

## **Interview with David Ross**

by Carlos Motta

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**Carlos Motta:** Based on the years that you've been closely looking at Net-Art could you say in what aesthetic and social direction artists using this medium are leading us? Should we be "expecting" something from a medium that is in a constant state of flux?

**David Ross:** I have a problem with the singular word direction, because I think if there's any characteristic and distinctive quality to Net Art it is that it remains undirected and very anarchic. The nature of the medium itself doesn't lead to any one particular formal or ideological direction. Obviously there are people that are doing things that use some of the same techniques, programs, that use some of the distinctive qualities of Net Art, but even in that case it's all for very different reasons. For me the key is that Net Art is a kind of art – making that is central in the post – conceptual era; by that I mean that the idea comes first. And what you then do with it, how you make it work, whether you employ the Internet or any number of tool sets or venues, or social structures, or technological frameworks is, at least from my perspective, fully a function of what the idea demands or calls for. I don't think that there is, thank God, a school of Net Art. I don't think that there's a central critical approach, in fact I don't think there is any powerful or prominent critics who are playing the role of gatekeepers. There are some prominent curators like my former colleague Benjamin Weil and Peter Weibel in Germany, but even they seem to be characterized by being extremely open to difference and questioning. We are in a moment of enormous questioning. There are very few answers to people posing questions with this technology. They are reframing our considerations, which are varied and vast. Artists are communicating in ways that are sometimes compelling, even elevating and transcendently beautiful and sometimes just straightforward, didactic and annoying. In fact, a lot of artists like to make Net Art that is annoying, that is not pleasant. Even the idea of art being pleasant, making art that makes you want to look at it is challenged. Whereas in most kind of visual art, even if you are looking at something horrifying and gruesome there is usually some formal quality that is visually, optically compelling. A lot of artists working on the Net reject this notion of opticality, they recognize that they are looking at a fucking computer screen and wonder how beautiful that is supposed to be and why? What happens to the idea of beauty that they've inherited from other mediums?

**CM:** Do you think this is something given by the limitations of working with a computer screen?

**DR:** It's not a limitation, it is simply what it is; a canvas has limitations too, and so does paper or the stage. If we think of and try to define an aesthetic arena by its limitations we can get into negativities that could bring us right to the bottom

very quickly. The reality is that the computer screen isn't a space that was intended as an aesthetic space. That is a particular quality that attracts a lot of people who want to make art that engages the world outside of the sanctified and sanitized world of art. The world of Net Art is definitely not a sanctified and sanitized world; it's a world of commerce, pornography, crime, quotidian messaging, corporate activity and government attempts of control. It's a pretty complex and strange space to try to assert a poetic.

**CM:** I am extremely interested in the idea of authorship and identity behind Net-Art works. Conventional notions of authorship, mastery and the creative self seem to be challenged to produce anarchic works, with political motivations, and in a more domestic setting, invention of identity. How would you define this new social space?

**DR:** The invention of identity is something that authors have pursued for all time. One of the great pleasures of the novel, of creating an identity as an author is that it doesn't necessarily have to correspond with who the world says you are in relationship to your birth certificate, your social standing or the frames of reference that define your day – to – day life. You are free to invent yourself. I think the speed as well as the extent to which that is possible on the Internet has called a great deal of attention to the medium. This is a critical quality of Net Art, the fact that identity is so morphable. It has wonderful analogs in the computer's capacity to morph images and to create fictive realities that have the look of absolute real imagery. In the early 70's Nam June Paik talked about this in regard to the conceptual framework behind the invention of the video synthesizer, which at that moment was all about morphing and abstracting the video camera's or pure electronic imagery, first on an analog level and then digitally. Paik said to me back then, that there will come a time when you'll turn on your TV (we weren't thinking of streaming on computers yet) and you'll see the President of the United States come on the screen, and he may declare war. And that completely credible vision of the President in the White House, speaking to the nation, is entirely composed of zeros and ones, is completely invented, and we won't know the difference. This, because our eyes won't any longer know the difference between that reality and the reality of flesh. Because we've been retrained over the last 50 years to believe that real time, reality TV, real, real, real; the word "real" has been shoved down our throats and up our asses simultaneously, so that at this point it occupies our entire consciousness but none of it is actually "real". It's all about fiction. Paik was trying to underscore the fictive quality of what passes for reality. This was during the Vietnam War, during the late 60's, when he took a videotape of Under Secretary of State George Ball off air, shooting off a TV screen and morphed that taped image mechanically – using a magnetized wire. That may not seem to have a lot to do with identity changing but in fact, like so much that we experience today, Paik is, conceptually speaking, at the bottom of a lot of it. He was talking about this essential ontological issue that runs through all the art that's been made in the conceptual and post – conceptual eras, which is the construction of truths that are believable, distortable or used and misused one way or another.

