

September 9th - October 22nd 2016

Asymmetrical Response

Cory Arcangel

Olia Lialina

In military parlance the terms *asymmetrical* and *symmetrical* are employed to refer to political provocations and diplomatic *démarches*, escalation and tension, and power dynamics of the highest order. Not specific to war, these terms also refer more generally to a set of conditions that define our relationship to power.

Since their first meeting on the eve of Y2K, Russian-born Olia Lialina, one of the best known participants in the 1990s net.art scene, and American artist Cory Arcangel have been involved in a deeply symmetrical relationship. Uniting them is an abiding preoccupation with the relationship between people and their computers, in particular computers connected to the internet. Their awareness of the cultural implications of the internet's technical context—as it has shifted from a tool for military communications, to the “information superhighway” that promised open and equal exchange, to the increasingly asymmetric “content delivery system” it has become today—has resulted in two complex bodies of work in constant conversation with each other, seen here together for the first time.

The evolution of the internet has been mirrored by a generational progression of artists using it as a medium for expression. From the early net.artists (of which Olia Lialina was a prominent participant) who were experimenting with the internet as an entirely new platform, through subsequent generations for whom the web shifted from a new medium to a mass medium, Lialina and Arcangel

have been active throughout. With this transition to mass medium, digitality has become a normative experience. Omnipresent and increasingly invisible technology has focused attention on the content of our digital lives, the outputs of technology. Lialina and Arcangel remain adamantly preoccupied with the medium specificity—hardware, software and networks—that generates this content, and most significantly, the diminishing status of the computer user within.

In the early years of the world wide web users created content for their personal web pages through html code, the technological frame in which the content appeared, affording them a degree of agency over their online presence. In the era of social media and template-based web pages, it is nearly impossible to use our computers, or express ourselves on the web in ways other than what is dictated to us by Apple or Facebook. A prolific writer and historian of internet vernaculars, Lialina maps this broad shift in the user/computer relationship to a number of important, industry driven linguistic translations.

Computers become Technology
Interface becomes Experience
Users become People

According to her line of thinking, *computers* can be programmed and reprogrammed at any instant. *Users* are in control of their *computers*, whereas the more generic *people* are unable to exert the same control over their *technology*. Instead technology becomes something

intuitively *experienced*, causing users to forget that their devices are computers that can be creatively used, programmed, and played with in ways other than what is prescribed. This shift in language reveals the ideological biases on which contemporary technology, both software and hardware, is built.

Lialina has made serious study of early web culture and aesthetics, charting significant typologies, developments and conflicts. Earlier DIY approaches to web page making included infinite variations on “starry night” backgrounds, bulleted lists of “things I like” and animated gifs borrowed through the “view source” function of your web browser. Standardized online interfaces like Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat limit users to content sharing, likes and now 🍷, or 🍷. The custom wallpapers covering the gallery, *MeetMyDog*, *PersonalPageBlue* and *CelebrityBckgd3* were a direct attempt by Yahoo.com to “clean up” its amateur user’s web pages with prefab templates. Lialina considers these early templates an opening salvo in the asymmetrical conflict between corporate led technologies and computer users.

For *Online Newspapers, French Edition, Liberation* Lialina revives a 90s amateur aesthetic, pairing it with content from the mainstream press. It imagines how major media outlets, that grew in dominance during the Web 2.0 era, might appear were they developed by the lay journalists whose aesthetic choices defined web culture before the dot-com boom. By creating a faux precedent to today’s online

media environment *Online Newspapers* reflects a multitude of conflicts: the perpetual obsolescence of technology, the broad disruption of traditional journalism engendered by the web, and the demotion of user to “commenter” in our current mainstream media landscape.

