Reconfiguring education with flexible teachers: Interview with Mark Amerika

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Abstract

Mark Amerika is well known as the author of two literary novels, as Founding Director of the Alt-X Online Network, as author of GRAMMATRON, one of the most widely accessed art sites on the World Wide Web, and PHON:E:ME, an mp3 concept album with an accompanying "hyper:liner:notes. Time Magazine included you into the 100 most innovative people, the University of Colorado offered him a professorship in the Fine Arts Faculty. In an earlier interview we talked with Mark Amerika about his works, about authorship, and about writing concepts on the net. Now, we want to know more about the pedagogical site of his activities.

dd: How is it when a net artist becomes a professor of net art?

MA: It's great. I am very fortunate in that the university I am a Professor at is in the same city I have lived in for almost 14 years. Boulder is a picture perfect Colorado town with a beautiful open space environment that is open to hiking, mountain biking, and of course there is all of the nearby skiing and snowboarding too. Meanwhile, when one thinks through the possibilities of "How To Be An Internet Artist" (the title to my recent net art retrospective at the ICA in London), one cannot help but see that as an Internet artist you do not have to live in Berlin, New York, Tokyo, Paris, London, Sydney/Melbourne, etc. I visit these places all of the time and maintain contact with my networks from wherever I am, so it's not very problematic to be both a Professor and a Practitioner.

In fact, if we look at a lot of the breakthrough work that came into the net culture in the 90s, we can see that it evolved out of a practice-based research agenda that has resonance with the university R&D model. In the late 90's, I often referred to GRAMMATRON as a research and development platform for digital narrative production and distribution, and Alt-X has always been an experimental conceptual art project that looks into the interrelationship between new media publishing technologies and online exhibition contexts. And then there's the continuous

renegotiation of the image and text in a kind of binary art environment and what does it mean to create net theory, to port critical consciousness through popular protocols like http, ftp, etc. Presently, we are asking key questions like "What is literature's exit strategy?" and "Who writes the Action Scripts?" (a direct reference to the coding language of Flash and its ability to make words and images behave in unique artistic ways).

The very notion of an engaged net art practice focused on digital narrative and theory in cross-media platforms challenges our conventional assessment of what a certain kind of work or cultural production actually is. This kind of practice is very conceptual and interdisciplinary and requires a flexible approach to being a teacher or, as the case may be, "academic." I'm not a typical academic in the true sense of the word, but then again, many artists who are Professors are not true academics. What we share with the academic and scientific communities is changing, though. The more collaborative, computer-supported work environments that were known to be available only to computer science and engineering students are now the very models that I, as a Professor of Digital Art, am exploring in my new role here at CU.

Lastly, one thing I think is important to understand from our vantage point here at the end of 2001, is that net art has become mainstreamed by the museum and media cultures and yet there are still very few people who really know what it is, or can be. This means we need to explore its potential as a medium and to not let it get locked into some predigested, predetermined meaning. We also need to reconfigure education and the pedagogical process associated with learning, especially when using new media technology in an arts and humanities context. Which brings me back to this practice-based research environment that the university is uniquely positioned to support and facilitate.

dd: Lets talk about this: What exactly do you do in your classes?

MA: We do so much! The students are sometimes overwhelmed at first, but then they catch on, knowing that the more they put into it the more they are likely to get out of it. The key thing is to create an engaging work environment and to assign projects that allow for the development of both individual projects and collaborative projects. These projects include large-scale digital narratives using hypertext, Flash animation, Director, etc., but also experimental sound or "concept albums" embedded in narrative environments, interactive digital cinema, color field e-books, net art performance, etc.

It's also important for students to feel like they have a certain amount of control over the distribution of their work. Traditionally, students have a rough time finding exhibition contexts for their work and it is often not taken seriously. Part of the problem is the lack of physical space or just finding a proper venue. But with digital art, they are finding that they can immediately exhibit or publish their work online

and that there are potential audiences out there that may be willing to engage with their work.

This is both a good thing and a very challenging thing. It's good because it forces the students to rethink their role as artist in culture. For example, just because you can put anything online, does that mean you should put all of your work up there? What is the context for your work when it goes live on the web? And then there are issues of copyright and participating in an attention-economy where the pay off may not necessarily be money since most things put on the web are given away for free.

Of course, now that net art has been somewhat mainstreamed, it's not as if we here in Colorado live in a bubble. There is a readily accessible history of net art that is still available online, and so I also teach a seminar on the history and theory of net art. It's a kind of "edified conversation" about all of the issues artists on the web must deal with, and we look at some of the famous net art shows like the "Digital Studies" show we launched on Alt-X in 1997, the "beyond interface" and "Art Entertainment Network" shows at the Walker Art Center, the net_condition show at ZKM, etc. We also study critical theory, starting with Walter Benjamin but taking in the likes of Vannevar Bush, Vilem Flusser, nettime, Rhizome, etc.

Perhaps one of the most exciting projects we have developed here is called "Histories of Internet Art: Fictions and Factions" which is a kind of online multi-media resource that focuses on the recent history of net art practice, theory, community building, etc. The site is developed by the students with my supervision and includes investigations of (h)activism, digital narrative, cyborg theory, code work, surf-sample-manipulate, data visualization or GUI art, etc. The students keep building the site which then becomes a major resource for the students who come after them. It keeps feeding off of itself and is growing into a resource that I imagine other classes around the world will want to access via the web which our students are quite thrilled about.

dd: Lets move away from your student and their pilot projects at University of Colorado to those other classes you are visioning. Which role net art should play in university and school in general?

MA: It should be part of both an undergraduate and graduate education in the arts, especially for those with an emphasis in the media or digital arts. It needs to be part of the curriculum so that the students have all of the latest practical, historical/theoretical, and technical skills and background they need to continue building their online portfolios once they leave school. Many of these skills are also transferable to the marketplace and so, instead of having creative, smart, art students who can't earn a living in "the real world," we want our graduates to be just as valuable as any computer scientist or engineering student, perhaps even more valuable, because if they have the tech skills in addition to the creative, conceptual

and design skills, then they may be able to balance out their need to make money and their need to make art.

dd: Considering your experiences as an artist and professor, what role is netart likely to play?

MA: What we are really talking about here is developing a kind of Life Style Practice. This is something that probably differentiates American culture from most other cultures (although the Australians seem to share this with us more than any other country). The idea is to turn your own life into a kind of Action Script that animates your experience in ways that reward you for your creative risk-taking.

Here in Boulder we keep asking ourselves the same set of questions, but reformulate them as a way to come up with different angles, different perspectives, different approaches. For example, what does it mean to be a net artist? Is it a life? A style? A practice? One way to think about the growing confusion between net art and net lit is as a continually emergent dialogue. You see someones web site in Brazil and send them an email from a ski town in Colorado telling them how much you admire their work - and a dialogue is born. This dialogue branches into more emails and soon you have a kind of relationship, maybe even an interview you can post on your class website. The site grows exponentially because all of your student colleagues are doing the same thing, but with different people, different artists or theorists, and these threads start overlapping, intersecting, playing off of each other. A network is born -- or emerges - or converges, and it feels like art history is not so much a thing of the past but a thing in-the-making. Soon, you have an instantaneously delivered multi-linear thread of narrative-potential being practiced as a form of social networking or online dialectical materialism. It's much more valuable than just earning three credits toward your diploma.