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Detect, Bite, Slam

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DETECT, BITE, SLAM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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This paper explores the influences, ideas and motivations behind my MFA thesis exhibition. It primarily focuses on how I developed my work for the show in connection to my previous work as well as work created by other artists who explored the impacts of new media in the last decade. With the advancement of social media, digital technologies no longer have their infamous coldness. Our perceptions and the metaphors in language are all reflected onto the machines we create while in return they also shape and redefine our lives. It becomes increasingly difficult to talk about dialectics such as machine-human, virtual-real, and nature-culture. With the aid of some humor, I attempted to reflect on the marriage of these old oppositions and this paper will discuss the foundations of these ideas as well as my practice in general.

Background

"It may be noted, incidentally, that there is no better trigger for thinking than laughter. In particular, convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul." [1]

My work questions either social influences of emerging technologies or looks at older paradigms in light of current advancements and practices. In order to reflect on the relationship of technology and issues related to copyright, censorship, globalism, power, as well as our basic perceptions that are transformed in an increasingly ubiquitous technological environment, I use computational techniques at some stage of my work. In addition to new techniques, I also use new technological concepts as metaphors for social issues that remain unresolved. I create a representation, a system or an environment that provides viewers another aspect of a reality that they confront in their everyday lives. I treat technological systems as a critical form of language, sometimes incorporating humor into them. Sometimes the final product can be an object rather than a system, however the emphasis is still on the process behind it, so that the object becomes an interface to a wider range of ideas and network of relations.

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1   Michael W. Jennings, Gary Smith and Howard Eiland, eds. Part 2: 1931-1934, Vol. 2 of *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*. (Harvard University Press, 2005), 779

In order to avoid the work-interface-viewer hierarchy that is evident in many new media art works today, it is important for me to have some degree of 'openness' in my work on different levels: 'open' in the sense that viewers take part in creating a system or its formal elements, 'open' in another sense that viewers can perform within a completed system, and 'open' in the classic sense that viewers can read the work in different ways.[2]

Before year 2000 my work was influenced by conceptual and process-based art. After that I started to incorporate digital technologies into my work, especially exploring the possibilities of the Internet as a medium and platform, trying to contribute to the earlier work done by pioneering artists working on the Web. A small group of these early practitioners of Internet-art, whose works are referred to as net.art, was highly influenced by Fluxus, among other early art movements such as Dada and conceptual art. Ken Friedman, an artist and art theorist associated with Fluxus, characterized Fluxus by twelve ideas: Globalism, the unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity, implicativeness, exemplativism (a word Dick Higgins coined in 1976 to describe the quality of a work exemplifying the theory and meaning of its own construction), specificity, presence in time, and musicality.[3] He wrote that according to George Maciunas, Dick Higgins and him, "Fluxus is more valuable as an idea and a potential for social change than as a specific group of people or a collection of objects"[4].

Rather than viewing it as an art movement, net-artists saw Fluxus as a way of doing things, as

2 Umberto Eco. *The Poetics of the Open Work*. 1962. In *Participation*, edited by Claire Bishop, 20-40. (Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2006), 37-38.
3 Ken Friedman, "Forty Years of Fluxus" (1998), art / not art, http://www.artnotart.com/fluxus/kfriedman-fourtyyears.html (accessed May 4, 2010).
4 Ibid.

a tradition independent from a specific group and embraced its principles in their art practice. With their avoidance of producing static objects and concentration on the flux of time there were many characteristics that they shared with Fluxus, such as the global nature of the movement, its playfulness and the short and simple nature of the experience despite a possibly complex code running in the background. The performative aspect of net.art was also important. Just like in many Fluxus events, the instructions for the event were specified by the artist, but this time in the form of computer code. The event was executed by machines rather than performers and distributed via computer networks rather than physical performance spaces. This completely new approach to art gave way to a highly conceptual phase most often referred to as net.art (as opposed to the later normalized "net-art", "net art", "web art" or "Internet art") which was based on a dirty aesthetic (involving elements such as glitches, error messages, quick coding), deeply limited, but also facilitated, by the network. Artists of this period such as Jodi, Olia Lialina, Heath Bunting, Alexei Shulgin, Vuk Ćosić used the constraints of technology as the subject of the work.[5]

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5 Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: how control exists after decentralization.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 219.
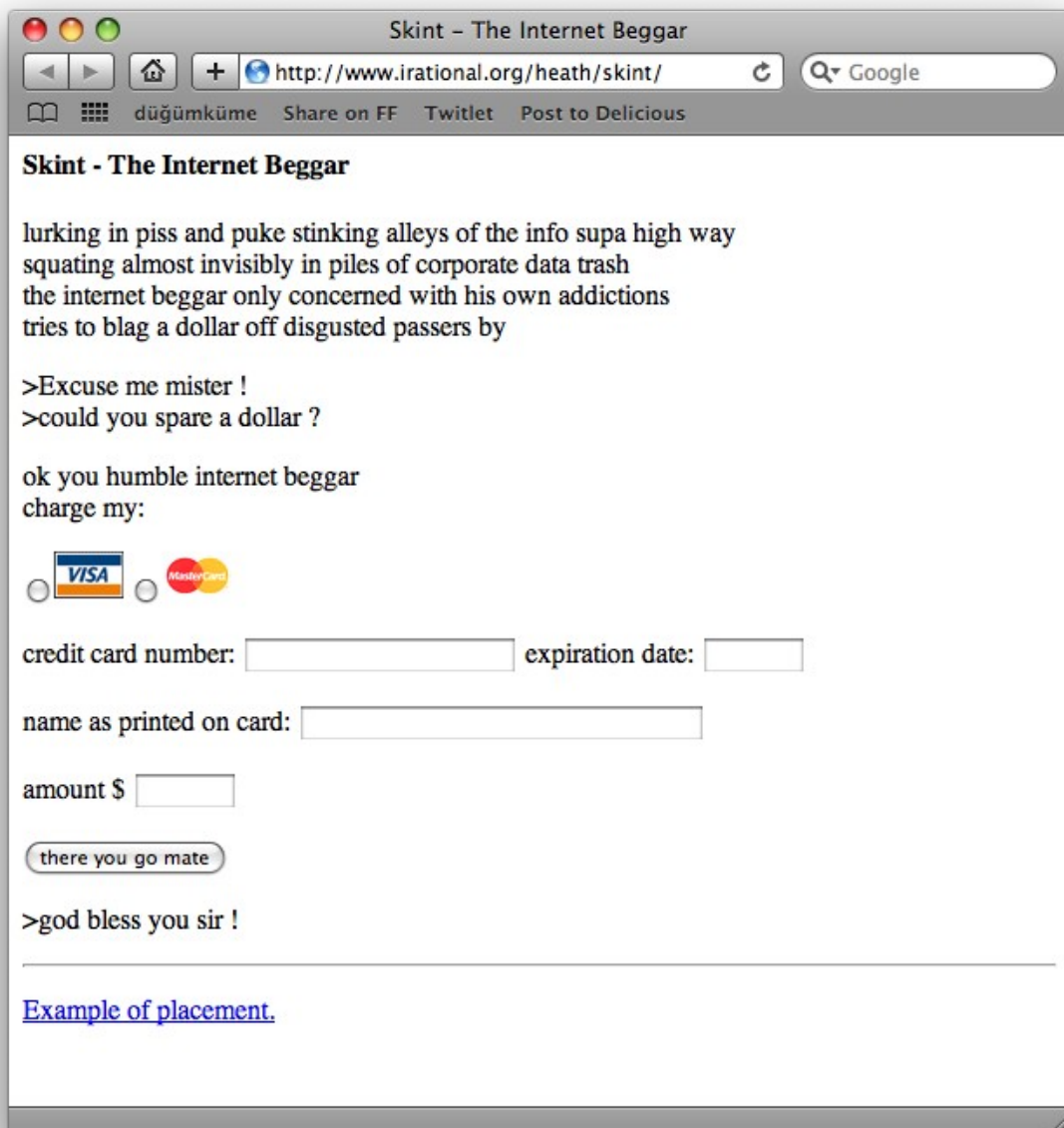
Figure 1: Heath Bunting, "Skint" (1996)

