

# NETWORKING: The Net as Artwork

Book by Tatiana Bazzichelli <[www.networkingart.eu](http://www.networkingart.eu)>

## PREFACE BY DERRICK DE KERCKHOVE

Tatiana Bazzichelli is a rising scholar and critic of digital culture and this book is a milestone in the critical theory she began developing in the 1990's while studying sociology. Her interest in the connections between art and media matured within academic environments, to consider their social and political implications. She went on to concentrate more fully on the themes of art in hacker ethics and collaborated directly with independent Italian hacker communities and networking activists in the art industry.

This book follows the itinerary in the art field and in digital activism that she has documented over time. A quest that is not exclusively personal; but that also recounts some of the experiences of many other people in Italy who began to work experimentally on art and technology during the 1980's. This type of writing I call "glocal autobiography", meaning that it connects the personal to the larger connected realm of global activities. The book takes its place in the evolution of the artistic networking project *AHA: Activism-Hacking-Artivism*. An initiative started in 2001 by Bazzichelli as part of her plan to promote art on the Internet and to give greater visibility to the Italian digital culture, AHA has contributed to the creation of a vast network of relations and projects.

Italian hacktivism and net art are little known to the rest of the world. That situation ought to be remedied, since Italians, as in so many other fields, are just as innovative on line as off, in their own inimitable way. Exporting Italian thinking on media and network technology is a sort of vocation I am presently following within a few institutions in Italy: the Faculty of Sociology in the University Federico II in Naples, and the M\_Node research centre within the Belle Arti Academy in Milan (NABA). The McLuhan Program at the University of Toronto is a possible platform for the diffusion of Italian hacktivist and artistic paths such as are mentioned in this book.

Penetrating at the heart of current networking dynamics, of complex processes in the internet, one may notice that instead of the usual focus on technology, there is a growing trend towards interest in people, in their way of connecting and their social-cultural friendships and relations, their direct connection to the reality in which they live.

Not long ago people talked a lot about the virtual, but today it's clear that the people in flesh and blood are the destiny of the network and not just machines.

The *network of participation* and the formation of networks and relations through technology is an increasingly pervasive and global phenomenon, and the analysis of the methods with which these networks are formed is becoming a necessity for those who deal with digital culture. One must not limit oneself to solely analyzing singular contents which are present on the internet, but instead should try and understand how people who create such contents are connected between themselves in a present, extended way. One must therefore consider the social dimensions of connectivity. This book attempts to do this for the Italian communities of networkers.

Quoting the famous phrase by Marshall McLuhan "the medium is the message"<sup>1</sup>, today one may say that *the network is the message of the medium Internet*. The networking phenomenon was anticipated by the practice of mail art long before Internet evolved, just as the *pointillism* of Seurat could be considered prophetic with respect to the subsequent development of the television image. Until recently in America the term network was used to describe the television medium, but today it regards a much larger and vaster connective dimension, which is the Internet. Network becomes "the net of social relations", it is the message transmitted by the Internet medium, which is in turn the net which technically permits transmission.

The net of relations represents the message of the technical net. If the medium conditions the message (though converging on the Internet, TV, books, radio, telephones, cell phones do transmit specific messages), on the internet (a medium based on the creation of connection nets), the message is the social relationships all these media generate.

All this leads to the role of the user. McLuhan often jested that "If the medium is the message, then the user is the content". What he implied, I think, is that media were not just support or even conditioners of messages; they were prime and foremost *environments*. The medium thus could shape both the content and the user. If the medium conditions the message, the user becomes the content of this message, and this goes for all the forms of networking. With the extension of the Internet, one's position within the flow of information changes: today the net allows us to diffuse our thoughts in a global manner; whereas before these affirmations were merely a utopia,

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<sup>1</sup> Even if he never spoke of anything close to the Internet, in a certain way Marshall McLuhan had anticipated it in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Understanding Media* predicting the development of electronic technologies as vehicles through which to expand not only our senses, but our consciousness itself (the book was written in 1962 and published in 1964).

now one may experiment with them as a concrete phenomenon. Once on-line we quite literally become content for the Internet.

The structure of the medium also conditions one's perception of one's own identity: the fact that one becomes an active lever in the distribution and creation of digital contents also determines a change in the net structures and in our way of communicating and relating with the outside world. People carry an aura of communications around them.

In the case of TV, television images speak directly to the body of the viewer. Television addresses one's inner state and the electron beam paints its sensorial and emotional dimensions directly unto the viewer's nervous system; it is a form of physical action which is conveyed through sound and moving images. But with the Internet, we share the responsibility of making sense with the technology; we are not just consumers of information, but also producers, creators, and our production becomes an active part of network dynamics. Just check this out on Youtube. Internet is a medium which contains in itself all the other media, even as the cellular phone recaps the history of all media by bringing the convergence of speech, writing and electricity to a single portable appliance.

