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Reality is simply a matter of presentation
On digital art projects and branding

The digital age started with a bang and inspired many with the utopian idea that mankind would soon be able to leave reality behind. The art world also allowed itself to be infected by the euphoric mood. At 'documenta X' in 1997 the hall with Internet art caused both a sensation and irritation. Yet the heyday of this new art form was of brief duration. Art in and with the Internet underwent the most significant development in its approximately fifteen-year history during the second half of the 1990s, practically at the same time as the dotcom euphoria was at its height. As long ago as 1999, the Slovenian artist Vuk Cosic laid down a bouquet of flowers at the opening of the 'net.condition' Internet art exhibition at the Centre for Art and Media Technology (ZKM) in Karlsruhe – as a symbol for the demise of Internet art as a result of its institutionalization in museums. In the year 2000, the media theoretician and art historian Boris Groys seconded this opinion by comparing Internet art with Mail Art, which also disappeared after a brief phase of playful experimentation.[1] And in 2001, even one of the most indefatigable Internet art theoreticians and critics, Tilman Baumgärtel, remarked on the 'demise of web art';[2] he diagnosed artists' dwindling motivation as the result of declining interest on the part of the public. Internet art not only found its way into the institutions of the art world,[3] but in some cases even caused a great deal of agitation in the world of finance – is all the excitement already over?

At all events, the public hype is definitely over. Internet art now takes place in niches, primarily in those that have been opened by the anti-globalization movement. That is not particularly surprising, because net art celebrated its greatest triumphs precisely on the interface between artistic expression and political awareness, predominantly by criticizing the private sector's aggressive methods of creating added value. In other words: branding.

Of course, criticism of sales-promoting measures, which have been applied extensively and in an increasingly sophisticated manner since the 1960s, is not a recent phenomenon. From the very beginning, marketing met with scepticism. For most Internet artists, the history of our branded world is also 'the history of the decline of the

rational consumer'.[4] Consequently, their projects focus on the beginnings of advertising in the nineteenth century: on the one hand, they attempt to point out to consumers that the confidence in a certain product or the confidence in the manufacturers of goods – which without personal contact to the producer is merely fictitious – should be critically questioned, or is unjustified. On the other hand, Internet artists aim to expose the mechanisms of the pressure to consume, which now go so far as making one feel inadequate when wearing a no-name item of clothing without a logo – branding is not merely manipulation, but is even a constitutive prerequisite for identity.[5] The examples of Internet art that explore the branding phenomenon selected for this article and, in five cases, commented on in detail, do so in quite different ways. Simply put, three directions can be ascertained: firstly, projects motivated primarily by aesthetic criteria (*Ingold Airlines*; *Hotel Vue des Alpes*); secondly, informational projects (*They Rule*; *Nikeground*); and thirdly, the radically activist (*Toywar*).

Internet art – Internet culture

Like its art-historical precursors Dada, Fluxus, video art and concept art, Internet art is based on concepts, events and interaction. Then as now, the typical interplay between coincidence and control applies. Internet art also possesses a series of mutual characteristics: a lack of location, a lack of authorship (as opposed to creatorship), changeability, incompleteness, interactivity and hyperlink.[6] Attention must also be drawn to the arbitrary, direct and constant access to information,[7] and to interaction. Without the latter, Internet art would not exist at all. Terms such as authorship and creatorship are diluted.

A second parallel to the computer art of the 1960s is the initially predominant experimentation with the new technology. As the prices of software and hardware, Internet and mobile accessories fell, the number of experimenters grew. These rapidly became professionals, and continuously created new media content. In parallel, business-based Internet use was of course expanded. The worldwide web was soon considered to be a kind of mirror of the real world, the map of which was densely populated with e-commerce. The dotcom bubble burst in March 2000, but not the digital technology industry. More than ever, this made the Internet the ideal platform from which all kinds of information could be distributed. For this reason, the greater proportion of Internet artists are those who form strategic alliances[8] in virtually infinite cyberspace, disseminate technology that they have programmed themselves, or support under-represented social groups or classes,[9] entirely in the spirit of the (still utopian) ideal of total democratization thanks to the Internet. The first of the two

