

# NETWORKING: The Net as Artwork

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept that Networking is Art is loaded with meaning, since it unites two seemingly different worlds: the practices of Networking with that of Art. In this context, however, the two are perfectly integrated. To Network means to create relationship networks, in order to share experiences and ideas in the context of a communicative exchange, and an artistic experimentation in which the sender and the receiver, the artist and the public, act on the same plane.

In Italy, over the course of twenty years of experimentation, thanks to the alternative use of the internet network, a vast national network of people who share political, cultural and artistic objectives was created. These projects, which are active among underground movements, integrate different media (computer, video, television, radio, magazines) and individuals are involved in the technological experimentation also known as "Hacktivism", to use terminology in use in Italy, where the political component is key. The Italian network proposes a form of critical information, diffused through independent and collective projects that share the common value of freedom of expression. At the same time, it reflects the new role of the artist and author who becomes a networker, an operator of collective networks, reconnecting himself with the artistic practices of the Neo Avant-guard of the 1960s (Fluxus being the first), but also with Mail Art, and with Neoism and Luther Blissett.

The Art of Networking is shaped by weaving open relational dynamics that are coming into being, and, in many cases, difficult to define. Even those who produce this type of Art (or have produced it) often do not define it as such, or rather prefer to not limit it with some agreed upon categorization.

Until recently, the term "Art" has rarely been used to connote artistic activities on line. Instead an attempt was made to define these practices by creating micro categories, often sources of ambiguities (and vivid contrasts!) even among those in the know. A point of view that is perfectly rooted in the rejection of the concept of Art belonging to the artistic Avant-guard; from Dadaism to Futurism and Surrealism, up until the Neo Avant-guard of the 1960s, which, in any case, took place within the art circuits.

In general, there seems to be great confusion surrounding the various definitions, which go from Net Art (or net.art, with a period between net and art) to Web Art, Hacker Art, New Media Art, Cyber Art, Electronic Art and Digital Art. In many cases however

the difference among these practices is real and can be documented.

Terms like net.art (with a period between net and art) or Hacker Art refer to a series of practices and events that are created during specific phases of the development of a critical approach to the web, as we will see in the following pages. Sometimes however, categorical definitions run the risk of delimitating a scope of action on the basis of how it came into being, generating distinctions of belonging among those who recognize a term as more or less valid as another, on the basis of “community perception” or on one’s own artistic history.

At the same time, it is no longer enough to define these practices in terms of the medium used. The Art of Networking is transversal to the arts that are characterized by a medium of communication and realization: it can travel through Mail Art, Web Art, Video Art, Computer Art, net.art, Software Art, ASCII Art, Media Art in the broad sense. For this reason, it is possible to say, without reading too much into it, that Networking was an art and it still is. *The Net as Artwork*, therefore freeing itself from the prejudices of the past and re-appropriating itself of a term that, in its conceptual vastness allows it to embrace different practices, without forcing them into rigid forms, leaving them free to transform themselves through the inter-weaving of links that are always new. It is Art outside the box, which comprises, as we shall see, numerous spheres of action.

The term “Art” can help to critically refer to a series of activities that hinge on the construction of connections, community networks and relationship networks between heterogeneous subjects. The works of Networking mentioned here allow for the reconstruction of the development of realities that, from the 1980s, had proposed a shared creative use, conscious of the technology, from video to computer, contributing to the formation of an Italian hacker community. A journey that goes from Mail Art to BBS (alternative telematics networks widespread throughout Italy before the internet), to Hackmeeting, to Telestreet, and to the practice of networking and net.art.

The main research field of this book is Italy, since it is here that the practices of networking have determined the construction of a network of projects unparalleled in any other country. A scene with a strong identity and with its own artistic, technological and political feeling has been formed in Italy. The forms of artistic activism (artivism) and technological activism (hacktivism) are tightly interconnected in an extensive network diffused throughout the nation.

In Italy, the idea of cyberpunk and hacking has taken on a very particular typology, tightly connected with the history of alternative telematics and to the environments of movement, something that has not happened in most other countries. In Italy, in fact we prefer to use the term hacktivism to define artistic and mass media practices, giving

them an artistic and political value which is not always recognized as such, outside of Italy. In some ways, our country constitutes a laboratory of underground experimentation that can become a model for many others. At the same time however, it represents a sort of creative “island” that is not always able to export its own creations. The idea that the “Italian scene” has been virtually marginalized comes from here.

Surely, this affirmation derives from the fact that in many experimental environments a linguistic obstacle has existed, and to a certain extent, still exists, so that artists and activists tend to only use the Italian language and to disseminate their activities via local channels. Furthermore, it has very often been the “community” dynamics of political activism that have made some processes slower. In any case, several Italian realities described here are conceptually tied to international ones, which frequently represent very important inspirational sources.