With the internet or mobile phones, intended as network platforms, a flow of connective information is generated and extended globally and our existence, with its own particular inclinations, preferences and connections, becomes a lever in the production and reception of relationships as well as information.

How does the user become internet content? First, we need to abandon the illusion of being containers of information. The user, instead, becomes an active producer of this information in such practices as *social bookmarking*<sup>2</sup> or *tagging*. Social software either for personalized encyclopaedias such as *Del.icio.us* <<http://del.icio.us>>, or for human and professional contacts such as *Small World* <[www.asmallworld.net](http://www.asmallworld.net)>, or for sharing personal media such as *Flickr* <[www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)> or *Youtube* <[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)>, are professional and amateur at the same time. Each innovation augments the strength and the capabilities of the network.

The creation of expanded communities on the basis of common interests, in which it is possible to interact with and involve diverse media, is something I explain by examining the concept of "hypertinence". This is a neologism which I created to describe the progressive precision of the rapport between offer and demand (and vice-versa) within the internet contents and within the information contexts which are created on the

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<sup>2</sup> For a deeper knowledge of concepts such as *tagging* and *social bookmarking*, look at the description on the respective Wikipedia at: <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tags](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tags)> and <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_bookmarking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_bookmarking)>.

internet. An example of hypertinence is the story of the particular refinement of search engines and the access of information on the net: thus one passes from Yahoo to Google and from Google to *Del.icio.us*. Through these platforms of social networking as *Del.icio.us*, one moves on from Wikipedia, a more or less anonymous albeit genial form of collaboration on the net, to the formation of myriads of just-in-time-on-line-on demand connective intelligence networks that involve diverse individuals sharing their own specific interests.

Here, one gives free access to a personal homepage from which various *tags* branch off, which allow for the organisation of digital elements such as photos, text, and videos, which are all under a specific index, a key word which may be shared with other people too. At the same time these indexes become accessible to anyone who connects to the platform and has the intention of exchanging information with a similar content to their own. The evolution of the net demonstrates that progressively more and more situations are being created whereby the creation and the production of knowledge is evermore pertinent and the access of information becomes common ground - a process which involves people directly, the individual user who refines him or herself periodically with the aim to create more harmony with his or her own personal preferences.

The structural characteristic of the net is packet switching, through which all these processes come about on the net. The technical principle supporting packet switching is to fragment each message in tiny information packets, before sending them on line and give each one both a specific address/identity and a code to indicate the order in which they are to be recombined on arrival. Thanks to tagging it is possible to make one's own contents accessible to a global community of individuals without creating a hierarchy between them and between the access paths. The shared information, the exchanged messages, the personal preferences indexed on the net through associated *tag* systems, give way to a more profound development of the social networking dimension and allow the addition of a level of great maturity on the net. In *Del.icio.us*, anyone may participate freely and gratuitously without restrictions. One may insert one's own material, be that photographic or text, and associate particular *tags* to it, key words which are interpreted as connections. These key words circulate within the community and on the vaster net and may attract other people with similar interests, who access the networking platform and exchange information and documents. Thus thematic interest groups are generated which are the connective evolution of blogs, which were the first form of personalization of the net and a concrete example of the

network of participation, if associated with other friends' or acquaintances' blogs with through related topics.

A simple example to explain how social software works on the net is *Flickr*. Suppose you have been invited to a wedding and have taken some photographs. The website allows you to publish them online and describe them by typing in the names of the people who appear on them. Chances are you may not know or recall the name of everybody who appears. You may leave those in blank, hoping that someone else who was at that wedding, and has connected to *Flickr* either to post pictures or to see those already posted, might know the missing names. Flickr allows surfers to add the forgotten names. This is just to say that through these networking platforms one may give life to an intricate web of connections, as if one had many personalized Wikipedia regarding one's own activities.

Platforms such as Wikipedia, with strategic interconnections, use a similar mechanism, which is coherent with the idea of partaking, but opposite through the modalities of its practice. Wikipedia is an anonymous and free internet encyclopaedia and produced by anonymous people. The *tagging* of platforms such as Del.icio.us or *Flickr*, on the other hand, allow for the emphasizing of the presence of the user on the net and gives the public a configuration of indexed information based on one's own interests. In this sense, there is room on line both for useful but anonymous contributions as well as personalized information. Both projects are examples of technological systemization of connective thought which arise from the intelligence of the few who create something useful and accessible for a vaster community.

