Neural.it interview
Questions by Alessandro Ludovico, Feb-2005

1. One of your latest art experiment is the 'Processual PixelPainting' series, performances where a human carefully reproduce digital pictures painting them pixel by pixel. This sort of 'human-printer' describes a digital process in a physical and atavic art practice (painting). There's any reference to the history of art here and on how the art system still needs renewed objects to deal with?

lizvlx: pixelpaintings show objects/scenes that are either present only in the virtual world (.com shopping carts) or scenes that have taken place in reality, but have been perceived primarily virtually (9-11, abu ghraib). so the question was how to portray something that does not exist really, how to give real life to objects that only live on-screen. a mere print-out would not have done the job, as print-outs are nothing but consumable throw-away objects without a "soul". paintings on the other hand carry this uniqueness and timelessness with them. to me, they are in fact objects with a "soul". so painting the virtual makes it become real. references to concepts in art history can be seen in the nature of the paintings, i.e. they depict (virtual) objects, they are stilllives, they portray (virtual) scenes, they are landscapes, pixel landscapes.

Hans Bernhard: This ubermorgen "product line" is a strategic combination of New Code [technical / digital actionism] and Old Code [human / painting] with a simple goal: infiltrating the art market. There are 3 types of pixelpaintings. 1. Sucking light out of the white [destilling light invisible to the human eye from a white canvas and turning it into abstract pixel compositions on canvas], 2. Iconographic / Logos and 3. Landscapes. There is not exactly a conscious reference to art history but a working method of how the art system can incorporate the structure and historical supercharging of the painting itself with the radical and acute knowledge and experience of the children of the 1980s – the first productive internet generation investigating the need for digital art. Over the years a broad spectrum of works materialized from the etoy and ubermorgen digital actions into videos, paintings, [F]originals*, lectures, performances, documentary material, etc.. The pixelpainting is a subversive application of digital images. We are living in a hyperphysical world, and at the same time the digital revolution is constantly updating and expanding fully medialized environments. But like the paperless office brought us 1000% more paper over the last 10 years, digital art will bring us 1000% more physical objects over the next decade**.

* [F]originals: forged original documents; either forged or authentic documents, in any case original and unique.
** just watch our friends from http://0100101110101101.org/ move fast & hard into the new-old digital physical art market

2. Your artistic activity often deal with the 'spreading of cultural viruses', and this seems to be accomplished using the same linguistic domains (propaganda, marketing, legal issues, etc.) with very different purposes. Is this similar to the deceptive misuse of a net protocol?

Hans Bernhard: Yes. Much closer to the syntax of Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons and Joseph Beuys. With ubermorgen and etoy we use[d] language as a tactical and aesthetic tool to manipulate specific entities [i.e. institutions, media, humans] and to

dream and speculate about the future. The potential importance of polluted and unhealthy environments in which our virus outbreaks often occur is being ignored due to lack of funding, market expertise and scientific indifference. It's noteworthy that the ubermorgen virus is typically described by scientists as a rare, mild and usually harmless infection in humans, affecting mostly the news media and curators. In technical environments, however, the virus has been highly touted as a killer. Traditionally, news media have been viewed as sentinels for toxic environments, the journalist in the artist studio being the most famous example. What if some degree of the damage to journalists and humans now attributed solely to the virus is actually triggered by harsh environmental factors that need to be addressed?
At the Lentos museum of modern art in Linz* "JUST DO IT! The subversion of signs from Marcel Duchamp to Prada Meinhof – A thematic exhibition on the disturbing reinterpretation of powerfully effective images in art, popular culture, political agitation and advertising." our sculptural [paper sculpture] and iconographic [The seal**] work "*THE*AGENCY* for manual election recounts" will be shown along with our Voteauction classic.

lizvlx: if you mean to point out the similarities between ethical and criminal hacking and our techniques of "media hacking", then you have a point. i guess, it is clear that a) we like hacking techniques anyway and b) have to use them. the only other option (to get a voice in mass media) would be to produce regular – expensive marketing or maybe also to use any sort of real-life actionist methods. we have prefered online actionism as we come from 1995s net.art and feel at home with the server. plus, media hacking seems to be the a more efficient and intelligent way to get ideas across the news ticker. you need less strategy and more flexibility, less people and more individualism, less hierarchy and more determination.

*http://www.lentos.at
**http://ubermorgen.com/*THE*AGENCY*/

3. The 'AnuScan', one of your most provocative pieces, the (advertised) application of biometric devices to the anus (unique for every person, as the iris or the fingerprint), pushes to the extreme the imaginary of surveillance, pulling out??? a terrific politic statement, without using any popular symbol or rhetoric. Can you elaborate more on this 'iconoclastic appeal'?

lizvlx: AnuScan is a "webpainting". it looks like a website, but it has no functionality, it is a photorealistic virtual pixelpainting of something that exists (as iriScan). it is an "abbild". we could have realized a full-functioning website for anuScan, but we did find that functionality was not key concerning any kinds of biometric scanning techniques. by leaving out the clickable, we focus on the absurd.