The heroic period of net.art did not last long. Several factors played a role for this kind of art-making to lose its popularity. Three major reasons are as follows below.

First, with the advancement of newer web technologies the hardware and software limitations started to disappear. This set the groundwork for the peaking of the corporate and commercial

phase of the Internet between 1999 and 2000. Internet artists from this period on, like the

pioneers RTMark and Etoy, started to focus primarily on the commercial aspect of the Web.[6]

Second, the inclusion of net.art works in Documenta X (1997) and later in the Whitney

Biennial (2000) marked for many pioneering net-artists the end of their practice. After that

the online practice started to merge with the rest of contemporary art.

Figure 2: NASDAQ Composite Index 1995-2010

Figure 3: Etoy, "TOYWAR" (1999), the legal battle between the Internet toy retailer eToys.com and the artist collective etoy for the domain name etoy.com who called it "the most expensive performance in art history".

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6   Ibid.

The last factor was related to the technical advancement mentioned above. The commercial growth of the Internet started to accelerate with the first release of the Mosaic web browser in 1993 and continued through the 1990's. During that period even adding a "e-" prefix to their name or a ".com" to the end would rise the stock values of IT companies. The IT economy in this period went through a typical economic boom and bust cycle eventually bringing a new realism to the Internet economy. Right after the peak on 10 March 2000, NASDAQ crashed so spectacularly that it would never fully recover from the burst. Even today, it still sits at about 54 percent below that level.[7] This disappointment and the second failure of Bertolt Brecht's Utopian ideas on "radio as an apparatus of communication" in the service of democratization of culture also reflected on some artists working with the medium. It was time to be realistic again since now the cause of the crash was known as "a period of distorted values and valuations where everything touched by the Internet lost its connection to geographic and economic realities".[8]

This time of crisis can also be seen as an important transition period in global culture. Although the economy went down, the mass culture was deeply changed as "the computer-like conceptual models were intensely propagated during the boom years"[9] Network research done by scientists and mathematicians of the era came to be applied to many fields in social sciences. It was during this period that concepts such as open source and the hacker ethic reached the mainstream. Books like "The Cathedral and the Bazaar", "Open Voices", and

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7   Matt Buttell, "10 Years On: When the bubble burst", *European Financial Services Technology News*, http://www.fsteurope.com/news/when-the-bubble-burst (accessed May 10, 2010).
8   Priest, J & J. Stevens "Trip the loop, make your switch, consume the net" (2004) In G. Cox, J. Krysa & A. Lewin (eds.) *DATA Browser 01. Economising culture: On 'the (digital) culture industry'*. (New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2005), 123.
9   Otto von Busch & Karl Palmås, *Abstract Hacktivism: The Making of a Hacker Culture.* (London and Istanbul: Published in collaboration with OPENMUTE.org, 2006), 86. http://www.kulturservern.se/wronsov/selfpassage/research/AbstractHacktivism-book.pdf (accessed May 8, 2010)

"The Cluetrain Manifesto" were published. The film "Matrix" was released. The operating system Linux was recognized as a work of art at the international technology and art festival Ars Electronica.[10] The abstract model of networks started to find its place in the cultural domain, just like the steam engine and the 'motor logic' influenced many modernist ideas and models of thinking. [11]

Similar ideas regarding this problematic era was also expressed by media theorist Lev Manovich. He thought that 1990's were about the virtual and after the end of the decade "the virtual became domesticated: filled with advertisements, controlled by big brands, and rendered harmless".[12] The introduction of graphic browsers in mid-90's made cyberspace a reality, followed by another virtual phenomenon, the dot-com's, which eventually crashed because of the reality of the real world economy. By the end of the decade the original wonder of cyberspace was lost and the use of the Internet became a norm.[13] Manovich argued that 2000's would be about the physical, more specifically "physical space filled with electronic and visual information".[14] Now leaving the first decade of the century behind, we can see that happening in mid-00's social networks. The social relations were one aspect of the reality that merged with the information space. Towards the end of the decade, the use of smart phones and wireless technologies became more and more evident and location-based media started to rise, incorporated in earlier services such as Google Maps working with GPS devices on cellphones, Flickr with geo-tagging of photos or location-based features in Twitter that lets users track conversations in a specific geographic location.

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10 Ibid., 101.
11 Ibid., 21.
12 Lev Manovich, "The Poetics of Augmented Space: Learning from Prada" (2005),
    www.manovich.net/DOCS/Augmented_2005.doc (accessed May 4, 2010).
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.

Not specifically pointing to the last decade, but more generally on the emergence of the networked society, art critic and curator Domenico Quaranta expressed similar thoughts more recently: "What we can be sure of is that this machine, especially in its networked version, completely redefined the usual relationship between media and reality, escaping both the logic of representation and the logic of simulation, giving birth to a new reality, which is neither a reproduction nor a simulacrum."[15]

It was around the turn of the millennium when I first found out about Internet-based art and became familiar with its methods and motivations. Although creating similar online works, my early online work differed in two aspects.

One of the differences in my work was the way the viewer's experience changed each time, not because of randomized events, but because of the memory of the systems I created. A central server would store viewer's interactions which would effect or inform the later viewers. This took it away from being independently repeated machine-performances to a single continuous event. This approach was later to be commercialized in what is called "web 2.0" applications, a buzzword popularized after 2004 and characterized by user-centered design, crowd-sourcing, collaboration, dynamic content content[16] and exemplified by websites such as Wikipedia, YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, Digg, Delicious, last.fm, Blogger, Google Docs, Gmail, LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.

