The Exchange Happens Here: Net Art's Alternative Currencies

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THE EXCHANGE HAPPENS HERE:

NET ART’S ALTERNATIVE

CURRENCIES

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THE EXCHANGE HAPPENS HERE:

NET ART’S ALTERNATIVE

CURRENCIES

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty of

Meadows School of the Arts

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

with a

Major in Art History

by

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Lastly, thank you, as always, to Charles, who jump-started my motivation in the cyburbs.
This thesis examines three installation pieces from the New Museum and Rhizome’s 2019 exhibition “The Art Happens Here: Net Art’s Archival Poetics.” Throughout, I question if net art can act as an alternative currency itself, if different projects can interfere with existing economic systems, and, if so, what they can reveal about changing economic structures.

Ultimately, I explore how Cory Arcangel’s *Arcangel Surfware*, a lifestyle brand offering products for web-surfing, is representative of works that play with accessibility and inaccessibility and alternative patronage systems in relation to social currency; how Shu Lea Cheang’s *Garlic=Rich Air*, a browser-based and physical garlic trading system, demonstrates explorations of the possibilities of actual proposed replacement currencies, similar to Bitcoin; and how Bunny Rogers and Filip Olszewski’s *Sister Unn’s*, a closed flower storefront and interactive website, connects to other works that look into the function of game-based currencies and play as primary motivation for action and collaboration. I also argue that, despite the evocative positioning of these restagings around the New Museum’s gift shop, they lack central elements of interactivity from the original iterations of the works and contextualization that would allow museum participants to meaningfully experiment with alternatives.
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Dedicated to Christian Griffith and Gordon Donlou. Shine on, you crazy diamonds.
INTRODUCTION

From January to May 2019, visitors to the New Museum passed a window displaying nine floating copies of a neon green book, before entering the museum’s lobby. Inside, the space between the ticket counter and gift shop is loosely separated by a wave-shaped, chain-link, metal shelf. Behind this entry space lies the Lobby Gallery, demarcated by a glass wall. At this time, the show within the Lobby Gallery leaked into the actual lobby, where a cart full of garlic straddled the barrier between the ticket counter and gift shop, a three-tiered, circular shelf within the gift shop had its own wall text, marking it as a work of art, and a recess next to the museum’s cafe contained an installation full of dead flowers. Though not immediately apparent, these three works of net art play with currencies and markets in relation to the internet.

These pieces were part of “The Art Happens Here: Net Art’s Archival Poetics,” an exhibition organized as part of the organization Rhizome’s larger project to propose a canon for net art.¹ Rhizome, which has commissioned works and organized exhibitions, digital preservation efforts, and software developments since 1996, was originally developed by the artist Mike Tribe as a mailing list and database.² The organization, which is currently an affiliate

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¹ Michael Connor, the artistic director of Rhizome, explained in the book version of the “Net Art Anthology” that the project was inspired by the Essential Cinema Repertory collection, which attempted to define the art of cinema; Michael Connor, ed., The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology (New York: Rhizome, 2019), 6.
in residence of the New Museum, originally launched the “Net Art Anthology” project online in 2016, and it lasted until June 2019, with the closing of the New Museum’s show.\textsuperscript{3} For the project, one hundred works of net art produced between the 1980s and 2010s were presented one at a time, at a rate of about once every week or so, on the website anthology.rhizome.org.\textsuperscript{4} Since the project, as described in the “Net Art Anthology,” “took shape through and against gaps and silences in the archive and the historical narratives surrounding net art,” the selections were made to “evoke breadth of practice, but prioritized works that gave form to important critical positions throughout the development of the net.”\textsuperscript{5}

Organized in five chapters, the “Net Art Anthology” covers early network cultures and early web (through 1998); Flash and blogs (1999-2005); surf clubs, early postinternet art, and social media platforms (2006-2011); and mobile apps and social media saturation (2012-present).\textsuperscript{6} The last chapter, not defined by any time frame, was left to revisit any gaps developed during the project.\textsuperscript{7} Regardless of chapter organization, Rhizome claims to have selected works of net art that work with the internet to express “emerging subjectivities, model new forms of collective cultural practice, and/or exemplify aesthetic, subjective, political, and conceptual positions that have taken on singular and profound resonance within particular networks of artists.”\textsuperscript{8} The emphasis made here on the importance to “particular networks of artists” demonstrates how Rhizome needs to carefully consider the contextualization of these pieces

\textsuperscript{3} Rhizome is currently housed in the office building adjacent to the New Museum, which the museum owns. Their residency is part of the New INC program, which describes itself as a not-for-profit cultural incubator that hosts annual cohorts of creative entrepreneurs; Rhizome, “Net Art Anthology,” 2018-2019, https://anthology.rhizome.org/.
\textsuperscript{4} Connor, ed., The Art Happens Here, 5.
\textsuperscript{5} Connor, ed., 6-7.
\textsuperscript{7} Rhizome, https://anthology.rhizome.org/.
\textsuperscript{8} Rhizome.
when presenting them to a larger audience. This highlighted relevance for “particular networks of artists” additionally comes through in the introductory essay in the book version of the “Net Art Anthology,” which states that the anthology “is a history told from the perspective of a New York-based organization” that had “advisors from around the world” but chose to privilege “forms of practice that thrive with institutional support and access to resources,” thus leaving out many “locally embedded, net-based collectives around the world.”

For the New Museum exhibition, Rhizome strictly selected works that could be “meaningfully restaged, reconstructed, or reperformed,” as a result of the archival issues presented by net art. In the end, sixteen of the one hundred works from the anthology were displayed, in the forms of websites, software, sculpture, graphics, books, and merchandise. Through their display, the Rhizome curators aimed to offer “a space for considering the internet as social process, material infrastructure, and lived experience.” An additional central aim of the selection process was displaying pieces that would reflect “on the process of narrating archives and histories of online artistic practice,” as Rhizome underwent a major archival effort to retrieve several works that became inaccessible due to updated software and technology. For this reason, the project as a whole is considered one of the most important displays and preservation efforts of net art undertaken since the development of the internet. To prepare for the exhibition, Rhizome partnered with Google and Google Arts & Culture, to develop tools like Web Recorder, and critics and theorists like Josephine Bosma, one of the first scholars to write

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about net art. As one of the only shows organized thus far that focuses exclusively on net art in a major institution, and as one that aims to offer the history of net art and ways to interpret its trends, “The Art Happens Here” demands critical attention.

In the museum space, only five out of the sixteen works were displayed on computers, as most of the pieces took physical form, even though they were all born-digital in one way or another. The majority of the sixteen featured pieces were displayed behind a glass wall separating the Lobby Gallery from the lobby itself. The Lobby Gallery has a vague role in the New Museum’s program: on their website, it is described as a space that offers “capsule contemporary art exhibitions.”13 Outside of the Lobby Gallery, the curators strategically positioned the remaining works, three installation pieces, within and around the museum’s gift shop.14

Cory Arcangel’s Arcangel Surfware of 2014-present (Fig. 1), Shu Lea Cheang’s Garlic=Rich Air of 2002-2003 (Fig. 2), and Bunny Rogers and Filip Olszewski’s Sister Unn’s of 2011-2012 (Fig. 3) each deal with currencies and markets in relation to the internet, as they serve to represent one of the most common themes in net art—reactions to financial shifts and crises.

As outlined by Critical Art Ensemble in their 1994 essay “Electronic Civil Disobedience,”

“(Un)common sense tells us that we can follow the money to find power, however, since money has no point of origin but is a part of a circular or spiraling flow, the best we can expect to find is the flow itself. Capital rarely takes a hard form; like power, it exists in an abstract place, or to be more specific, in cyberspace.”15

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In analyzing this quote, Michael Connor, the artistic director of Rhizome and curator of the New Museum show, points out how Critical Art Ensemble identified the internet “early on as the key engine for [the] global movement of capital, and consequently as a means for resistance against it.”16 The members of Critical Art Ensemble were not the only artists considering this, though, and, as a result, a common thread in net art of the past and present has been the analysis of capital, currency, and power.

Thus, Rhizome’s placement of the three works on which this thesis will focus around the gift shop was presumably intentional, as each installation offers a different conception and exploration of currency that is representative of a broader trend in net art. Although Rhizome created an evocative positioning with these three pieces, the organization missed the opportunity to provide adequate contextualization of their significance to the history of net art or fully address the role of currency in net art in either the exhibition’s wall text or the accompanying website and catalogue. Therefore, this thesis will explore how Cory Arcangel’s Arcangel Surfware, a lifestyle brand offering products for web-surfing, is representative of works that play with accessibility and inaccessibility and alternative patronage systems in relation to social currency; how Shu Lea Cheang’s Garlic=Rich Air, a browser-based and physical garlic trading system, demonstrates explorations of the possibilities of actual proposed replacement currencies, similar to Bitcoin; and how Bunny Rogers and Filip Olszewski’s Sister Unn’s, a closed flower storefront and interactive website, connects to other works that look into the function of game-based currencies and play as primary motivation for action and collaboration.

By considering each of these works in separate chapters, this thesis also aims to question if net art can act as an alternative currency itself, if different projects can interfere with existing

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economic systems, or what they can reveal about changing economic structures. Oftentimes, net artists like Hito Steyerl are quick to claim that “computation and connectivity could produce building blocks for alternative networks,” but one should take time to question if such works really reflect on economic systems at all, and, if so, the actual political efficacy of works that play with, call for, directly propose, or spark imaginations of alternative economic systems.