The work *Asymmetrical Response* illustrates a more overt conflict. A clear gif is an early web convention used by designers to layout their pages. This 1x1 transparent pixel is also a simple form of analytics and surveillance that can be used by web developers to track users to any web page. Blingee.com is a popular image generator and online community that allows users to create and share sparkling, blinged out images. Controversially, this miniscule 1x1 pixel lurks behind Blingee’s code and prevents its users from sharing their custom bling-making elements as freely as they would want. In an asymmetric response, Blingee users created and distributed a 400x400 transparent gif that rendered Blingee’s clear gif irrelevant. These pixels, displayed here, are invisible but powerful weapons in the war between users and technology providers.

The free web hosting service Geocities.com was founded by “Beverly Hills Internet” in July 1995 and soon became one of the most popular hosting services on the web. With the advent and professionalization of Web 2.0 Geocities became synonymous for bad taste. As “social media” ascended, Geocites users continued to dwindle, until the 26th of October 2009 when Geocities was extinguished. Archive

Team, a group of internet activists/archivists, managed to download almost a terabyte of Geocities pages and on the 1st of November 2010 Lialina and her partner Dragan Espenschied embarked on a massive archival project to study this unprecedented cache of user culture. Of her ongoing research into this archive Lialina has said, “There are two types of homepages that break my heart on the daily basis. Ones that promise that soon — very soon, in two weeks, or till the end of the year, or when school starts or stops — the page will be built...Others are goodbye pages. Their masters say that they fail, or that they got real life or the real domain name, or that they are angry about Yahoo or rude comments. Both could be last updated on the same day and appear next to each other in the archives timeline. that makes my experience even more dramatic.” The slide projection *Give me time/This page is no more* juxtaposes more than 200 of these pages, poignantly documenting the life-cycle and pathos of the Geocities community.

Similarly extinct is Hyves, once the number one social network in the Netherlands from 2004 until it finally succumbed to Facebook in 2011. Unlike Facebook with its standardized blue and white template, Hyves allowed for a “pimp my profile” approach which allowed users a high degree of control over the appearance of their profile pages. Upon learning of Hyves’ imminent shutdown Lialina, the digital folklorist, scrolled through thousands of Hyves user profiles, in particular the immigrant

youth which composed a significant user base, identifying trends, basic technical patterns and typologies. This research became the work *Body Class Pimp* a series of images which highlights how users like “damlos” and “halim71” masterfully matched backgrounds and profile images to create nuanced self-portraits that made themselves visible online.

(Nothing You Can Compare to Your Neighborhood Hoe) distills multiple eras of internet user culture: a readymade in the form of a Tumblr page featuring Lialina’s infamous 2005 work, *Animated Gif Model*. Designed to be shared on the web, her hula hooping avatar has appeared on countless websites, in various resolutions and contexts. *Neighborhood Hoe*, which takes its title from a line in the David Guetta song is a radical rejection of template-based social media. User ursulagaiofatto.tumblr.com’s page stands as a testament to the abiding appeal of early web principles: tiled backdrops, pixelated animated gifs, poor quality audio files, and images borrowed and recontextualized without attribution.

Watching *Neighborhood Hoe* is a work from Cory Arcangel’s sculpture series *Screen-Agers, Tall Boys, and Whales*. Made from ubiquitous colourful flotation devices, these “dressed up pool noodles” appear as bodies adorned with brands and devices. Representing typologies of youth culture the “tween” sculpture *Frozen*, with its Elsa branded headphones and iPod nano playing “Let it Go” points to another shift in the vernacular use of technology. Our interface and outputs are no longer simply

screen-based, but have rematerialized as products.

The consumer nature of the tech object is an increasingly central point for Arcangel. *Diamond Plate* is both a reference to 90s web culture (and the background image of his first ever website) but also how the internet, art and internet art function as product. This wall to wall carpet transforms the gallery into a showroom for the display of objects, a nod to the art market's historical reluctance to embrace internet art and the artist's own strategies to overcome it. The photograph, *Photoshop CS: 60 by 20 inches, 300 DPI, RGB, square pixels, default gradient "spectrum", mousedown y=600 x=3000, mouseup y=17500 x=3000; tool "Wand", select y=16600 x=3000, tolerance=100, contiguous=on; default gradient "spectrum", mousedown y=17000 x=5900, mouseup y=17000 x=100* is from a body of work that transforms an ephemeral action—user input to Photoshop's gradient tool—into sumptuous and highly collectable artworks.

