Denis Viva

First life*

"If everything it's here, within reach, the imprisonment is in the heat"
P. Virilio

"The art of implication...invites us to experimentate the creation
of a collective language that is recognized as such.
When it does, it aims to the essence of artistic creation"
P. Lévy

Since communication and the circulation of goods were organized into a structure, the "knot" and the "net" ceased to be tools (for hunting or weaving) and instead, became an ergonomical system focused on the connection between the parts.[1]
The development of highways, ports and railways, that is to say the development of networks and accumulation points, has progressively altered geographical space and the proximity between places through the creation of a *deterritorialized* space of flow and circulation. [2]
Simultaneously, net-structures became useful for distributing resources. In addition, in this case, the reticular devices changed the access points to resources and the opportunities for socializing: Marshall McLuhan, for example, discusses an incident when UNESCO had to remove the experimental waterworks from an Indian village. When the waterworks were installed, the people of the village became angry as they lost the socializing opportunity that drawing water from the common well. [3]
But it's with the birth of telecommunication (from the telegraph, the telephone and the radio, to TV and the World Wide Web) that the fundamental change in communication between people occurred, a change that permitted people to connect without physically moving, thanks to the transmission of waves and bytes.
Pierre Lévy called this new net of Hyper-conductivity, "Cyberspace", the space in which "each element of information is virtually in contact with another element and the whole net". [4]
After reconstructing the perception of space, rewriting social identities and making time on our planet synchronous, nets, thanks to the Internet, became the place for individual and collective expression, for intimate and public relations, for our "affective constellations" and for the "publication of the self".

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* "First life" is translated by the author himself and thanks to the corrections of Colleen Alborough. Some parts of the text have been modified or eliminated by the author in translation.
[1] I will use "knot" and "net" in their general meaning, referred also to internet "node" and "net".
[2] The word "*deterritorialized"* is derived from the psychoanalytical meaning used by: G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Anti-Edipo*, Einaudi, Torino 1975, p. 320-4; G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Rizoma*, Pratiche editrice, Parma-Lucca 1977, p. 34-5. Pierre Lévy reused this word for the new virtuality of the space: P. Lévy, *L'intelligenza collettiva*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1996, p. 137-46.
[3] M. McLuhan, *Gli strumenti del comunicare*, Garzanti, Milano 1977, p. 92. (1ª ed. 1964)
[4] P. Lévy, *L'intelligenza collettiva cit.*, p. 14.

Art and nets

This is a large area of discourse and due to spatial constraints; I am going to focus my discussion around a few key concepts that deal with the use of "nets" within the arts. Firstly I want to point out how the Internet became, while it was "rhizomatously" growing around its own connections, a medium for the arts.
Moreover, this same telecoms system that was based on an uncontrolled, democratic flow, highlights for us today, albeit with less ideological ardour, the problems founded by Conceptual Art and the ideological art of the 70s: the claim for a dematerialization of art, the struggle for increased accessibility to art production which saw artists using new media at that time (video, photography), and finally the attempt to stimulate open and critical spectator participation in the arts.
net.art, born with the first users of the Internet, tried to resolve these problems of this ideological legacy of the 70s. It believed in the pioneering and anarchical characteristics of the web during the 90s. This is the reason why it assumed the Internet as its meta-medium, a democratic and shared container and medium, which was able to create places of debate like chats or forum, and expressive contributions by connecting disseminated authors.[5]
In a certain way, *net.art* actualized Umberto Eco's concept of *Opera aperta*: the work as "a field of possibilities, an ambiguous situation which repeatedly stimulates different operative and interpretative choices", so the spectator has the equal creative role of the author who started the dynamic process of the work. [6]
Net.art explored, in a radical way, the same problem of "authoriality" introduced in literary theory by Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, who denied the myth of the creative author by connecting the text with its mechanisms of transmission and "trans-textuality". [7]
This attempt of opening communications by means of the telecommunication technologies found its sociological version in the 90s: namely Relational Art, theorized by Nicolas Bourriaud – not by chance sustained by artists like Piero Gilardi, a link between the engaged season of the 60s and the new media situation of the 90s – selected as a territory of expression the "social interstice", where the "horizon of human interactions and its social context" replaced the "symbolic and