The history of net art and its ties to economic structures reveal the importance of this line of questioning.\textsuperscript{17} Often considered “art that acts on the network, or is acted on by it,” net art made up about a tenth of the internet in 1995.\textsuperscript{18} Much net art is the result of the “creative use of the net,” but it is oftentimes also a direct “effort to come to terms with the nascent conditions of the network while participating in it.”\textsuperscript{19} This sometimes involves the critical investigation of a network’s “underlying technologies and their encoded cultural and commercial agenda,” but the most common feature of net art is arguably participation or interaction with a network in some capacity.\textsuperscript{20} The work produced by a group of the first net artists, who were early to join the internet through the first public browser in 1993, came to be known as “net.art,” but the title “net art” refers to a broader range of “artful participation in network culture.”\textsuperscript{21} Intentionally

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{17} Stephanie Bailey, “OurSpace: Take the Net in Your Hands,” in \textit{You Are Here: Art After the Internet}, ed. Omar Kholeif (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 2018), 133.
\textsuperscript{19} Connor, 9.
\textsuperscript{20} Christiane Paul, “Challenges for a Ubiquitous Museum: From the White Cube to the Black Box and Beyond,” in \textit{New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 67.
\end{flushright}
informal, the category “net art” includes anything from critical uses of the “web as an artistic medium” to selfies, memes, YouTube videos, and blog posts.\textsuperscript{22}

Commonly thought of as strictly screen-based, “net art was not born on a screen… Instead, net art is profoundly implicated in both the conceptual space of the network and its expanded materiality, which includes social and economic aspects as well as myriad technological possibilities.”\textsuperscript{23} In fact, for humans to experience net art, “it must become analog—physical—at some point, as an almost unlimited number of potential outputs that engage the human sensorium,” such as screens.\textsuperscript{24} When works of net art are either directly created as physical objects or reinterpreted as such for certain contexts, they can enhance the gallery experience and fuel participation.\textsuperscript{25} While net art that takes physical form also allows for easier preservation and circulation between non-internet-based art institutions, oftentimes, screen-based net art faces the archival challenge of not being updated for compatibility with ever-changing software and technology, which has led to many works becoming irretrievable, and, as a result, impossible to display and share.\textsuperscript{26}

Since the rise of some net art came with the spread of the internet, a common thread in net art has been the questioning of how the internet alters the economy and market-fueled interactions. Much of the existing literature on net art questions how the internet can serve as a platform for artists’ “struggles for freedom and control” and the development of alternative

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Rhizome, “Net Art Anthology,” https://anthology.rhizome.org/.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Steve Dietz, “Curating Net Art: A Field Guide,” in \textit{New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 77.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Bosma, “Breaking the Media Barrier,” 389; Connor, \textit{The Art Happens Here}, 10.
\item \textsuperscript{26} O’Toole, https://hyperallergic.com/485466/the-new-museum-hits-save-on-net-art/.
\end{itemize}
networks of interaction. In these writings, the history of the internet’s development often begins with tales of its early formation as a military technology. Both Julian Stallabrass’ *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* and Christiane Paul’s *Digital Art* describe the technology as funded by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), a Pentagon research body, which existed to control and streamline government and military communication during nuclear war. The telling of this history generally leads to an expression of the internet’s perceived “dual promise,” described by Josephine Berry Slater in *Proud to Be Flesh: A Mute Magazine Anthology of Cultural Politics after the Net* as “[the possibility] to increase the direct democratic potential of many-to-many communication while, at the same time, perfecting the conditions for further expansion of capitalist social relations and the ‘free market.’” This “dual promise” seems representative of the internet. On the one hand, individuals have increased access to creating and sharing their own content and interacting with others despite physical distance. Yet, corporations often capitalize on user-generated-content and encourage precarious working conditions through providing solely gig-based opportunities. In a sense, networks have been “mobilized by capitalism” since the internet became widely available to the public, as commercial internet service providers, fueled by profit and expansion, made this accessibility possible in the 1990s.

Just as the internet itself can be thought of as a medium for net artists, the money that fuels it can be considered a medium that “[enables] new distributions of power and resources” as

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it changes in form. To characterize “good money,” Aristotle outlined four essential properties: durability, portability, divisibility, and intrinsic value. The fourth property, intrinsic value, long fueled the drive for civilizations to use metallic currency standards, such as silver or gold, based on the likelihood of others also valuing these materials. With the move to paper-based money systems, backed by metals, like silver or gold, and controlled by banks, monetary manipulation increased as individuals became additionally “remote from the metallic source of value.” Thus, movement away from any metallic backing at all further increased such manipulation, reflected by the “number of monetary recessions increasing accordingly.”

With the growth of the internet, the money medium has increasingly transformed into a digital system, making monetary manipulation easier due to “ever fewer physical cash units with which to contend.” Cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin represent this transition, and Bitcoin exists as a kind of money in “that it serves as a medium of exchange, a unit of account, and a store of value.” Some champion Bitcoin, which contains its total supply within its system’s code, as a threat to the existing currencies supported by private institutions and governments, but others claim it functions more as an entirely new “financial instrument” rather than an independent currency. Due to Bitcoin’s reliance on existing currencies, banks, and legal structures and the “ubiquity of expensive graphics processing cards produced by capitalist companies under state-

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32 O’Sullivan, “Ungoverned or Anti-Governance?” 93.
33 O’Sullivan, 94.
34 O’Sullivan, 94.
35 O’Sullivan, 94.
36 O’Sullivan, 93.
negotiated international trade laws,” it is unlikely, in its current state, to offer a truly emancipatory, anti-government monetary alternative. In fact, it is most likely impossible, as “the rate of return on capital[, or the assets of an extremely small minority of humans, comes closer to exceeding] the growth rate of the economy” as a whole.

Despite this, the movement towards digital monetary systems can still reveal much about contemporary art production, and vice versa. In particular, one can examine how works of net art might reveal something about specific economic regimes. As Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle explain in their introduction to *E-flux Journal: The Internet Does Not Exist*, “The digital image is not as ephemeral as one might think, because just as a photograph is lodged in paper, the digital image is lodged in a circulatory system of desire and exchange, which itself relies on a very specific economic regime.” This idea is demonstrated by works of net art that work with and/or rely on profit-driven platforms, like Instagram or Twitter.

The production and distribution of net art, like any other art form, relies on economic systems, but Martin Zeilinger argues it remains “difficult to buy or own a piece of net art in the conventional sense of obtaining and then owning a unique artefact,” as the digital image is generally reproducible or willingly shared. Yet, to complicate this understanding, it is important to note that one can still technically purchase the source code of a “unique” work of digital art, but many net artists do not make this an option. In part, this is due to the earliest net

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artists’ self-distancing from mainstream art institutions and questioning of art production, exhibition, and ownership. These intentions have been expressed by the artists Alexei Shulgin and Natalie Bookchin, who describe net art as a “temporary autonomous zone with no tolerance for institutional dogma and the ideologically suspect economic value systems propagated by the institutional bureaucracies of the art world.” This attitude has arguably led to the creation of many works that react to financial shifts and crises.

For instance, net artists known to produce “tactical media” worked in the late 1990s to directly interfere in financial and governmental operations while allowing people from all over the world with access to computers to participate in private locations. As outlined in the essays “The ABC of Tactical Media” (1997) and “The DEF of Tactical Media” (1999) by Geert Lovink and David Garcia, the “tactical practitioner” was envisioned as a “rebellious user who used the artifacts and texts of their media environment towards an aesthetic of poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, [and] desiring” and aimed to temporarily alter power structures through whatever means available.

The work of Electronic Disturbance Theater demonstrates the activist nature of these early works of net art. After the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) released the First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, which declared war on the Mexican government. Since the EZLN message was sent out through activist networks, it reached many tactical media artists like Ricardo Dominguez, Brett Stalbaum, Stefan Wray, and Carmin Karasic, who collaborated under the

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43 Zeilinger, 34.
name Electronic Disturbance Theater.\textsuperscript{46} In 1998, they developed their project \textit{FloodNet} to collaborate with the Zapatistas via electronic protest (Fig. 4).\textsuperscript{47} \textit{FloodNet}, which used a “Java applet, a piece of software accessible from a web browser, that would visit the same web page over and over,” allowed the protest participants to repeatedly work against the institutions identified as enemies of the Zapatistas, such as Bolsa Mexicana de Valores and Grupo Financiero Bital, by targeting their websites.\textsuperscript{48} The first of these virtual sit-Ins had minimal participants. However, by September 1998, the actions “delivered an estimated 600,000 requests per minute to the websites of the Pentagon, the Mexican government, and the Frankfurt Stock Exchange.”\textsuperscript{49}

Works like \textit{FloodNet} directly interfered with existing systems outside of the art world, but many later net art projects that reacted to financial shifts and crises did so in less explicit, non-activist ways, as demonstrated by \textit{Arcangel Surfware, Garlic=Rich Air}, and \textit{Sister’s Unn’s}. Due to the lack of explicit interaction with or manipulation of existing economic systems and institutions, the efficacy of net art of this kind must be questioned, as, while these works generally do not directly promise the formation of alternative systems, they cannot be separated from this history and activist ethos of early net art.

\textit{FloodNet} and other works of “tactical media” arguably had a tangible effect on existing systems, and, because they do not have the same effect, the strains of net art represented by Cory Arcangel, Shu Lea Cheang, and Bunny Rogers and Filip Olszewski in the New Museum show demand a different kind of consideration. Instead of activist art, which might “suspend, amplify,
[or actually] intervene in” existing economic relations, these works may be considered “potentialized art,” which the artist and theorist Nathaniel Stern describes as capable of providing “contexts where we experience and practice styles of being and becoming.” With this understanding, the works by Arcangel, Cheang, Rogers, and Olszewski can be considered to create situations in which participants can conceptualize alternative methods of acquiring and displaying social currency, trading currencies, and using game play as the main motivator of actions. As argued by Theodor Adorno, works that operate in this generative middle-zone both challenge the “way things are and [suggest] how things could be better, but [leave] things practically unchanged.”

