

»Herstories« of the web

panke.gallery, Berlin

»She was always complaining that YouTube ruined her life.«¹
(brother of Nasim Wonder1 (†), 6th April 2018)

The story of early net art in Berlin is one of subversive gatherings, strategic hacking, alternative working practices, digital identities and collective bodies. Although it took various forms, since the very beginning artistic engagement with the Internet included reflections on the internal structuring logic of a virtual and decentralized new disposition of politics, markets, and emotions. Turning their focus away from televisual society, the protagonists of Berlin's media art scene devoted their attention to the Internet with a mixture of curiosity and critical distance. The aesthetic of their work was frequently appropriated from interfaces, borrowed from browser software or other channels of communication.

The promise of horizontal decision- and opinion-making also prompted a range of net art projects that took aim at the production and recognition of art itself. Some of the most important ones were created by women. In 1997, Cornelia Sollfrank hijacked the open call for a net art prize sponsored by Kunsthalle Hamburg with her piece *Female Extension*, submitting 127 artworks by 289 international female artists she had herself invented. Using a Perl script that created the required art pieces by combining random HTML material, she overturned common assumptions about authorship, originality and identity.²

Between 1993 and 1995 Eva Grubinger had also found a way to challenge the power structures of the art world with her piece *C@C – Computer Aided Curating*. This website was designed as a way to overcome the monopolistic power of curators. Users of the platform could enter their own pieces into a registry of artworks and link it to other works and artists. They could also assign a value to a work or offer it for sale. In a critical reassessment of the project in 2005, Grubinger described how a neo-capitalistic avant-garde formed within the continuously growing network of C@C. Rather than defeating capitalist structures of power, they were simply replicated on a subliminal level.³

More than twenty years later, artists are still confronting the technological enclosure of life, which has only intensified since. They deal with the politics of web-based labour as well as digital currencies; appropriating behaviour and gestures from the Internet, and employing net aesthetics and code to create objects of art.

¹ Brother of Nasim Wonder1, quoted in *The Telegraph*, 6 April 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/04/nasim-aghdam-everything-know-youtube-hq-shooter/>

² A later version of the project, »Net Art Generator«, is included in the panke.gallery exhibition.

³ 'C@C – Computer Aided Curating' (1993-1995) revisited Lecture, Tate Modern, London, 4.6.2005. <https://www.evagrubinger.com/pdf/grubinger.pdf>

All this is true of Nadja Buttendorf's work, too, but she also puts her own body on the line. In a set of speculative art pieces involving the body and prosthetic extensions to it, she questions the very concept of the body by pushing past its edges. As if responding to an endless proliferation of confessional YouTube videos and beauty blogs, she disrupts the relationships between identity, beauty rituals, and technology in series of images, workshops and videos. Her nails, her face, her clothing, everything becomes a surface for her responses to the commodification of bodies on platforms like YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram. Her art provides a space for the queering of the body, a space in which mismatched replicas or doubles intersect with body modifications of all conceivable kinds.

Buttendorf's works can be seen as engaged in an ongoing dialogue with a new form of life that has emerged from the Internet, and neglects the borders between online and offline, simulation and reality. In spring 2018, YouTuber Nasim Wonder1 ran amok in the Californian headquarters of the video platform shooting two people and then apparently committing suicide after getting angry about the company supposedly censoring her videos. The very life of this user was evidently, even more than for the rest of us, inseparable from her online presence.

Buttendorf's YouTube series *Robotron – a tech opera* explores related ideas, expanding her work through a fictive reconstruction of a so-called work collective at the East German computer manufacturer Robotron in Dresden in the 1970ies and 1980ies. The artist herself performs every single role simultaneously. Grey coats and old photos collide with cloud rap, nail art and squiggle brows. Soundless dialogues revolve around the feelings of the women working there. Here the question is no longer whether an artwork might manage to oppose or resist the conflation of technology, the body and emotions, for example by hacking it. Both art and life have merged with the Internet and can no longer be held apart from it.