This book wants to shed light on a series of activities that starting from the 1980s, in and outside of Italy, has transformed the conception of Art as Object in Art as a Network of relationships, possibilities of personally and collectively intervening in the creation of an artistic product. The formation of Art as a Network laid down its theoretical and practical bases a long time ago.

The Avant-garde of the nineteenth hundreds had already shifted its attention from the artistic object to daily life, further tarnishing the notion of “originality”. But it is with the Neo Avant-garde of the 1960s that the public enters directly into the process of creation of the work with the *happening* in which everyone is, at least ideally, simultaneously a producer and a consumer of information. In the *happenings* and in Fluxus, art becomes inter-action, inviting the spectator to eliminate the distance between himself and the artistic product, with the goal of making the dichotomy of artist-spectator obsolete (however, it does in part survive).

It is above all, in contexts outside of the gallery and museum circuit that the possibility of experimenting with Art as collective inter-action is truly materialized: moving the debate from the artistic realm to daily social reality. This dates back to the 1970s with the graffiti artists and with the punk movement and is carried through to the rival telematics networks and the current hacker movement. This Network is comprised of activists, artists, and a collective that have the self-managed use of media in their own actions in common, defining self-management as the self-organization and self-production of communication media and artistic practices.

In punk, a movement which constitutes the basis for many practices of future artistic and technological activism in Italy, the concept of self-management is manifested in the

willingness to undermine the opposition between the amateur and the professional, showing that it is possible to self produce one's own art (music, magazines, information material, etc.) outside of the market circuits.

Instead, within the sphere of the practices of the graffiti artists, self-management is manifested in the act of personalizing the walls surrounding their lives with *tags*, activating a moving communication between various anonymous identities.

The concept of self-management is also key for the development of the alternative Italian telematics and for future forms of networking. The scene of Italian cyberpunk and the hacker movement show that, starting with a conscious use of technology and the instruments of language, it is possible to conceive of a type of Art in which it is possible to personally intervene: activating an open process of creation. These dynamics have been widespread throughout Italy since the mid 1980s, especially within the circle of the *Centri Sociali Occupati* [Squatted Social Centres], developing by means of an independent use of technology through the creation of collective practices, and artistic and political objectives, forming a web of projects that is diffused throughout the country.

At the same time, the course of analysis and critical thinking about the culture of the internet has begun. It saw the height of its expression in the 1990s, giving way to the first virtual reality experimentations; forging the foundations for an Italian *Net Culture*. These processes involve different artists, such as, just to name a few: Giacomo Verde, Antonio Glessi and Andrea Zingoni from the *Giovanotti Mondani Meccanici*, Massimo Contrasto, Tommaso Tozzi, Federico Bucalossi, Claudio Parrini and the collective from *Strano Network*, Simonetta Fadda, Mario Canali and the *Correnti Magnetiche* group, Flavia Alman and Sabine Reiff of the *Pigreca* group, Helena Velena, the director Mariano Equizzi, together with the editors of specialized publications such as Francesco Galluzzi and the editorial staff of *La Stanza Rossa*, Alessandro Ludovico from *Neural*, the collective from *Decoder/Shake Edizioni* and those of *Isole nella Rete*, *FreakNet*, *AvANa.net*, *Tactical Media Crew* and different other artists, theorists, activists and hackers who have already acted in the arena of alternative Italian telematics.

Some of the aforementioned have developed an aptitude towards the artistic experimentation with media (from video o computer) which presents a strong community character, which makes us talk more in general about the "art of the hackers" or hacker art. With Hacker Art the meaning of the work of art should no longer be looked at in its manifestation as object, but in the network of relations and in the collective processes that have contributed to its creation. The story of hackers in Italy is

closely knit to that of the countercultural telematics and the formation of underground alternative networks.

In Italy the concept of the hacker developed at the same time as the development of a critical conscience on the use of technology. A hacker is not only someone who uses technology to test its limits, but above all someone who believes in the freedom of information (and let us add, Art), within the accessibility of information and in the exchange of knowledge, who perhaps has never seen a computer in his life. For this reason, the hacker ethic is the attitude of thought that best accompanies many of the practices described here.

In this sense, the social component gains a central importance: that is why often in Italy many experiences between the 1980s and the 1990s are defined as social hacking, in which experimentation in technology and in programming code is tied to the idea of sharing resources and knowledge. Following this objective, Italian artists, activists and hackers act concretely in person and on the internet, putting protest practices like Netstrike, into play; constructing radical sites and independent magazines, hacker laboratories (Hacklab) and organizing collective meetings regarding self-teaching and the exchanging of skills. (Hackmeeting).