Though this type of simultaneous engagement with and questioning of existing economic systems and distancing from activism can lead to productive imaginations of alternatives, the effectiveness of “potentialized” experiential art relies on faithful performances or restagings. Rhizome’s archival efforts for “The Art Happens Here: Net Art’s Archival Poetics” must be applauded, but their restagings of Arcangel Surfware, Garlic=Rich Air, and Sister Unn’s lack central elements of interactivity from the original iterations of the works and contextualization that would allow museum participants to experiment with alternatives. “Mere consciousness of society” and alternatives to it “does not in any real sense lead beyond the socially imposed objective structure,” but interacting with “potentialized” artworks, which contain the potential

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for alternatives without explicitly offering solutions, may allow individuals to grapple with their own internal contradictions and those of the systems on which they rely.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{53} Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, 121; 284.
Chapter 1

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CURRENCY THROUGH CORY ARCANGELO’S
ARCANGELO SURFWARE

Cory Arcangel, an artist, composer, and entrepreneur, began working with the internet in 1996 while studying classical guitar at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. Since then, he has used strategies of “reconfiguring web design and hacking” in his works, such as *Super Mario Clouds* of 2002, for which he altered a Nintendo game cartridge, leaving “only the iconic backdrop of blue sky and clouds” (Fig. 5). In 2011, the Whitney Museum of American Art hosted a full-floor solo exhibition for Arcangel, and, shortly after, Arcangel began experimenting more directly as an artist-entrepreneur, as seen with his project *Arcangel Surfware* (Fig. 6).

Arcangel introduced his “non-aspirational lifestyle brand,” *Arcangel Surfware*, in 2014, when he created a temporary shop in a Manhattan Holiday Inn, where he sold his own branded products for web surfing goods. To announce this event, Arcangel only made a tweet “linking to a bland press release on a comically dated website, explaining that the products ‘consist of

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everything one needs to ‘chill’ in bed all day and surf the internet in comfort.” 58 Though some initially thought it was more a “prank than a genuine product launch,” when asked about Arcangel Surfware in connection to his other works, Arcangel said, “I would consider them two parallel systems. Surfware has its own mailing list… [and products.] So, it’s separated. But, in… relationship with my work; although it is parallel, there is a kind of bleed.” 59 It makes sense that Arcangel views his project in this way when considering his larger body of work, as he consistently plays with accessibility by sharing much of his work and code for free online, making one question the future of the traditional art market in connection to net art.

For the Arcangel Surfware launch, Arcangel “emblazoned his signature Comic Sans typeface, yin-yang symbol, and rainbow gradients onto… bed sheets, tracksuits, zines with printed lines of code, and vinyl albums of electronic keyboard music” (Fig. 7). 60 Later on, the “company” offered everything from celebrity-themed fidget spinners to Tony Conrad’s album “Music and the Mind of the World.” 61 In 2018, Arcangel also debuted a collection featuring multi-functional scarves that could be used as hats, emojis designed specifically for the work-oriented chat tool Slack, and a catalogue for “Asymmetrical Response,” Arcangel’s collaborative show with Olia Lialina, another major figure in the history of net art featured in the “Net Art Anthology” and frequent collaborator of Arcangel’s since 2001. 62

While *Arcangel Surfware* may at first seem like a haphazard collection of objects for sale, common thematic threads tie the brand’s products together. With every product design, Arcangel referenced outdated visual trends, featuring nature symbols and modes of collection and exchange. In particular, Arcangel’s use of the Comics Sans typeface and rainbow gradients references early web design, and his use of the yin-yang symbol and “surfing” in the brand’s name nods to the popular outdoor sports lifestyle brands of the 90s and early 2000s, such as Billabong, Quicksilver, and O’Neill. Similar to what Fredric Jameson observes in what he calls “nostalgia film,” these objects do not operate as representations of historical content but “instead approach the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by [their] glossy qualities.”

Notably, the brands Arcangel references were distanced from their countercultural origins once their accompanying slacker aesthetic became commodified by major retailers offering marketable products to the masses.

Arcangel has acknowledged this shift, as seen when he said, “When I was a kid, surfing was popular in the suburbs of America. When you were 12 and you’d go to JC Penny, you would buy Ocean Pacific clothes. I had all these stickers… that were yin-yang from these surfware companies and I had no connection to them at all.” To elaborate on his use of the yin-yang in connection to the nature symbol of the ocean, “Arcangel said, “The more I thought about the project, the more it seemed to be about these ugly outdated aesthetics… I wanted the yin-yang because it’s about the spiritual side of surfing.”

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projects to fixate in this way on obsolete graphics and technology, as seen with his modified
game cartridges that allow viewers to focus on isolated graphic elements from nostalgic game
series.

When asked if Arcangel Surfware products were “going to be super limited edition, or
more like when a band makes a ton of merch T-shirts,” Arcangel responded, “Band. I think there
might be one or two limited-edition items.”66 Though such band T-shirts are generally mass-
produced, they used to hold more weight as collectibles, as people had to make the effort to
attend concerts to purchase them. Yet, when bands launched online stores, their merch became
easily accessible.

Overall, it could be said that Arcangel Surfware products moved in the opposite direction
of band T-shirts in terms of accessibility. Originally available online and at several pop-up
events after the initial Holiday Inn event, Arcangel Surfware products became much less
accessible in 2018 when Arcangel moved to Stavanger, Norway, and opened a brick-and-mortar
shop and his Flagship A.S. gallery there (Fig. 8).67 For the shop, Arcangel chose to occupy a
former canning factory and rifle shop, and, for the gallery, he chose to occupy an adjacent bomb
shelter in Norway’s Øst neighborhood, “just 30 seconds from the waterfront at the entrance the
byfjorden fjord,” further enhancing the nature references of the brand.68

Since the shop is ambiguously decorated, Arcangel reported that several individuals have
entered looking to get their cell phones repaired or purchase actual surfing supplies.69 When the
shop was open from 2018 to the end of 2019, it kept “modest hours, noon to 3 p.m. on Saturdays,

66 Holland.
68 Cory Arcangel, “Arcangel Surfware,” Arcangel Surfware, accessed October 6, 2019,
and by appointment.” Arcangel opened the shop because he “wanted a reason to be social,” as it’s “not the most casually social culture... in western Norway,” but he acknowledged that it didn’t get much foot traffic. As explained by Arcangel, “It’s at the farthest end of Stavanger... It’s designed to be a destination... It’s a kind of halfway house, or purgatory, for my ideas.” Thus, Arcangel willingly acknowledges the effort one must make to interact with the brand and plays with the idea of a “destination,” a concept that connotes exclusivity and aspirational longing, which becomes complicated in connection to how Arcangel describes the brand.

Through his so-called “non-aspirational lifestyle brand,” Arcangel aimed to produce “comfortable, useful products for web surfing” that circulated, initially, “via the commercial internet without the mediation of art institutions or galleries.” In the “Net Art Anthology,” this project is described as Arcangel “pursuing net art’s long-standing fascination with commercial aesthetics to its logical conclusion [and playing] on the overlap between his roles as artist and entrepreneur.” Rhizome also describes the project as “less a critique of art’s commercialism than a kind of retail therapy,” while Arcangel himself describes the same project as “built on an "anti-Amazon" model of commerce [and having] an almost reactionary retail structure, where the products are not readily accessible, easy to attain, or permanently available throughout time or space.” Instead, the brand requires deliberate effort from its customers, forcing planning and strategy to purchase into the brand’s image.

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With this in mind, it is essential to question what Arcangel’s project means at a time when corporate and art aesthetics and practices are continually exchanged, as seen with the collective DIS’ series *DIS Images* of 2013, which “uses an art and lifestyle online platform to create editorials, fashion, and stock images… using the language of corporate aesthetics,” like the watermark, to, as they claim, “explore the tension between popular culture and institutional critique, while facilitating projects for the most public and democratic of all forums—the internet” (Fig. 9).\(^76\) As a stock image library that functions the same way as an actual corporate tool, *DIS Images* interrupts the existing depictions of lifestyle and commercial products and inserts alternative imagery that may cause one to pause and question what is easily accepted as neutral, natural imagery. Since stock imagery is often hyper-accessible, due to it being mostly free, DIS’ experiment highlights how net artists can work with existing systems to play with accessibility and inaccessibility to call attention to collective and individual practices fueled by the internet, and this interest is also observed in *Arcangel Surfware*.

One can gain an understanding of how Cory Arcangel both amplifies accessibility through speed and legibility and reinforces inaccessibility through encouraging specific movement and purchases by examining *Arcangel Surfware* in partnership with Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of social and cultural capital. Bourdieu theorized capital prior to the mass spread of internet technology; yet, his ideas may be more relevant than ever now, “as there is no natural, spontaneous process to prevent destabilizing, inegalitarian forces from prevailing permanently” as a result of the accumulation of capital in its various forms.\(^77\)


In his 1986 essay “The Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu defines capital as “accumulated labor (in its materialized form…) which, when appropriated on a private… basis by agents… enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of… living labor.”\(^{78}\) When an individual takes time to accumulate capital, they have the ability to produce profits.\(^{79}\) Yet, Bourdieu cautions against only considering capital in its economic sense, as this reduces all forms of exchange to mercantile exchange, which is solely focused on the maximization of profit and monetary self-interest.\(^{80}\) Bourdieu believes focusing on economics alone poses all other forms of exchange as “noneconomic, and therefore disinterested.”\(^{81}\) These other forms of exchange include those responsible for making material types of capital, like money, “present themselves in the immaterial form of cultural capital or social capital.”\(^{82}\)

In defining the distinctions between these three forms of capital, Bourdieu describes economic capital as that “which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights;” cultural capital as that “which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications;” and social capital as that which is “made up of social obligations (‘connections’)” and “convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title nobility.”\(^{83}\)

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\(^{80}\) Bourdieu, 1.

\(^{81}\) Bourdieu, 1.

\(^{82}\) Bourdieu, 1.