Another difference was that rather than seeking an art that uses Internet as a tool, as a content,

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15 Domenico Quaranta, "Reality is Overrated / When Media Go Beyond Simulation", *Artpulse Magazine* Vol. 1 No. 3 (March-May 2010), http://artpulsemagazine.com/reality-is-overrated-when-media-go-beyond-simulation (accessed May 8, 2010).
16 Prashant Sharma, "Core Characteristics of Web 2.0 Services" (2008), *TechPluto* http://www.techpluto.com/web-20-services (accessed May 9, 2010).

as a medium and as an exhibition space, all in one, I looked for ways to escape this excessive

self-reference and fuse it more with the physical world or concepts outside of the Internet.

One approach I used was creating art that also has to do with issues outside of the Internet

and the culture surrounding it, by creating multi-layered pieces whose comments on

digital/online culture and use of new technologies can be also read as allegories of older

phenomena. Another approach was using the recent language of the recent technologies to

point to older issues. In a way these were steps away from the work of net.art pioneers that

was for and about the Internet. I started to comment on the real world, but by still staying in

a symbolic domain, without being a activist or a hacktivist, a common practice that started to

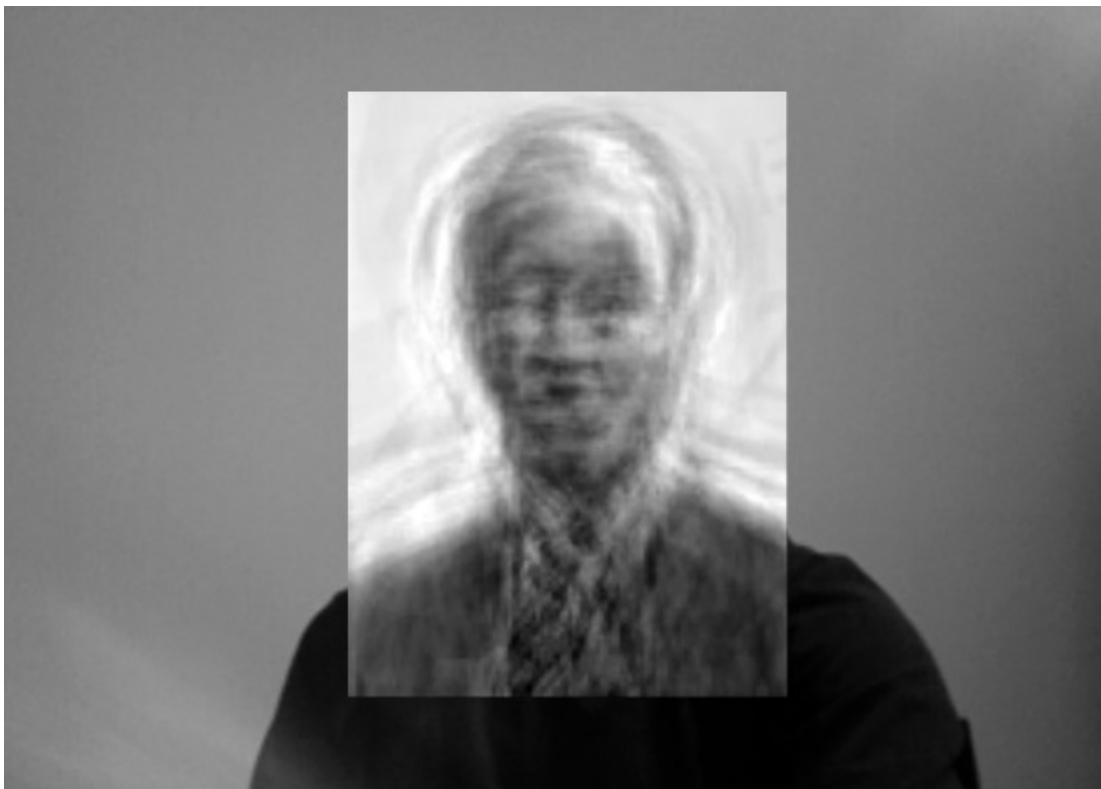rise among Internet artists at the turn of the century.

Figure 4: Ali Miharbi, "Delegations III" (2008)

While I did not stop working on the Internet (as an environment) and with the Internet (as a

tool and medium) after 2000, I started looking at other technologies that become wide-spread,

e.g. data-mining, data visualization and surveillance technologies such as face recognition software. I also started using software process as metaphor and the first example of this was the "Delegations" (2007-2009) series exhibited in Turkey, Mexico and South Korea. When viewers looked at the screen, they saw a real-time reconstruction of their faces. In each country, the live processed image was computed using the combination of statistically extracted face features ('eigenfaces') of that country's members of the parliaments. I was interested in how for the sake of generalization different kinds of representations - political, mathematical and artistic - can all blur the features of the subject represented.

Figure 5: Ali Miharbi, "Last Time" (2009)

Another piece that seemed completely remote from this but had common points in the way it

showed the tensions between the individual and the communal, was "Last Time" (2010). Rather than being a critique of a social phenomenon, this piece provided an unusual experience of time. It consisted of an analog wall clock with a button underneath. Each time the button was pressed, the arms of the clock rotated to make up the time that passed from the last instance the button was pressed, stopping at the current time and remaining there until the button is pressed again. The idea of viewers being anonymous users running the system without necessarily realizing their role was formally an extension of the my earlier web-based pieces. Setting the clock to the current time replaced the technologically much more advanced task of storing data on a Web server and presenting the next viewer with the memory of the last interaction. This piece was a bridge to "Torture Wheel" and "Bites" that I exhibited in my thesis exhibition. "Faces on Mars" was the third piece in the show which was a continuation of my exploration of face detection software. The piece is related to "Delegations" but this time focusing on "errors" in human perception, the way these errors are reflected on the machines or artificial systems we create. It is based on specific examples such as the famous "Face on Mars" instead of touching upon general insufficiencies in sociopolitical systems.

Figure 6: General view of the thesis show. "Torture Wheel" on the left, "Bites" on the right, and "Faces on Mars on the wall behind.

