Will Google Eat Itself?

On the activist project »Google Will Eat Itself«, which looks at the monopoly held by the highly remunerative search engine

Slavo Krekovic

The friendly-looking search engine and advertising company is again under attack by activist artists. The »Google Will Eat Itself« project, which critically explores the relations between the new click-based economy, technology and society, has recently succeeded in gaining the attention of a larger audience and was also nominated for the Transmediale festival award at the start of the year. Hans Bernhard, Lizvlx (both UBERMORGEN.COM), Alessandro Ludovico (Neural.it) and Paolo Cirio (epidemic) do not like the label »hacktivists« – they tend rather to call themselves »digital actionists«. The idea of the GWEI project is sophisticated, but at the same time simple: for every click on ads on registered partner pages of Google, both the company and its partner get a micro-payment from the advertisers. By hosting Google ads on many of their own hidden websites, the creators of GWEI are earning money with which they automatically buy Google shares. It will take a long time but, in the end, artists will own Google – a growing information and advertising monopoly that, due to its power and attitude, is becoming a dangerous element in our information society. When the Google company found out about this endeavour, it cancelled some of the partner accounts and erased the GWEI website from its database. However, the other accounts remained untouched and the

project continues: from now on, it will take 3,443,287,037 million years until GWEI fully owns Google.

From its early days, net.art has functioned as a kind of parallel counter-movement to the traditional art scene. Now, the situation is different: besides the online version of GWEI, the team has also put on several exhibitions in galleries (Johannesburg, Berlin, São Paolo, Sydney). It seems as if we are entering a period of »complex art«, where the manifestation of an idea can take on many forms, using various media.

Slavo Krekovic: How did you have the idea of a self-referential Google parody, and how did the team get together?

Lizvlx: I don't know if it really is a parody. Probably not, as GWEI is not actually funny, is it? I don't regard it as funny that one can make money with a company that lives on a system of fake/non-fake click rates, posing as a kind of pseudo-governmental information provider. I think that's sick. What does money really mean anymore if a company that lives from commercial pixel-arrow-relations is worth a thousand times more than, let's say, a food chain, or if you like, even a bank? I think that GWEI is in fact very serious and that Google seems to be a parody of the capitalist definition of »money«.

Hans Bernhard: In 2004 the net.art world was flooded with Google art projects. They all dealt with search-engine results, the image-database or other Google services. Our artistic strategy is to search for the weak points within strong and large-scaled systems and exploit them aggressively. We first met at the 2004 »Read_me« Festival in Aarhus (Denmark). It took us more than six months to adjust our focus to the core principles of Google, to reduce and to remove all interfering material. GWEI is a conceptual work with a high degree of reality. It involves the simple step of understanding that we can build a simple model in which the giant becomes a cannibal of itself. It is a self-referential game and conceptual hack of the second New-Economy bubble.

Alessandro Ludovico: I've talked with lots of artists in the past, but Hans Bernhard was (surprisingly for me) the first to come back after we'd exchanged some ideas. And from then on, I really felt in sync with him in a fruitful, intellectual kind of way. All this happened after I had spent more than a decade analysing and critiquing the artistic work of others. This is the first time I am getting my hands dirty with art as an »artist«. We all live quite far apart (Bari, Turin, Vienna, St. Moritz), but at the moment this does not seem to be a very important aspect.

Slavo Krekovic: The more people use the Google search engine, the more powerful it is. If you are not listed, you do not exist. However, open-source and non-commercial search engines (such as Mozdex) are too weak to provide a real solution. Can the detection of »evil processes« hidden behind the nice Google face change the situation? What are the biggest dangers of Google-style info-monopolies?

Alessandro Ludovico: What Google makes possible is a two-faced brand awareness. On one hand, you have this »porcelain« interface – funny and totally clean – that everybody likes and that is immediately recognized, accompanied by a number of »positive« rumours. On the other hand, you have all these services established by the same corporation, which is becoming a standard, a monopoly. This mechanism, which also seems to trigger the rise in Google shares, may make Google an unstoppable machine forming an almost complete interface to the net services. With everything you do, you would be better off conveying your information via the Google servers, leaving your unavoidable traces. They are establishing themselves as a thin, global and almost invisible layer for accessing the whole net.

Hans Bernhard: We are not changing the situation and we do not want to. Google is part of a oligopolistic market (along with Yahoo and msn). We are simply developing strategies to symbolically attack such market giants. These are practical (technical) and formal (aesthetic) games. We try to publish all the information we gather during such an experiment. We like Google, we use Google, we fuck with the minds of the Google users and Google employees. Google's position is dominant right from the moment when they enter a new business field with a new service. It's the »Google effect«: creating consensus in a new business field, even if they instantly take the dominant position. The greatest enemy of such a giant is not another giant: it's a parasite. Our working thesis: if enough parasites suck small amounts of money from this embodiment of self-referentiality, they will empty this artificial mountain of data and its inner risk of digital totalitarianism. By establishing the GWEI model, we deconstruct the new global advertising mechanisms by rendering them into a surreal, click-based economic model. The reality is that Google is currently valued at more than all the Swiss banks together! Google earned 500 million dollars with advertisements in 2005, and is projected to earn 1.5 billion dollars in 2006. Google has used the knowledge of the economic internet-avant-garde. Those who come on the scene later always have a serious advantage over the pioneers. They have efficiently put together a technical high-performance invention and a super-clean business model. They had the best product at the right time. But mainly they just profited from the crisis of search engines, the blown dotcom energies and visions, and the fucked-up business plans.

Lizvlx: I would just like to add that we do our job as artists in order to ask questions, and not to provide answers. I don't want anybody believing in my ideas, I would like people to believe in their own thinking abilities.

Slavo Krekovic: There are not only artists, but also journalists and theorists among you, actively dealing with electronic culture. So how would you describe the development of relations between art and technology in recent times and how would you position your project within them?

Hans Bernhard: After the nearly futurist approach to drugs and technology in the early net.art days (for example, the works of etoy, 1994–1997), a group of actionists grew out of the general net.art scene. A large array of digital actions was launched during the second net.art period (1998–2001). For me, GWEI is a new manifestation of digital art. We do not primarily use mass media (media hacking); the project is basically a conceptual piece (with practical, technical applications) produced for the fine-arts market. The objects we create from this experience are large-scaled paper sculptures, diagrams and the GWEI-seal (pseudo-governmental icon, digital print on canvas).

AL: Personally, I think that GWEI is really a child of its time. It makes manifest some of the biggest contradictions of the immaterial era: the extreme volatility of the economy, the globally abstract and, at the same time, personal involvement in the net-content economy, and the risk of monopoly that is always around the corner.

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