\(^{83}\) Bourdieu, 1.
Cultural capital is further described as taking three forms: long-lasting mind and body states, cultural goods, and objectification through credentials like educational qualifications. It is generally acquired through “a process of embodiment” that costs time, a form of personal investment. While most cultural capital is gained through a process of self-improvement, which requires this sacrifice of time, it can also be acquired unconsciously based on one’s class or where one lives; the example Bourdieu gives is that of one’s style of pronunciation.

Social capital, on the other hand, is the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition,” or, more simply, one’s membership in a group that confirms a specific credential. The relationships Bourdieu references include those guaranteed by common names, like that of a family, class, or school, and those acquired through “instituting acts designed simultaneously to form and inform those who undergo them.” Such groups are formed based on signs of recognition, which are gained based on exchange, and mutual recognition of these signs allows for the reproduction of the group while asserting its limits.

In expanding on exchange, Bourdieu explains that social and cultural capital can be gained from economic capital, “but only at the cost of a more or less great effort of transformation, which is needed to produce the type of power effective in the field of

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84 Bourdieu, 2.
85 Bourdieu, 3.
86 Bourdieu, 3.
87 Bourdieu, 4.
88 Bourdieu, 4.
89 Bourdieu, 4.
question.”90 This effort can come from an expenditure of time, attention, care, or concern.91 To describe this, Bourdieu uses the example of personalizing a gift, which might be seen as “pure wastage” from an economic standpoint, but, in terms of social exchange, it is considered a solid investment, as there might be monetary or other profits gained in the long run.92 The cost of time spent customizing, though, might only be made possible by one’s possession of economic capital, as one must be able to take time away from earning money in order to dedicate it to gaining cultural and social capital.93

This kind of effort to invest in *Arcangel Surfware* became necessary when Arcangel made the products only purchasable in-person in Norway and discontinued his partnership with Universal Music Group’s merchandise company Bravado in order to achieve a “more artisanal aesthetic that [he] describes as ‘New Nordic.’”94 When Arcangel announced the close of the shop, which will be transformed into a software lab, on his website on October 3, 2019, he described the “anti-Amazon” model of commerce the brand strove for by requiring “deliberate effort from its customers, forcing effort and strategy to purchase into the brand.”95 As Arcangel further detailed, “The goal of the flagship was to provide its clients with a site specific and exclusive shopping experience outside of the normal lanes of commerce, but also, the normal metropolitan centers.”96 It might be tempting to read this as a direct challenge to existing market

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90 Bourdieu, 4.
91 Bourdieu, 5.
92 Bourdieu, 5.
93 Bourdieu, 5.
dynamics and a movement away from traditional systems of museum patronage, but it is possible that Arcangel’s move away from his online store reinforces the inaccessibility of the art market.

*Arcangel Surfware* also connects in this way to Bourdieu’s essay “The Intellectual Field: A World Apart,” in which he explains how transformation occurs in a field through revolt. In this essay, Bourdieu categorizes artists as a “dominated fraction of the dominant class” because they simultaneously “hold the power and privileges conferred by the possession of cultural capital” and are controlled “in their relations with those who hold political and economic power” through the mechanisms of the market. Although, they may “revolt against those they call the ‘bourgeois,’ they remain loyal to the bourgeois order,” which is seen when Cory Arcangel attempts to distance himself from the art institutions he has relied on in the past, such as the Whitney, while upholding the exclusivity central to the operation and reputation of these institutions.

Furthermore, Arcangel still operates within and profits from these institutions by sharing his work through various talks and events. At one of these talks at the Met, Arcangel “quoted Duchamp as saying that one part of being an artist is making the art, and the other part is engineering its entry into the world,” and Bourdieu expressed a similar idea when he said, “Cultural producers hold a specific power, the properly symbolic power of showing things and making people believe in them, of… [bringing confused, vague, unformulated experiences of the natural into existence].” To qualify this statement, Bourdieu explained that “this doesn’t mean that non-naive artists, whose paradigm, in [his] eyes, is Duchamp, are totally aware of everything

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they are doing, which would amount to making of them cynics or imposters,” and such doubt was expressed by Arcangel about his own project when he responded to an interviewer by saying, “I haven’t figured out how to talk about it yet, actually. The second part is in progress right now. I haven’t figured out what it is yet, so I’m kind of flying on the seat of my pants.”

This type of internal confusion is central to “potentialized” art, though, as it does not offer direct solutions or actually create alternatives, and Arcangel’s changing perceptions of his project can be traced on the accompanying *Arcangel Surfware* website, where he regularly shares his thoughts via blog posts.

Bourdieu argues that despite this doubt that comes when introducing something new, the process “excludes cynicism, [and] even demands you get caught up in the game.” Such sincerity is also expressed by Arcangel, who, when asked what he would do if the project failed, said, “I’m really trying for it to somehow happen because I want to keep working with clothing. I’m doing everything I can to do it like if I were Lil Wayne. When he does a company, he’s going to try and make it a real company,” and this type of sincerity does come through with brands generated by pop cultural figures, as seen with Jay-Z’s Tidal and Rhianna’s Fenty. Yet, for a brand to succeed to the impressive extent that these brands have, enough people must be able to understand its intentions and/or willing to pay a price to engage.

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu details that “a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is,

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101 Bourdieu, 17
the code, into which it is encoded.” However, instead of denying “lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, or servile” cultural references in order to distance his art from the masses, Arcangel actually relies on mass aesthetics in designing his products. Despite this, to buy into Arcangel’s brand, one must be both familiar with his role as an artist and aware of the steps necessary to purchase his products. As Bourdieu explains, the consumption of goods always comes with the “labor of appropriation” and the consumer’s help with the production of the “product he consumes, by a labor of identification and decoding.” As a result, Arcangel’s project fails to actually enable participants to engage in new “conceptual-material relationships;” instead, the few who engage with Arcangel’s “potentialized work” practice alternative accumulations of social and cultural capital.

Even though Arcangel amplified accessibility to his work by treating the hours Arcangel Surfware Flagship was open almost like an open studio during which he would “chew [people’s] ears off about the artwork,” the political efficacy of the work is questionable in comparison to other works of net art and groups of net artists that adopt corporate aesthetics and strategies, like Etoy.

In the late 1990s, the art group Etoy was offered “substantial compensation in cash and shares” by the toy retailer eToys if they were to change their name, even though Etoy had registered their name before eToys. Despite the eventual shut down of Etoy’s website due to

105 Bourdieu, 100.
litigation, they still put up a fight using Electronic Disturbance Theater’s *FloodNet* technology, which overloaded eToy’s site “with calls to load its pages” and returns of pointed error messages,” which “hobbled the eToys site on at least some of the crucial days before Christmas, preventing online ordering.  

Additionally, Etoy “even took to issuing shares, which, while not recognized by stock markets, do fluctuate in value,” as people who invested got dividends, “not in money but in seeing the realization of Etoy’s cultural output.”  

Josephine Berry Slater claims that Etoy came so close to the “corporate activities that they set out to undermine as to be indistinguishable from them,” but Julian Stallabrass argues that this view “insists on art’s uselessness” and allows for failed interventions “to be interpreted as conceptual art experiments, [while forcing successful ones to] leave the realm of art for politics.”

*Arcangel Surfware* never claimed to actually change existing systems; instead, it provides new contexts for the imagination of alternatives in a way that connects to a broader trend in net art of playing with corporate strategies and patronage. Yet, the project’s reframing in the New Museum show severely limited the possibilities of participant engagement, as the only reference to *Arcangel Surfware* was made with a “dump bin” positioned in the center of the gift shop (Fig. 1). This three-tiered, readymade, metal “dump bin” contained a pile of random DVDs and copies of Arcangel’s zine, *The Source Digest*, and was only contextualized with a small sign that read: “This dump bin… features a range of merchandise selected by artist Cory Arcangel from his ongoing project Arcangel Surfware. All merchandise is available for purchase.” Even less satisfying than the possible glimpse of alternative exchange networks one may have gained from further contextualization and engagement with Arcangel’s flagship or internet shops, this “dump

109 Stallabrass, 99-100.  
110 Stallabrass, 101.  
111 Stallabrass, 101.
"bin" increases the inaccessibility of this work by requiring one to come into the museum space with pre-existing knowledge of Arcangel and his work to even find humor in the display, let alone inspiration to imagine alternatives.
Chapter 2

REPLACEMENT CURRENCIES THROUGH SHU LEA CHEANG’S
GARLIC= RICH AIR

The Taiwanese artist Shu Lea Cheang moved to New York in the 1980s, and, in 1998, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum commissioned its first piece of net art, Cheang’s work *Brandon*, which focused on transgender issues (Fig. 10).

In 2007, Cheang moved to Paris, where she has primarily created film works, and, in 2019, she represented Taiwan at the 58th Venice Biennale.

Before her move to Paris, Cheang focused on “deconstructing the economic machinations of the internet,” as seen when she led *Platinum SnapMeat*, a real-time sex auction at the 2003 Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.

During this time, she also created her *Garlic=Rich Air* of 2002-2003, a participatory project with an interactive online component (Fig. 11). For this work, Cheang “imagined a post-capitalist society in the year 2030 in which community wireless would be the only internet and

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organic garlic the primary currency.” Similar to Arcangel in his production of *Arcangel Surfware*, Cheang relied on references to the natural world, with her use of garlic, and outdated modes of collection and exchange by creating a bartering system. To gather enough garlic for her trade system, Cheang worked with the organic farmer Tovey Halleck in upstate New York to grow and harvest 10,000 garlic plants with fellow artists. To initiate the barter system in 2002, Cheang and her assistants and friends drove a pickup truck around New York City in order to ask people what they would trade for garlic (Fig. 12). The truck also served to provide mobile Wi-Fi, making it, as Cheang described in hyperbolic fashion, “a kind of digitized farm stand that operated outside traditional systems of exchange.”