Throughout inter-connective strategies which give people the possibility to share their own information through evermore sophisticated methods; we are presented with what I recently described as "connective intelligence", which makes auto-organisational strategies a central part of the net. In these platforms there is no limit to the contents which may be published and one may share them with the entire planet, attracting more specifically those who have similar interests to our own. *Tagging* is a form of *social networking* refinement, and gives the possibility to create a plural and extended conscience. In these forms of connectivity I see a resurrection of the aura, intended as that tactile but unperceivable halo, created by the informational connections of each and every one of us, such as our sentimental and personal bonds and our friendships, which are all organised in a whole and extended fashion - a web of relations which represents how we relate to the world and what we have shared so far.

The artist becomes a networker and creates possibilities for exchange between people who become a part of the conceived network, which means to open up the idea of aura

to all possible connections which may come about in that network. The aura of a person connected in a professional and friendly information net system represents the communicability of that person and the interconnection of all his or her bonds. For example, our computer, our mobile phone, also contain the aura of our cohabitation in this world, consisting of the messages we send and receive, the list of friends or acquaintances in our address book, files we have saved and archived, the configuration of the system we have created, etc. This web belongs to us personally, and makes us a part of a community which reunites in hyper-cognitive systems in the information-sphere. It is part of our digital persona, although much of that escapes our control entirely.

In Tatiana Bazzichelli's book, connection is seen as an artistic practice. Interaction platforms, free operative systems such as GNU/Linux, independent experimental or community projects and *hacktivist* movements are presented as works of art. The network in itself becomes a work of art. When I was member of jury at the Ars Electronic Festival in Linz in 1994, myself and the other four members, Joi Ichi Ito, Franz Manola, Morgan Russell and Mitsuhiro Takemura, we were confronted with the need to formalize criteria to judge the works submitted in the newly created category of art developed on the net. We asked ourselves how we could judge these forms of art, if the www was the medium that supported them, and so we decided that the connectivity was the message<sup>3</sup>. Among the criteria for evaluating the artistic validity of a web site, I proposed *webness*. With *webness* I mean the quality of connectivity of projects. These criteria led us to attribute the Golden Nica award to no less than Linus Thorwald, for having invented and spread the use of Linux the following year.

In 1979, at the first ever edition of the Ars Electronic Festival in Linz, digital culture was an avant-garde theme. Today we are no longer relating to Utopias, but rather dealing with tentatively interpreting an economic and social phase in which technological progress has become the grammar of the present. On the one hand we live in a progressive segmentation and specialization, as demonstrated by the technique of *tagging*, and on the other hand we are experimenting an extended inclusion which involves common people who have access to technology which 20 years ago was unimaginable (like video conferencing or the multi-medial or multi-sensorial use of mobile phones). People become the active content and the producers of connected information.

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<sup>3</sup> The statement of the judge panel for the www category online at the site of the Ars Electronic Festival, 1995 edition: <[www.aec.at/en/archives/prix\\_archive/prixjuryStatement.asp?iProjectID=2554](http://www.aec.at/en/archives/prix_archive/prixjuryStatement.asp?iProjectID=2554)>.

The Italian thoughts and activities relating to the net become central in the explanation of this mechanism of media evolution, which sees the presence of the user as being evermore active and pertinent. The experiences told in this book show a network of individuals who act as an alternative to the standardized production of culture, information and art. These are people who pour their own political, social, artistic relations and friendships directly into a creative use of the media; a net which exists before the evolution of the Internet, through the alternative use of BBS and even before that through mail art. Through the projects and activities contained in this book, it is possible to understand how the central component of networking in Italy is the web of relations: going to a conference, participating in a festival, talking and sharing projects with others, organising a thematic meeting and at the same time, meeting in a bar or a restaurant with people who share our interests, become creative occasions to produce new activities and projects.

Tatiana Bazzichelli's work proposes to us to understand our cultural present through art itself. Art can be used to explain current cultural processes, and this kind of study, which is still in progress even now - like this book - is a precious instrument whereby to understand who we are and where we are going. It is a cut on Italian culture inside the network, an important lesson for young people and for many students, academics, critics and artists who may gather their inspiration from this text and who don't really know the origins of internet art and of Italian digital culture.

Italy is a country which is controlled by one-way communication media and particularly by television: it is quite apposite that to resist a collective medium, one must use a connective one, and, at the same time, give life to an artistic tradition of networking which involves the entire country, and which is still in evolution. In the creation of such an extended connectivity, the free access to the net creates an occasion to develop one's own communication from the bottom, moulding it to one's own needs - needs which become subversive artistic practice in order to create new stages for free participation and to give visibility to all. I support Tatiana Bazzichelli's effort in that direction. And so does this book.



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