Transient Passages: The Work of Peter Horvath
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Abstract. Peter Horvath produces non-interactive, cinematic Internet art works which explore conditions of agency, mobility, and continuous flow, traversing and arguably collapsing notions of the micro and macro, near and far. The idea that this sense of movement is random is deemed important here and coalesces I argue, with the Situationist International (SI) concept of the dérive, ‘a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances’ and an idea closely associated with psychogeographies. Implied within this process is a ‘drift’ which mediates social, creative and conceptual boundaries between the specific locality of the user, the presence of urban markers within the works and the mapless topography of the medium itself.

Keywords. Internet Art, Mapless, Place, Psychogeographies Dérive.

Peter Horvath produces non-interactive, cinematic Internet art works which explore conditions of agency, mobility, and continuous flow, traversing and arguably collapsing notions of the micro and macro, near and far. The idea that this sense of movement is random is deemed important here and coalesces I argue, with the Situationist International concept of the dérive, ‘a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances’ and an idea closely associated with psychogeographies. Implied within this process is a ‘drift’ which mediates social, creative and conceptual boundaries between the specific locality of the user, the presence of urban markers within the works and the mapless topography of the medium itself.

The potential for navigating the ambient or mapless ‘place’ of the Internet on an imaginative and allegorical level has proven endemic since its inception. For example, the Internet has been appropriated by entertainment companies like Blizzard in the production of multi-user, online games, which are creating a profound and massive culture of local-global relations. The ambivalence of location and cultural authorship within these games is also at play so to speak, in Internet art. But whereas Internet gaming capitalizes on accessibility and vast distribution and thus remains a logical part of Internet economics, Internet art has sought to generate a critical and creative dialogue between the web’s anarchic, free information space and its accumulation and surveillance of data body and other forms of information economics. As such, Internet art has the tendency to conceive of itself as a counter-site, which continuously seeks to challenge and invert concepts of art and their relationship to time and space.

Vuk Cosic first used the term ‘net.art’ in 1996, immediately configuring the artist and ‘user’ as a unified agent, interacting within the network. Since, ‘net.art’ has become a widely held, but contentious term, generally understood as art which cannot be experienced in any other medium or in any other way than by means of the Internet. Recently, the term has given way to more general names: Internet art or online art, and has also been subsumed within the category of ‘new media’ art, (an equally indistinct term). MTAA’s ‘Simple Net Art Diagram’, 1997, is useful to reference here: it shows net art as ‘happening’ between two, spatially dispersed computers. This implies that net art is not art simply represented online, that is, created in one medium and reproduced online, but must use the Internet as its ontological remit. The work is not

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3 Robertson and McDaniel consider place to be a unity of time and space, particularly in relation to how global economic and information networks are connecting ‘remote’ places. See ‘Place’, Themes in Contemporary Art, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
4 http://www.mteww.com/nad.html
necessarily about the technology either, but rather it uses the www as an opportunity for further expression. In this sense, it is very much an art of appropriation: Internet art uses the web’s vast distribution network as a primary concept, medium and mode of access.

Internet art thus invites the viewer or ‘user’ to consider the problem of defining itself as ‘art’ while simultaneously requiring us to think through ideas of networked creativity that are at once personal and collective. The idea of agency – both within the work as well as its reception, is pronounced. Internet art not only asks us to consider art devoid of its ‘aura’ (Benjamin’s term for art’s particular presence in time and space), but also whether it can be heterotopic: simultaneously within ‘real’ time and space but also occupy an inestimable and unknowable place.5

The notion that Internet art gives rise to an immanent experience largely concerning transitory behavior, was an approach also shared by the Situationist International, who conceived of fleeting ‘situations’ as a new creative tactic, “Our situations will be ephemeral, without a future; passageways. The permanence of art or anything else does not enter into our consideration, which are serious. Eternity is the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts”.6 Central to the creation of these situations was the idea of the psychogeography, which was envisioned as a means to counter urban spectacle:

The Situationists developed tactics that doubled both as game and sedition, such as the dérive, which is aimless drifting through urban streets, preferably in groups, employing the 'psycho-geographical' method to understand the psychological affect the buildings and built forms have on the dériver, while hunting for environments that issue suitably exciting and passionate atmospheres.7

The creative tactic of wandering through psychogeographic spaces is pertinent to Horvath’s work, which utilizes non-linear narratives to explore the momentary nature of the subject in Internet art. In particular, his Triptych: Motion, Stillness, Resistance, 2006, (Figure 1) reflects upon the dérive as a means to reposition the relationship between a psychogeographical engagement with undiscovered places. It does so primarily by exploring the disorientating and affecting nature of travel through urban environments. It also offers the potential for an elongated experience of these spaces, so that our perception of the here and now are superceded by the possibility of an inexhaustible presence of the global.

Figure 1, Peter Horvath, Triptych, 2006 - Screenshot
Reproduced courtesy of the artist

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5 Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, Diacritics, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986) 22-27.Translated by Jay Miskowiec. Of Other Spaces was originally delivered as a lecture by Foucault in 1967. Here he describes heterotopia as a kind of evolving and highly malleable counter-site, ‘a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live’. So whereas the utopia is imagined and unreal, the heterotopia is a real space that is continuously ‘represented, contested, and inverted’.


7 Jan Bryant, Play and Transformation, (Constant Nieuwenhuys and the Situationists).
Horvath is an artist who produces browser driven ‘non-linear video based narratives that run on the Internet’. His work is perhaps most accurately defined as web cinema: they are (mostly) non-interactive works that use found sound and film footage as well as the artist’s own video and animation. The work can be seen on his website 6168.org as well as through prominent Internet galleries including the Whitney Artpop and Rhizome, and have also been exhibited in ‘real world’ gallery spaces on monitors, LCD screens and via large-scale projections. Horvath has also contributed to MobileGaze, an on-line artist collective, founded in 1999 in Montreal, Canada by Brad Todd, Andrew Brouse and Valerie Lamontagne which is ‘dedicated to the promotion of ‘Canadian / Quebec artists on an international scale’ and the desire to create ‘a bridge between the micro and macro web art communities’. <Pause>, 13 an online exhibition curated by the group, aims to intercept ‘the stream of information in order to provide a disruption within this endless expanse of data, by providing the viewer with a vantage point, a moment of reflection and a slowing down in his/her interactive viewing habits’. Here ‘pause’ is considered a kind of diversion, a counter site in which a series of cinematic Internet art works seek to challenge the hegemony of its context, the rapid information-economics of the www.

In <Pause> Horvath contributed Either Side of An Empty Room, 2002, a 14 minute work, in which the artist explores the slippage between waking life, dreaming and memory in the context of a ‘day in the life’. Here we encounter time less as a study of progression and more as a reoccurring series of multi-paced moments that fast forward, flicker, and reverse. As in all of his works there is an intimacy here which relies on detaining the user, a tactic frequently absent in our regular experiences of the Internet. Importantly then, most of Horvath’s works are lengthy: 12 or so minutes, and in the case of Triptych, which is generative, it can potentially run infinitely. Subsequently, the work requires a ‘pause’, a slowing down, a protraction and subversion of the speed of the Internet.

Triptych (Figure 2) is composed of three video panels, situated side by side, and although not spiritual in intent, does induce a sense of contemplation. Each panel expresses a condition: motion, stillness and resistance, which are mostly conveyed in the pace and rhythm of passageways through unknown urban environments. ‘Motion’ largely explores the themes and conditions of movement through the city, and particularly highlights urban transportation. It lacks distinctive context and disorientates geographical specificity, moving the user through a series of familiar yet indistinct urban markers. The central frame, ‘stillness’, concentrates our vision on subtle images of skies, seemingly unchanging shots of cityscapes as well as quiet private and domestic scenes, that are equally without the particularities of place. They are comparable to Wolfgang Staehle’s continuous images of places that are subtle and meditative in tone, and although not modified, appear to suspend and elongate time. Like Staehle’s Comburg, 2001, in which a live web-cam transmits images of an eleventh-century monastery over the Internet, ‘stillness’ seeks to capture subtle changes that are barely perceptible to the eye. Yet in both cases, we also experience distant locations as immediate and for local consumption, reminding us of the desire for infinite access to images which the Internet has fostered. The third panel is ‘resistance’ and explores instances of urban drama and conflict – couples arguing, people protesting or in states of agitation.