When developing this project, Cheang took inspiration from the economic crises of around 2000, especially that of Argentina, “where alternative economies emerged when the currency was devalued.” In response to the “trueque clubs that formed after the Argentinian credit crisis in 2001, where coupons served as a means to keep an exchange economy going, based on mutual trust,” Cheang said, “When [a crash] happens, you invent your own currency locally. Why not use garlic?”

Cheang’s project moved a step further than physically-based alternative systems, though, as she also created a website where participants “could deposit digital goods to be exchanged for

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organic garlic, whose value was decided collectively by the community.”

Featuring the large, bold font and neon colors of “store closing sale” signs, Cheang’s 2002 version of the *Garlic=Rich Air* website called users to “claim their credito” and “sign on!” (Fig. 13).

In examining this project, the critic Armin Medosch considered it a “‘sociopolitical real-time fictional scenario’ that prototyped strategies for community adaptation in the face of climate change and economic precarity.” Through examining Cheang’s website, one can see how carefully she constructed each element of this scenario. On the 2002 version of the website, several pages detail the harvesting of the garlic, accompanied by pictures, the history of El Club del Truque, documentation of the live trading events, the plan for seeding new garlic plants to replace those harvested for the project, and the call to actively exchange in the digital garlic market, which will close in 2030 (Fig. 14).

The potential of such imaginations must be questioned, because, as Martin Zeilinger notes in “Everything You’ve Always Wanted to Know about the Blockchain*,” art that engages with or proposes alternative currencies, like those fueled by the blockchain can, “similar to [some] conceptual art, occupy a position that could very powerfully continue, or even amplify, the project of institutional critique [but,] just like [some] conceptual art before it, [alternative currency-based art] is also in acute danger of falling prey to [the] unwanted implications of these experiments, in the form of hyper-commodification and financialization.” Though unlikely that Cheang’s garlic currency system would be co-opted by corporate efforts, due to its

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121 Rhizome.
122 Rhizome.
123 Martin Zeilinger, “Everything You’ve Always Wanted to Know About the Blockchain* (*But Were Afraid to Ask Mel Ramsden),” in *Artists Re:Thinking the Blockchain*, ed. Ruth Catlow (Liverpool: University of Liverpool, 2017), 291.
insistence on mere uselessness, the work seems to predict future net art projects that rely on alternative currencies connected to broader ranges of use, such as Bitcoin.

Since it was introduced about ten years ago, many have hoped for Bitcoin to replace the existing “international regime of central-bank-issued monies” and therefore dramatically alter capitalism. Yet, some argue that Bitcoin, as the “truest extension of the Western project of promoting the values of private property, markets, and contractual fidelity,” will only end up reinforcing existing systems. In order to question if alternative currencies in net art can “productively critique, or even counteract areas of concern, such as the tightly controlled access to professional art fairs and trade [and] auction platforms, or the commercial exploitation of artists,” one must first understand how alternative monetary currencies function. Cheang herself has described “early net-art as a period in which artists thought that they could live off of air, that there was never any economy in what they were doing,” but, as Ruth Catlow argues, “with climate change and environmental pressure, it’s interesting that Blockchain is a space in which you actually need to account for everything, and where you’re called to think about the economics of every transaction.”

Just as net art takes inspiration from financial crises, technology often responds and adjusts to changing levels of trust in economic systems. In response to the financial recession of the early twenty-first century, which emphasized the “system’s tendency to protect well-connected financial actors at the expense of common people,” Satoshi Nakamoto launched the

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125 O’Sullivan, “Ungoverned or Anti-Governance?” 100.
126 Zeilinger, “Everything You’ve Always Wanted to Know About the Blockchain*,” 288.
Bitcoin network in 2009. Individuals who were anti-government, anti-corporation, and pro-individual were the early adopters of Bitcoin who developed a ‘Bitcoin philosophy,’ which has “imbued the resultant community with an individualistic and contrarian ethos, even as more mainstream investors and professionalizing projects [have taken] the limelight [since] 2013.”

While blockchain technology has many potential applications, the most popular use has been for cryptocurrencies, which allow for the transfer of value between groups and individuals using cryptography instead of the resources offered by central financial institutions. Bitcoin has become one of the most successful cryptocurrencies to utilize the blockchain, a cryptographic tool, by allowing for buyers and sellers to remain anonymous while “transparently publishing the transaction record to eliminate double spending of the same ‘Bitcoin.'”

Bitcoin’s reliance on blockchain technology prevents such double spending due to the technology operating under the principles illustrated through the Byzantine Generals Problem. To understand this “classical problem,” one must imagine a castle that could only be conquered with the coordination of several armies attacking at the same time. If one army sends out a messenger telling all other armies to attack at a certain time, there is the possibility that the messenger may be captured, resulting in the message never being delivered; a similar situation could occur if the army who sent out the messenger asks for a message acknowledgement. Thus, to successfully carry out the attack, there needs to be a consensus that: “(1) the transmitter

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128 O’Sullivan, “Ungoverned or Anti-Governance?” 92.
129 O’Sullivan, 92.
132 Mahmoud, “Research Challenges and Opportunities,” 2.
133 Mahmoud, 2.
134 Mahmoud, 2.
of the attack message knows that all other armies have received this message and (2) every army that has received this message can confirm that all other armies have received this message.\textsuperscript{135} To understand the rest of this scenario, one must imagine that the leading army general sends the attack charge through the blockchain, which uses a proof of work system that makes each army work on solving a collaborative problem, which should take ten minutes to solve, if every party works at the same time.\textsuperscript{136} If valid proof of work solutions appear around every ten minutes, the individual armies will know the charge has been successfully communicated to all participating armies due to the designated time rate of producing valid proof of work solutions.\textsuperscript{137}

Outside of this imaginary scenario, the blockchain uses smart contracts, pieces of software used to move around information and digital assets.\textsuperscript{138} With Bitcoin, to generate new coins, ‘miners’ rely on the proof of work system detailed previously and run software to compete for coins by using processing power and lots of energy.\textsuperscript{139} This software allows the computers to collect ‘blocks’ “of new transactions across the network and then race to solve a difficult mathematical puzzle,” or a cryptographic problem, which is “easy to verify but computationally difficult to arrive at a solution.”\textsuperscript{140} Therefore, the system grants the owner of the first computer to solve a puzzle ownership of the newly minted coins and any associated transaction fees.\textsuperscript{141} Afterwards, the successfully mined block contains a “reference to the previously mined block… and joins a sequential, [unalterable] chain of blocks.”\textsuperscript{142} These blockchains remain secure

\textsuperscript{135} Mahmoud, 2.
\textsuperscript{136} Mahmoud, 2.
\textsuperscript{137} Mahmoud, 2.
\textsuperscript{138} Ruth Catlow, Marc Garrett, Nathan Jones, and Sam Skinner, eds. \textit{Artists Re:Thinking the Blockchain} (Liverpool: University of Liverpool, 2017), 25.
\textsuperscript{139} Catlow, \textit{Artists Re:Thinking the Blockchain}, 25.
\textsuperscript{140} Harwick, “Cryptocurrency and the Problem of Intermediation,” 570.
\textsuperscript{141} Catlow, 25.
\textsuperscript{142} Catlow, 25.
because all users involved hold records of every transaction made, and, due to the computational power required to mine new blocks, “it very quickly becomes prohibitively expensive to hack the currency.”\(^{143}\)

Since Bitcoin lacks a central issuer like a bank, many hope it will eventually operate entirely outside of established regulatory structures, and, due to this, many bold predictions are made by those who champion it.\(^{144}\) Without a central issuer, Bitcoin “cannot be strategically manipulated… to affect trade and production,” and this feature calls for some to argue that it may “impact the future state of currencies, particularly the US dollar…, and undermine dominant methods of controlling social behaviors by controlling financial behaviors.”\(^{145}\) Yet, to truly affect existing currencies, there must be significant movement away from individuals using centralized banks and institutions and replacement of such actions with investment in alternative currencies.

Since Cheang did not intend to actually offer such an alternative that would be widely adopted, her work must be considered for its “potentialized” qualities that allowed individuals to engage with her work and perhaps walk away questioning their relation to financial institutions and the economy as a whole.

In 2002, Cheang’s orange pick-up truck with “GET GARLIC. GO WIRELESS” and “Trade for Garlic” painted on the side “facilitated a lively barter-based micro-economy” at sites like the New York Stock Exchange, the New York Public Library, and the Union Square Farmers’ Market.\(^{146}\) When the Mute Magazine writer JJ King reported on Cheang’s appearance in Tompkins Park, he noted that individuals in the area were quick to “search themselves and

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\(^{143}\) Catlow, 25.  
\(^{144}\) Harwick, “Cryptocurrency and the Problem of Intermediation,” 569.  
\(^{145}\) O’Sullivan, “Ungoverned or Anti-Governance?,” 90.  
their bags for things to exchange.”147 As one person exchanged his shoes for five garlic bulbs, another traded three cigars for three bulbs, and three months of web hosting were exchanged for 15 bulbs.148 Inspired by the action, “a restaurant across the road [offered] dinner for two in return for [twenty] good cloves that they [used] in their kitchen.”149 King reported that eventually so many people participated that “everyone [seemed] to be clutching a bulb or two in their hands as they [went] about their weekend business.”150

Many even used the truck’s “WiFi access to trade creditos over the net,” while Cheang’s assistants explained the background scenario behind the trading—the “demise of the world economy has led to the establishment of garlic as the basis for a new economic system.”151 As King explained in his article for Mute, “people [had] little trouble understanding the idea,” as they had just lived through the “dot com shakedown, the fiscal wobbles following 9/11, and the ‘accounting problems’ plaguing huge multinationals like Enron and WorldCom.”152 Just like the net artists who react to financial shifts and crises, many individuals are willing to accept the inherent instability of currencies and economic systems and imagine alternatives, especially with the aid of fictional scenarios.