Faces on Mars

Figure 7: Ali Miharbi, "Faces on Mars" (2010)

"Faces on Mars" (2010) is a collection of 100 digital prints, arranged in a 20x5 grid on the wall. The image on each print is a false positive result of face detection software searching for faces on the surface of Mars. Each detected 'face' is enclosed in a square and the rest of

the image is presented as it was downloaded from Google Mars, except for the addition of an orange-red color mostly associated with the planet Mars.
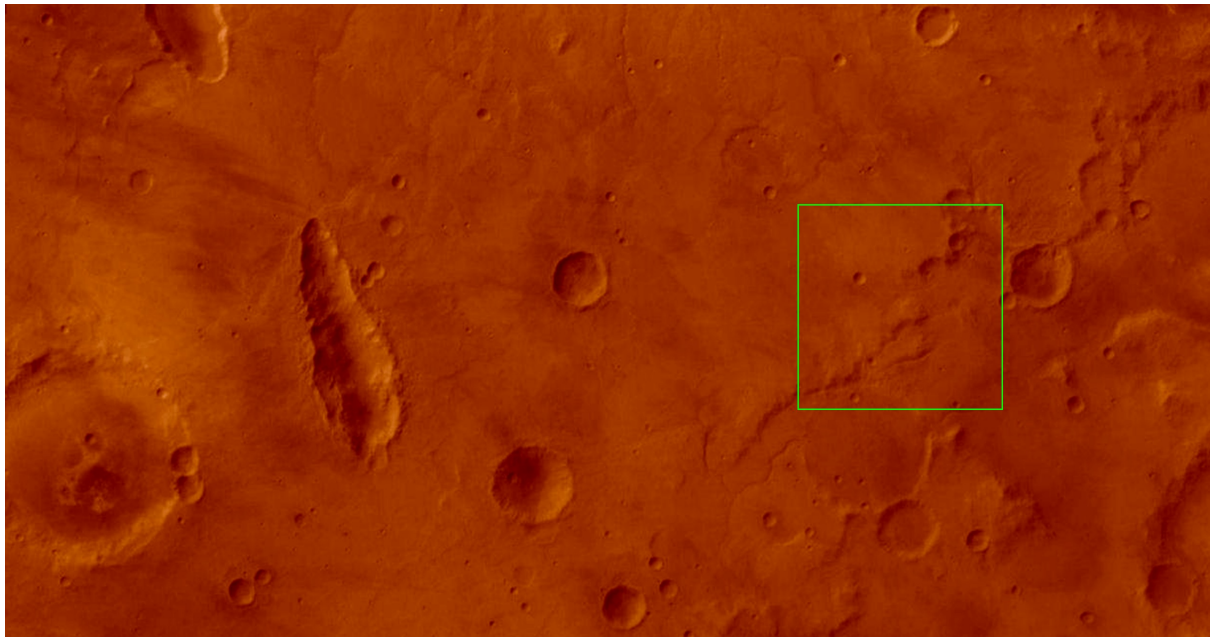

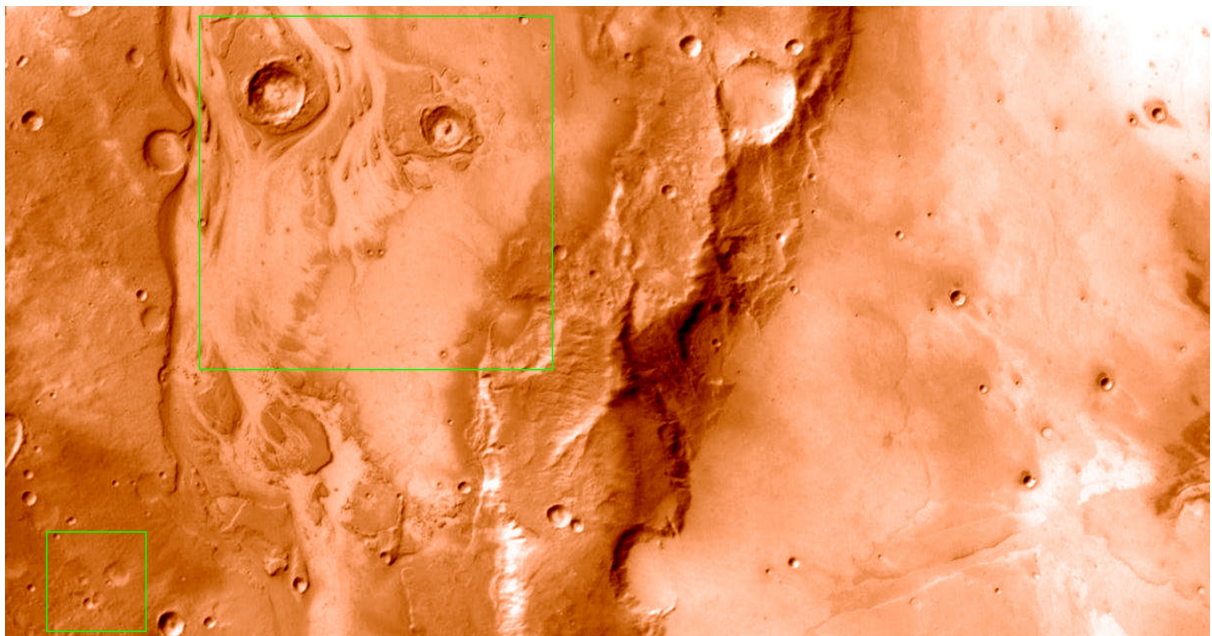Figure 8: "Faces on Mars", image # 47

Figure 9: "Faces on Mars", image # 60

In the branch of artificial intelligence known as computer vision, a significant amount of research has been done that uses findings from the psychology of face perception to design software. For analyzing the images in "Faces on Mars", I used OpenCV, a computer vision library to find, recognize and match patterns in images and videos, among other tasks. OpenCV uses a technique developed by Paul Viola and Michael Jones, known as the Viola-Jones detector.[17] OpenCV comes with a set of pre-trained object-recognition files.[18] I have used the standard face detector that ships with OpenCV.

The software defect that gives false positive results is closely related with the psychological phenomenon called "apophenia", a term coined in 1958 by German psychiatrist Klaus Conrad, [19] who defined it as the "unmotivated seeing of connections" accompanied by a "specific experience of an abnormal meaningfulness". In a way it is like a false alarm caused by excess of sensitivity and can be observed in many areas, from people's beliefs in pseudo-science, paranormal and religious phenomena to arriving to an incorrect conclusion when testing a hypothesis in statistics.

Figure 10: Examples of pareidolia on the moon

17 Gary Bradski and Adrian Kaehler. *Learning OpenCV.* (O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2008), 506.
18 Ibid., 507.
19 Jan Dirk Blom. *A Dictionary of Hallucinations*. (Springer, 2009), 33.

A particular type of apophenia is called pareidolia which involves finding of images or sounds in vague or obscure stimuli that are actually random.[20] David Hume wrote in year 1757 that "there is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice or good-will to every thing, that hurts or pleases us."[21] In addition to the occurrences of pareidolia observed on the moon by many cultures and stories in their mythologies such as the man, woman, hare patterns seen on the moon, there are also contemporary mythologies being created based on pareidolia: the monkey tree phenomenon in Singapore (which began in September 2007), a monkey-like appearance on a tree; the Badlands Guardian, a geomorphological feature in Alberta, Canada; the "Sleeping Giant" in Ontario, Canada; the "Old Man of the Mountain" in New Hampshire, USA; the "Silhouette of Atatürk" in Ardahan, Turkey formed by shadows of the mountains for a few weeks every year; and finally the image taken by Viking 1 on July 25, 1976, a 1.2 miles long Cydonian mesa, which had the appearance of a humanoid "Face on Mars", an image that caused many conspiracy theories about Martian Civilization.