We can go back and look at any artist's work through the history of art and talk about truth, reality and identity. We can look at Velázquez and think about his identity in relationship to "Las Meninas". As Juan Downey – the great Chilean video artist talked about in his work referencing Foucault's famous analysis of "Las Meninas": where is the gaze fixed? Who is looking at whom? Where are the constituent receivers of the work of art situated in relationship to any work of art? What is the artist's role in constructing that set of relationships? On the Net it has been underscored and put in bold face and 60 – point type that these realities are morphable. Now we are playing with them on a much greater level than before. Yet we do it with a lot more fear because everyone recognizes how thin that line is. How close are we to that point where constructed realities and "real" realities are completely indistinguishable?

A few years ago at Cal State San José I spoke of the erasure of the line between reader and writer as a distinctive quality of Net Art. This still remains critical for me: when you abandon the idea of authorship in a conditional sense and recognize that the reader and the writer have become merged within the creative process. Or at least it has the potential that you can take your work in that sense. Not in relationship to an abdication of responsibility – neither aesthetic, ideological or otherwise, but in relationship to the acceptance of the reader/viewer as an active partner in a construction of a work of art. This is what happens – as we all know – psychologically every time you look at a painting; you are completing that work with your own psychology, your individual sociological frame of reference, your personal intellectual predisposition and every other aspect of who you are before you came to that picture. Yet we'll say it's a Manet, Picasso, Barnett Newman. When we look at a Cindy Sherman photograph we are not just looking at Cindy's invention: we are imagining ourselves in that similarly transformed role.

Online we actually have to step up and declare our willingness as artists and as readers to marry, to really say we are going to allow this critical line to dissolve. And we are going to allow that to happen because we believe that something new and important will come out of the dissolution of that hierarchy. Because there was a hierarchy, the artist was up there and the reader was down here. Even though artists/writers can talk about the readers being so important to them, of course we all know what symbiotic relationships are about, as well as relationships that are not fully symbiotic. The writer/reader relationship has always been symbiotic; you can't have a writer without a reader; and now we are saying you can't create a work that doesn't allow for the direct engagement of that reader to live within that work once its been born and put into the world.

**CM:** In a sense traditional discourses of art are being reshaped at this time.

**DR:** I don't know if it's so traditional, I think its just becoming highlighted now. Walter Benjamin wrote about this and understood it in his own way in his incredibly perceptive analysis, both in terms of literary criticism and even in his accurate understanding of photography and the idea of mechanical reproduction.

That's not simply because we find ourselves living in the world of digital extension. It is not even reproduction when you are using digital means; it is just an extension of the information itself. What is the right word? Digital reproduction always seems to be an oxymoronic term to me. Reproduction seems like a mechanical term. So what is it? When it's just an extension of the existing morphology of the work, it just grows, it just expands? That is, to use the world's most overworked and overused word, truly the beginning of a new *paradigm*. When the idea of invention has to do with beginning but never with ending. A work of art, lets say a great Picasso, is a finished painting. His work was done. Now it's for us to go and look at it; and do our work with it, and it affects us differently than it affected people who saw it 50 or 70 years ago. But imagine a work that is never fixed even in that fashion. Your engagement with it 50 years from now is a continuation of a process that was begun by artist X in the year 2003, but that work never ended.