Yet, the restaging of the project for the New Museum did not necessarily allow for this type of engagement. Though understandable that Michael Connor, Rhizome’s artistic director, did not want to treat “this project archaeologically” and instead “wanted to revitalize and reperform it,” the reimagination within the New Museum space lacked the performance elements

150 King.
151 King.
152 King.
of the original project that so successfully called people to participate.\textsuperscript{153} Connor and his team restaged the performance aspect of Garlic=Rich Air on July 28, 2019, but the actual installation within the museum space that most people would have encountered only featured a tricycle cart paying “homage to the truck” and an entirely new online game designed by the artist Melanie Hoff and “inspired by Ms. Cheang’s garlic-trading universe” (Fig. 2).\textsuperscript{154} Since it did not offer the ability to engage with individuals explaining the scenario or invite viewers to become participants by actively exchanging goods, the reimagination of the piece lacked the full experience of Cheang’s scenario.

Despite this, Rhizome’s selection of Cheang’s piece for the New Museum show was fruitful, as Cheang’s commitment to constructing a complete immersive play scenario is also representative of a broader strategy in net art. In 2015, the artist, theorist, and developer Rob Myers published the paper Decentralized Autonomous Organization With Others (DAOWO), which “set out the political range of ideas at play in blockchain cultures [and] examined some of the philosophical and artistic potential of the technology as medium.”\textsuperscript{155} Although initially a paper, DAOWO eventually inspired the development of a “blockchain laboratory and debate series for reinventing the arts” under the same name and organized by Ruth Catlow and Ben Vickers “in collaboration with the Goethe-Institut London and the States Machines” program.\textsuperscript{156} Overall, the group intends to lower the cost for organizing and collaborations, initiate “solidarity for artists and new kinds of audiences, patrons, and participants,” imagine new ways for

\textsuperscript{155} Navarro-Serra, “On Blockchain and Art,” 970.
interacting with the world, and work with “black box technologies in order to diversify engagement.” Like Cheang, the group has initiated live action role play (LARPing) scenarios to imagine alternative realities by, in this case, “adopting the personas of crypto-millionaires and billionaires in order to configure a speculative society upon the Seasteading frontier.” Similar to Garlic=Rich Air, this scenario does not operate directly in the activist realm, but calls for individuals to occupy alternative positions within economic systems, which may help them contribute to the broader goals of DAOWO previously detailed.

Blockchain technology and its use by artists, along with their own proposed alternative currencies and systems, may amplify the distribution of financial and life-sustaining resources and one’s ability to make independent choices, but, ultimately, “whether it fulfills [these] promises depends on who gives their energy to it.” Thus, in developing these projects, one should pay attention to the “restructuring of access to online environments, to shifts in social media relations, and to redistributions of labor time.”

If Bitcoin and blockchain technology really do serve as the truest “extension of the Western project of promoting the values of private property, markets, and contractual fidelity,” then is it possible for them to actually alter existing systems? Artist initiatives like Bail Bloc may model something to strive for in future projects, as Bail Bloc works to “install a program that mines Monero, a digital currency, and funnel the earnings to help bail out low-income people in the Bronx who have been accused of misdemeanors” (Fig. 15). Unfortunately, as of

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161 O’Sullivan, “Ungoverned or Anti-Governance?” 100.
September 2018, *Bail Bloc* had only “raised a little more than $6,000.” For such projects to really make an impact, they would require additional attention and collaborative effort, much of which is instead being used to fuel projects like *CryptoKitties*, a blockchain game that allows one to collect and breed virtual cats (Fig. 16). Perhaps there may need to be additional collaboration between those creating explicitly activist art projects and those who allow for individuals to contemplate their own questions and possible solutions in order to expand commitment to actual world-altering efforts.

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Chapter 3

IN-GAME CURRENCIES THROUGH BUNNY ROGERS AND FILIP OLSZEWSKI’S
SISTER UNN’S

Bunny Rogers, born in Houston in 1990, graduated from Parsons The New School for Design in 2012, and Filip Olszewski, born in Warsaw in 1984, graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2006.164 Both inspired by childhood experiences online, the two started working together around 2008, and they created their project Sister Unn’s when living together in Forest Hills (Fig. 17).165

In the autumn of 2011, Sister Unn’s appeared as a closed flower shop on a wealthy shopping street in Queens. Through the dark shop’s windows, positioned directly under an awning that read “Sister Unn’s,” passersby could see rows of “wilted, brittle roses trimmed with black ribbon” in handcrafted vases that lined the shelves.166 At the back of the shop, a “single rose encased in a block of ice in an illuminated freezer” drew the eye, as it was the only source of light in the closed shop.167

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When this sight sparked curiosity and passersby searched online for “Sister Unn’s,” they came across the still-active website, sister-unns.com, which presents pictures of the installation and a link titled “A letter to our loyal customers” at the bottom of the webpage. Following this link leads to a letter, which states, “We hope that our roses/ribbons/advice/conversations/etc. helped you cope during the saddest times of your life such as funerals and illness and we hope that we made you happy during the best times of your life such as weddings, newborn babies and proms.” In this way, Rogers and Olszewski pose the items presented in the closed shop window, roses and ribbons, as interchangeable signifiers of mourning and celebration.

The website also presents each visitor with their own pixel-art flower icon in a “Rose Gallery,” a gridded display that counts thousands of blooms to date (Fig. 18). As described by the organization Rhizome, “referencing anonymous gifts left at a graveside or vigil, the site is also curiously game-like [since] the existence of more and less common flowers… makes each visit feel like rolling a die.” Although this format of random rose assignment does not require input from visitors of the Sister Unn’s website, the project inspired participation in other ways. This was seen when the installation was active, as several individuals posted inquiries about the store on blogs and other social media platforms. On websites like BlogSpot, a user named “Drake” posted about Sister Unn’s five times between August 2011 and March 2012, and the posts often had at least nine different people engage through comments, many of which linked to the Sister Unn’s website and commented on the text found there.

Due to net art’s engagement with existing web platforms, many pieces have allowed for alternative forms of engagement than those found in the traditional gallery space, and the drive

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168 Rhizome.
169 Rhizome.
170 Rhizome.
for this has been influenced by larger trends in contemporary art. In Artificial Hells, Claire Bishop argues that there has been a surge in participation and collaboration in art since the 1990s initiated by artists becoming “less interested in relational aesthetics” and more interested in the possibilities presented by individuals interacting with and directly shaping works.\(^\text{171}\) Artists interested in these possibilities have worked to overturn the “traditional relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience,” and thus repositioned the ‘viewer’ as a “co-producer or participant.”\(^\text{172}\) Many have viewed this as an attempt to “place pressure” on traditional artistic production and consumption, as participatory art does not necessarily supply the market with a purchasable object. Due to this, participatory art is often imagined to “channel art’s symbolic capital towards constructive social change.”\(^\text{173}\)

However, although participatory art is perceived in this way to positively alter social relations, Bishop argues that interactivity is often “less about repairing the social bond than a mission to enable all members of society to be self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state and who can cope with a deregulated, privatized world.”\(^\text{174}\) Under the current economic system, creativity can be understood as a “political tool for individuals to be entrepreneurial, embrace risk, look after their own self-interest, perform their own brands, and be willing to self-exploit.”\(^\text{175}\) Overall, the rise of participatory art seems to coincide with the rise of the gig-based economy, which may offer individuals the satisfaction of rapidly completing small tasks, but ultimately leaves them without safety nets and forces them to often manage multiple jobs at the same time. This type of forced balancing act is also echoed in

\(^{172}\) Bishop, Artificial Hells, 11.
\(^{173}\) Bishop, Artificial Hells, 27.
\(^{174}\) Bishop, 29.
\(^{175}\) Bishop, 32.
the rising market of micro-transactions within games and the accompanying micro-goals, and net artists have long examined these dynamics fueled by online games within their works. For this reason, *Sister Unn’s* makes sense as the selection for the New Museum show’s representation of this movement.

Rogers herself noted the game-like quality of this project by claiming that “the fact that people couldn’t enter [the shop] made it a diorama, it flattened it. In a way, it was like a real life Neopets gallery.” Neopets, adoptable virtual animals, come from the online universe of Neopia, where users engage in alternate markets called galleries. For *Sister Unn’s*, Rogers took inspiration from the Neopets item called Black Roses, which can no longer be purchased on the website. In describing this object, Rogers detailed that when she “entered the virtual world of Neopets in 2000,” the item cost 8,000 Neopoints, but, by 2016, it cost over 450,000 Neopoints. This inflation speaks to the practice of item rarefication that is not exclusive to the in-game market of Neopets, as the economies of most online games are fueled by the exchange of rare items.

In *Diablo 2* and *CS:GO*, for instance, in-game items are exchanged for other in-game items or in-game currencies. The drive for item acquisition in these systems of rarity and scarcity is often fueled by the desire for the “affirmation of identity” through weapons, tools,
accessories, outfits, and entire characters. Oftentimes, these in-game currencies and items cannot remain solely within their virtual realms. As a result of players finding “ways to manipulate, adopt, and appropriate economic systems to suit their desires,” individuals have sold their entire World of Warcraft accounts for hefty fees, and in-game items, “specifically cosmetic, purely visual and non performance-enhancing, modifications of in-game items called ‘skins,’” have been used “as collateral for traditional [online] gambling.”

However, this bleed between virtual communities and “real life” is not restricted to the economic realm. Though one often becomes invested in an online game based on the satisfaction of “amassing digital prizes to share and compete with,” the ability to adopt new identities or enhance pre-existing ones gives many players an outlet to rely on, something Bunny Rogers herself has pointed to when describing her early computer-based experiences.

In recounting these experiences, Rogers detailed that she gradually moved from websites like AOL Kids, Art Forms, Neopets, and Furcadia to Second Life, another virtual world often explored in net art. The very concept of the “second life,” or alternative identity, within the game Second Life makes it a reoccurring reference in the work of Rogers and other net artists, as seen in Cao Fei’s RMB City of 2008-2011, for which Fei constructed a fictional Chinese city in Second Life (Fig. 19).