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20 "The Skeptic's Dictionary", Skepdic.com, http://www.skepdic.com/pareidol.html (accessed May 10, 2010).
21 David Hume. *The Natural History of Religion.* (Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 8.
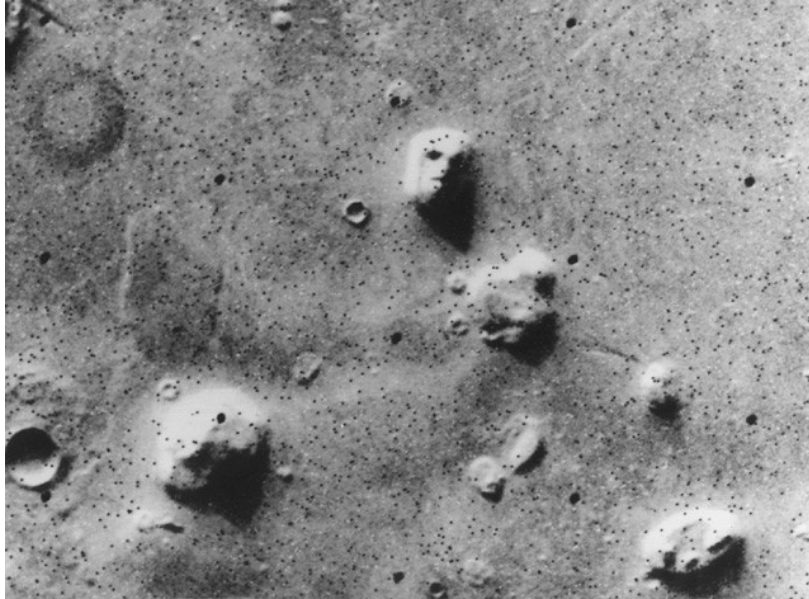
Figure 11: Part of the Cydonia region, taken by the Viking 1 orbiter in 1976. The famous 'Face on Mars' is near the center at the top.

Especially linked to the latter, Carl Sagan commented on these occurrences: "As soon as the infant can see, it recognizes faces, and we now know that this skill is hardwired in our brains. Those infants who a million years ago were unable to recognize a face smiled back less, were less likely to win the hearts of their parents, and less likely to prosper. These days, nearly every infant is quick to identify a human face, and to respond with a goony grin."[22] Sometimes more specifically, people see images that they are used to seeing every day inside of random images, like in the case of Ardahan, Turkey where sculptures and depictions of the founder of the state are everywhere.

Thinking of the errors in human perception while employing a readymade algorithm to find the reflections of human errors on the machines or artificial systems reveals interesting aspects of our relationship with technology. We are sometimes transferring our mythologies, dreams, conspiracies to the machines we build, without even realizing it. Some artists

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22 Carl Sagan. *The demon-haunted world: science as a candle in the dark.* (Ballantine Books, 1997), 45.

extended this phenomenon, such as Ethan Ham and Benjamin Rosenbaum's "Anthroptic" (2006) that is a collection of audio-visual narratives based on facial-recognition software results.[23] I came across "Anthroptic" while working on my "Faces on Mars" project, which first made me question the uniqueness of my idea, but later I thought that despite similar methodologies, they had major differences. Rather than analyzing random images, finding false faces and creating audio for it, my narrative was already there: the existing face on Mars, conspiracies people created about it; shapes on the moon with the stories written about them and our desire to find something human even on surfaces of remote and cold objects in space.

The fact that humans recognize familiar patterns on random textures or images can be extended to the idea of metaphors. In general terms, pareidolia can be described as creating visual metaphors based on similarity in patterns. This extension of the concept of metaphors and allegories informed my other project "Torture Wheel".

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23 Ethan Ham and Benjamin Rosenbaum. "Anthroptic", http://www.anthroptic.org/about.html (accessed May 9, 2010).
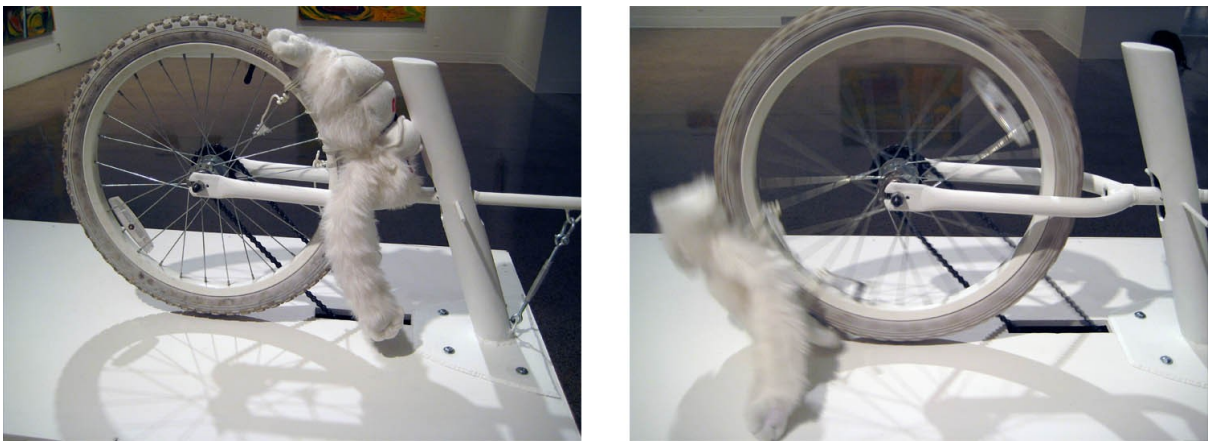
Torture Wheel

Figure 12: "Torture Wheel" (2010)

"Torture Wheel" is a piece related to communication and perception. It focuses on text rather than images, more specifically, to the everyday use of metaphors and their dissipation rather than the role of images in media. It consists of a white bicycle wheel with a white toy monkey strapped on it. A bike chain connects an electric motor to the wheel, rotating it every time the keyword "torturing" is used in Twitter and slamming the monkey to the pedestal. The most recent search result from the keyword "torturing", along with the nickname of the user and the date/time is displayed on a small monitor mounted on the same pedestal. The frequency of this occurrence is approximately seven minutes, which can vary between one minute to more than 20 minutes. It is completely unknown when the next time will be for the

wheel to rotate because it is based on live input. The word "torturing" is mostly used in everyday context, such as "Lol. Do you enjoy torturing me? :P", "And the torturing morning class begins", "Torturing myself by watching the food channel". Only a few occurrences of these uses would be literal. However with the excessive information flow including personal and open conversations, the everyday use of this keyword translated to the physical space, (through a cheesy-looking toy monkey) is another form of alienation from reality. A real event is expressed in metaphorical means, carried to a virtual environment, transformed into a physical space as movement, appearing to torture a toy monkey. Nothing appears to be real, not because of some virtual reality technology, but because of the use of language and its metaphors, as the "primary cognitive tool by which we make sense of the world."[24] A process very similar to apophenia mentioned in the previous section is at work here to create our "default form of thought, providing many angles from which to literally 'see' the world."[25] In the simplest formulation, when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active at the same time and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction.[26] The physical wheel and the motor attempt to connect the event to the real world but can do no more than create another metaphor.

