

## *Public and Private Space on the Internet*

Mouchette.org sends me an email inviting me to a webpage made just for me. I open it, view the flesh filled page and am told that I can never come back. It is a strange world of bits and flickering notions: a world where the art is only finished when I interact with it. The page exists before I view it on a server awaiting my opening. However it is the act of opening it, of engaging the work that then triggers its completion. This work of art requires the viewer to enter into its digital space, its world that still need to be completed. Similarly, the world of Life Sharing by 0100101110101101.ORG requires an audience's direct interaction to be complete. Here the artists Franco and Eva Matteos made their entire computer accessible to anyone via data downloads. The act of viewing intimate details from personal emails to financial statements is not complete, until the user downloads and interprets the raw data. The data existed beforehand, but it was the act of downloading and viewing the information that completes it. These two net art pieces highlight an important development in net art, that is that viewer participation with the pieces of art are required to complete the work of art. It is through these acts of participation that both works of art have created a discourse on the boundaries of public and private space.

This paper seeks to address the emerging discourse, that is the system of relations in net art that blurs the boundaries of public and private space between the art, the viewer and the artist. It is this phenomenon of relations, the discourse, within the medium of net art that speaks of the blurring of boundaries between the public and private space.

The interactivity of both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing, not only opens the work to individual and private experiences with the work of art, but the users interfacing

the public realm via their private computer creates a set of social relations that further explore the blurring of public and private space in net art. It is through the interactive modalities that the intrinsic nature of net art and the use of relations between the viewer, the art and the artwork via the medium, that the public and private exchange is fully explicated.

Both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing contain within their structural strategies modalities that utilize the conception of a relational work of art.

Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational art as

“a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space”<sup>i</sup>

In Bourriaud's definition the exchanges that relational art create between the art object, the artist and the viewer is in effect the work of art. The very constructs of social relations created by the interaction with the work of art, creates a discourse on the social context in which the viewer becomes a participant. It is through the exchange of relations that the human social relations are reified, and it through this practice that both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing create a discourse on the boundaries of private and public space. However, both of these works not only explore social relations, but the very relations that they reify are dependant upon the use of new media to engage the viewer participation, which in turn then creates a work of art that is at its core a meta work. That is, a work of art which articulates the idea of relational art itself through the mediation of technology. It is at this intersection that both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing by 0100101110101101.ORG find their conceptual base. Both pieces create a meta discourse

on the very nature of public and private space that is intrinsic to the nature of net art. By utilizing the net for their examination of social interactions, and problematizing the concept of public and private space, Mouchette.org and Life Sharing have opened the work of art to create a set of relations that are reliant upon the interaction of the viewer to finish the work, thus blurring the boundaries of private and public space within the work of art.

The mode of interactivity that both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing rely upon in their relations with viewers problematizes notions of private space with public space. To understand either piece of art, one must understand the specific nature of the medium, specifically net art, that the art utilizes and its interactive modalities. Lev Manovich, in his book *The Language of New Media* has writes:

“New media is interactive. In contrast to old media where the order of presentations is fixed, the user can now interact with a media object. In the process of interaction the user can choose which elements to display or which paths to follow, thus generating a unique work.”<sup>ii</sup>

As Manovich points out, it is the nature of new media art to create a exchange on the boundaries of interaction, of man’s interaction with machine and to the work of art generated by machine. Furthermore, the essence of new media, that creates a “unique work” with each viewers interaction is inherent in the very materiality that new media and specifically net art incorporates.