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8 Interview with the artist. December 2006.
9 Only one work, The Presence of Absence, 2003, is interactive in the sense of users being able to actively select or trigger aspects of the work. In some of the works, like ESER, the artist offers the opportunity for viewers to add their personal anonymous thoughts online, which are then posted at the conclusion of the work.
10 See Peter Horvath: Transient Passages, at the ACA Gallery of SCAD, Atlanta, GA. March 29th-April 29th, 2007, curated by the author.
11 www.mobilegaze.com
13 http://mobilegaze.org/pause#
15 Currently, the work can use original footage for approximately 4 hours, however, the artist is continuously adding to it.
16 Both ‘motion’ and ‘stillness’ use video shot at the standard 29.97 frames per second, whereas ‘resistance’ is modified.
17 http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/timezones/artists.shtm#staehle
Horvath chose not to use the pop up window as a framing device in this piece, a technique common in his work, but found an equivalent means of creating a dialogue between individually framed panel sequences by situating three videos side by side, creating a reflexive dialogue between these states.\textsuperscript{18} This unity is also achieved through the consistency of line and color passing through each panel - images are frequently subdued in color but sharply lit. Like Viola’s \textit{Hatsu Yume}, (\textit{First Dream}) 1981, a 56 minute color video\textsuperscript{19}, which uses the effects of water and light to transition between geographies in Japan, from the forest regions to the city for example, as well from the documentary to the ephemeral, Horvath elevates these sequences from the documentary to the psychogeographic – revealing unexpected ambiances of the environment. As in Debord’s description of the dérive, we experience the spaces of this work with irony, the viewer is unable to make decisions about the way in which they encounter space within and through the work, and yet they are presented with its residing affecting conditions. In other words, we do not wander aimlessly, as did the Surrealists, but encounter habitual ‘psychogeographical attractions’, which in \textit{Triptych} are the rapid, suspended and troubled encounters with the unknown city.\textsuperscript{20} The randomly generated sequences that continuously juxtapose these states create unending narratives, passages, and pathways, which glide between the here and there.

\textsuperscript{18} A similar format of inter-connecting video sequences was recently explored by Christian Marclay in \textit{Video Quartet}, 2004, a four channel installation which ‘samples’ extensive found Hollywood film scenes of musical and distinctive sound based performances. Each section or channel informs the next finalizing in an exuberant arrangement of song and dance that concludes crescendo like. Marclay is known for exploring the legacy of Cage’s sampling technique (itself a kind of détourment) first experimented with in \textit{Williams Mix}, 1952. Cage used the I Ching to achieve the chance driven and hence negated intentionality of the mix, giving the process a seemingly infinite range of possibility. While Horvath’s \textit{Triptych} appears to employ sampling in the same way as Marclay, it is in actuality generative, meaning it uses a software program to randomly select from Horvath’s pool of video footage. As such, it plays differently every time you log on and is in this sense effectively unique and endless, in that the generative schema gives rise to a vast array of possible sequences.

\textsuperscript{19} Bill Viola’s \textit{Hatsu Yume}, translated as ‘First Dream’, was produced in Japan in 1981 while Viola was artist-in-residence at the Sony Corporation.

