

ART AND CELL PHONES OR THE SOCIAL NETWORKING ENVIRONMENT

Andres Manniste, Montréal, Québec
E-mail: <andresmanniste@gmail.com>.

Abstract

When compared to a decade ago, the Internet appears to be increasingly homogenous but it has also evolved. Social networks, designed to be practical rather than aesthetic, function in a manner similar to cell phones. Although young people are initially attracted by a graphic user interface, they rapidly adapt to network architecture due to a familiarity with diverse technologies. Social networks work because they allow an idealized content that can be easily accessed. I am interested in these networks because they provide a novel social and cultural matrix for art making. They are narcissistic by nature because they are a mirror of the user and, for the same reason, social networking is fundamentally ontological.

Cell phones are restricted in some places because they are seen as telephones. In fact, a cell phone is a multi-purpose device fundamentally different from a telephone. With its technology, the user can establish a network presence. Where I work, cell phones have been formally banned from studios and classrooms. The idea is not unique, with movie theatres, museums and concert venues regulating the appropriateness of such devices. A majority of my colleagues supported this rule because they thought that students were using telephones during lectures (which I had always understood as an impolite reflection on my ability as a teacher). My students, of course, immediately responded to the regulation by creating a network project that required the presence of cell phones in the classroom.

“Not getting it” seems to stem from a reactionary posture rather than from ignorance. To me there is a difference between having knowledge and “getting it.” It is the distinction between understanding and realising. I have colleagues who, despite considerable instruction, still have trouble with using e-mail. The problem is not about ignorance but rather in their difficulty adapting an accumulated body of knowledge to the larger scale of a new situation.

Not being immune to intransigence, I think that I once assumed that a cell phone was a telephone. I had difficulty understanding the need to communicate so often and apparently superficially. I found it difficult to accept the transformation of the notion of the privacy of a telephone call into the public display of a mobile call. Of course, it is not a telephone although the device can be used for voice communication. The cell phone is also a multi-purpose computer and, most importantly, a portable

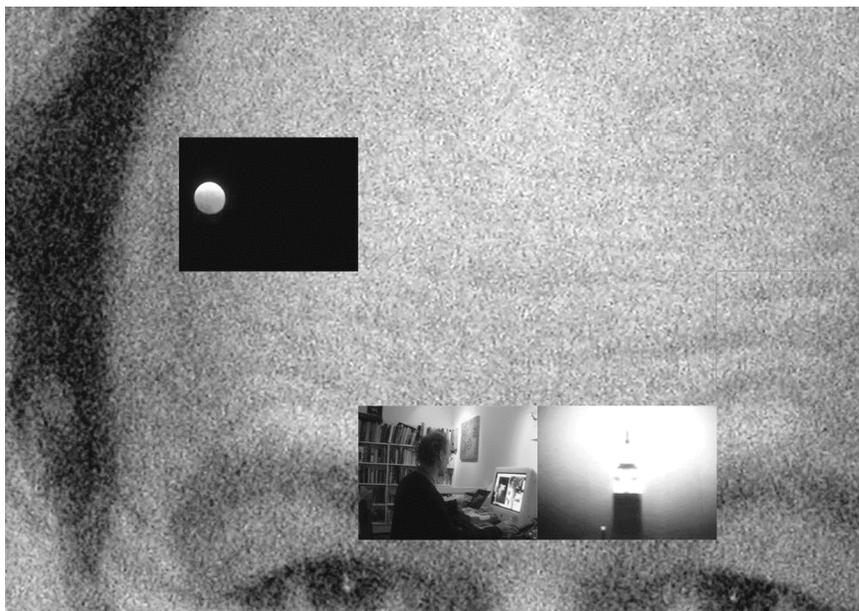


Fig. 1. Andres Manniste, *me_me_2006*, screen capture of internet-based artwork. (© 2006 Andres Manniste.)

network node. What I saw as unnecessary calls and text messages were simply “Pings”. A Ping or an echo request is a network program that allows a user to verify that a particular address exists and is operating – simply a method to get the attention of another party online. The cell phone is an immensely significant social and cultural phenomenon because through it users have already adapted to the architecture of the network.