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As Fei described it, “RMB City [was] the condensed incarnation of contemporary Chinese cities … a series of new Chinese fantasy realms that are highly self-contradictory, interpermeative, [and] laden with irony and suspicion.”\(^{185}\) The participants of RMB City got to experience this “self-contradictory” virtual city through engaging in events like economic competitions, operas held in both RMB City and physical space, and mass virtual foot massages “staffed by Marx, Mao, a Lehman Brothers executive, and Lao Tze.”\(^{186}\) To further blur the lines between the participants’ and Cao Fei’s ownership of RMB City, the participants were also encouraged to purchase land and property within the fictional city.\(^{187}\) This emphasis on Second Life’s economy, reinforced through these activities, arguably comes as a result of the work beginning in 2008, the year of the global financial crisis, when images of the Lehman Brothers executives collecting their belongings after the company’s collapse circulated in the mass media.

Sister Unn’s also references the global financial crisis, in that it takes the form of a closed shop, but the main focus of both Sister Unn’s and RMB City takes shape in the exploration of the relationship-building central to online universes. Generally motivated to initiate online game play in order to achieve in-game objectives, individuals are often called to form groups and work together, as this makes goals easier to obtain.\(^{188}\) Such group formation for “shared, playful activities” can “stimulate the formation of intimate bonds between” players and “promote the formation of close and long-standing friendships.”\(^{189}\) In The Video Game Debate: Unravelling the Physical, Social, and Psychological Effects of Video Games, Rachel Kowert and Thorsten

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\(^{187}\) Rhizome.
\(^{188}\) Rachel Kowert, and Thorsten Quandt, The Video Game Debate: Unravelling the Physical, Social, and Psychological Effects of Video Games (London: Routledge, 2015), 96.
\(^{189}\) Kowert, and Quandt, The Video Game Debate, 96.
Quandt argue that the anonymity of these gaming universes promotes “a unique combination of trust and anonymity, often referred to as the Online Distribution Effect.”

This effect promotes intimate conversations because those involved in these forms of relationship-building generally act and communicate without the fear of social repercussions. This encourages participants to “self-disclose at a quicker rate than is found in non-visually anonymous relationships.”

Just as trust and perceived closeness and connection in face-to-face relationships may often lead to one acquiring intellectual resources, like new information, social and emotional resources, like support, “and/or physical resources,” like tangible favors, internet-based friendships and community can lead to a “range of positive outcomes, including career success, increased life satisfaction, enhanced self-esteem, and general physical and psychosocial well-being.”

With *Sister Unn’s*, Rogers taps into this understanding of the positive social aspects that can come from online gaming economies, such as community connection based on shared engagement in imaginary worlds. Rogers also recognizes a common factor that contributes to individuals’ search for connection online—feelings of isolation, disbelonging, and grief.

Notably, for *Sister Unn’s*, Rogers took inspiration from the 1963 Norwegian novel *The Ice Palace* by Tarjei Vesaas. In this novel, a young girl, Siss, mourns the death of her newfound best friend, Unn, who freezes to death in a natural ice formation. Similar to many relationships built online, Siss and Unn’s relationship formed rapidly and intensely, perhaps amplifying Siss’ grief when Unn dies.

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190 Kowert, 96.
191 Kowert, 96.
192 Kowert, 100.
When reflecting on her connection to this story, Rogers stated, “When I was ten-years-old, I moved to New York from Texas, leaving behind my best girlfriend of three years. This marked a set of idyllic shared experiences and feelings, which I understood as unique and irreproducible.” Even though Rogers’ personal experience connects more to Siss’ individual mourning process, the novel also “explores a community’s process of mourning,” and, in a similar way, Rogers’ installation itself becomes a site of community mourning. Within the letter found on the Sister Unn’s website, one finds the following statement:

“Hello friends,

… Another establishment is being built where our store stands and we regret to inform you that we have decided to shut down forever. Initially we attempted to move within the Forest Hills area but we could not find something both affordable and adequate. We take that as a sign that the times are changing and so should we. After carefully weighing our options we decided to gracefully bow out rather than relocate the store during tough economic times and risk not being able to provide the same level of service that you’ve come to expect from us…

- The entire Sister Unn’s family”

In this quote, Rogers highlights the community impact of the store’s closing by first addressing the readers as “friends” and then claiming that the main factor considered in this process was the risk of letting people down through a reduction in service quality (Fig. 20). Rogers’ related goals were expressed in an interview for Rhizome, during which Louis Doublas said, “A gallery is always immediately recognized as a space for art, but with Sister Unn’s this

context is obfuscated,” and then asked Rogers, “What were some of your intentions surrounding this allegorical intervention?”197 In response, Rogers said, “to build a house of worship.”

Rogers’ view of the installation as both a site of reverence and mourning makes sense, as she views mourning as a lifelong, magical experience rather than a finite process.199 However, *Sister Unn’s*, a “mausoleum of sorts with lots of wilted roses and a frozen rose in ice in an industrial freezer in the back,” was not a site intended for Rogers’ mourning alone.200 Instead, *Sister Unn’s* relies on the communal “vernacular of temporary memorials,” the “impromptu accumulations built on roadsides and at sites of mass tragedy” where one finds “votive candles, wilting bouquets, or ribbons tied to any available object” (Fig. 21).201

*Sister Unn’s* thus uses these symbols to initiate a collective, community mourning for an imagined closed establishment in a similar manner to the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, who relies on mundane, often ephemeral, materials to explore collective memory (Fig. 22).202 The fictional nature of the shop and the accompanying symbols of public grief may thus be used for one to attach their own mourning experiences to while engaging in a shared “space for empathy,” much like those that can be found with online communities surrounding particular fiction-based fandoms and games.203

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Yet, in part, this ability to extend one’s own mourning experience to a carefully crafted collection of mourning symbols, as seen with Sister Unn’s, comes from the act of stumbling upon the site, which allows for the interruption of one’s normal daily patterns. For the New Museum show, though, the ability to engage with the installation in this “potentialized” way was removed, as the inside of the store was recreated in a closet-like recess behind a glass wall within the museum space (Fig. 3). In this reimagination, the installation does not immediately read as a closed store, as it lacked the awning and door of the original shop, and the freezer at the back of the small room was covered with a curtain, making it unclear what the object was without outside knowledge.

Individuals often engage in an “increasingly shared network of public memory and perpetual audience,” as they generally have immediate access to the background story of any mourning site due to the internet. Thus, coming across a space, like the original installation of Sister Unn’s, that uses the same visual language of these memorials without providing a clear narrative in relation to its existence allows the individual to apply their own imagination and/or enter a playful internet hunt for further context, as seen through the blog posts generated by people who encountered Sister Unn’s in person. The New Museum’s restaging of the installation offers an entry point into exploring the history of game-based mechanics and social interactions within net art. However, the removal of the element of the chance encounter severs the piece from its connection to the practice of web surfing that continually allows individuals to “stumble upon” and jump between communities, and sometimes even identities, that may offer spaces for expressions, like grief, that are far too often shamed and suppressed in public settings.

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CONCLUSION

Computer viruses, much like biological viruses, have the ability to self-replicate, mutate, and rearrange “their working patterns to infiltrate a host system... and spread throughout it” and beyond.\(^{205}\) As viruses, both digital and biological, spread to other systems, they quickly reveal “the inadequacy of the host system’s defenses.”\(^{206}\) At the time of this thesis’ completion, COVID-19 is spreading across the world, forcing museums to close, resulting in a newfound reliance on digital resources for continued public engagement with art. Simultaneously, thousands of education and public programming staff are being laid off just when their knowledge and creativity could radically expand the reach of these institutions.

Since the closing of the New Museum, the institution has used its social media accounts to promote “Virtual Nu Mu,” an ongoing list of resources that primarily emphasizes those generated by their affiliate in residence, Rhizome (Fig. 23). As the New Museum now feverishly promotes online resources and net art, one should question why these works were previously pushed to the margins, despite their potential for increased accessibility and relevant reflections on contemporary life. With the looming threat of an unprecedented economic crisis, one may also wonder what net art will be produced as a result and whether or not such work will

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\(^{205}\) Joasia Krysa, “Distributed Curating and Immateriality,” in *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 94.

\(^{206}\) Krysa, “Distributed Curating and Immateriality,” 95.
find larger audiences than those that existed before the spread of the virus. Will they, like
Arcangel Surfware, an (initially) online-based shop; Garlic=Rich Air, a make-shift currency
replacement; and Sister Unn’s, a closed shop, react to financial shifts and crises in their very
forms? As representatives of works that play with accessibility and inaccessibility and alternative
patronage systems in relation to social currency, works that explore the possibilities of actual
proposed replacement currencies, and works that look into the function of game-based currencies
and play as a primary motivation for action and collaboration, the pieces this thesis highlighted,
and similar works to follow, require careful contextualization and (re)framing within the virtual
and physical museum space, especially if museums are to turn their main focus to digital works
and resources as a result of forced closures.

Rhizome and the New Museum’s efforts for the “The Art Happens Here: Net Art’s
Archival Poetics” muted the “potentialized” aspects of these works, and there was not a
sustained effort in the museum space itself to engage with the majority of viewers. Instead of
recreating the interactive elements of these pieces, Rhizome and the New Museum hosted an
event during which Cory Arcangel had a conversation with the critic and curator Ed Halter and a
screening of Arcangel’s film So shines a good deed in a weary world (dunkindonuts.com) of
2014.207 Outside the museum space, Rhizome also held an event on July 28, 2019, in Rockaway
Beach, New York, during which Shu Lea Cheang led a “real-time fictional scenario” using the
Garlic=Rich Air cargo tricycle that was created for the New Museum show.208

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Despite the show’s aim to emphasize the significance of net art, Rhizome and the New Museum did not prioritize engaging with an online audience by either developing programming specifically for the web or streaming the events that occurred at these particular locations. Furthermore, while Rhizome and the New Museum had every opportunity to share this programming online, they problematically limited access to people who had either purchased New Museum tickets or those who carefully followed Rhizome’s blog posts. In the end, the events were not even as accessible as the actual installations within the New Museum’s lobby, which did not require admission to view. Since the three pieces in the lobby were the most accessible elements of the show, Rhizome and the New Museum should have worked to better contextualize them and their alternative aspects, as, without context, they easily appear completely affirmative of capitalism rather than critical of it in any manner.