Unlike *Triptych*, the majority of Horvath’s works use the pop-up window as a narrative-framing device for multilayered video. In *Unexpected Launching of Heavy Objects*, 2003, (Figure 3) hundreds of empty pop-ups rapidly unfold, encasing scenes of fascism that subsequently merge into images of atomic bomb tests. For Horvath then, the appropriation of the pop-up window has acted as a means of subverting the once familiar visual language and usage of the Internet, while also addressing broadband restrictions. The pop-ups produce an assortment of sequences inspired more by the collage based work of Hannah Höch than Sergei Eisenstein’s montages (Figure 4). But they are also particular to the Web: The browser frame is always present, and they tier in such a manner that they fill the border of the screen, making us conscious that the context is emphatically that of the Web. Such dense layering of video is enhanced by Horvath’s use of music, sound and word: written and whispered, readable and obscured, which converge to realize the rich potential of the medium.

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21 Interview with the artist, March 2004.
Horvath’s textured use of audio-visual space not only investigates the possibilities of the medium but seeks, he argues, to emulate random memory acts and suggest unfolding consciousness,

As a medium, the web simulates the environment of the mind, offering frenetic and multiple displays of stimulus. In my work, windows open and close in the same manner that thoughts enter our minds, play out, and disappear, making room for new thoughts. In this way, my pieces mimic the thought process.\(^2\)

Memory, life cycles and waking dreams are recurrent themes in his work, and feature prominently in *Either Side of An Empty Room*, 2002. As viewers, we pass through undefined city spaces — the underground, supermarket, and bars — all in a matter of seconds and without the security of a destination or sense of purpose, much like the dérive. Interspersed throughout this urban drifting are photographic stills and film footage of the artist’s family life, and surrealistic animations, which foil the consideration of the city as a private, ambient experience. The sense of disorientation and isolation experienced here is echoed in *Life is Like Water*, 2002, (Figure 5). Set on a heady NYC subway, it observes the intimate gestures and impersonal interactions of passengers whose insular lives are ruptured by 9/11 and its subsequent media frenzy.

\(^2\) Interview with artist, October 2005.
The public uncovering of deeply personal secrets is also a subject addressed within *Intervals*, 2004, (Figure 6), an 8-minute, Web-based video which has also been presented as a projection in a gallery. The ‘interval’ is a brief moment in which four characters reveal their most intimate selves through accounts of lost innocence, fear of the unknown, masculine ritual and the mystery of love. Here identity is subject to visual and textual slippages, distortions, and to filmic alter egos that mimic, echo or subvert their subjects’ account.
Tenderly Yours, 2005, (Figure 7), a 10-minute, Web-based video, revisits the themes of love, loss and memory in a visual language which simulates the personal, casual and ambiguous approach of French new wave cinema. Here we also encounter a series of filmic ‘doubles’ — of French new wave cinema rendered as Web cinema.
Boulevard, 2007, is a three-channel Web video and installation, running 12-minutes. Like Tenderly Yours it has a strong sense of cinematic presence, transitioning from the visual language of collage to scripting and directing a highly intense narrative. Located in Los Angeles, we follow a striking woman, the passenger of a convertible car, driven by an unidentified driver through the city, passing its generic streets, billboards and motels, to an unknown destination. There is a voice-over, presumably hers, that exposes her feelings of obsession. Running parallel to the piece is a dialogue between a man and woman in intimate, but casual conversation about love. The video sequences are frequently suspended, disjunctive and blurred, distorting our visual and emotional sense of place. At once lyrical and intoxicatingly beautiful, we move through discrete emotive atmospheres experiencing ambiguity, desire and longing.
Horvath’s net art is perhaps more accurately defined as cinematic, in that, unlike the vast majority of net art works that utilize interactivity as its ontological remit, they are non-interactive and experientially passive. The dense arrangement of video is enhanced by Horvath’s use of the word both written and whispered, readable and obscured, which augment the richness of the medium. This literal and metaphorical layering of subject simultaneously queries time as a collection of fragments or memories, both real and imagined. Within and through all of these works, the subject drifts aimlessly, like the dériver, through real and virtual urban environments, without preconception as to where they may arrive but attempting to seek out purpose in their movement. This ‘drift’ mediates social, creative and conceptual boundaries between the specific locality of the user, the multiple places navigated within the work, and the globalized, mapless topography of the medium itself.