1   From the Tate-webproject: Mongrel, *Uncomfortable Proximity. Giovanna Gaccelli, Genine and Sypilis 1782–2000 After Thomas Gainsborough*, 2000
<http://www.tate.org.uk/netart/mongrel/collections/mong11.htm>
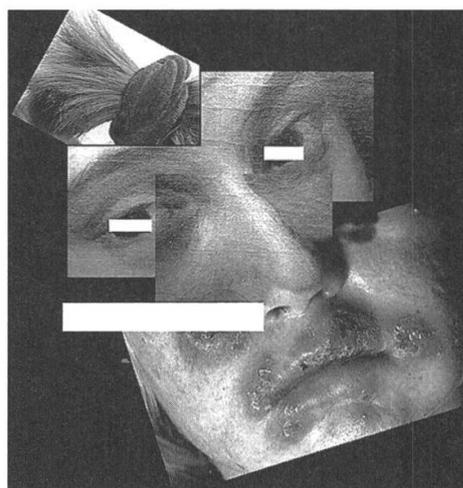
great advantages of this type of digital art is the reduction or even abolition of distances in the worldwide web: in the Internet, every artistic project is merely a click away from the object of its criticism. The second advantage is that artists benefit – as, admittedly, criminal elements also do – from users' fundamental insecurity when it comes to differentiating between originals and copies.[10] While companies represent the traditional model of property, copyright, moral rights and branding, many Internet artists see themselves as part of the 'copyleft' movement for open source software[11] and attempt to undermine, parody and sabotage the system, which functions according to the principles of intellectual ownership. Web artists can impose their projects on companies and – by manipulating the search engines – can even outdo them in the battle to attract attention. For companies they thus represent a potential risk primarily insofar as the virtual territory of a company or institution can easily be cloned and incorporated into new contexts – which many artists have in fact done. Vuk Cosic, for example, duplicated the 'documenta X' websites and put them online when the organization wanted to close the portals.[12] The first Internet art project commissioned by the Tate, *Uncomfortable Proximity* (2000), by Graham Harwood, a co-founder of the British Internet art group Mongrel, reproduces the Tate's website, but in altered form (fig. 1): Harwood has digitally manipulated exhibits of the Tate's various galleries by creating collages using photographs of body parts smeared with mud from the Thames or marked by disfiguring diseases, thus creating distressing hybrid images. In his criticism of the elitist history of the museum, Harwood referred to the history of the Tate's collection as an arbiter of the artistic canon and of taste on the one hand, and on the other he attacked the Utopia of the 'perfect' human being as propagated by digital picture-processing technology in advertising.[13]

Hacktivism, Appropriation Art, Adbusting

Projects of this kind can basically be described as culture hacking. Internet hacktivists – the neologism created by combining 'hacker' and 'activist' refers to a technology freak whose political commitment is expressed through civil disobedience and is generally a member of the open source movement – act similarly to their hacker colleagues who are not active in the Internet: they decontextualize digital content and surfaces in order to recontextualize them in altered form.[14] The history of the Internet hacktivists begins – at least in technological terms – in the late 1960s with the Sony portapaks, the first portable video cameras. Since then, several Internet art exhibitions have already been dedicated to the phenomenon of activism, hacking and open source.[15]

The idea behind these forms of civil disobedience is creative resistance. Adbusting, for example, alters advertising posters, slogans and logos for the purpose of critical anti-advertising. As the experimentation with identity or 'webdentity' is an important motif in Internet art on the one hand, and the Internet is used by opposition groups as an ideal instrument of power with which to reconquer the intellectual space colonized by companies on the other,[16] brand-hacking on the worldwide web was only a logical step in the development of Internet art. The central themes of the hacktivists include the power structure of the media, anti-racism, gender issues and supporting fringe groups, although only very few campaigns are particularly ambitious in artistic terms or take place exclusively in virtual space, but are simply presented in the Internet and generally disseminated free of charge. Thus groups like Adbusters,[17] The Critical Art Ensemble[18] or the Surveillance Camera Players[19] initiate and/or promote street campaigns and provide a platform for these in the Internet. As far as purely virtual art projects are concerned, however, 'Artistic positions on the relationships between picture, power and ownership should be a kind of amalgamation of Indymedia, Matrix I and Mark Rothko.'[20] In other words: not only the concept and effect, but also the creative or technological execution of these works is decisive.

Besides hacktivism, the term Appropriation Art is also often used in connection with Internet art. Nonetheless, Peter Weibel considers the term unsuitable as a critical tool, since in the mid-1980s such was the designation used to refer to all New York art in the wake of Pop Art that used appropriating devices for strategic marketing purposes and enjoyed a boom in the art trade, as this type of art-lover considered the forgery to be more genuine than the original.[21] However, that was several years before the Internet was opened to private users. Yet as the history of Internet art shows, appropriation strategies are a success factor.[22]

Examples of Internet art groups who appropriate corporate strategies and images and beat the objects of their criticism at their own game, as it were, by using aggressive branding (marketing and corporate identity concepts) are etoy and ®™ark. The appropriation goes as far as the language in which the activists present themselves on their websites.[23] In ®™ark's case, specific examples of the reversal of company strategies are the current branding slogan 'Just undo it' – an allusion to the sports goods multi Nike – and the battle cry 'The "transnational cowboy" days of venture capital

2   Homepage of ®™ark
<http://www.rtmark.com>

are over', with which ®™ark offers activists a platform for 'intellectual products' with which to launch sabotage attacks on companies. ®™ark provides information, constructs satirical websites, but also sets up funds to support subversive and illegal art (fig. 2). ®™ark changes its web aesthetic constantly; at times the site resembles the Shell homepage, at times that of McDonald's. Like etoy, ®™ark sees itself as a 'public limited company', thanks to which the project participants receive a 'dividend' in the form of cultural improvements to mankind. Projects of this kind include the manipulation of the computer game Simcopter, so that two warriors do not engage in combat, but kiss each other, or the call for the creation of a website that reminds Internet users that they have inadvertently downloaded spyware with which companies trace the browsing habits of users with a view to subsequent marketing measures.

