

# Book Review: net.art generator

Cornelia Sollfrank, *net.art generator*, Verlag für moderne Kunst, Nürnberg (2004)

by Matthias Weiss

However hard you try, it is quite difficult to get rid of your authorship in this country. From a certain intellectual level, a work is considered worthy of protection under the law, no matter what material it is made of. But why would a creative person want to get rid of their authorship in the first place? Wearied of anything subjective? Maybe. But also technological progress has led, for example, to questioning authorship within the fine arts since the beginning of the 20th century.

The possible use of machines or aut(h)o(r)matisms in producing art confronts artists as well as experts with the task to assess and reflect upon the altered conditions of production. For, what does it actually mean if a computer automatically produces something? What status is attributed to this product? Legally, the question has long been answered: Neither an industrial robot nor a personal computer may claim copyright, not even if creating the most beautiful works or producing the most interesting images. For these artificial creators solely operate when applying a program which itself is determined by unequivocal criteria following a specific logic of command – and in general, these programs are written by men. However clear the issue may appear from a legal perspective, it remains quite diffuse in the less abstract sphere of life and experience. The fields of art and literature are at the forefront of addressing these issues, and genres such as science-fiction regularly deal with the feasibility of automatic identity. For this is in fact what lies at the bottom of all uneasiness caused by artificial-artistic artifacts. What is the extent of authorship, identity, and subjectivity if the work is done by a machine? This is one key motif of that section of contemporary art that makes use of machines.

For quite some time, artists and aestheticians have been reflecting upon a range of questions in this context. The debate on so called generating arts emerged in the 1960's,

featuring, for example, Max Bense, Georg Nees and Frieder Nake. The issue was again topical in the 1990's when net.art was introduced, in particular by Hamburg artist Cornelia Sollfrank. Thanks to her clever conceptual querying of authorship, the male domain of media art was radically disturbed. Her trailblazing work is called net.art generator and is still considered as one of the most important and significant internet art projects.. Developed in several stages the 1997 version female extension was a response to the the Hamburger Kunsthalle's first contest of internet art. female extension challenged the supposed competence of experts of contemporary art, – coherent in sense and concept – it revealed the hidden power mechanisms of public prizes and the selection of art. female extension worked by flooding the competition with numerous automatically generated female “net artists”. By use of these artificial and false females, the software had influenced the selection committee to a superficial politically correct quota sensibility. The large “proportion of women” participating in the contest was made part of the museum's marketing strategy and led, at the same time, to misinterpretations. In the end, no one paid thorough attention to the presented works of these simulations anymore. Still today, Sollfrank's work, questions the habit of reception.

Thanks to the Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg – which published Sollfrank's illuminating and important collection of essays entitled “net.art generator. Programmed seduction” – the work is now introduced to a broad public beyond the internet. Besides Annette Schindler's introduction, the bilingual book contains six essays. Two of them were written by Sollfrank herself – on her work and on copyright. Further, literary scholar and expert on code-art, Florian Cramer, contributed to this project as well as the English curator Sarah Cook, and the art scholars Ute Vorkoeper and Verena Kuni. Furthermore, there is an interview with programmer Richard Leopold who developed one of the generators, and a range of comments and remarks by several authors, including Dieter Daniels, former jury member of the above mentioned award of the Hamburger Kunsthalle, and Christiane Paul, curator and expert on computer art of the New York Whitney Museum of American Art.

Like a retrospective, the book covers the artistic tension between performance and conceptual art where Sollfrank positions herself. And implicitly, it is a homage to the artist, born in 1960, living and working in Hamburg and Celle. The book revolves

around the – touched on but not yet sufficiently answered – key issue about the relationship between authorship and copyright as well as the historical act of female extension. When Sollfrank first developed female extension, it seemed as if one could produce a “female artist” by accessing the subversive website with a browser and then filling in the relevant fields. Behind the user interface there was a program running which produced, completely automated, countless pseudo-artists corresponding to the algorithms then passed them on to the competition. Both today and ten years ago, the work plays an uncompromising role in irritating and agitating the mechanisms of the art system. At the same time, Sollfrank questions the individual artist and the term ‘author’. How could a machine not be the author if experts had acknowledged that the uniform fake sites were the works of female net.artists? At this point two different debates blend into a seemingly insoluble paradox. And even more: The key motif was to establish a female-dominated screen-based art as being quite cheery and colorful. It is Ute Vorkoeper who points this out in her text “Programmed Seduction”. She uncovers how the recipient becomes ironically involved, whether s/he wants or not. Cynical enough, that three men were nominated at that time.