The disposition of a net art which facilitates interactivity and a discourse on the boundaries of public and private space through the interaction or relations of the work with the viewer is reliant upon, not only in the execution of the work, but also in the

system on which the work of net art is built. This system of interaction is a recent phenomena that has developed during the last two decades and has exploded on to the art scene via the net art phenomenon. The term net art denotes artwork created on and disseminated by the internet<sup>iii</sup>. By using the internet to create and distribute interactive works of art, net art has created a discourse on the nature of interaction and on the users interaction with the boundaries of the private and the public space. This discourse is facilitated by the material aspects of the delivery system of net art. The system of delivery, the internet has profound implications for the boundaries of public and private space. . In his book *Virtual Art from Illusion to Immersion* Oliver Grau writes about the implications of the interface:

“The physically intimate design of the human-machine interface gives rise to such immersive experiences that the artist speaks of reaffirming the participants’ corporality... Prerequisite to the attainment of this goal is immersion experienced in solitude, a subjective experience in the image world.”<sup>iv</sup>

The dichotomy of the solitary experience of the human-machine interface and the system in which the interface is manifest establishes a dialogue of the solitary, private experience with the work of art and the public access system in which the work is viewed, thereby questioning the systems of public and private space within the work of art. Thus, the nature of the interaction between the net art creator and net art viewer is a space that allows the private to become public. To access a piece of net art one must move through the public space of the Internet. The very nature of public and private are mutable in relation to the Internet and the practice of net art. This aspect has profound implications for the users role in net art and the understanding of public and private

space. The implications of the public private discourse created by the net art is predicated upon a feedback loop of interaction. Linda Carolli in her article, *Virtual Encounters: Community or Collaboration on the Internet?* establishes the idea that the interaction via new media is reliant upon the idea of cyberspace as a social system that by its essence explore the boundaries of public and private space. She writes:

“The adoption of cyberspace as a distinct social space of interactivity renders it indistinguishable as either public or private space. It is represented as the seamless extension of the private and public into each other or as interstices between the public and private into which a range of identities can be projected.”<sup>v</sup>

Thus the alterations that each participant affects on the work of art dismantles the boundaries of the work of art and with that the notions of public and private space. The participatory work breaks the boundaries of the artist and the user, and concomitantly breaks the boundaries of the public and private space of a work of art.

The boundaries of public and private space in net art are uniquely exhibited in Mouchette.org and Life Sharing by 0100101110101101.ORG. Both works of art blur the boundaries of public and private space through the systems that each utilizes to engage the viewer from passive to active.

Mouchette.org is an anonymous web site begun in 1996 and is continuously updated and changed, that is there is no discrete end to the site, and as such is timeless. The creator of the Mouchette.org site has remained anonymous through out the last decade and the gender, age, and identity of the creator has remained private and inaccessible to the public who view the piece. The piece itself is in the guise of a personal website of a thirteen year old girl. Here, the public personae of the private artist manifests

itself through the interaction with the website as the user interacts through questions which create a unique system of interaction for each user. Furthermore participation with the site for the user is via email, thereby crossing the boundaries of public; that is the Mouchette website transgresses the boundaries the users private space via the internet with its email. Thus, the public persona becomes a private interaction between users on the site, which then penetrates the private users space with the continued interaction via email.

Conversely, Life Sharing is the private materials of the artist manifest as public. Here, the art duo of Eva and Franco Mattes, made public their very private files on their home computer from the year 2000 until the pieces' end in 2003. Everything from their financial records to their intimate emails with their friends had been made into public data for the specified time period. The private data of Life sharing is then accessible to the public via their persona computer that by virtue crosses the boundaries of the public and private. Thus the private material is made public through the interaction of the piece on the internet. Furthermore, the public site of their website then manifests itself on the user's computers further blurring the boundaries of public and private space.

The question of how to understand the interaction and the implications of Mouchette.org and Life Sharing can best be understood through Caroline Jones taxonomy for interaction in new media. The taxonomy is from Caroline Jones' book *Senorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*. Her taxonomy of interactive modalities in new media art has six main modes. They are:  
*Immersive* ~ the cave paradigm: the virtual helmet, the black box video, the earphone set

*Alienated* ~ taking technology and “making it strange, ” exaggerating attributes to provoke shock, using technologies to switch senses or induce orientation

*Interrogative* ~work that repurposes or remakes devices to enhance their insidious or wondrous properties; available data translated into sensible systems

*Residual* ~ work that holds onto an earlier technology, repurposes or even fetishizes an abandoned one

*Resistant* ~ work that refuses to use marketed technologies for their stated purpose: work that pushes viewers to reject or subvert technologies

*Adaptive* ~ work that takes up technologies and extends or applies technologies for creative purposes, producing new subjects for the technologies in question<sup>vi</sup>

The implications of the blurring of public and private boundaries within the system of the interaction posited Jones’ taxonomy explicates the modes of interactions that both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing utilize, as well as illuminates their distinct differences of interactivity. However, a close inspection through the taxonomy will reveal their similarities.