Naturally projects of artistic networking do not exist solely in Italy. On an international scale, in the last ten years, mailing lists, festival and online projects have been, and in many cases are still now, a territory for primary experimentation for the birth of net.art and, more in general, of the international *Net Culture*. These experiences have involved numerous theorists and artists for years, and are fundamental in order to develop a critical approach to the Network. The Networking scene in Italy has acquired a particular character, and, due to its participation and diffusion, it does not have any equals anywhere. The Italian scene links itself directly with the hacker practices, as evident in the work of the activist Jaromil and, following the Blissettian tradition of the "viral" participation on communication, the works of 0100101110101101.ORG and of [epidemiC], to name those who had major contact with international reality.

Between the 1990s and 2000, the culture of networking in Italy has developed through the proliferation of collective projects that work critically on media and on the internet, which are by now available to everyone instead of only to the few experts. Many activists, hackers and artists take advantage of the diffusion of the low priced technological instruments, from computers to video cameras, to realize far-reaching projects which provide a concrete turning-point into the Italian culture of networking in terms of its diffusion throughout the nation.

Realities are born: such as Indymedia Italia, the Telestreet network, the New Global

Vision collective, and the Autistici/Inventati free server, which experiments with the computer, with video and with the internet with a critical point of view. Many other local projects are tied to these national realities which share these same political and technological objectives. Among these, the collectives: Candida TV, Serpica Naro, Molleindustria and other groups who actively respond to the post neo-economy social problematics, such as ChainWorkers and in the realm of strategic marketing tactics of Guerrigliamarketing.it.

The majority of the above mentioned projects emerged after the G8 anti-summit in Genova in 2001; a stage not only for difficult clashes, repression and violence, as the majority of the official media highlighted, but also for an important experience for anyone who constructs grassroots information, with amateur webcams, underground internet sites, independent radio circuits. The three days in Genoa, with its violence and repression, not only dealt a harsh blow to Italian activist groups, but also contributed to rendering the critical reflection on media, on technology and on the forms of political activism more incisive.

Together with the projects of networking described above, there is a network of people who answer to the strategies of the opposition with a ludic-tactic frivolity, putting into play one's own body and subverting the idea of political action as "resistance": which showed its strength as well as its limits in Genoa. In this network, the corporeal network becomes a fundamental channel through which to create new openings, to initiate experimentation on the "bordering", even sexual, territories. There are many projects that aim to form a larger network, commonly described by the term "queer" or "pink". Among these, the collective Sexyshock in Bologna, Phag-Off in Rome, and the Pornflakes in Milano stand out, whose activity is inserted in a discourse of reflection on sexuality, pornography and artistic experimentation ranging from cyberfeminism to Netporn to pornographic experimentation on the internet.

The description of the ties that exist in this dynamic Italian network of artistic, technological and political experimentation, intends to show how it is possible to create successful critical and creative routes that involve "alternative" channels, compared to those dominated by the economy of the market, by the politics of control and by commercial information, often presented in Western society as the only possibilities. A criticism of the *status quo* which overruns, not only the social and political plane, but also the artistic plane, as, for example happens with the episode of the Tirana Conspiracy at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This event which few know about, dealt a harsh blow to the Italian system, which is based on commercial dynamics. The Tirana Conspiracy brought to light the vacuity of the cycle of the relationship among collector-

market-artist, and showed that the current artistic challenge lies in the invention of new courses of action and new contents.

The networking projects described in this book act within these spaces, in the social and cultural fractures that are apparently on the margins of daily life, but which in reality constitute an important territory for the re-invention and rewriting of symbolic and expressive codes with which to transform and decode our present. It is not surprising, therefore, that the internet, with which we all work today is in reality the fruit of connections, battles and relationships which see hackers playing a leading role. Just like it is not surprising that many individuals here mentioned were precursors of different artistic and cultural processes which have contributed shaping the current Italian mass media and technological imagination.

This book wants to give the proper weight and worth to many artistic, social and cultural practices which, through their network of political, artistic, technological and affective ties, have contributed to make the instruments with which we interact daily, more fascinating; from the computer to the internet. With the hope that the experiences told here become a model for all those who would like to continue to work creatively in the spaces and fractures of the everyday, or for those who will fight to ensure that everything comes out in the open, allowing anyone to make it his or her own.

Naturally, the components of personal networking play a central role in approaching subjects like these. My analysis should therefore be thought of as one of the many possibilities, and I expect others to follow, dictated by the personal worlds that we each have built, following one's own network dynamics. I defer to a future of new connections and sharing; opening the contents of this book to future reflections and re-elaborations, with the same passion, enthusiasm and even idealism that have characterized these past twenty years in the history of Italian networking.

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