When in 1997, the established institutions were hit by the first large wave of net.art it was mainly an art of the explicit. This is what Sarah Cook talks about when she reflects upon the question: “What would be considered beautiful in the eyes of artificial intelligence?” Early net.art comprised mostly of works which opposed a materially oriented art market. It explored the limits of what could technically be demonstrated by use of a browser or specially programmed presentation programs, or which watered flowers by telematics – and thus knew how to fascinate a young and technically inspired generation. At that time, the scene was eager to overcome the traditional art with an internet art that tackled many social and political phenomena like globalization, for instance. Diverse issues were elaborated, and many ideas of a world-changing art were developed as well as many ways of presentation and narration structures. Art, though, was often neglected. On the other hand, the traditional art market was experiencing new forms of painting and artistic photography while at the same time emphasizing documentary positions and meta-artistic strategies as well as worshipping the “ordinary”. On the rise of this polyphonic, lively pluralistic mix, net.art was merely assigned a niche-position – which it still maintains to this day. That is why it is exciting to follow philosopher Kirsten Hebel’s reflections upon the role of the code, in which

she comes to an unerring analysis of art's assertion of code-based activity and classic genres at the ontological level: While, since Kant, art is considered something determined by autonomy in terms of being unassailable by codes and language, a code itself is seen as character string which tolerates no interruption, and unfortunately has never known the true promise of calling its own existence into question.

Against this background, Sollfrank's work was of a shocking effect and caused some disillusionment. For in contrast to many other artists who used the internet as an explorable infrastructure in order to escape the supposed chains of traditional artistic media, Sollfrank interpreted the internet as an "extension", not reducing it to the one and only means and medium of her subtle practices. The book shows that her performances, interventions, and drafts are not only to be understood on the basis of the internet's technical infrastructure. One might believe that this contradicts her attempts to deconstruct authorship. But the internet – as a paradox of hierarchy, boom, and free market, academic counter-mundaneity, of ephemeral data production, unstable availability, and projection screen of diverse promises – is the best medium to discuss the relation between fiction and reality.

The anachronism of the book (which serves as publication on the net.art generator and as medium to reflect upon it) only appears as one, for it is calculated and part of the artistic concept of exploring the limits. „I intend to reduce the inhibition thresholds of the traditional art audience”, explains the artist, „a book is therefore a quite suitable means because it is a familiar medium”. For it is merely since the opening of net.art to traditional art-debates, that the suffix art as in net.art is not only a loanword and marketing-label in the procurement of means. Quite in the spirit of conceptual art, the book may be understood as the Archimedean point of the artist's works: As Florain Cramer points out, the cover-typography celebrates a carnival of identities, with the title appearing above the author's name and font sizes are swapped. Essentially, the book helps to comprehend the work, but in addition, it is also the outcome of artistic creation when considering the order of the texts. Metaphorically, it may be described as a systematic sculpture. The book is a complex layering of Sollfrank's research and debates as well as a detailed exploration of her practice.

The book also looks at Sollfrank's challenging of the legal system and how the law supports the art system through copyright and other protectionist statements.. But from the perspective of theory and history of art as well as of the artists these statements are often strangely inept, misjudging and misunderstanding the intention of the works. This becomes clear when taking a look at the legal assessment of Sollfrank's Warhol-flowers which were brought to new blossom by the software and adorn, for example, the cover. The owners of the rights are being tested. Thereby and in all complexity, Sollfrank ascribes the imponderability of the relation between original and copy to the system. You wonder, how one may claim copyright if a smart machine does the work and if the production process of the "originals" had already been based on the idea of multiplication. The absurdity of making a fetish qua copyright opposes the discourse of theory and history of art which again cannot be congruent with the legal one. Sollfrank's work and her book render these irreconcilable tensions clearly perceptible. On the other hand, she masterly uses the mechanisms of the art market by, for instance, exposing their ways of documentation (catalogue) and market mechanisms (duplication of the generated images). Further, Sollfrank enters the professional debates of computer-hackers, as Cramer's article clarifies.

In the year 2000, Sollfrank humorously introduced a targeted intervention to the yearly convention of the Chaos Computer Club – a device to calculate the fertile period of a woman. On the convention's web-site it was published as a find. None of the exclusively male organizers was able to make any sense of this mysterious machine. "The supposed experts on subversion of systems turned out to be blind to their own system", concludes Cramer in his enlightening article on the term hacker from the perspective of Sollfrank's artistic work. But the author misinterprets the artist's intentions. It does not so much seem that "her ideal of a philosophically radical fusion of art and hacker culture" fails – as Cramer assumes – but rather she acknowledges the difference between the art system with the inherent possibility to fictionalize the daily routine and the discourses and systems mainly on technical matters.

The premise of the book reveals how convincingly Sollfrank points out the blind spots of individual systems such as law, technology, and art and how she turns them into the "material" of her work. This may give the impression that there is a meta-authorship which no longer fetishizes the object but instead uses the debates in their materiality as

a malleable mass. But the uncertainty in regard to authorship, identity, and the work's status and concept remains. Moreover, none of us knows at what point we are turned ourselves into material of Sollfrank's plastic work. By presenting a book, Sollfrank enables us to archaeologically get an impression via experience – through the thoughts of the different authors, which Sollfrank has assembled according to her own criteria – of the plastic qualities of the blind spots of some debates. But the contour does not become really clear. The blind spots are being operationalized. You cannot catch up with them. In this sense Sollfrank is interested in a specification of a designed dubiousness of systemic parts which are taken for granted. The reader can pursue this joy and suddenly learn in the entire polyphony of artistic possibilities about the demanding of all artistic in a field that otherwise prefers to rid itself of the rather classic notions of art.

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