As do-gooderish as that may sound, hacktivists nonetheless face critics within their own ranks. As is the case with criminal hackers, some hacktivists' campaigns have resulted in companies constantly improving their security barriers as well as developing increasingly subversive marketing and branding strategies. Hacktivists thus weaken what they see as their 'unethical enemies' in the short term, but strengthen them in the long term. Another criticism of this type of Internet art is that, rather than creating works of art, these artists produce new attitudes and consumption
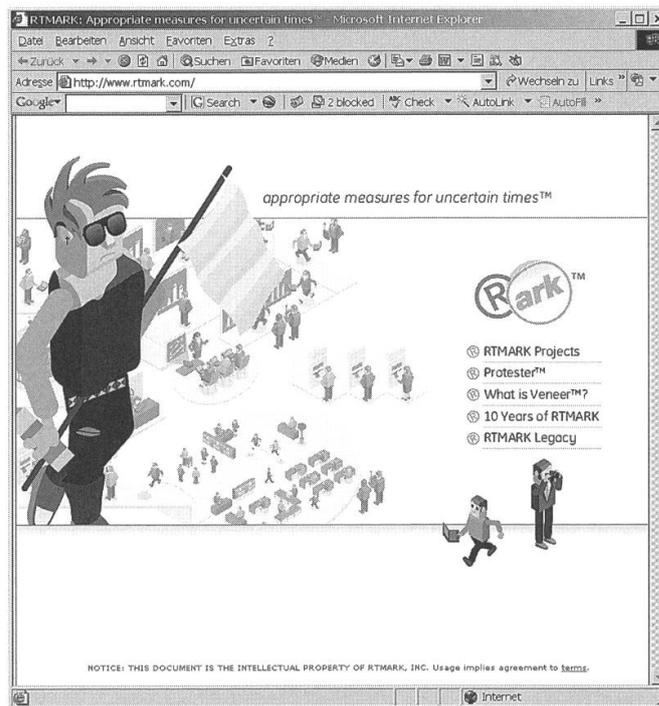
patterns, in fact an entirely new lifestyle, which is then adopted by companies.[24] This can go so far that people like the French designer Ora-Ïto become 'defectors': his fakes of real brand products proved to be a stepping stone for a brilliant career as a designer – Adidas, for example, employed Ora-Ïto as a product designer.[25]

Brave new worlds: the non-hacktivist projects *Ingold Airlines* and *Hotel Vue des Alpes*

Two examples of non-political hacktivist Internet art, which examine the branding phenomenon from a more aestheticizing perspective, are the virtual airline *Ingold Airlines* and the virtual *Hotel Vue des Alpes*.

3   From the website of Ingold Airlines, online since 1999
<http://www.ingoldairlines.com>

4   From the website of Ingold Airlines, online since 1999
<http://www.ingoldairlines.com>

Ingold Airlines[26] has existed as an art project since 1982. It is merely the *artistic representation* of a corporate model (figs. 3 and 4).[27] 'Junior boss' Res Ingold continuously revamps the company's 'corporate design' and satirizes the latest trends from the world of labels and branding. For example, there was a 'relaunch' in the year 2000. Until 1990 *Ingold Airlines* presented itself with installations as a bogus company at exhibitions. Later it really did work as a transport company, running a shuttle service between Bonn and Kassel at the 'documenta 9' exhibition. Ingold Airlines is 'a forgery without an original';[28] its product is an empty brand consisting of a logo, PR text, lectures (some of which include video projections) and a website.

Ingold Airlines reflects the trend towards strengthening brands and corporate identity of the past twenty years, and conforms to the post-modernist tendency to replace production with representation. Unlike the performances of the Italian network activists 0100101110101101.org,[29] for example, who will be discussed later, the rela-

tionship to authenticity as questioned by Pop artists from the 1960s onwards remains unbroken: through its appearances in museums or at exhibitions, *Ingold Airlines* clearly declares itself as a 'work of art', and its authorship in the person of Res Ingold is known at all times. Most Internet artists' groups have long since abandoned the question of creatorship or authorship, and are now concerned with the relationship of the fake to its original context, in the case of the hacktivists – to which *Ingold Airlines*, with its decidedly apolitical concept, does not belong – in other words to company brands.

5   From: Monica Studer / Christop van den Berg, *Vue des Alpes*, since 2000 <http://www.vuedesalpes.com>

6   Ausserschwand, Adelboden, Bernese Overland Photo: Tourist Office

A similar virtual Internet art project that is also fictitiously yet realistically 'anchored' is the *Hotel Vue des Alpes* by the Swiss artist couple Monica Studer and Christoph van den Berg, which has been online since the year 2000 (fig. 5).[30] By contrast with the Internet presence of *Ingold Airlines*, the digital postcard aesthetic of *Vue des Alpes* would not fool anyone into believing that it is a real hotel for a moment. The images generated with 3D and CAD programs – used above all by architects – exude 'a kind of dust-free atmosphere, leaving the impression of a generally additive space that, from a certain degree of proximity [...] dissolves into individual components'.[31]

Anyone who has the patience to put up with the long waiting period – for current bookings, the next free rooms will be available only in 2007 – is given a room code for five days free of charge. A mad distortion of the maxim propagated by the Internet artist and open source community: *Vue des Alpes* is at once democratic and elitist, for theoretically everyone has the right to five days of exclusivity – free of charge.