24 Terry Marks-Tarlow. *Psyche's Veil: Psychotherapy, fractals and complexity.* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 92.
25 Marcel Danesi. *Poetic Logic: The Role of Metaphor in Thought, Language, and Culture.* (Madison, WI: Atwood Publications, 2004), 125
26 Ivan A. Richards. "The Philosophy of Rhetoric, Lecture V Metaphor" (1936), http://web.archive.org/web/20070101145805/http://tscp.open.ac.uk/t185/html/resources/r2history.htm (accessed May 4, 2010).

Figure 13: Screen view showing the most recent tweet with the
keyword "torturing".

Figure 14: Medieval image of demons applying the
"Torture of the Wheel", from "Grand Kalendrier ou
Compost des Bergers", Troyes, Nicholas le Rouge, 1529

Similar to the "torturing" keyword used in the pieces, the war metaphor is also common in many languages, especially when talking about any kind of competitive activity such as sports. With any discussion on media and violence, it is inevitable to talk about people getting habituated to violent images. However the idea that in modern life we become exposed and habituated to horrors goes back before images were ubiquitous. In year 1800, Wordsworth wrote in the Preface to "Lyrical Ballads": "the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies".[27] In 1860's Baudelaire had similar ideas: "It is impossible to glance through any newspaper, no matter what the day, the month of the year, without finding on every line the most frightful traces of human perversity. [...] Wars, crimes, thefts, lecheries, tortures, the evil deeds of princes [...]; an orgy of universal atrocity. And it is with this loathsome appetizer that civilized man daily washes down his morning repast."[28]

Both of these statements were made when there were no photographs in the newspapers. With the introduction of the photographs on the press, later moving images of atrocities on TV, these images shifted from shocking to banal. With the introduction of the Internet and the WWW in mid-90's this process continued without much significant change since the early Internet was more like a combination of printed press and TV, related to Marshall McLuhan's statement that the "content of a medium is always another medium". However, especially after the 2000's, user-generated content on the Web started to rise and the "Web 2.0 applications" where the website owner only provides a platform and the users provide the content, became more and more popular. With the spread of cell phones and attempts to connect different network types such as broadband connections, local area networks, wireless

27 Susan Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others.* (New York: Picador, 2003), 106-107.
28 Ibid., 107.

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networks and mobile phone systems such as GSM, multi-platform messaging platforms started to spread and Twitter became the most popular of them. With its 140-character limit in order to comply with the short messaging system (SMS) on GSM systems it came to characterize the speed and superficiality of our times. One deviation from the previous services was that this time there was a return to text, similar to early 19th century newspapers, only now dominated with people's personal lives and open conversations rather than extraordinary and terrifying events. Daily conversations coexist with links to corporate news media, occasionally also reporting first-hand user news reports.

Building on Baudrillard's ideas on the postmodern society as a transition from production and consumption of commodities to simulation and play of images and signs, both Manovich and Bourriaud arrive at similar points via different routes: they both argue that we are experiencing a shift from the postmodern to a new condition, characterized by the production and consumption of systems, gestures, methods, algorithms. In contemporary culture these new practices are not only limited by DJ techniques or using multi-platform software plugins, standard procedures we follow in programs like Final Cut, Photoshop, but also applies to daily life.

"Torture Wheel" does not aim to warn against the desensitization of media consumers. If this were the case, it would be doing something real, such as leaving a mark, or better, some physical damage to the building, give pain to the artist or the viewer or something shocking that would surprise us because we apparently did not realize before that it was 'real'. What the piece does point out more is that the 'real' consists of so many symbolic components.

Taking Twitter as a platform to observe transitions between conceptual, physical and electronic domains it is possible to see how people's perceptions of reality are effected:

Blogging and more specifically Twitter as a micro-blog website effects and changes life like a closed feedback mechanism. "Retweets", a means to redistribute other peoples tweets, gives some more complexity and dynamism in the system. Users see a pattern in what becomes popular and follow certain guidelines and principles to become more popular. When the acts of reporting one's life and the motivation to become popular are combined, users' daily life is effected by this online activity and starts to become a mixed reality, a combination of online and offline routines that are under continuous influence of each other. It's not only a sequence of words that are "retweeted" but also certain attitudes, reactions, conversations, approaches in user's real lives.

In "Torture Wheel" the old tension between the real and the virtual is tamed by using elements that are physically "real" but at the same time unrealistic children's toys that don't really effect people's lives but only serve aesthetic purposes.

There is a technical resemblance between this piece and some telepresence pieces in which users interact with another live, real space. However, as opposed to the telepresence pieces where users feel present in a remote physical space, in "Torture Wheel" the information flow from users of another system is filtered and used to trigger an event in physical space. Technically, this one-way capturing of information flow makes "Torture Wheel" a piece of translation, so it does not need to use the full potential of the communication medium, in contrast to what would be expected from the below examples that made me start thinking

about these issues earlier in the decade.

Ken Goldberg's "Telegarden" (1995-2004) was an art installation that allowed web users to view and interact with a remote garden filled with living plants. Members could "plant, water, and monitor the progress of seedlings via the tender movements of an industrial robot arm."[29]

Figure 15: Ken Goldberg, "Telegarden" (1995-2004)

Around the same time as the "Telegarden", another telepresence piece, Eduardo Kac's "Teleporting An Unknown State", active from 1994 to 2003, created the experience of "the Internet as a life-supporting system"[30]. In a completely dark room, through a video projector suspended above a pedestal with earth and a seed in it, remote participants send light via the

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29 Ken Goldberg. "The Telegarden Website", http://goldberg.berkeley.edu/garden/Ars (accessed May 10, 2010).
30 Eduardo Kac. "Teleporting An Unknown State", http://www.ekac.org/telepsim/telep.html (accessed May 10, 2010).