Hans Bernhard: Webpaintings play with the expectation of what a web-site is or what it should be. Here a selection: the WHITE_WEBSITE*, ekmrz.cx**, BartnLisa.com**, bannster.net****. AnuScan was further developed into physical space. We built an exhibition prototpye [Anus Scanner, 42X55X32cm, steel, rubber] and produced a series of prints and paintings of anus patterns – the visual similarity to fractal structures is striking. They look very beautiful and strange, these very hidden treasures of mankind – opposite attractors of the iris, the naked and open eye we look into every day.

*http://ubermorgen.com/THE_WHITE_WEBSITE
** http://ubermorgen.com/ekmrz
***http://ubermorgen.com/bartnlisa.com

****http://ubermorgen.com/bannster.net

4. [V]ote-auction opened the pandora box of capital hypocrisy, pushing social compromises to the extreme consequences and producing an astonishing media response (CNN included). What's the price you paid for that and what's , instead, the most important result achieved?

lizvlx: the price was (and is) not being able to travel to the u.s., spending quite some money on lawyer ad telephone bills, and being subject to all that aggression that gets pointed to you when you act as the bigggg anti-democratic supercapitalist villain (i mean, how many hate-mails can one get in one day...). the gain was lots of fun, so incredibly much attention, control over the the press (a weird feeling), and the joy of doing a project that clearly succeeds. it would have been nice to have had enough money to pay for all those media archives on vote-auction. and it sometimes makes me sad that i did not have enough time during the project to read what was written all over the world on the project. the greatest result: reaching so many people and messing with their minds, making them rethink the electoral system and giving them something to talk about.

Hans Bernhard: Ein Gesamtkunstwerk. Meanwhile I consider [V]ote-auction as such. "Bringing capitalism and democracy together". The most important products are the "contemporary pop-art" video: "CNN - Burden of Proof" [27 Min. exclusive feature on Voteauction*] and the "Legal Art" [legal documents: i.e. temporary injunction] we exhibit as paper sculptures or as wall mounted [f]originals. Our last exhibition was spread all over those media, at the Malmoe Konsthall "Electrohype" Computer Biennal** ubermorgen exhibited all these different manifestations including a slideshow with the original Voteauction-Web-site and 2 drawings of the seal. We understand media as plastic phenomenon, media and media networks can be formed and carved and brought into form like sculptures. I analyzed some art & language installation strategies, but did not understand a word.
Underlying to the visible results of the work, there is the non-systematic research which defines my "art" practice: Real-time communications-experiments in the vast global mass-media [i.e. Voteauction: 30 tel.-interviews + 15 email interviews per day], underground networks and one on one communication [during Voteauction: up to 100 user emails per day], feedback-loops, black holes, secret services, one-to-one user-communication, trans-national law, etc.
The downside of the project: As lizvlx already pointed out, we spent over 70.000 euros and we are bankrupt. We can not travel to the U.S.A [blacklisted]. During the Project our server-infrastructure was totally destroyed by anonymous. Various secret services hunting us became more and more uncomfortable. "They" did not know who we were and we really did not know who "they" were [bloody NSA/CIA spooks].

* , In the Studio: 6 Lawyers, 2 Journalists, Videoconference: 1 Domainbank-Representative, 1 Stanford-Lawyer, 1 Politician, On the Phone: Hans Bernhard, Video can be seen online under: http://vote-auction.net ; CNN movie DVD is coming out in February 2005 including original footage from US television, user emails, log-files, internal communication, the web-sites and much more.
** http://electrohype.com

5. You are a celebrated founder of the famous etoy project. What's the most important cultural heritage you got from the etoy experience?

Hans Bernhard: It is worth coming back. By that i mean you can cross any border, you can go way over the edge – thats what i did with etoy – mixing hardcore technology with chemical agents [lsd, alcohol, cocaine, thc, meskaline, benzos, etc.] – but we always had to come back and explain what we found on our expedition into the realms of the global digital networks. We tried very hard to do that at Ars Electronica 1996 – the year etoy won the Golden Nica in the net.category – slick and elegant in our work, juvenile, bold and agressive in our communication and appereance we returned as digital test-pilots from the .net; at a time when our "competition" was desperately trying to get onto the net. For the Festival-Exhibition we built a large scaled installation of the etoy.TANK-SYSTEM, a double surrealism, a physical representation of the digital metaphor. This linear and material structure consisted of orange pipes and black tanks spread over 400 m2. Each tank was in itself an digital installation, i.e. a screen with a animation of the 7 etoy.AGENTS faces morphing into each other.