7   From: Monica Studer / Christop van den Berg, *Vue des Alpes*, since 2000
<http://www.vuedesalpes.com>

So 'Welcome to Hotel Vue des Alpes'. The room is viewed quickly. The visitor turns on his own axis and looks out of the window onto mountains and a lake. This is followed by an exploration of the hotel: bright corridors, a pot plant here or there, or a picture, narrow, horizontal windows, reddish carpet runners. From time to time the visitor stops in front of the door to another room, which, however, remains closed – the code is held by another of the total of seven guests. Arrows and black dots on the floor provide the visitor with orientation on possible routes – a maximum of three per position with a panoramic view of a maximum of 360°. The 'Mango Bar' is on the lower ground floor, which is reached by lift. The dining room on the ground floor leads onto a terrace (fig. 7). Like the architecture, logotype and interior, the red plastic chairs and 'Maggi' condiment sets on the tables evoke the impression of a 1960s sports hotel. A little way off from the hotel is a funicular with which the visitor can go up to a mountain called Gleissenhorn; further down by the lake a paddle boat is waiting.

The apparently simple concept of *Hotel Vue des Alpes* results in vertiginous duplications and experiments with reality. Starting with the decoration: every one of the nine rooms is different, every guest has various options at his disposal in the 'private room'; each guest experiences a different (virtual) reality when alone. Another unsettling aspect reveals itself when the visitor rotates on his own axis: the perspectives do not overlap, meaning that the data required to complete the impression is lacking. And not least: accustomed to hordes of tourists in the mountains, the visitor to Vue des Alpes will find himself alone, turning on his own axis in the true sense of the

word. Even the funicular ticket counters and the hotel reception desk are devoid of human presence. There is only one hotel, one cable car, one paddle boat. Time stands still at seven minutes past ten; up on the Gleissenhorn at twelve minutes to six. The advertising posters for the 'Hotel Vue des Alpes' in the funicular station carry the self-reference to extremes.

The restricted perspective soon becomes obvious and claustrophobic; the Swiss Alpine idyll crumbles, similarly to Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow up* (1966): if the visitor zooms in, the desired close-up dissolves into a blur of pixels. Visitors can send postcards 'to their loved ones at home' from the digital rotating racks, whose retro design does not allow the recipients to recognize the pretence: the 'Swissness' brand only bears up when communicated through a medium, in this case via an electronic postcard.

The nationally and ideologically motivated branding of the Alps that was promoted after the suicide of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner in 1938, one of the last painters who wanted to use the Alps to put himself in a 'soulful mood', resulted in a break in the artistic exploration of the Alpine motif. Only Pop Art in the late 1960s rendered the Alps interesting for the art system once more by viewing them from a conceptual distance. The mass production of postcard clichés is the Alpine equivalent of Warhol's series of icons of the consumer world.

Unlike in painting, an object or texture of a surface – Studer/van den Berg call their creations 'templates' – is only constructed once, saved and then retrieved and organized arbitrarily. A stereotype has replaced an individually painted motif.[32] Travel to the imaginary places of *Vue des Alpes* is oriented in conceptual terms towards the interface of the 'Myst and Riven' computer adventure. Studer/van den Berg, however, are not concerned with playfully simulating 'being there', but with 'a continually changing system of images that is not intended to suggest naturalism, but is superimposed with moods that have been experienced and idealized in memory'.[33] The relationship of creative imagination with the representation of reality, then, lies at the centre of their work. There are numerous postcards in this style dating from the 1960s; the link to the 'Swiss Alps' brand – and thus to reality – is made in the collective memory.

Indeed, the setting of *Vue des Alpes* is based on holiday brochures and is a compilation of the promises they contain (fig. 6).[34] The memories of visitors fill the gaps, just as Studer/van den Berg, who have explored the cliché of the Swiss Alps in several projects, most recently at the World Exhibition in Aichi, Japan, created *Vue des Alpes* on the basis of their childhood memories. *Vue des Alpes* is thus saturated with memories, meaning that – although there is not a soul to be seen in the place – it is

not possible to walk through 'unspoilt' nature, as the typical tourist would ideally imagine doing. These abstract images subtly reveal that reality, even in the form of memories and desires, is also always something artificial. Ultimately, *Vue des Alpes* is about 'achieving the dissolution of (reality) by citing different forms of reality'[35] – to the point of dissolving the brand in total artificiality.