The object value of the ephemeral is further interrogated in *AUDMCRS Underground Dance Music Collection of Recorded Sound*—a collection of 839 trance LPS purchase from retired trance and underground dance music DJ Joshua Ryan. Over the course of two years, Arcangel and his studio meticulously catalogued the entire collection, transforming these pre-EDM LPs into a museum-like collection. Only ever intended to be heard in a rave context, these LPs are both a sculpture and

performance that tease out the difficulty of preserving an experience through its related objects. AUDMCRS, and the genre of music it represents, also interrogates the role of users, populism and personal preference in the assignment of historic and cultural value.

In *Lakes* the problem of objects, vis-à-vis digital technology, is expressed through a conflation of consumer technology, pop culture and web aesthetics. Images of a Seinfeld DVD, Hillary Clinton's 2014 autobiography and a smoking, dog walking Harry Potter all distorted by a 90s Java Applet effect and displayed on large monitors are evidence of a consumer-grade asymmetry between users and technology. The race for the newest, highest resolution tech objects, betrays our low res images, and the recent past to which they refer. Overarching expectations of 'image quality' and lack of backwards compatibility, force users into a constant cycle of equipment upgrades and revised compression algorithms.

On a long wood table in the middle of the gallery sits *MIG 29 Soviet Fighter Plane, Clouds and Android*, a version of an iconic Arcangel work. Emulated on Android phones (a computational process in which new computers act like old computers in order to run old software) Arcangel translates his own work across technical, historical and geo-political time. The cold-war context of the original *MIG 29* game is reflected back through the readymade across the table. Lialina's *Liquid Crystal Curtain* consists of Soviet hand-held games and Nintendo's popular

Game & Watch devices from which they were directly and deliberately copied.

Two additional works in direct response to each other are “wearables.” In 2014 Cory Arcangel launched a new “lifestyle brand” and product line under the imprint *Arcangel Surfware*, that includes T-shirts, sweatpants, bedsheets and iphone covers, “to surf the internet in comfort.” This summer, Lialina launched her own clothing line *Webmaster Summer* with the tagline “Don’t wear it if you never made a web page and aren’t planning one.” Users have bodies and their work is real. These clothes—one uniform for labour and another for lounge—acknowledge the physical, embodied nature of our lives online.

In the introduction to the 2009 book *Digital Folklore* Lialina writes, “we have studied the history of hypertext, but not the history of Metallica fan web rings.” An observation that applies this concept of asymmetricality not only to how we function within it as embodied users, but to our intellectual approach to computers and technology more broadly. Our digital environment is built on a network of algorithmic decisions and assumptions, increasingly being made by a handful of powerful technology companies. It is easy to become cynical in the face of such blatant, relentless asymmetrical capitalism. Users as consumers, computers as products, outputs as content, interface as ideology—these analogies are embedded in our current digital framework.

Lialina and Arcangel remind us what

happens when users push up against this framework—when users come into conflict with the underlying technical context of their computers and proudly assert their visibility. The conditions that users create for themselves through relationships and within the broader technological context is a form of resistance, an ongoing challenge to the asymmetry of our contemporary condition.

Overtly political, *Asymmetrical Response* is also deeply personal. Lialina and Arcangel are members of a mutual admiration society, united by their abiding admiration of vernacular internet users. Two of the most often referenced “media artists” of their generations, for over 15 years their work has been in near constant conversation with each other. The symmetry of their own relationship gives a frame through which we can observe a long view of the short history of our current digital context. —Caitlin Jones

Artist Biographies

United States born fine artist **Cory Arcangel** makes work in a wide range of media: composition, video, modified video games, performance, and the Internet. Recently he worked extensively with a team of computer experts from the Carnegie Mellon Computer Club, in collaboration with The Andy Warhol Museum, to unearth and preserve Warhol’s lost digital experiments. In 2014 he released his first novel, “Working On My Novel” published by Penguin. Currently he is the CEO of the non-aspirational lifestyle brand and publishing imprint, Arcangel Surfware.