6. Injunction Generator' folded a big business practice (suing the enemy for online violations) onto itself letting it conceptually implode. In your opinion the de-construction of this power tool represents a symbolic re-appropriation of the same tools or a hack into a luxury legal system?

lizvlx: i like the idea of it talking about a luxury legal system, that is a good point. in the beginning, the focus was on the absurd practice of "implementig" the u.s. legal system onto the rest of the worls anytime an internet domain would be disputed or being used as a decoy. legal systems are designed to work for souvereign nations, the internet is designed as a global networtk. no wonder that it is here, where the 2 concepts of nationalism and globalization collide. but of course, this also happens elsewhere in the real world, anytime the u.s. is involved in global issues (but this is not limited to the u.s., of course). but on the other hand, the injunction generator is a remedy for costly legal procedures (that no-one needs).

Hans Bernhard: I do not know. It is not a hack into something but more a wonderful experiment with a para-meta-legal system. Our idea goes back to Voteauction's legal troubles. Initially the domain votauction.com – registred at Domainbank Inc., a US company – was shutdown after a court order from a Chicago judge. lizvlx immediately bought the domain vote-auction.com at joker.com [owned by CSL in Germany]. The Court in Illinois then issued another court order to shut-down vote-auction.com and sent this legal document per email [sic!] to joker.com, to SILVER SERVER – our loyal provider in Austria and to Corenic, a dubious company in Geneva, Switzerland. Corenic pulled the plug on the domain without notice and without authorization or obligation. Anybody understanding basic law knows that U.S. court orders are not valid outside U.S. jurisdiction, therefore this shutdown-action was illegal.
Now we started to think into the more productive direction instead of fighting with a horizontal networks of technical idiots and frightend lawyers – we conceptualized IPNIC – the "Internet Partnership for No Internet Content". IPNIC's raison d'etre is the "Injunction Generator"*, an engine generating court orders to shut-down web-sites via email. It is a very simple affirmative step towards a very chaotic international system with courts all over the world ruling with very different sets of parameters [national laws] on a new set of problems [i.e. international technical] on different territories. One could say that the "Injunction Generator" is exemplary net.art / digital art for the "Do It" publication, edited by Hans-Ulrich Obrist: "Since 1993 Do It has provided its public with how-to pages of instructions written by 168 of the most

important artists and writers working today. ...a book that is part manual, part cookbook, part do-it-yourself kit."**

* http://ipnic.org
**http://www.e-flux.com/displayshow.php?file=message_1099844540.txt

7. There's a recognizable pop-flavor in most of your projects. Is 'pop' one key element to escape the art's tortuousness on one side and the ideological rhetoric on the other?

Hans Bernhard: Pop gone evil, pop gone totally mad, pop is the devil. Pop is a seductive worldview and the master illusion, and pop always had this very dark dimension, hiding death, desaster and evil. But our work looks very good, it feels extremely easy to understand and use on the first level, superficially functional. But behind the curtain there is something that is not so good... not good at all. To understand our generation you have to look back at our teens: we are children of the 1980s*, cocaine and Michael Milken, with junkbonds from 2 billion credit to 2 billion debt within 24 hours dancing along to Michael Jacksons "Thriller". As teenagers we were bombed with pop, we were living in a plastic pop world, in a popped up media world and to be honest, we are still living in this world; and more important, we still think and feel that way. After watching "CNN - Burden of proof", Marti Guixe** told me: "This is ultimate contemporary pop-art". i like this concept! Clean cut, slick & straight, and contemporary, what do i want more, as a child of the 80s.
lizvlx: to me, pop ist very important. i find it nicer to entertain people while talking about or working on a maybe more intellectual or tougher subject. if painting is concerned, i personally want the painting to do both, look good and have an interesting concept. there need to be layers of interest to attract a greater target group. marketing is pop. and good marketing neither improves or makes kaput a good product/object; so why not use it. in lots of our projects, however, marketing is integrated into the product/project as a medium. we see, for example, the press release as an art medium. finally, i would also describe ubermorgen's work as a merge between actionism, hacking, and classic pop art.
* born in the early/mid 1970s
** http://guixe.com / http://buyguixe.com

8. Communication mechanisms seem to be important now as battlefield tactics were in the middle age. Triggering the single person's attention means to (temporary) conquering a piece of the volatile market immaterial land. Which are the communication mechanisms you're mostly interested into?

lizvlx: pseudo-personal email communication might be my personal favorite. i like the old "you can be a dog on the internet" thing when working with email and forums. we call this technique "drama marketing". you make up a cast of people [like for example andreas bichlbauer - andy bichlbaum] and use them in different projects, professionally and privately. then, i also did a lot of radio interviews during [V]ote-auction, radio makes it very easy to lie, deceit and create something that does not exist. it leaves more to imagination, i guess. plus, it works with the voice, i prefer that to the face [i.e. TV].