'Artivism': sensitizing strategies of *They Rule* and *0100101110101101.org*

They Rule[36] by the New Zealander Josh On is not an activist project in the true sense of the word, but primarily the visualization of a database (fig. 8). Comparably to Hans Haacke's concept art project 'Shapolsky et al.' (1971)[37] or Michael Moore's films, in *They Rule* On researched publicly accessible data on the most influential American corporations and managers, updating it on a yearly basis since 2001. *They Rule* users can produce entire maps of power with this information; in other words, they can link
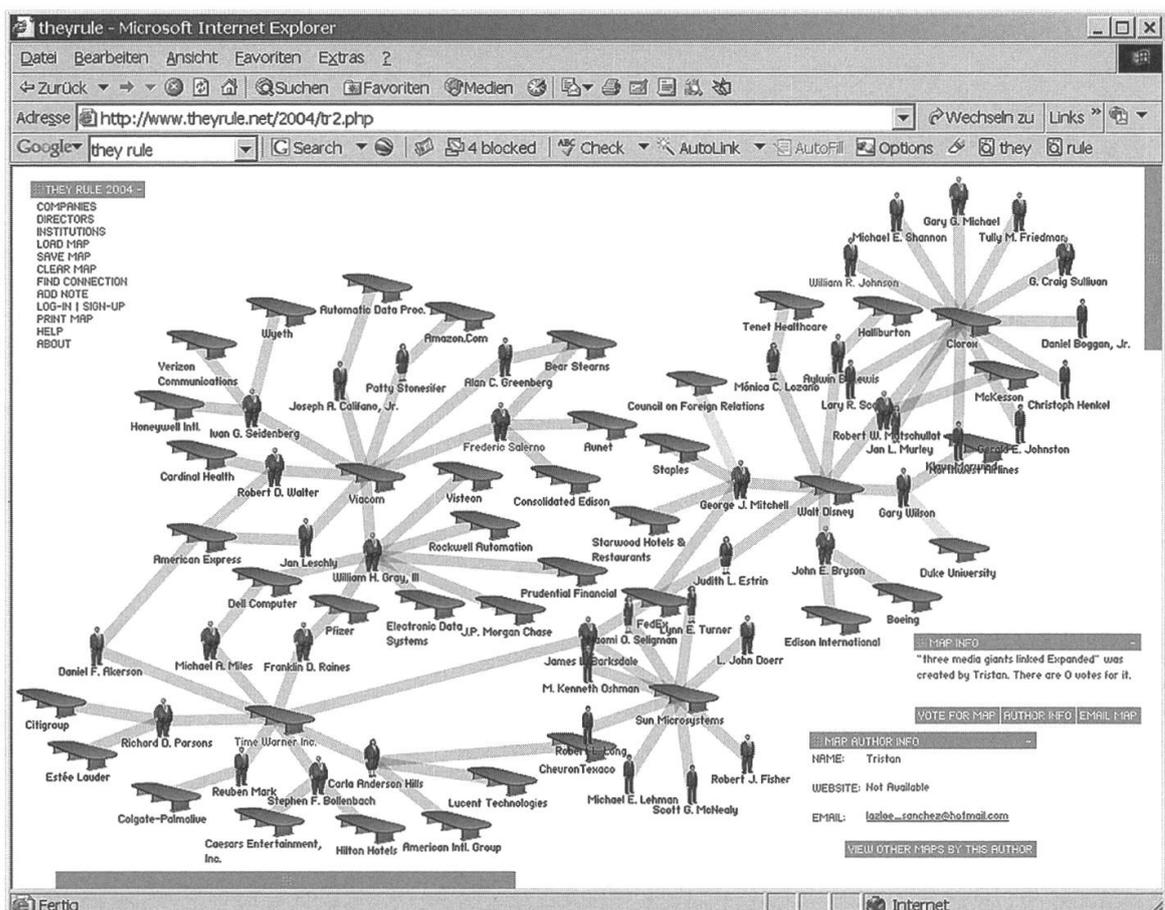
8   From: Josh On, *They Rule*, since 2001
<http://www.theyrule.com>

9   Infobox of the webproject
www.nikeground.com, Karlsplatz,
Vienna, 2003

companies and individuals, some of which are at the head of up to seven of the top 500 American corporations – thanks to legal loopholes, because the Clayton Act of 1914 forbids the accumulation of offices.

They Rule not only demands specific campaigns against specific companies,[38] but also generally supports the demand for greater transparency and protests against the unequal distribution of capital and political power. And above all, the project reminds us of the fact – frequently forgotten by Internet surfers – that the Internet is not a one-way street, but that websites serve many companies as a marketing tool in order to gather data on visitors, without informing them.

0100101110101101.org (Eva Mattes and Franco Birkut) has unmasked the power structures and the pervasion of our lives with marketing measures in a considerably more sensational manner. After various projects in which the Italian Internet art duo cloned the websites of other Internet artists or organizations, created a (harmless) virus called 'biennale.py' in the Slovenian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2001, and in the same year even made their own website public property in *life_sharing*, the team, which had until then remained anonymous, came up with a special project in 2003.

