like chat rooms, private messages, short questionnaires, passwords and virtual alter egos, the artist's hand, which at first glance disappears behind interfaces that remind us of virtual communities, is always present and in some cases hangs over the users as in the case of *Badplayer*, the exhibit's second work. Created in 2002, *Badplayer* is a net.art project that develops in an artificial intelligence context on Internet and uses the chat room to treat the problems of communication. The project stages a cruel game on the monitoring of Internet users, where nobody can foresee the identity of the other users and their reactions. The works are based on a collective navigation system where all the actions that the user does -like answering questions on his/her identity, chatting and sending messages- are never private. This way, as the user progresses in the game, he/she collects information that gives more power and control over the rest. There are no winners or losers, only the *Badplayer*, the most experienced player and the most powerful place in this pyramid system which everyone wants to occupy.

Finally, *Easyfriend* is a piece from 2006, which is a hybrid between active cinema and net.art and ends a cycle in Aguirrezabala's last ten years of production. *Easyfriend* evolves in a fictional world, populated by numerous couples who can relate and converse as if it were a real chat, accessed by creating two characters: on the one hand, a virtual avatar with a nick as in any other chat room, and on the other, its alter ego or virtual friend, a *bot* (*easyBot*), endowed with an intelligence chosen by the user, who must define its character by projecting his/her desires and expectations into it. This scene or social interface is only the first reading level in an interactive story in 14 chapters that tells the difficulties of two characters in a film style: Oriol, an artist in crisis and Laura, an art journalist who must interview him because of his new exhibit. The participation of Internet users is the determining factor because the story is constructed by discovering, living and participating in its development, until the Hitchcock like ending.

These are not Roberto Aguirrezabala's only three projects, among his others, *easyOne* in 1998 and *Scanner Game* in 2001 stand out, neither are presently available on the Internet, circumstances that demonstrate the difficulty of conserving and collecting, a problem that pursues net.art since the beginning. Unlike other art disciplines that have been rapidly assimilated by museums and the art market, net.art continues to be discriminated against because of its nature. Besides its poor profitability, the unedited exhibition and conservation problems that the digital medium, a temporary medium of an area in constant evolution where each programming language only works on the computers in which they have been devised.

There are still too many false myths around the world about net.art, and in this exhibit, we intend to refute at least one. Given the fact that we would have liked to know Oscar Wilde's opinion on the subject, to the question What is net.art? which we ask Dorian, the name of one of the *bots* that lives in *Easyfriend* and the emblematic lead character of the Irish writer's unforgettable story, answered us: "...it is simply an (artistic) expression, that uses the net as an investigative medium, but everyone must formulate their own idea on what function it plays. The artistic object does not exist, neither is it possible to market it, so many understand that it is not a piece to be viewed in an art gallery." This has been refuted..., here and now!

Roberto Aguirrezabala

<http://www.robertoaguirrezabala.com>

what:you:get

<http://www.whatyouget.net>

Badplayer

<http://www.badplayer.com>

Easyfriend

<http://www.easyfriend.org>