The interface of the Internet appears to be increasingly homogenous but this also means that it has evolved. Artist and theorist Olia Lialina [1] noted a certain presence and alchemy in amateur web pages that is lacking in the increasingly bland interface of the Internet. Lialina speaks of the loss of naiveté, adding that in a commercial context, it is easier to create and market an established model that tends to mimic the look of other media such as print, television or cinema.

This is especially true in social networks that are designed to be practical rather than aesthetic. Inherent within the coding of a personal web page is the ability to create a unique graphic user interface (GUI). It is the individual that determines aesthetics and the content. A classic home page is a public portal that gives access to private communication not unlike a telephone.

Through the Internet I am able to invite the viewer to come in to my art practice. What my web page offers the person waiting there with the mouse is a response. *me_me_2006*, was created to be seen on a network. It was made in a way that I imagine my thinking occurs. As life goes on around me, I am in a bubble, connected

and extended toward the exterior. The work opens to a grainy picture of my head. One click initiates references to sounds, melodies, icons and film. Animations appear and fade to the sustained sound of violins, while reality seems to be farther and farther away. The interactive process is about being mutually involved in communication and experiencing a kind of physical switch-around; exchanging bodies with each other, thinking, conversing and simultaneously reading into each other’s expressed thoughts. But this web page deals with the way that I make art, obviously, so it’s not done blindly. My personal opinions and desires also have a say in its graphical appearance.

In proprietary GUIs (like “Google” or “Neopets”) or social networks (like “Facebook”, “Orkut” or “Myspace”), the web pages are being used like cell phones on a bus, where privacy might be incidental to the desire to exhibit a presence. Social networking providers offer a sparse aesthetic, often relying on text or a limited choice of designs. They also have practical objectives, including pathways for commercial interests. The link between the cell phone market and social network servers has already been established by telecommunications providers through their equipment.

Young people are initially attracted to the Internet through the graphic user interface but once they understand some elementary code, they begin to see the network as a structure. In my experience, when I teach about art on the Internet, I find that students go through three stages of understanding. First, I spend a lot of

time discussing the GUI because the GUI is overwhelming. Because it is everywhere, it is the way that people learn how to see things. They are used to television, used to movies, used to a piece of paper, so when they actually look at a computer it is a great abstraction for them to imagine that what they see on the screen is a set of coordinates. That takes a while to get across to them. Then I tiptoe into simple programming, a little html, some animation, and some things that seem magical. When they begin to understand programs through making web pages and trying out small scripts, they almost automatically jump into a “getting it” realization of the nature of Internet-based art. I am of a generation that saw computers as impressive hardware, equipment and gadgets to be mastered. This attitude is apparent in gallery or museum installations of Internet-based works, where technical equipment dominates the art that tends to assume the role of a screensaver. [2] Because they were born into downloading, cell phones and iPods, the young people that I see understand computers more as electronic networks.

Social networks are attractive because they allow the user to specify an idealized content that can be accessed at leisure by both the client and the server. I am especially interested in the conceptual structure of a social network for art making because it can provide considerable access to a wide range of people. The only practical

guideline for working on the Internet has been to make things that you are willing to make public. This is especially true for social networks that are meant for fun and not high security. On a social network, I am less motivated to tell the world about myself (as I might through my artwork) than I am at specifying what I wish the world to know about myself. In this sense, it is narcissistic. I collect friends and information and, in a manner similar to the cell phone, I can choose when to connect or whether I am simply verifying a node. Social networks are “pinging” at a new level of sophistication. Features allow me to discreetly find out what happens or who is online at the same time as I am.