His works have been exhibited & performed both online and at venues including the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Tate, London; The Migros Museum, Zurich; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin.

Moscow-born, German-based artist **Olia Lialina** has, for the past two decades, produced many influential works of network-based art: *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War* (1996), *Agatha Appears* (1997), *First Real Net Art Gallery* (1998), and *Last Real Net Art Museum* (2000), *Online Newspapers* (2004-2013) *Summer* (2013). Currently she is a professor at Merz Akademie in Germany. Lialina writes on digital culture, net art and web vernacular.

Her work has been exhibited extensively online and at venues including Ars Electronica, Linz; the New Museum, New York; Museo Tamayo, Mexico City; Transmediale, Berlin; Havana Biennial, Cuba; ACAF, Alexandria; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; ABC Gallery, Moscow; ZKM, Karlsruhe; Madison Square Park, New York; Barbican, London; LEAP, Berlin; MOTI, Breda.

List of Works

1. Olia Lialina

Wallpapers: *MeetMyDog*, *PersonalPageBlue*, *CelebrityBckgd3*, all 2016, digitally printed wallpaper, dimensions variable

2. Cory Arcangel

Diamond Plate, 2016
carpet, dimensions variable

3. Olia Lialina

Give me time/This page is no more, 2015
35mm slides

4. Olia Lialina

Asymmetrical Response, 2016
animated desktop background, gifs

5. Cory Arcangel

The AUDMCRS Underground Dance Music Collection of Recorded Sound, 2011
839 trance LPs and corresponding catalogue in Machine Readable Cataloging standard, (optional) listening station and cotton gloves

6. Olia Lialina

Bringing your talent to the web, 2009-ongoing
books

7-9. Cory Arcangel

Hillary / Lakes; 2014, ***Seinfeld DVD / Lakes***, 2014; ***Dawgs / Lakes***, 2016
1920x1080 H.264/MPEG-4 Part 10 looped digital file (from 11 lossless TIF masters), media player, 65" flatscreen, armature, various cables

10. Olia Lialina

(Nothing you can compare to your neighborhood hoe), 2011
digital video projection

11-12. Olia Lialina *Webmasters' Summer* and Cory Arcangel *Arcangel Surfware*, 2016, custom clothing lines, locker

13. Cory Arcangel

Photoshop CS: 60 by 20 inches, 300 DPI, RGB, square pixels, default gradient "spectrum", mousedown y=600 x=3000, mouseup y=17500 x=3000; tool "Wand", select y=16600 x=3000, tolerance=100, contiguous=on; default gradient "spectrum", mousedown y=17000 x=5900, mouseup y=17000 x=100, 2016
chromogenic print

14. Cory Arcangel

Frozen, 2015
Foam pool noodle, eKids Di-M40FR Frozen iHome co-brand headphones, blue iPod Nano, Disney's Frozen "Let It Go" MPEG-1 Audio Layer III file player, sock

15. Olia Lialina

Online newspapers, French Edition. Liberation, 2013, web page, 65" flatscreen, armature, various cables

16. Olia Lialina

Body Class Pimp (From L to R: voelmegoed, damlos, naoualtje89, halim71, gekregen2012, henessy), 2016
digital prints mounted to plexiglass

17. Cory Arcangel

Mig 29 Soviet Fighter Plane, Clouds, and Android, 2015
two LG Volt cell phones and chargers, Mig 29 Soviet Fighter Plane and Clouds (2005) Nintendo Entertainment System .nes Roms, Android OS Nintendo Entertainment System emulators

18. Olia Lialina

Liquid Crystal Curtain, 2016
One Game+Watch Nintendo hand held device, 4 Elektronika hand held devices