The artist Richard Hamilton used the term “affirmative” when claiming that Pop art “of affirmatory intention isn’t necessarily uncritical,” but the term can be extended to net art, which also often relies on the “approbation of mass culture.” Similar to how Pop revealed “how, in a consumerist economy, objects and images tend to become serial and simulacral, and how commodities tend to operate like signs and vice versa,” net art often operates within the same structures, like social media, that corporations rely on for the virus-like spread of their brands. Such strategies make it essential to question how these works can criticize and/or validate these corporate strategies.

While Arcangel Surfware, Garlic=Rich Air, and Sister Unn’s are affirmative in some respects, they are not solely that, as they carry the potential to encourage others to imagine

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alternatives. By refusing to engage in the potential radicality of these pieces via interactivity, these organizations reduced their complexity and restricted their affirmative qualities from engaging in any form of criticality. Just as Hal Foster asks, when is Pop art “truly analytical, and when is it only appreciative, even charmed?,” one must ask how net art can operate in either fashion (or an in-between position) based on how it is displayed.\textsuperscript{211} Importantly, one must also ask how museums, especially in moments of crisis, may enhance the analytical and/or critical aspects of physical and digital installations.

With net art, the role of the curator becomes “increasingly less that of a ‘caretaker’ of objects… and more that of a mediator and interpreter or even producer,” but this does not mean that artists are not also responsible for ensuring their works are shared as intended.\textsuperscript{212} For “The Art Happens Here: Net Art’s Archival Poetics,” Rhizome and the New Museum could have worked with artists to create a store experience similar to that which Arcangel offered in Norway, staged regular “real-time fictional scenarios” through garlic trade events within the lobby space, and installed Sister Unn’s in the window.\textsuperscript{213} Considering the history of window installations at the New Museum, as seen when the museum held an ongoing window exhibition series, which ran from the late 70s through the 80s, and featured the activist works of groups like ACT UP/Gran Fury, Rhizome and the New Museum missed, or outright neglected, an opportunity to engage with a larger audience (Fig. 24).\textsuperscript{214}

\textsuperscript{211} Foster, \textit{The First Pop Age}, 52.
\textsuperscript{212} Paul, “Challenges for a Ubiquitous Museum,” 65.
\textsuperscript{214} The works in this series were designed specifically for this site, often as part of larger shows, and they were designed to engage the public; The New Museum, “Window Series,” The New Museum, accessed March 10, 2020, https://archive.newmuseum.org/series/2128.
Regardless, it remains important to note that offering further opportunities for individuals to engage with these works would not have resulted in direct resistance to dominant culture. Instead, enhancing the “potentialized” elements of these works, which can lead to productive imaginations of alternatives, would have allowed everyone who encountered them to interact with “art as a form of experimental activity overlapping with the world” and indirectly pushing its boundaries.\textsuperscript{215}

With this potential “boundary-pushing” in mind, the New Museum, and other art institutions, should carefully consider how they can take this moment to reimagine how they present net art and their collections in an online format to the public. Link sharing alone will not ensure the futures of these institutions or encourage increased engagement. Exchange and participation, in all forms, must be reimagined, reworked, spread, and embodied for truly alternative forms of engagement to emerge.

\textsuperscript{215} Bishop, 27; 471-472.
Fig. 1 — Arcangel, Cory, installation view of “dump bin” from *Arcangel Surfware*, 2019, readymade shelf and merchandise, the New Museum, photo taken by author.
Fig. 2 — Cheang, Shu Lea, and Melanie Hoff, installation view of recreation of *Garlic=Rich Air*, 2019, cart and redesigned game, the New Museum, https://archive.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/2588.
Fig. 3 — Rogers, Bunny, and Filip Olszewski, installation view of recreation of *Sister Unn’s*, 2019, freezer, ice, dried flowers, shelves, doormat, the New Museum, http://moussemagazine.it/art-happens-net-arts-archival-poetics-new-museum-new-york-2019/.
Fig. 4 — Electronic Disturbance Theater, screenshot from emulation of *FloodNet*, 1998, Java applet, Rhizome, https://anthology.rhizome.org/floodnet.
Fig. 6— Arcangel, Cory, screenshot from *Arcangel Surfware* website, 2014-ongoing, website and merchandise, arcangelsurfware.biz, https://www.arcangelsurfware.biz/.
Fig. 7 — Arcangel, Cory, photograph of merchandise from *Arcangel Surfware* website, 2014-ongoing, website and merchandise, arcangelsurfware.biz, https://www.arcangelsurfware.biz/.
Fig. 8 — Arcangel, Cory, photograph of flagship Arcangel Surfware store in Stavanger, Norway, 2014-ongoing, website and merchandise, arcangelsurfware.biz.
Fig. 9—Kline, Josh, *How Much is that Intern in the Window?* from *Dis Images*, 2013, digital photograph in the style of stock images, Rhizome, https://anthology.rhizome.org/dis-images.
Fig. 11 — Cheang, Shu Lea, screenshot from emulation of *Garlic=Rich Air*, 2002-2003, interactive website and exchange system, Rhizome, https://anthology.rhizome.org/garlic-rich-air.
Fig. 12 — Cheang, Shu Lea, photograph of truck from *Garlic=Rich Air*, 2002-2003, interactive website and exchange system, Rhizome, https://anthology.rhizome.org/garlic-rich-air.
Fig. 13 — Cheang, Shu Lea, screenshot from emulation of *Garlic=Rich Air*, 2002-2003, interactive website and exchange system, Rhizome, https://anthology.rhizome.org/garlic-rich-air.
Fig. 14 — Cheang, Shu Lea, screenshot from emulation of *Garlic=Rich Air*, 2002-2003, interactive website and exchange system, Rhizome, https://anthology.rhizome.org/garlic-rich-air.
Fig. 15 — Earle, Grayson, and Maya Binyam, screenshot from *BailBloc* website, 2017-ongoing, blockchain app, bailbloc.com, https://bailbloc.thenewinquiry.com/
Fig. 16—Axiom Zen, screenshot from *CryptoKitties* website, 2017-ongoing, blockchain game, cryptokitties.co, https://www.cryptokitties.co/.
Fig. 17 — Rogers, Bunny, and Filip Olszewski, installation view of *Sister Unn’s*, 2011-2012, freezer, ice, dried flowers, shelves, doormat, sister-unns.com, http://www.sister-unns.com/.
Fig. 18 — Rogers, Bunny, and Filip Olszewski, screenshot from *Sister Unn's website*, 2011-2012, website, sister-unns.com, http://www.sister-unns.com/.
Fig. 19 — Fei, Cao, still from 2007 video that featured a model of *RMB City* prior to its opening in *Second Life*, 2008-2011, fictional city constructed in *Second Life*, Rhizome, https://anthology.rhizome.org/rmb-city.
Hello Friends,

As of February 2nd 2012 another establishment is being built where our store stands and we regret to inform you that we have decided to shut down forever. Initially we attempted to move within the Forest Hills area but we could not find something both affordable and adequate. We take this as a sign that the times are changing and so should we. After carefully weighing our options we decided to gracefully bow out rather than relocate the store during tough economic times and risk not being able to provide the same level of service that you’ve come to expect from us. This was an extremely hard decision for us and in many ways it’s the end of an era. This store is all we’ve ever known.

It’s no secret that economic times are tough and small family owned/operated businesses are disappearing. We have been here since 1963 but the shop itself has been in business for at least 75 years. It was not an easy decision to close up a shop which has been in the same building for nearly a century, believe me! After serving you all for over 50 years, we feel it’s best to end the store on a high note and move on to different things.

We hope that our shop/ibon/conversationsonline helped you cope during the saddest times of your life such as funerals and illness and we hope that we made you happy during the best times of your life such as weddings, newborn babies and proms.

Thank you for making us a part of your lives and if you’d like to keep in touch you can write us an E-Mail at store@sister-unns.com or you can send a handwritten letter to the shop’s former address: 72-32 Austin st. Forest Hills NY, 11375. The U.S. Postal Service will forward your letter to us.

Thanks for the memories.
- The entire Sister Unns’s family.

Fig. 20 — Rogers, Bunny, and Filip Olszewski, screenshot from Sister Unns’s website, 2011-2012, website, sister-unns.com, http://www.sister-unns.com/.
Fig. 21 — Rogers, Bunny, and Filip Olszewski, installation view of *Sister Unn’s*, 2011-2012, freezer, ice, dried flowers, shelves, doormat, sister-unns.com, http://www.sister-unns.com/.
Fig. 22 — Hirschhorn, Thomas, photograph of *Twin Tear*, 2004, wood, cardboard, screws, adhesive tape, plastic sheet, ham, crutches, prints, fabric, red spray paint, plastic bowl, 98 x 199 x 96.5 in. Gladstone Gallery. http://www.artnet.com/artists/thomas-hirschhorn/twin-tear-a -qrhtgh1cmpVPgCrS9yIZww2.
Fig. 23 — The New Museum, screenshot from the New Museum’s Instagram, screenshot taken by author on April 10, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/newmuseum/.
Fig. 24 — ACT UP/Gran Fury, *Let the Record Show...*, November 20, 1987-January 24, 1988, photomural, neon, concrete, the New Museum, https://archive.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/158.
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