At the beginning of October that year a thirteen-tonne, high-tech container with the inscription 'Nike Infobox' suddenly appeared on Karlsplatz in Vienna (fig. 9). Visitors were informed of the imminent renaming of the historic square as 'Nikeplatz' (Nike Square) and the installation of a 36-metre-long and 18-metre-high red sculpture made of steel and rubber – an enlarged version of the 'swoosh', as the Nike logo is called (fig. 10). Two people purporting to be Nike employees distributed thousands of brochures explaining the campaign during which, after Vienna, squares and streets in eleven other cities around the world were to be renamed 'Nike Square'
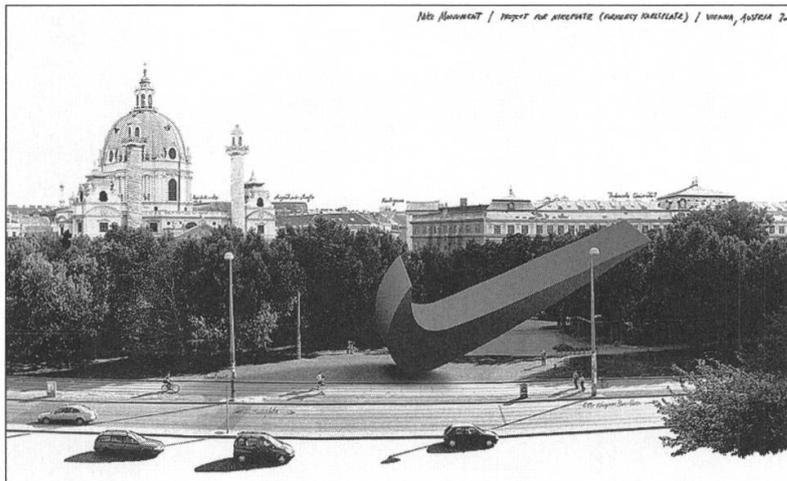
10   From the website
0100101110101101.org
(Eva Mattes & Franco Birkut),
Nikeground, 2003
<http://www.nikeground.com>

or 'Nike Street', from London to Paris, Rome, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Sydney, Los Angeles, Chicago, São Paulo, Toronto and New York. Under the motto 'Rethinking Space', the project was presented in detail on the www.nikeground.com website, which imitates the aesthetics of the authentic Nike website and is even linked to it, and 'cited' the co-founder of Nike, Phil Knight: 'I've always had the impression that, for some mysterious reason, urbanism and architecture have not evolved as fast as other disciplines, like design or fashion. That's why big cities look old, out of fashion and burdensome. Think of the names of squares and streets, in fact they're the *brands* of a city. Politicians that nobody knows, old generals and unknown artists: those names are not suited to represent the spirit of a modern metropolis! The idea of the Swoosh and its shape is far more recognizable and something well known to the new generation. Besides, the name Nike is much easier to remember than any other local name, especially for tourists. With the *Nike Ground* mission we plan to encase the cities with our values and style, to bring inspiration an innovation to the people out there, rethinking space!'[39]

The local newspapers were inundated with outraged letters to the editor; the action group 'Öffnet den Karlsplatz! – Für einen Platz der Offenen Kulturen' (Open up Karlsplatz! – For a square for open-minded cultures) was immediately founded, which appealed against the sale of Karlsplatz and called upon Vienna's city council to reverse the decision immediately. Both the government and Nike issued denials. Utter confusion reigned, and the anger of the populace against the sports goods corporation was great.

Thus 01.org had achieved their objective. On 10 October 2004 the duo admitted to this 'hyper-real theatrical performance', which was produced by Public Netbase, a

Viennese Internet culture platform. 'Guerrilla marketing or collective hallucination?' was 01.org's provocative title of their coming-out on their website. Of course, matters did not rest there: on 14 October Nike sued the Internet culture institution Public Netbase for 78,000 euros' worth of compensation and demanded that all copyright-protected materials be removed and all Nike-related activities cease immediately. 01.org and Netbase had no intention of abandoning the performance before the planned date at the end of October. Konrad Becker, director of Public Netbase, pleaded for the artistic freedom to be permitted to manipulate everyday symbols. The artists as well as the media were pleased to make the pointed and appropriate refer-ence to the Viennese Secession building of 1898 opposite the Infobox, on which the inscription reads: 'Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit' (Art for our time. Freedom for art). Artists who had used commercially loaded symbols for their work were invoked, such as Andy Warhol and Campbell's soup. 01.org asked provocatively what had become of Nike's sporting spirit – a further barb against Nike's image, in which the company had invested enormous sums and was now forced to contradict. As in the 1999/2000 *Toywar*, which will be investigated in the following chapter, the media reacted extremely negatively to the legal action taken by Nike, which was in-terpreted as further evidence of aggressiveness and financial greed.

There is a specific prehistory to 01.org's performance: Nike's misleading, subver-sive camouflaged marketing measures, which seek to take hold of youth culture like viruses. This was already known before the appearance of Naomi Klein's anti-global-ization book entitled *No Logo!* (2000); the author denounced Nike for the working conditions in its sweatshops in Asia and branded the company as a symbol of ex-ploitation and global injustice.