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[5] Bibliografia italiana: G. Perretta, *art.comm*, Cooper&Castelvecchi, Roma 2002; M. Deseriis, G. Marano, *NET.art: arti della connessione*, Shake, Milano 2003; V. Tanni, *Net Art: genesi e generi*, in *Le arti multimediali digitali*, a cura di A. Balzola, G. Monteverdi, Garzanti, Milano 2004, p. 277-87; D. Quaranta, *Net Art 1994-1998. La vicenda di Äda'web*, Vitaepensiero, Milano 2004; *Cinema video internet: tecnologie e avanguardie in Italia dal Futurismo alla net.art*, a cura di C. G. Saba, CLUEB, Bologna 2006; *Arte delle reti: elementi per un atlante: liste e linee temporali*, a cura di T. Tozzi, Ucan-Book 001, Carrara 2007.
[6] U. Eco, *Opera aperta: forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee*, Bompiani, Milano 1962, p. 95.
[7] R. Barthes, *The Death of the Autor*, in "Aspen", n. 5-6, inverno 1967; ora in: ID., *Il brusio della lingua*, Einaudi, Torino 1988, p. 51-6; M. Foucault, *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?*, in "Bulletin de la Societé française de Philosophie", n. 3, luglio -settembre1969; ora in ID., *Scritti letterari*, a cura di C. Milanese, Feltrinelli, Milano 1996, p. 1-21; G. Genette, *Palinsesti. La letteratura al secondo grado*, Einaudi 1997. (1ª ed. 1982)

private space" of "authorial" art.[8] Relational Art placed the intersubjective power of the Internet, the poetics of the encounter, human sharing and the collective elaboration of meanings in the concrete field of exhibition space, where people could meet around the artwork as a "link-object".[9]
Therefore, the capacity of objects or situations to stimulate an open and non-hierarchical sociality, a situation of unselfish cultural sharing, actuated Bourriaud's claim for awareness and human participation in society.
Both Relational Art and *net.art* can be considered as "arts of connection" because they share the same attempt to create open, discursive communities and strive to point out the new possibilities that reticular systems offer to the arts.
Bourriaud's artists and net-artists are critical of the expressive tools they utilize and, in fact, they inform us about the risks of being manipulated by the networks, although they basically remain and operate inside the same environment they criticize: *net.art* concretely uses nets, while Relational Art uses the structural model of nets.
It means that the problems inherited from the 70s (the de-materialization of the artworks, the accessibility of people to arts and the participation of the spectator) are shifted in the new setting of the web and the hypertext, that is to say that they are transformed into new problems: **multimedia**, **virtuality** and **interaction**.
If these experiences of the 90s were fruitful, as I believe, nowadays, it could be possible to explore reticular systems without concretely using them.
In other words, if the metalinguistic attitude of a code, namely to analyze and criticize itself, is today accomplished for the arts based on nets, it will remain possible to talk about nets by using comparative methods, such as the codes or the properties that the networks dismantled.
This could be an alternative attempt to understand the complexity of knots and nets, in order to reveal some unexpected aspects. Tangible matter, for example, is continually being reduced in its hindrance. The hardware, wiring and other connective materials are about to become obsolete thanks to new compact and wireless technologies.
The aim of this exhibition isn't nostalgia, but rather it explores the attitude of comparing what nets refuse, overpass or hide, and what nets continue to use for their connections. The artworks of this exhibition highlight to us this kind of comparison because they remain outside of the reticular communication to which they allude.
The artworks try to talk about these three new problems (**multimedia**, **virtuality** and **interaction**) from a different point of view.

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[8] N. Bourriaud, *Estéthique relationelle*, Presses du réel, Digione 1998; P. Gilardi, *Not for sale: alla ricerca dell'arte relazionale*, Mazzotta, Milano 2000.
[9] Definition of the "link-object" is: "It circulates, phisically and metaphorically, between the members of a group, it pertains, simoultaneously or alternatively, to everybody. So everybody can mark it with an action, a contribution, an impulse or an energy. The object consents to refer the whole to the individual and the individual to the whole" (P. Lévy, *Il virtuale*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 1997, p. 122)