Hans Bernhard: During the 1990s i was mainly interested in what we called "the market of attention". How to become a global digital Pop-Star, how to be and to feel

like a Rock-Star, how to live and communicate pure and hard net.art Rock&Roll, we even destroyed hotel rooms and threw tvs out of windows just to artificially experience stardom - that was etoy. Communication was mainly top down. Although etoy thoroughly analyzed the 1980s corporate communications, we replayed the classic "mistakes". etoy wanted to be the evil, hardcore fascist, bastard corporation flashing into the future. We tried to push the message to the people, we used standard "no comment" strategies and worked with extensive press-releases. As the .com-strategist and pr-manager I experienced all communication as positive for the brand. More important, I learned that once information exists outside your brain, it is impossible to control, it will make it's way. This is a law of nature. With ubermorgen, the situation was practically turned upside down. Someone released an idea - a virus - and it spread it like a manic. It bounced back and lifted the .com-level into extremes [100s of millions of viewers]. These research environments were fantastic, we were able to drop info-pieces into the global network-matrix and watch them travel, morph and come back.. Then we could give them another spin - mix them with other information or combine them with classic knowledge like a spin-doctor. This was possible because there was no goal except the experiment, no political message or ideological foundation to serve - an ideal world - our "laboratory". Today i am interested in mixing the different strategies and in exploring double negative affirmative levels of meaning and blind meaning. Still not political and non-ideological, a high level of freedom is guaranteed. The reality and research becomes highly complex due to this fact. Unforseen events are triggered and can be explored. The combination of inner networks such as the brain and the nerve-systems and the networks we are connected to are my fields of research and production. How do mental disorders*** of the of the human affect the global network and how do mental disorders of the global network affect the human. In relation to ubermorgen this is a quite interesting question. We have attacked the network with a series of totally mental / extreme projects. Now my network has attacked my mental health. In 2002, I was diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder [manic-depression]. This is well documented on hansbernhard.com, with documents, photos and in videos. How is this interrelated - did my attack onto the network bounce back - does this mean the same mental attack has an effect on a network and on a human being?

* http://vote-auction.net
** http://ubermorgen.com/NAZI~LINE
*** http://hansbernhard.com

9. The importance of designing a meta-level of reality that would generate a 'consensual hallucination' is clear in the care of details of your most famous works. But isn't this what our mind is constantly switching with: meta levels of reality created by hyper-realistic adv commercials, rhetoric mainstreams movies, 'reality tv' fiction shows and ideological news report?
Hans Bernhard: I do not think so. Neither with etoy projects as "the digital hijack", nor with the work from ubermorgen this consensual hallucination was created; because we are dangerous and devious but not destructive. We are seducers and brainfuckers. We need constant decisions on how to relate to this material, we do not make people hallucinate, we confuse them, sometimes we shock them and then we let them regain consciousness again. My work - i.e. psychiatry material on hansbernhard.com - is perceived extremely non-consensual, in the mass media world, in the art world and anywhere else. On the other hand, there are some projects such as the stock certificates [etoy.SHARES] or the ubermorgen Webpaintings and Seals that have a certain hallucinatory look&feel and consensual "reality". The etoy.Shares were part of a large scaled global hallucination during the

late 1990s until the internet economy bubble went bust. It is interesting to note that in many, if not all of the representations of cyberspace spatial depth and perspective is suggested through the use of wire frames, either explicitly or as armatures, calling on the techniques and rules first formulated by Alberti in De Pictura in 1435. This new virtual space of binary data is so alien to us that we have fallen back on traditional media*. Most important again, the individual hallucination in research and fractures, the stories and the transfer of the inconprehensible into consensual material, tradeable, utilisable, visible and readable artforms and organic forms, for example a child. We work against consensual hallucination, it is impossible to reach a consensus about our work – and if everybody would agree we would so strongly agree that it would lead others to disagree.

lizvlx: yes and no – it is the same, but we do it with no or very little money. so sometimes the outcome is the same, the working process is totally different. and there is one important difference: advertizing etc. wants to give answers to the consumer (i.e. this is the right product, buy me), ubermorgen poses questions, the answer is always up to the thinking indivdual user.

- Mantovani, G. (1995). Virtual reality as a communication environment: Consensual hallucination, fiction, and possible selves.Thanks to you Alessandro for the beautiful and hardcore questions and many thanks to Jacob Lillemose for the in-depth discussions.

http://english.neural.it