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Artistic approaches to the treatment  
of online information

L A U R A B A I G O R R I

## Technologies To The People

Daniel García Andújar's forays into the terrain of the internet began with obscure projects questioning the limits of legal information and free access to technology, and the supposed interactivity of the Net and its credibility. In recent years these incursions have developed into a series of *transparent* initiatives<sup>1</sup>, which are fully open to citizen collaboration. This transition stems from his moral stance and his deeply social conception of new information and communication technology.

Let's take this in stages. García Andújar's online career began in 1996, when he created *Technologies To The People*<sup>®</sup>, a non-profit-making organization which was hosted on the website of *irational* —an “international system for deploying *irational* information, services and products for the displaced and roaming—with which it shares space and philosophy. “*Irational* was one of the first spaces in the digital world to realise the potential of the internet for sharing information, and espouse the famous hacker dictum, “Information wants to be free”. In opposition to an intellectualised activism, *Irational* has been characterised by a more direct form of action, which always requires the complicity of other collaborators, opening the doors to a more collective approach by political action in artistic format”<sup>2</sup>.

### From simulation...

From his home page, where he greets us with a “*Welcome to NetArt-Ghetto*”, García Andújar offers links to various simulation projects. The paradigm is perhaps *Video Collection*, an outstanding collection of video-art featuring the leading names in the discipline, which can be accessed completely free of charge over the internet. E-mail messages from users and distributors reveal the confusion that can be caused by a project like this, which offers free viewing of work that has previously always involved copyright issues.

His next step was to create a project in which truth and simulation perversely cohabitated. In *The Famous Art Power Database for ARTIST*, for example, *TTTP*<sup>®</sup> offers secret information over the internet. The site gives useful information and news for artists working on the internet: everything they need to know to design their own websites, and also texts on legal and illegal internet issues. The site is divided into various very specialised theme sections: Computer Crime and Intellectual Property; The Hacker's Dictionary and Unix Glossary; a section devoted to attack and defence tools, and a compendium of basic know-how about legally or morally dubious activities.

Along the same lines is *Phoney*<sup>TM3</sup>, another information project in the form of a CD-ROM. It consists of a database of computer weapons (applications and viruses) available to anyone who wants to use them... and who knows the codes. The project contains two levels: one more specialised, for hackers capable of causing genuine computer »

» catastrophes (such as hacking into the computers of powerful companies or infecting servers), and another which is much simpler: behind a safe mask of anonymity, any newbie can follow the simple instructions for making small bank transfers or tapping phone conversations. All of these activities are entirely illegal, and a warning to this effect comes up continuously on the screen (*Technologies To The People®; its members and Art Power Database's contributors will in no case be held responsible for any misuse of the information provided. You do the crime, you do the time*). Nonetheless, the artist has decided to trust in the user's good judgement and sense of responsibility. The fact that someone can access the information freely does not necessarily mean that they have to (ab)use it... or does it?

These controversial projects raise numerous questions: the most important concerns García Andújar's true intentions. Is his aim to further knowledge by disseminating restricted information? Or does he want to question the use of free access to information that any user can manipulate at will, safe behind the impersonal parapet of his computer? *TTTTP®* uses irony—and on occasions cynicism—to subvert conventionalism, but, above all, to examine access to information in “other terms”.

*e-valencia.org*...is open to debate, dissemination and discussion over the Net, and the users themselves are responsible for creating the contents.

### ...to collaboration

Some years ago, in the course of a talk at the arts school in Barcelona, Muntadas was asked why his proposals criticised the use and abuse of the mass media and did not offer “solutions”. His answer was categorical: “I am an artist, not a politician. Politicians have to work for social progress; artists can only point out the lacks in a community”. With the setting up of *e-valencia.org*, García Andújar appears to have decided to break beyond this supposed limitation, effecting a new departure in his career and getting fully involved in the area of direct social action... and operativity. The site *e-valencia.org* is a discussion portal on Valencian cultural policy. It is open to debate, dissemination and discussion over the Net, and the users themselves are responsible for creating the contents. It is no longer a case of information or simulations previously arranged by the author, but of the creation of a forum, viewed as a cooperative space, which allows (counter) information to be shared among different people. The same is true of the brand new *e-barcelona.org*<sup>4</sup>, another portal site with the same characteristics as *e-valencia*, but targeted at the cultural needs of the city of Barcelona—hence its audacious subtitle “*Forum of Culture*” (*in counterpoint to the “Universal Forum of Cultures”*). This same participative approach can be seen in the projects discussed below.

*e-arco.org* opens with the slogan “*First Aid for Artists*” next to a logo that plays ironically with the symbol of the red cross and the Swiss flag (guest country at ARCO'03). The site, which is particularly geared at artists, gives information on artists' rights, and also contains two controversial sections: a survey of income and a space entitled “*conflict*”, where artists are invited to relate the problems they have had with galleries, museums and public institutions. As well as encouraging free participation, the creators (the site is co-authored with Roc Parés) have made sure to clearly define and orient their critical intentions.