Internet to enable this seed to photosynthesize and grow. [31]

A project whose methodology seems to be closer to "Torture Wheel" is Jonah Brucker-Cohen's "Alerting Infrastructure!" (2003) where users were just causes to an effect that they are not aware of. The piece translates the nature of a website to a building, linking the dialectic but complementary pairs together. Continuous use of a buildings wear them out whereas using/entering a website only creates some more numbers in web statistics. "Alerting Infrastructure!" is not a telepresence project but a physical visualization of a counter that translates hits to the web site of an organization into interior damage of the physical building that web site represents. The focus of the piece is to amplify the concern that physical spaces are slowly losing ground to their virtual counterparts. "The amount of structural damage to the building directly correlates to the amount of exposure and attention the web site gets, thus exposing the physical structure's temporal existence."[32]

In all the above examples, no matter what the purpose is, we see a tension between the physical and the virtual. My attempt is to blur this distinction, as I see that's what has been happening through technology. The "Torture Wheel" is more about the removal of tension. When watching the little monitor on the pedestal, viewers see personal messages that are conveyed through "torturing" metaphor. Metaphors are not only crucial components in language but also building blocks of "the virtual", since most computer interfaces are metaphors themselves: the desktop, mouse, file cabinets, trash can, etc.[33] What we have been calling "virtual" can be described as the extension of our language and communication, with

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31 Ibid.
32 Jonah Brucker-Cohen. "Interactive Networked Projects", http://coin-operated.com/?p=1181 (accessed May 10, 2010).
33 Katalin Szabó. "Metaphors and the user interface" (1995), http://www.katalinszabo.com/metaphor.htm (accessed May 8, 2010).

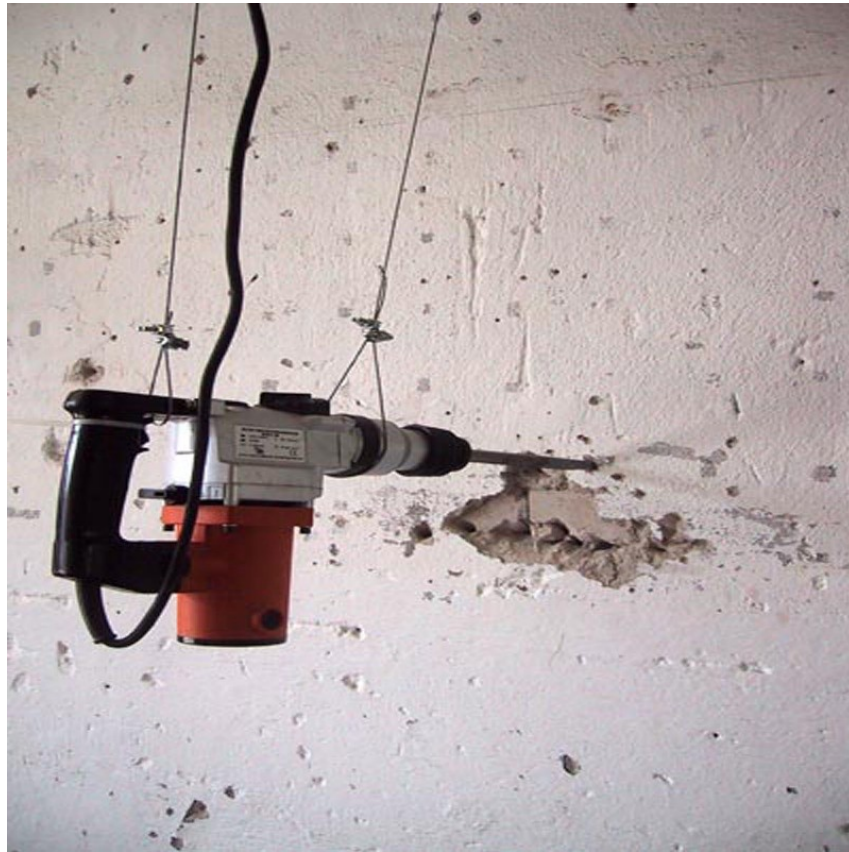its colloquial or creative metaphors reflected on it.

Figure 16: Jonah Brucker-Cohen, "Alerting Infrastructure!" (2003)

Rather than confronting the virtual and the real to shock the viewer, my attempt was to focus on the virtual within the language and within the physical that has always been there (because the human brain is evolved as a simulation machine[34]). It can be mind-opening to look at these old and apparently straightforward concepts through the glasses of new technologies.

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34 Richard Dawkins. *The Selfish Gene*. (Oxford University Press, USA: 2006), 57-59.

Bites

The third piece in the exhibition, "Bites" (2010), consists of a custom audio mixer, headphones, a computer and custom software. With the help of the mixer viewers can adjust the duration and volume of the audio-visual record of the artist biting different food (potato chips, carrot, chocolate, apple, beef jerky, lemon, watermelon, rice krispies - a selection of natural and artificial food products) and create an audio-visual composition.

For this piece, I chose to provide an open system because with unlimited number of arrangements and with the indifference in combining them, there was no reason to prefer one specific combination and display that as a final result. The viewers can give the last shape to the work, which also adds a conceptual layer where the biting process becomes more mechanized. In order to avoid technology to be foregrounded and make the programming labor as transparent as possible I used a relatively familiar user-interface and simple building blocks such as split screens and linear combinations. Viewers make their own remix rather than the artist providing them one and each viewer picks up the composition from the previous person, passing his or her composition to the next one while the whole piece still has an integrity as a system.

Figure 17: Ali Miharbi, "Bites" (2010)

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a remix is "a variant of an original recording (as of a song) made by rearranging or adding to the original".[35] The DJ technique of remixing was first used in mid 1960's when King Tubby and Lee Perry started to experiment with dub music in Kingston, Jamaica.[36] Later, this term started to be applied to the fields outside of music, to any alterations of cultural media. After half a century now, we can talk about a wide variety of ways remix is approached in popular culture as well as incorporated in contemporary art to supplement the earlier practices of collage, assemblage, readymades, cut-ups, détournement, appropriation, pastiche, etc. What changed today from these historical

35 Merriam-Webster Online. http://www.merriam-webster.com (accessed April 25, 2010)
36 Simon Wallis. *Remix: Contemporary Art and Pop*. (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 5.

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practices of appropriation and collage to different types of remix is the way cultural products
are dissipated and the way media production and consumption are increasingly being fused
through Web 2.0 technologies. Nicolas Bourriaud wrote that "artists' intuitive relationship
with art history is now going beyond what we call 'the art of appropriation,' which naturally
infers an ideology of ownership, and moving toward a culture of the use of forms, a culture of
constant activity of signs based on a collective ideal: sharing."[37] With the overload of
information, categories have failed where users often times find themselves watching an
unexpected video or listening to something stumbled upon. Not only the materials but also
the intent is losing its originality. This associative flow of information resembles the way the
human brain works and it is no surprise that many artists exploring these technologies use
techniques that resemble the ones used by surrealists nearly a century ago, such as
automatism, surautomatism, collage, photomontage, cubomania, cut-up technique, exquisite
corpse, indecipherable writing and games.

Remixing, having its historical roots in traditional media through the 20th century art, cannot
fully exploit the digital media that is being used today. It breaks the linearity in a very limited
sense while using a medium that is designed to be non-linear and used in a networked,
participatory and interactive way by its users. Although this kind of work shows that there is
a significant cultural shift happening, it merely appears to celebrate it, rather than critically
examining why this shift is happening.