What does it mean when you erase the idea of completion? Duchamp talked about that in a way, as does one of my favorite (relatively) unknown artists: Howard Fried. He creates work that is never be finished. He simply never finishes a work. He does that in a kind of sophisticated and seemingly neurotic way, but I think the idea that a work can never be finished by the artist, that the artist has to give up control, has to walk away and allow you in, is insisted upon by technology. *Hey, you want to call it finished? Well it doesn't matter because I am gonna hack into it anyway if I want to...!*

**CM:** Net-Art demands a fast, up-to-date use of technology. How does this ever-growing, ever-changing nature of technology impact artists' production? Are works being produced faster to keep up with the pace of technology?

**DR:** You can't generalize. I think some artists are doing that but some artists are patiently and quietly working with the technology that they have decided to explore and understand as completely as they can, turning their back to the changes that are taking place around them, just because they want to focus. It is an ADD culture and so much of what we do today is about our attention span and/or lack thereof. For instance, take an artist like Bill Viola – a video artist who in fact is now working in super slow motion 35mm film, because the aspects of media art he was producing demanded that he produce completely unperceivable slow motion and then being able to transform and edit it digitally. But he had to step back two technologies ago and engage in advanced cinema technology in order to advance his digital video concerns.

Again, an artist starts with an idea. I don't think any artist him or herself is being dragged along by their collar by technology. Those who are, are probably not worth paying much attention to. They may be interesting for the moment and even a lot of fun to talk to because they are always up on everything new. Sometimes you have to look in the corners and look at those who have secreted themselves away and are working on an idea that is important to them, but perhaps to no one else. They may in fact push technology from his/her own

perspective; but poetry doesn't necessarily flow from technology. Poetry is often a response to technology rather than a simple reflection of its capacities.

**CM:** Could you give a few examples of a new generation of artists' work that you've experienced that may illustrate your reasoning?

**DR:** I am terrible at that. Well, you've seen them as much as I have. I think very highly of the work that Jodi is doing, or that Jodi are doing since they are a collective. I really enjoy the way they engage and disengage from the idea of art, almost in a kind of situationist level of the denial of art. Yet they think of themselves as artists and are happy to be working within that kind of open ended territory. On the other hand I think they see art from the perspective that they've seen it employed, exploited and commercialized; as a space that has too much baggage. I think they've taken their idea about the use of this technology and refuse to put it in any particular box, very openly refuse to allow it to be categorized and simplified. Is what they are doing experimental (if you want to use another tired word)? I guess all art is an experiment, isn't it, since you never know the results of a work of art? Jodi is experimental in that extent, although I think they also reject scientific and technological invention for its own sake or for the sake of the production of product as an equally closed world and empty universe.

**CM:** As a curator and former museum director could you comment on the impact and effects that Net-Art has had within institutions? How are Museums looking at work that can be global, mutating, massive and, dare I say, that denies definitions?

**DR:** There are museums and there are museums. I think that very few are looking at it at all. A reason may be that very few of the generation of curators that are decision makers within museums have an interest in conversing with Net Art and spending time to play the role that someone in a museum needs to play. There are extremely rare examples of people engaged in this practice like Steve Deitz and Benjamin Weil. Actually, in both of their museums they've been lucky to work within communities where there's a great deal of acceptance and understanding. Both curators seem to be working against the tide. In fact, Steve Deitz has been fired and his program terminated only in the last month, and Weil is spending most of his time at Eyebeam these days. But if you look around today and try to name 10 museums that have active Net Art programs you have to look at, well... The New Museum is now moving towards a more engaged relationship with Net Art, The Whitney Museum has also done that with Christiane Paul's (and Chrissie Iles') support. Also because Maxwell L. Anderson didn't reject the idea that we began back then, that a museum has to follow where artists are. MoMa has a little bit going on, but not much with Barbara London, ZDK continues to be a real model in Europe and Dia Center for The Arts remains consistently smart and selective in working with one artist at a time, looking at projects online and engaging with the digital art universe, in the same way they approach other new work. But in none of those institutions, with the exception of