Applying Jones’ Taxonomy reveals that Mouchette.org’s modes of interactivity are *alienated* and *adaptive*. Upon first interacting with the site the interactive mode of alienation assaults of viewer. That is Mouchette.org “takes technology and “makes it strange, ” exaggerating attributes that provoke shock, and using technologies to switch senses or induce orientation”<sup>vii</sup> This can be ascertained in the very first moments of opening the web site where a groan not quite human plays as the page the screen is filled with a close up photograph of a flower with flies fluttering on top of the technicolor flower. The juxtaposition of visual imagery provokes for the viewer a sense of

strangeness by assaulting our senses with two very different aesthetics and thus creating a sense of what Jones would term *alienated*.

Not only does Mouchette.org utilize the mode of *alienation*, but also the system in which the viewer interacts with the site is *adaptive*. That is, Mouchette.org “takes up technologies and extends or applies technologies for creative purposes, producing new subjects for the technologies in question”<sup>viii</sup>. This is established in the extension of public and private space that Mouchette.org utilizes through its system of networks. A use of the *adaptive mode* of interaction in Mouchette.org is the extension into the private computer of the networked user, which further complicates the boundaries of public and private space. Upon joining the Mouchette’s network, the user is sent an email establishing the user’s ability to interact with the Mouchette network. The email sent to the user confirms three major modes of interaction. First, the user is able to read and reply to the messages on Mouchette.org site, as though they were the Mouchette. Second they are able to access the message boards where all those who share Mouchette’s identity meet, inform and help each other.<sup>ix</sup> And third, the user is able to create pages for linking to Mouchette.org that like Mouchette remain anonymous. These action created by the user’s interaction extends the technology in an adaptive mode by blurring the boundaries of user and the artist/author. This is not unlike the strategy of and visual and aural alienation in its execution. The effect of the strategies of alienation and adaption creates a discourse on the nature of public and private space, not unlike that which is created by the net art piece Life Sharing by art duo Eva and Franco Mattes.

Like Mouchette.org, Life Sharing uses modalities of interactions to blur the boundary of public and private space and in particular its interaction model is *resistant*.

Jones writes that resistant interactivity is, “work that refuses to use marketed technologies for their stated purpose: work that pushes viewers to reject or subvert technologies.”<sup>x</sup> In Life Sharing the user is able to download to their desktop the entire contents of 0100101110101101.org’s private computer, including their personal financial information, their software and even their private emails<sup>xi</sup>. The information accessed by the user comes in the form of data. Upon first entering the site (which is unfortunately no longer accessible) the user was confronted with a page declaring, “Now you’re in my computer.” The user has accessed the private computer of Franco and Eva Matteo, and effectively broken down the boundaries of the private via access afforded by the public interface of the Internet. The user in general does not access private information of individuals via the Internet and thus must question not only the work itself, but also the implications of accessing private data through the technologies that assert themselves in Life Sharing.

Furthermore, Life Sharing employs not images or artistic interpretations, but rather it employs the aesthetic of the computer interface itself, data. This is significant in that the users interaction with the piece is one of decoding via the computer, and becomes an interactive act. The private materials of the artists, then are made public but require an interaction from the user to manifest the work. This act of decoding creates for each user a unique work, not unlike Eco’s concept of the open work in which he says of the open work,

“It will be a different work, and at the end of the interpretive dialogue, a form which his form will have been organized, ...in a particular way the he could not have foreseen.”<sup>xii</sup>