In a 1999 advertising campaign, for example, the multi painted Unter den Lin-den, a prominent Berlin street, with lists of football teams sponsored by Nike.[40] Also in 1999, Nike attempted to turn so-called Berlin 'Bolzplätze' (playgrounds with sim-ple football pitches) into branded spaces: posters, stickers and signs drew attention to the playgrounds without ever using the name Nike – only the 'swoosh' logo. In the summer of 2000 the campaign was continued with district matches; a Nike park was opened, followed by sister parks in Paris, London and Rotterdam. In September 2001 a three-day sports event was held in the unused underground station under Berlin's Reichstag.[41] The same year, the company set up the first Presto Bar in Berlin, in which Nike running shoes were placed inconspicuously. While the Presto idea worked in Berlin and as temporary lounges in Munich, Cologne and Hamburg, it caused protests in Toronto, Canada, where Nike opened a temporary 'Presto Space of Art' gallery for young artists. When the marketing concept behind it became public

knowledge, the resistance movement Opresto (from oppressed) was set up. There was a concert, and paint bombs were thrown at the 'Art Space', so that Nike had to close it after a few weeks.[42] In the summer of 2002 Nike set up a pseudo-illegal bar, granting access only to people in the possession of a red or blue key. The bar was in a comfortably furnished flat, a DJ took care of the 'sound' appropriate to the (brand) feeling – everything looked as it would in a private bar. Anyone who took a closer look, however, would notice Nike products everywhere: on the posters and Polaroids on the walls, on the feet of the girls behind the bar, and in one corner stood the statue of the goddess Nike – the sports goods manufacturer copied the hyped exclusivity cultivated by the hip party scene. The only 'mistake' that Nike made in its otherwise impeccable guerrilla marketing campaign: there was no difference between the red and the blue keys! The clients who realized this felt (rightly) that they had been hoodwinked. Another piquant episode related to this campaign: in the same year, 2002, Nike was itself convicted by an American federal court for publishing a press release containing misleading advertising content.[43]

There was a Nike art-hacking campaign as early as the autumn of 2002, when the artist Marc Bijl placed a 'swoosh' cast in concrete on Berlin's Alexanderplatz, where Nike had created a basketball pitch from the soles of gym shoes in 1994. Bijl's swoosh was removed, and he in turn replaced all the Nike logos on the pitch and on the baskets with the Adidas logo. However, Nike's various 'guerrilla' branding campaigns were reflected much more effectively by 01.org with their *Nikeground* in Vienna: 'The desire to discuss the function of public spaces inspired a process of reflection as to how far corporations alone can exercise power and influence on the symbols of everyday life', write 01.org, who describe their art as ethical rather than aesthetic, on their website. At the beginning of 2004 the commercial court rejected Nike's claim for formal reasons.

01.org call their performances 'artivism' because they are concerned with discussions and the subversion of art as opposed to hacktivism. They see the difference between themselves and the Appropriation Art of the 20th century in that the discussion concerning originality is generally no longer of any importance in the Internet: 'On the web [...] you don't destroy an original because there isn't any original at all. Our offline work was also directed against originals – but the paradigms of the "real world" are so deeply rooted that nothing can be changed that way. You're always just yet another anti-artist. By contrast, with the Internet you have the feeling you can still change something, that you can still exercise influence. [...] Duchamp had to work with reproductions of works of art; we can take the works themselves, because in the Internet the copy is identical to the digital original.'[44]

Ultimately, 01.org want to undermine the status of the artist and the function of the author as a brand: '…in 30 years perhaps […] Jodi […] will be called the Leonardo da Vinci of Internet art, and Antiorp will be Van Gogh and Vuk Cosic Warhol. […] The interesting thing about the Internet – as is exactly the case in the real world – is that there are no "geniuses" who are inspired by a muse, but only an enormous, endless exchange of information and influences. "Knowledge" is just one great act of plagiarism.'[45]

01.org is also an attack on the culture of pop in the sense of a 'doctrine of existence in the context of exploitation'.[46] For even in pop subversion, doubts about the world are expressed, yet it is presented as the best of all possible worlds. 01.org's *Nikeground* unmasked the allegedly best world as a hollow branding exercise that cannot keep its promises.

11   From: etoy, *Toywar*, 1999–2000
<http://www.toywar.com>

Playful seriousness: etoy's *Toywar*

Most digital art has a small audience and is constantly fighting for recognition. That is true of the art world, but in the realm of business things look a little different: unlike paintings (Richard Prince) or sculptures that are critical of capitalism (e.g. Jeff Koons's 'Michael Jackson'), for which the rich and powerful of this world are glad to fork out large sums, Internet art of this kind has often had their lawyers out. However, as in the *Nikeground* case, this was of no use to them in the legendary *Toywar* (eToys vs. etoy).

The etoy artists' collective was founded in 1994 and existed for a long period only as a virtual 'zero-gravity company', in other words only in the form of a name. With

12   From: etoy, *Toywar*, 1999–2000   13   From: etoy, *Toywar*, 1999–2000
<http://www.toywar.com>   <http://www.toywar.com>

its unprecedented campaign the group took the demystification of brands to ex-
tremes, winning festival awards and attaining world fame.[47] etoy is a conglomerate
whose membership, the so-called etoy.AGENTS, is in a constant state of flux. The
group sees itself less as an artists' collective than as a company, and presents itself as
the etoy.CORPORATION: 'By sharing risk, resources, maintaining a strong brand
and maximizing the shareholder value, the etoy.CORPORATION seeks to explore
social, cultural and financial value.' The owners of the etoy.CORPORATION now
number over 2,000 etoy shareholders. Their aim is to influence the global markets
through digital projects. They did this for the first time in 1996 with *Digital Hijack*:
etoy 'abducted' approximately 1.5 million Internet users, at that time equivalent to
approximately two percent of all users.[48] Etoy subsequently enlarged its own cyber-
space by setting up its own time zone and its own securities system, for example. In
1998 the collective turned etoy into a public limited company, which sells shares in-
stead of works of art.