Multimedia: opacity and tunneling

Words like "multimedia" have so much appeal because museums and academies want to distinguish between different artistic disciplines, at the same way Greenberg's Modernism tried to focus a medium on its autoreferential analysis.
At a deeper glance, if we understand multimedia to mean a combination of different media in a single object, support or environment, a church then is already multimedial, architecture has always been and the theatre was born thanks to this combination: body, mask and voice.
We are ourselves multimedial. If we are astonished by multimedial machines it is because the division of the arts into different disciplines – even though the avant-gardes destabilized this division – is still valid: the art catalogue always attributes a technique and a size to each artwork. So the novelty is another one: nowadays multimedia becomes an informatic dimension of technology. Multimedial works can avoid matter, they can exist in a memory-space, undefined and implemental, they are like a potential project in which texts, sounds, images and links refuse an end – that is to say that they lose empirical parameters such as technique and size. Lev Manovich wrote that new media are "the translation of all the old media in numeric data accessible to a computer", so new media operate as a digitalization: "conversion of continuous data in a numeric representation".[10] The space becomes pure memory, with a minimal and residual hindrance.
Postmedia arts seem to be divided into two fields: on one side, artworks that are still made with matter resulting from their production and on the other, artworks that are reduced into informatic data that need a multimedial machine to be covert in a concrete phenomenon.
Of course, there are so many artworks that combine both methods of production, but if we compare the two categories, it's clear that the second produces **opacity**: "the visible structure of the informatic systems doesn't permit us to see its way of working, as it happens with the physical systems".[11]
If we closely examine this sentence, its meaning becomes too radical: there are many devices that hide their way of working or, on the opposite side, there are so many multimedia system, arranged by the software engineer, that can recreate an environment very similar to physical reality.
Anyway, this sentence inspired some artworks in this exhibition.
Liquid Cat tampers with data transmission, they convert it into an obstacle for motion and knowledge, an obstacle that we could go beyond only if we take an active decision, if we rediscover our motor faculties.

[10] L. Manovich, *Il linguaggio dei nuovi media*, Olivares, Milano 2002, p. 38 e 47.
[11] G. Mantovani, *L'interazione uomo-macchina*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1995, p. 129.

Vera Fedrigo and Franco Del Zotto mount a surveillance system that doesn't work properly unless there is perspective coherence and synchronized time. The result is that the spectator can't foresee how the machines will monitor him/her.
This hiding process exists in different kinds of relationships, the relationship between humans and machine, as I said, and the relationship between machines themselves: **tunneling** is a data transferring process that remains invisible to unauthorised users: for reasons of security, many nets –and especially material nets - are insulated and placed far from intruders.[12]
Carina Randløv focuses on electrical nets and their logical and geometrical arrangement in architecture: she connects found, unused cables hanging in the space to other discarded materials, to create an irrational and chaotic setting.
Mauro Ciani records, by positioning his camera upwards toward the sky, hidden and silent data structures in the city (antennas, cables, etc...) and transforms them into entomological shapes.
Finally, Carlo Gloria rethinks the city as a wiring connection model, populated by multimedial walking people.

Interaction: motory program and tactile icon

The interaction between humans and a multimedial environment, immersive and sensitive, or simply between a person and a machine, implied more than an easy mutual action between two agents: it depends on more factors like the cultural conventions of the user or the preventive decisions of the software engineer.
So, the development of interactive systems is to try to explore and apply the adaptation capabilities of human intelligence. From this point of view, interaction can reveal cultural conventions not necessarily derived from technology or, on the contrary, it can expose the "stupidity of the machines" when we experience or program them.
Some works in the exhibition apply a kind of "frustrated interaction" in which the user receives nonsensical or useless feedback from the machines in order to point out the automatical factor (machine) and the instinctual factor (human) of the interaction.
Impoverished softwares, non-efficient machines or repetitive devices all place the user in front of a rigid pattern of motion. These technologies create a type of **motory program,** which can be likened to the instinctive reactions of animals.[13]
Instead of a flowing situation, in which we are able to adapt to changing situations, this kind of interaction plays on a conditional and repulsive communication that invites us to realize the conventional and genetic limits of our experiences.
Luc Mattenberger builds appealing and threatening machines that are characterized by a dull automatism. These machines evoke a dangerous interaction by repeating

[12] J. F. Kurose, K. W. Ross, *Internet e reti di calcolatori*, McGraw-Hill, Milano 2001, p. 339-41.
[13] Motory program is a concept derived from: J. L. Gould, C. G. Gould, *L'architettura degli animali*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2008, p. 1-8.