ZDK and Eyebeam – institutions born to respond to the challenges of these new art forms – could you say that Net Art is central to their aesthetic concern and direction. To be slightly cynical for a moment, part of that is because there is no commercial market for Net Art. There are almost no dealers, with the exception of Magda Sawon at Postmasters and Sandra Gering, who are really engaged in that work. As a result there are very few collectors, with the exception of people who might buy a John Simon fixed-screen piece as a sculpture or buy a Jeremy Blake computer-video-painting (from Richard Feigen) again as a beautiful object. So museums follow the money on a certain level, they reflect the central concerns of the moment. And those concerns are, in a capitalist society, often reflected by the monetary value assigned to those things. Net Art has next to zero in relationship to monetary value.

Even high-tech corporations (communications and computer-oriented companies) that were supportive of the idea of Net Art are not supportive anymore. They recognized that they could learn a lot from what artists were doing and maybe even profit by it in the long run – if they could conceptually grasp where artists were leading and find ways of commodifying and commercializing that. There was a lot of that going on. Now that kind of peripheral or parallel commercial support is no longer there, so Net Art is in a quiet moment in some ways. And that is not all bad by the way. Video art had the luxury of having a 15 to 20 year quiet moment if you think about it. There was no commercial activity in video from 1970 to the late 80s. Its only since the mid 90s that any artist had commercial success, with a few exceptions (Bruce Nauman, Bill Wegman, Nam June Paik, among others).

**CM:** How about the relationship of Universities and Academia with Net Art?

**DR:** That has been a place where art that's not supported by the market gets support. Although we may denigrate university art departments merely as cogs of the academic machine – and very often they are – they are also from time to time centers of innovation and exploration. If you look at what MIT did in the 70s and 80s or if you look at the kind of things that came out of CalArts; that's where Nam June Paik invented the video synthesizer. Nobody else was going to support that back then. He was able to do that work only within that kind of framework. Today if you look at the Net Art that's been done you have to look at San José, which is a rather remarkable place of investigation. Also Roy Ascott's program in Wales. Since it's primarily theoretical it's appropriately centered in an academic base. Columbia University is taking a step in that direction by hiring Mark Tribe, who started Rhizome, to run their digital art program. Also, think about the impact of Red Burn's Interactive Telecommunications Program at NYU. And these are just a small handful, yet there's much more there and it is much more serious than in most museums. Museums are coming late to the game, but that's their nature and role. Very few museums see themselves as sites for innovation. They are sites for conservation, which is the other side of the coin. They make sure that what does get created gets preserved, even though that may seem oxymoronic in terms of an art form that is so anarchic and so unconcerned about its future and it's role as a

collectable and commodifiable reflection of culture. Nothing actually escapes that trap. Nothing.

**CM:** If you could give one piece of advice to the new generation of artists doing Net-Art what would it be?

**DR:** That's a question I have a hard time with because who am I to give an artist advice? I think all artists deserve nothing but our respect and our admiration for their struggle. Like any other artist working in a new area they just have to be prepared for the long haul. Probably if there is any advice it would be not to give up their day job because the freedom that they have to create whatever they want is going to be a function of how free they are to be able to survive, support their families and themselves. They are not going to do that out of Net Art. Not yet. However, a young artist today that is not completely taken by the potential, the unbelievable potential that this medium, this system, this worldview carries with it, would be a young artist without a heart. How could you not be interested in an art form that is so transformative and part of such a fundamental transformation of our entire culture?

*David Ross was the director of SF MoMa, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the first curator of video art at the Everson Museum in Syracuse. He is also a curator well known for his involvement in contemporary art and especially in new media.*

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