In another of his recent internet projects, *Individual-Citizen Republic Project™* (2003), designed to coincide with the exhibition *El Banquete*<sup>5</sup>, García Andújar goes one step further, combining his earliest and latest interests in a single space. Defined by the author as “*a project in progress based on the construction and exploration of a social prototype of autonomous citizen who promotes, uses and develops resources obtained from public information sources, which s/he offers the community as an integrating part of the collective social process*”, the site contains compilations of resources sent in by users, classed according to the following categories: cracking, exploit, forum, hacking, Linux, phreaking, privacy and crypto, security, tools, tv-hack, virus and wireless. It is particularly significant that in the “*About*” section, which normally describes the beginnings of the *online* project, the artist has not written a single line, instead offering just three links to the alternative open code resources, Apache, PHP and MySQL. The founding commitment of *TTTTP®*—to facilitate access by everyone to technology—takes specific form in the *BanqueteWireless* workshop, a community infrastructure with its own access nodes and internet outlet where resources can be shared free of charge.

### Is it possible to do away with the author?

The internet offers plenty of opportunities for anonymity, and for a variety of reasons, some authors choose to shelter behind an *alias*: in most cases they are only trying to evade their role as “star-artists”, to emphasise the work rather than the person. Frequently, they use names that designate groups, like *Technologies To The People*<sup>®</sup>. This attitude also reflects a desire to grant greater responsibility to the spectator in interpreting and developing the work —“*Ce sont les regardeurs qui font les tableaux*”, as Duchamp put it. In other cases, they are trying to adopt a new, uncontaminated, identity which serves to dilute the national, geographical and cultural connotations of the author’s true name and allow them to operate outside the limitations of prejudice and/or categorisation. But there is yet another goal, which goes beyond the desire to evade artistic stardom or geo-cultural pigeonholing: when artists assume corporate names and strategies, they are also trying to question —through simulation— the speculative and legal structures of companies.

Obviously, despite their intentions, none of these devices manages to completely erase the author, or achieve true anonymity, but their attitudes bear testimony to an ethical stance which still questions the notion of authorship linked to the process of the mythification of the artist.

### Media context and institutional artistic context

At the same time, these online projects, structured on the basis of shared information and establishing a direct participative relationship with the spectator, also appear to have the potential to achieve legitimisation outside the scope of the artistic institution; they are self-sufficient and do not need institutional backing, because the direct relationship with the user and the permanent dissemination provided by the internet already satisfy their aims and needs<sup>5</sup>. But this situation is only true in very specific cases, such as that of *e-valencia.org*, which has had moderate success in terms of participation and dissemination operating only over the internet. However, websites like *Individual-Citizen Republican Project*<sup>™</sup> and *e-arco.org* form part of the artistic circuit, with presential installations in their respective exhibition sites<sup>7</sup>, whose mission is to complement or give greater visibility to their online existence.

And it is not only the physical presence of the works that appears to be necessary; the artist’s presence is also required. Daniel García Andújar, like his companions from *irational*, spends much of his time at festivals, meetings, seminars, workshops and the like. Indeed, these presentations form a very important part of his work. The paradox occurs when we see that his location in a (global) media context is not a substitute for the (local) institutional context, because public presence —the artist’s greatest resource for promotion and dissemination— is mainly achieved through the artistic intervention of the institutions. ❧

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**LINKS** are listed on page 24

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> “Creativity, as a social value, established in free access to information, produces a transparent generation of knowledge based on the effort and resources obtained collectively”. Daniel García Andújar in the foreword to *Creación Colectiva*. En *Internet el creador es el público*, in CASACUBERTA, D. Barcelona : Editorial Gedisa, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> CASACUBERTA, D. Op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Special Lux Ziffer prize at the Berlin Transmediale 01.

<sup>4</sup> As I write, I have the test site up on screen. The full site should be up and running by the time this piece is published.

<sup>5</sup> El Banquete [The Banquet] is a project designed by Karin Ohlenschläger and Luis Rico (directors of MediaLabMadrid) and curated with Iván de la Nuez (director of exhibitions of the Palau de la Virreina) and Peter Weibel (artist, theoretician and director of the ZKM in Karlsruhe). The central theme of the project is the analogy between metabolism and communication, examined here in the sense of dialogue, as introduced by Plato into Western culture. El Banquete takes the form of a conversation between artists, scientists and thinkers from spheres such as biology, economics, literature, anthropology, communication, neuroscience and social and environmental collectivism.

<sup>6</sup> “By forging a corporate identity and choosing the public space to express themselves and define their area of action (spaces of urban expression and public spaces of media communication), initiatives like this, despite, or perhaps because, they start from an artistic platform, no longer appear to require the backing of the artistic institution for their process of legitimisation, (auto)positioning and dissemination. Rather, they manage to re-examine some of its functions, since they operate self-sufficiently within the very context that generates and houses them. [...] These proposals force an implicit questioning of the forms of access, communication and interaction with the work within the frameworks of the institutional space. Whereas the exhibition space still appears to require instruments of mediation, these pieces, by being presented in interface form, question spectators and are targeted directly at them, making them users rather than passive consumers”. ARRIOLA, M. Razón social, International Symposium on Theory of Contemporary Art, Mexico DF, 2002. [http://www.enconstruccion.org/razon\\_social.htm](http://www.enconstruccion.org/razon_social.htm)

<sup>7</sup> The former in the exhibition El Banquete in the Palau de la Virreina and in the workshop BanqueteWireless which took place in Hangar, both in Barcelona; the latter in ARCO’03, Madrid.