the same obsessive cadenced movements with no kind of acknowledgment of our presence.
Cédric Hoareau creates mechanical circuits that are impossible for us to use and that dissipate their energy instead of being conductive and efficient. They remind us of the pioneering experiments of the 18th century but without the scientific purpose.
Other works, on the exhibition, reflect on the technological mediator of the dynamic relationship between nets and user-nodes: the interfaces.
Lev Manovich states that the operational environment of the computer is both a vestige of the historical use of the two-dimensional surface (pages, films, screens, etc...) and a metaphor of the concrete environment (desktop, window, etc...). With the interface, icons change their meaning and their comprehensibility, according to the manner in which they are organized within this new context of display and function. Icons start the communication, they try to be recognizable by appealing to our sense of touch: they are not seen as much as they are touched, although they impoverish our tactile sensation. The icons become the push-button.
The *Klingers* of twins Petschatnikov or the *Interactive lightboxes* of son:DA focus on this relationship between identification and the click, by two different approaches: the first increases the complexity, the second reduces it.
The *Klingers* record human identity, they put the sign under an historical point of view, as an accumulation, while son:DA stages the mechanicalness of human association between images and gestures, by an easy act of interpretation (on/off).
In this sense, Diana Scheunemann's video pulses between touch and sight, through the incredibily erotic icon of the female nipple, a demure button able to record the interior and the exterior with its symptomatic contraction and dilation.

Virtuality: etymon and degeneration

With the theme of tangibility we can introduce what is often thought of as the opposite of this quality: virtuality. However, Pierre Lévy defined the "virtualization" in other terms, as a complex existing state of situations and things.[14] Virtualization is a potential state, flow and indeterminate that can be resolved by the achievement of the opposite state, "actualization": while actualization is the solution of a problem, virtualization is the birth of a problem from a solution. Virtualization is an open field that requires, step by step, new settings and new solutions without choosing a certain and definitive one. If we understand virtuality in this context, we can find some opposite process not only in ontology –as Lévy did – but in biology and linguistics, that is to say in organic matter and words.
If we look at viruality in its evolutional history and its material limits, we can detect its diachronic aspects, in spite of its synchronous aspects.[15] So the words "net" and "knot" return to their original meaning of embroidery, tangle, fence, binding.

[14] P. Lévy, *Il virtuale cit.*, p. 1-15.
[15] De Saussure divided linguistics in this two fields, the diachronic linguistics and the F. De Saussure, *Corso di linguistica generale*, Laterza, Bari 2003, p. 84 *et passim*. (1ª ed. 1916)

Through the creation of their artworks, Maria Elisabetta Novello and Puni excavate mythic and archaic phase of human activity: Novello through the spreading of ashes and Puni through her diaphanous and shady structures. They charge every object with a repetitive and empty state of mind, typical of the praxis, closed in process and open to different results. The **etymon** reveals the original meanings of things that we usually consider distant and different between them.
In addition, organic matter demonstrates its capacity to survive and evolve despite the incredible varieties of species and individuals.
The scientist Gerard M. Edelman called this property "**degeneration**", which means "the capacity of components that are structurally different to produce the same results or signals".[16] The genetic nets of the human body, for instance, permit each person to be morphologically different from others, but to work and to produce the same *input*: despite the open-endedness and variety of evolutive strategies, nature encouraged similar organic functions.
Simone Racheli literally dresses the objects with organic nets: the effect is always the same but the shape and the use of objects change. Common and utilitarian objects become muscular.
Colleen Alborough creates a brain hollow, an antrum in which consciousness can travel and ask itself how neural nets can produce sounds, images and feelings without receiving any input from the outside.

A knot of possibilities

I hope that my discussion of properties that connect nets to the artworks on the exhibition is not misleading: my connections categorized each work and yet, at the same time, they pertain to all the artists shown.
But a question persists: what remains of the three expectations (de-materialization, free access and participation) of the 70s?
In this exhibition I try to explore an alternative way, not the opposite, in order to obtain a movement and not a direction. This means that each work of "Nodo_rete" (Knot_net) has an author, it's authorial, but –at least – it gives us shelter from the excess of interaction and openess, from the noise and the redundancy that is typical of the Internet. Sometimes an author-filter can help us to concentrate and broaden our interactions/communication in a way that balances the ever-crowded communication of today.
Instead, the issue of de-materialization becomes an ethical and strategical problem in relation to the arts: in a society of services and the New Economy it's not by avoiding the matter that artists can be against business interests.
Finally, increased accessibility to the arts is not only a problem of money or economical status, but also a problem of the complexity of art discourse and the social conventions associated to it.

[16] G. M. Edelman, *Un universo di coscienza. Come la materia diventa immaginazione*, Einaudi, Torino 2000, p. 104.

Therefore, the awareness of being, in spite of everything, a receptive center – we operate as nodes in a larger net of relationships – and the importance of knowing that there's an interior but an exterior too -still to be visited-, could be another valid way to save the active role of the spectator.