

‘Well Now WTF?’

Exhibition Essay by Wade Wallerstein

Art has always existed on the net. Since the first servers came to life and mailing lists started winding their ways through the inboxes of creative types, networked protocols have inspired artists and given them the tools to work together to build community. Legend has it Vuk Cosic was trying to send an email to the Net Time mailing list, but his server glitched and the only legible text that appeared was “net.art.” Thus was born a new genre of medium-specific work and a new generation of artists using their computers to create—and, importantly, to create together.

After the old school message boards and mailing lists died down, in came the surf clubs of the 00’s—these were pre-algorithmic feed online fora where artists surfed, shared, ripped, and remixed each others’ work in what were bustling online communities. Eventually though, as the monolithic platforms emerged in the 2010’s centralized, sterilized, and profiteered off of the labor of artists, the landscape changed once again and surf clubs turned into Tumblr feeds, Pinterest boards, and Facebook groups.

Net art had fits and spurts of popularity throughout the second decade of the new millennium, as artists grappled with the acceleration of digital culture and the commercialization of virtual space. There was a slow but sure rising tide of institutional new media interest. There were net art historical gallery shows. There was a whole new wave of “post-internet” work that existed primarily in the form of installation shots on Instagram. There were magazines dedicated to “cutting-edge” contemporary art who loved to talk about the new virtual happenings created by so-and-so for what’s-it-called. There were galleries and museums born that specialized in work created using digital technologies. There was even a virtual biennale of online-only exhibitions, a whole world of digital creativity delivered directly to your desktop!

But this all felt like the same art world nonsense: the same institutional pandering to younger audiences and hipper collectors with new money to spend on shiny gadgets and club kid personalities. It was all a dick measuring competition for the crispiest renders, the most bells & whistles on a web page, and the most famous names in the art game without critical experimentation. The engines of the attention economy were whirring, and the leaders of digital art movements were the ones who knew how to wrangle the algorithms and get the most attention. Where was the sense of community and camaraderie? Where was

the spark that made net art so special, and different from every other arts movement that came before it? Was it possible to still have net art in an age of saturated surveillance, algorithmic control, and search engine discrimination?

Net art thrived best in the cracks of the web until global pandemic hit. Then the art shows closed, museums shuttered their doors, performances were canceled, and now everyone is left with the same question: Well Now WTF? No one has the answer, but everyone is online. Folks who have been silent for years are suddenly active, engaged, and ready to dive head first into the virtual fray. It is clearly apparent that we need a public space to come together like we haven't used in a long time.

Well Now WTF? was born out of this vital need to reinvigorate the online communities of the digital art worlds. It is a space for debut and display and celebration, but more importantly it is a space for connection. In curated gif and video screening rooms are the collected post-pandemic labor of multiple generations of digital native artists. We have collected the workings of folks who made some of the first fine art gif experimentations in the 90s, to folks still in school but carrying the spirit of net art forward for a new age. The format of the gif was chosen specifically for its communicative potential—its ability to slide in through direct messages and comments sections—and be the intimate file-based sharing mechanism by which we might all feel a little bit closer to one another. The gif is a simple format, but it has the capacity to hold vast complexity and persist despite varying network protocols. We hope that you will use the power of connectivity that these works provide, starting from the point of departure that gif is a universal visual language that we can use to cross our isolation confinements.

The Art Magazines™ are calling our contemporary art moment a “net art revival.” It makes sense—we're all cooped up with nothing to do, and a lot of bandwidth on our hands. Artists who haven't produced work for the net (at least not publicly) are active and sharing. Though it might seem like this art had disappeared in lieu of our favorite feed-based media platforms, and is suddenly now resurging, it hasn't. It is still there (we are still here), making and sharing and populating our little isolated corners of the internet. Instagram just made us lazy community organizers.

Now, as everything continues to move online in a mass diaspora from physical reality, net artists are once again center stage in their own native playgrounds. We would like to offer a different take. Instead of jumping on the net art revival bandwagon, *Well Now WTF?* is dedicated as a net art reclamation. We are taking the net back into our own hands, creating space on our own terms with our own tools, and re-connecting the communities that got separated by time, distance, and filter bubbles.

We offer no answers or solutions to the crises happening outside of the four walls of the screen; nor is much of the work directly responding to the global devastation wrought by COVID-19. There is no great thematic presentation or grouping. We put together what felt right to be together. Instead, we offer what we can and what we feel is of great value during this time: a place to gather, investigate, critique, create and, honestly, have fun. Social distance does not mean isolation. As the famous internet adage goes, let's all be alone, together.

We know that attention will wane, and something more exciting will come along to render *Well Now WTF?* obsolete. Like all spaces of the net, *Well Now WTF?* will eventually die off and become a digital ghost town. But, for now, this is what we can do. *Well Now WTF?* is a place to start.