The use of decoding the work, in effect creates a personal or private experience of the work of art that is not complete until the data has been interpreted. Life Sharing, like Mouchette.org creates a discourse that calls into question the boundaries of the public and private space through its use of interaction between the user and the work of art. Both utilize the adaptive mode to question the boundaries of the public and private space of the internet and both works require from the user interaction that creates a discrete experience for the user and effectively competes the work. This interaction is unique to the experience that technology is able to provide through new media art, is dependent upon technology and effectively creates a meta discourse which problematizes the concept of public and private space. New media, and specifically net art is particularly suited for questioning the boundaries of the public and private space through modes of interactivity. The human computer interface is one of solitary exploration, but also importantly it is an exploration that dictates that the user interacts with a work of art. This unique solitary experience creates for the user a unique work, not unlike Eco's concept of the open work. But utilizing the interactivity of a net art piece, not only opens the work to individual and private experiences with the work, but the users interfacing the public realm via their private computer creates a set of social relations that explore the blurring of what is public and what is private.

Mouchette.org and Life Sharing are two exemplary works of net art that blur the boundaries of the public and private space through their modes of interaction. Both net art projects utilize the *adaptive mode* of interactivity however, Life Sharing exploits *resistant* interactivity in order to facilitate the blurring of the boundaries while Mouchette.org utilizes the idea of *alienation* interactivity. And most importantly, both

rely upon a discourse created by the exchange of information to explore the relations of the social system that is the boundaries of public and private space have profound effects on the understanding of a work of art. For Franco and Eva Matteo, the goal of the blurring between the public and private space in net art has profound effects through the interaction with the user. They write,

“We must use an artwork in an unpredictable way, one that the author didn't foresee, to rescue it from its normal routine and re-use it in a different and novel way, otherwise all the paradigms of traditional art will impose themselves again.”<sup>xiii</sup>

The paradigms of net art then is to rescue the work of art from the normal boundaries of an artwork, and one way to accomplish this is to push on the boundaries of the public and private space through the users interaction with net art. Both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing not only accomplish this goal, but also fully engage in the process of extending the public into the private and the private into the public through interactivity, thereby collapsing the normative social system employed in our perceptions of public and private space on the internet and making the user implicit in the work of art.

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<sup>i</sup> Bourriaud, Nicholas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. France: Les Presse du Rée. 2002. p123

<sup>ii</sup> Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. MIT Press, Massachusetts. 2001.p.49.

<sup>iii</sup> Tribe, Mark. Reena Jana. *New Media Art*. Taschen, Koln, Germany. 2006. p.11.

<sup>iv</sup> Grau, Oliver. *Virtual Art from Illusion to Immersion*. MIT Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2003. p.199.

<sup>v</sup> Carolli, Linda. *Virtual Encounters: Community or Collaboration on the Internet?* *Leonardo*, Vol.30, No.5, Fifth Annual New York Digital Salon. 1997. P.359-363

<sup>vi</sup> Jones, Caroline A. "The Mediated Sensorium". Ed. Catharine A. Jones. *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*. MIT press. Cambridge; Massachusetts. 2006. p.6.

<sup>vii</sup> Jones, Caroline A. "The Mediated Sensorium". Ed. Catharine A. Jones. *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*. MIT press. Cambridge; Massachusetts. 2006. p.6.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid. p.6

<sup>ix</sup> Mouchette.org. "edit.mouchette.org: request new user." Email to Belinda Haikes. 30 April 2007

<sup>x</sup> Ibid. p.6

<sup>xi</sup> Mattes, Eva and Franco. Introduction for Life Sharing.

[http://0100101110101101.org/home/life\\_sharing/concept.html](http://0100101110101101.org/home/life_sharing/concept.html), visited 4/17/07.

<sup>xii</sup> Eco, Umberto. "The Poetics of the Open Work". *Participation* Ed. Claire Bishop. Whitechapel, London. MIT Press. 2006.p.36

<sup>xiii</sup> Zeleznikar, Jaka. Now you're in my Computer.Interview with 0100101110101101.ORG,[http://0100101110101101.org/texts/mladina\\_complete-en.html](http://0100101110101101.org/texts/mladina_complete-en.html), visited 4/17/07

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