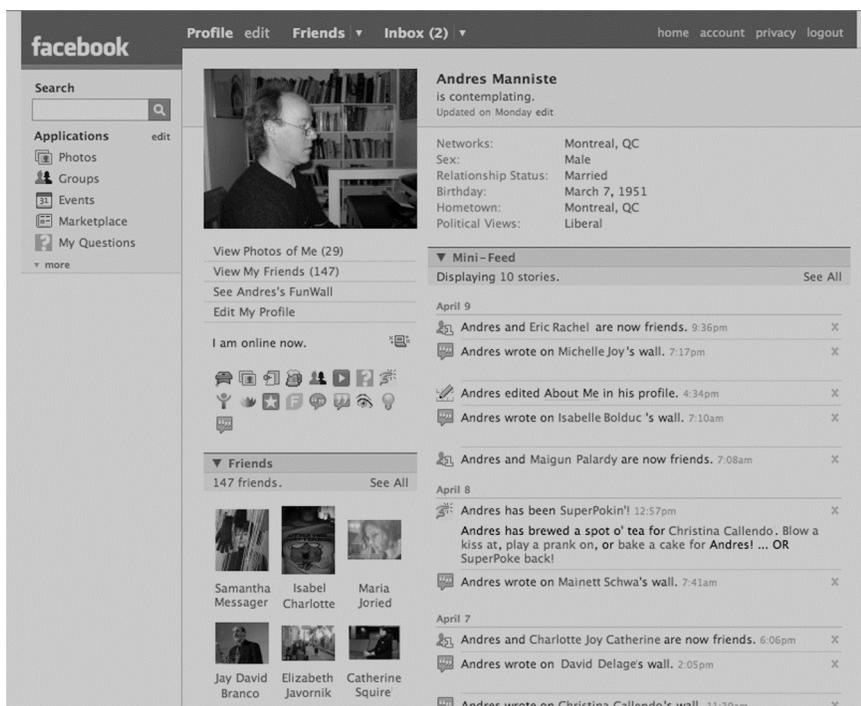
Making art on or with social networks appears to be related to the conceptual shape of a network with its nodes and gathering points. When I look at social networks, I am less interested in particular servers or code algorithms than I am in the emerging appearance (phasis) of electronic communication. Social networking is as ephemeral as the flesh and blood kind, so I do not expect any one network to endure indefinitely. The mutability of technology means that there will inevitably be other things. I have also noticed anomalies associated with art making in the otherwise smooth fabric of proprietary interfaces. I realise that there is some interest in writing applications for “Facebook” or creating phantom avatars, but to me the social network is primarily a cultural model that can

be applied to understanding who we are. This is already evident in the emergence of hierarchical posturing in friend lists and the presence of imaginary people or vague social causes that have to be distinguished from flesh and blood people and serious interest groups. On the other hand, social access to 100 million people is something that cannot easily be ignored by an artist and there is an aesthetic here, where one can work outside of corporate sponsorship, art world management or commercial bias.

Social networks are less about transmitting information than using the architecture of the network to establish a presence. When I look at a 1024 X 768 pixel computer screen, it provides me with a GUI that is really quite standard. On this screen, I might be looking at some erudite web page or I might be amusing myself with something very silly, but it is all delivered the same way. However, the process of looking at the screen, over time, reflects who I am. Servers have been specifically created for this purpose, for example, “Del.icio.us”, a social bookmarking service or “Twitter” for text messages.

Interactivity implies listening, which for me is the activity of collecting thoughts as the other person is talking. While listening, I have to turn inside to see what is going to be said, and then revise and communicate a two-way synthesis of the process. When I am online, I am looking for that response and that is what keeps me there. Social networks are narcissistic by nature because they mirror the user. In the image that I see on the computer monitor, I begin to construct an idea of my self, which has always been difficult for anyone, since no human can perceive his or her face. I can only see a reflection of my face or rely on my belief system to compare that representation with others, but that does not tell me what I look like, rather it tells me that I am as ephemeral as the reflection itself. [3] So why do I look at “Facebook”? I think that the image it reflects helps to understand who I am and what I am at an experiential level.

Fig. 2. Modified screen capture of a social networking page. (© 2008 Andres Manniste.)



References and Notes

1. Lialina, Olia (2007), “Vernacular Web 2”. <<http://www.contemporary-home-computing.org/vernacular-web-2/>>, accessed 11 April 2008.
2. Gulan, Genco (2005) “The Web Biennial Project: Developing Distributed, Real-time, Multimedia Presentation Technologies to Develop Independent, Open, Collaborative, Exhibition Models”. REFRESH conference, First International Conference on the Media Arts, Sciences and Technologies held at the Banff Center Sept 29-Oct 4 2005 <http://www.banffcentre.ca/bnmi/programs/archives/2005/refresh/docs/conferences/Genco_Gulan.pdf>, accessed 11 April 2008.
3. Kristeva, Julia (1983) *Histoires d'amour*. Editions Paris: Denoel (Folio essais). p.133.