In "Software Takes Command" (2008), Lev Manovich coins the term "deep remixability"
referring to a new kind of approach where not only content from different media but also

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37 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction – Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World.* (New York:
    Lukas & Sternberg, 2002), 4.

their fundamental techniques, working methods, and ways of representation and expression are remixed. It's not a remix of materials, but systems, techniques, methods, mentalities. Nicolas Bourriaud, although being more specific about the type of practices that are appropriated by contemporary art, makes similar observations. He argues that deejaying techniques are either inspiring or being directly used by contemporary artists, giving the following examples in his book "Postproduction":

- Crossfading: Pierre Huyghe's "Sleeptalking" (1998, 15min), Andy Warhol's "Sleep" placed side by side, separated with a glass wall from an interview with the protagonist John Giorno
- Pitch-control: Douglas Gordon slowed down the Hitchcock movie to extend the duration to 24 hours, "24 Hour Psycho" (1993)
- Toasting, rapping, MCing: Angela Bulloch dubbed "Solaris" by Andrei Tarkovsky ("Solaris" 1993, 1993)
- Cutting: Alex Bag recorded passages from a television program, Candice Breitz isolated short fragments of images and repeats them
- Playlists: In "Cinema Liberte Bar Lounge" (1996) Douglas Gordon offered a selection of films censored upon their release while his collaborator Rirkrit Tiravanija constructed a festive setting

Bourriaud adds that in these cases producers are transmitters to the following producers in an endless chain of appropriation. Since my motivation in "Bites" is not to create a merely formal piece but to use audio-visual and semantic components in a balanced way, "Bites" can be described as an open, interactive remix where viewing becomes deejaying. By turning the

collection of short video snippets of myself biting different food into a mechanical or computational process, I aim to emphasize the alienation from very primitive tasks like biting and eating. The work is not product-based but product-producing and in this way it resembles composing music, drawing architectural plans or creating conceptual art. It can also be described as an algorithmic performance.

Conclusion

Most of my pieces deal with extending our visual language in different ways. Slavoj Žižek

pointed out that "in order to get the truth to speak it is not enough to suspend the subject's

active intervention and let language itself speak. [Language] should be twisted, denaturalized,

extended, condensed, cut and reunited, made to work against itself. [...] The most elementary

form of torturing one's language is called poetry."[38] These comments on language and poetry

can also be applied to the way I approach visual language and art.

Today the way we express ourselves has become very complex. We are no longer only

consuming products and information but also creating/reorganizing while we consume.

Production of cultural forms is becoming more and more part of our language. The motto of

the DIY magazine "Make" says: "if you can't open it, you don't own it" as a reactionary

response to our reliance on mass-production. Their goal is to make the production of

materials and devices a widely practiced everyday activity. The aim here is to access a

technology and knowledge about it, empowering users, using intelligence of many for

innovation, decentralizing control, creating beauty and exceeding limitations. [39] Although

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38 Slavoj Žižek. "Language, Violence, Non-violence," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* Vol 2, no. 3
    (2008). http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/154/240 (accessed May 4, 2010).
39 von Busch and Palmås. 30-31.

these seem to be liberating, they still depend on and extend our natural spoken and written language. My art attempts to twist, extend, cut, reunite and play with these new forms of expressions – not only their forms and products but also their working methods. However I don't attempt to make this a mere formal play, but rather a more self-conscious process that gains its own metaphoric value. I think humor is important in this process, a feature I inherited from the pioneers of net.art who adopted it from Fluxus. In 1964, Alan Kaprow criticized the Fluxus artists saying that they simply "goof-off" and "seem to do important things by doing unimportant things."[40] Kristine Stilles argues that "goofing-off" can be a virtue of the piece since it can be a way to pause and "reinvest the world with wonder".[41] To me, the attitude of Fluxus performers dressing up, wearing bowler hats and business suits is very similar to early net-artists' use of highly structured media, originally designed as business machines and tools. They subverted and played with these structures. I have embraced a similar approach in some pieces I made, such as "Last Time" and "Bites" and although I did not deliberately adopt a Fluxus sensibility, its indirect influence from net-art resurfaces from time to time in my work. Combining technology and humor by still maintaining the strict practice of programming to create the work, without necessarily being cynical, I hope to provide the viewers unique experiences and hopefully bend, stretch and reformulate parts of fixed conceptions in contemporary culture.

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40 Kristen Stilles, *Fluxus Performance and Humour.* 1995. In *The Artist's Joke*, edited by Jennifer Higgie, 52-58. (Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2007), 52.
41 Ibid.

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Vita

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Education

2010 (expected)   MFA in Kinetic Imaging, Virginia Commonwealth University, VA, USA

2000   BA in Art Theory & Practice (Concentration in Painting), Northwestern University, IL, USA

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Group Exhibitions

2010   "Amber Selection", Portable art exhibitions supported by the Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture Visual Arts Directorate, Istanbul, Turkey

    "MFA Thesis Exhibition", Anderson Gallery, Richmond VA, USA

2009   "Words on Paper, Words on Screen", James Branch Cabell Library, Richmond VA, USA

    "Electronic Art Exchange", ADA Gallery, Richmond VA, USA

    "Five Past One", MFA Candidacy Exhibition, Richmond VA, USA

    "You, Me and Some Synesthesia", Doran Gallery, Boston MA, USA

2008   "insecure", Media+Space Gallery, Seoul, South Korea

    "Emerging Forms of Digital Art", Museum of Modern Art, Toluca City, Mexico

2007	"Be a realist, demand the impossible!", Karsi Art Works Gallery, Istanbul, Turkey
2003	"Contemporary Art on the Island Ferry", Istanbul, Turkey
	"Gentle Attack", Gallery X, Istanbul, Turkey
2002	Art on the Net - "9-11", online exhibition hosted by the Machida City Museum of Graphic Arts - Tokyo, Japan

Events Participated

2010	"Slide Jam" - Artist Talk, The Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX
2009	"Parting on Z: Virtual Interactive Puppetry + Pansori" - Real time text and video texture generation for Semi Ryu's performance in Chelsea Art Museum, New York City, NY, USA
2008	"New Media Art" - Artist Talk and Panel Discussion at Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul, Turkey
2007	"Generative Art" - Presentation, Amber'07 Festival, Istanbul, Turkey
	"Kayitdisi01 Design Week - Deterritorialization" - Panel Discussion, Yildiz Technical University – Dept. of Architecture, Istanbul, Turkey

Awards

2010	Thesis Assistantship, Virginia Commonwealth University
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Teaching

2009	Instructor, "Web Design", Virginia Commonwealth University
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Affiliations

dugumkume.org, a Turkish blog with a critical view on technology and culture