The *Toywar* (figs. 11–13) began in 1999 with an offer made by eToys of $520,000
for the domain name www.etoy.com – the highest price ever offered for a work of In-
ternet art. However, etoy rejected the offer; eToys had the site blocked. As etoy had
already occupied the domain two years before the eToys address had been registered,
the American toy corporation attempted to take over the address through legal ac-

tion. Instead, the two parties settled out of court after the Internet address was released for etoy. The result: playful seriousness prevailed over the serious business of toys. After eighty-one days of 'war', eToys had lost $5 billion of its market value and was practically ruined. etoy owed its victory to the support of Internet activists the world over and, to a not inconsiderable extent, to media such as the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post* or the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, as they further contributed to the loss of image suffered by the e-commerce company.

The etoy agents consistently appear in public wearing black and orange uniforms[49] and practise an inflated style of branding borrowed from the business world. This is diametrically opposed to the virtual etoy products, which cannot in fact be consumed. Among the Internet art groups, etoy thus probably acts in the most abstract way, as it reflects the medium and human psychology as well as the real economic market and technological innovations. Despite their strategy, which is similar to that of the hacktivists – namely in the *Toywar* – the etoy agents want nothing to do with the anti-globalization movement. Agent.GRAMAZIO: 'We are not Internet activists, we are not hackers [...]. We cannot be grasped, and that is our quality. [...] These discrepancies provoke aggression, and aggression is what makes the whole thing fascinating.'[50] eToys had underestimated and misjudged the young Internet artists and their intelligent electronic branding in several respects, and ultimately failed as a result of the logic of the Internet: the elusiveness of the Internet community – or, as the Internet artists would see it, the elusiveness of corporate branding strategies, which turned against their creators like a boomerang.

Yet the genre's swansong does not seem to have spared even the most successful and famous Internet art group: *MISSION ETERNITY* was launched in January 2005, a project for the production and long-term preservation of data capsules of deceased *etoy.AGENTS* and other pioneers of the Internet generation. Since then the etoy.CORPORATION has been working on the technical and cultural implementation of an adequate death cult for the information age.

1   Boris Groys, 'Programmierte Magie. Aus Kopien mach Originale. Kleine Kunstgeschichte der Dateien', *du*, November 2000, no. 711, pp. 36–8.

2   Tilman Baumgärtel, *Die Epoche der 'Webkunst' scheint zu Ende zu sein* (16.2.2001) <http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/html/result.xhtml?url=/tp/r4/artikel/4/4936/1.html&words=Cornelia%20Sollfrank> accessed 7.11.2005.

3   The most prominent institutions of this kind include the Whitney Museum of American Art <http://artport.whitney.org>, the Tate <http://www.tate.org.uk/webart>, the Walker Art Center <http://webnetmuseum.org> and the Zentrum für Kultur und Medien (Centre for Culture and Media) <http://www.zkm.de>.

4   Jürgen Häusler and Wolfgang Fach, 'Branding', in Ulrich Bröckling, Susanne Krasmann and

Thomas Lemke, eds., *Glossar der Gegenwart*, Frankfurt am Main, 2005, p. 30. For the topic of branding, cf. Klaus Schmidt and Chris Ludlow, *Inclusive Branding. The why and how of a holistic approach to brands*, Basingstoke and New York, 2002.

5   See Häusler and Fach 2005 (see note 4), p. 33.

6   Reinhard Storz and Samuel Herzog, 'Und ständig die Frage: Ist es denn Kunst? Netzkunst – Versuch einer Positionsbestimmung im Ortlosen', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 9.6.2001, p. 85.

7   Referring to Nam June Paik's eponymous installation of 1963, Christiane Paul, Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, talks about 'random access'; cf. Christiane Paul, *Digital Art*, London, 2003, p. 15. The term 'cyberspace' borrowed from William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* extended the vocabulary. From then on, 'cyberspace' was used to describe a world consisting of data or a network that people could experience as an organic, informational matrix; see Paul 2003, ibid., p. 22.

8   E.g. anti-globalization demonstrations, anti-war demonstrations, Howard Dean's candidature for the American presidency.

9   E.g. the British Internet art groups Mongrel and irational.org (Heath Bunting and others).

10 One prominent example of this is the British model Nell McAndrew, who has appeared as the incarnated double of the cybergirl Lara Croft since 1998 and can almost be described as a 'symbol of an epochal situation' in which the discussion about reality and virtuality has attained a high status; cf. also Manfred Geier, *Fake. Leben in künstlichen Welten. Mythos – Literatur – Wissenschaft*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1999, p. 11.

11 Free Software has existed since the 1970s (invented by Richard Matthew Stallman aka RMS). Open source is the more recent marketing term (and the name of a hands-on grouping of the Free Software movement) for software whose source text is freely available (not necessarily free of charge, but in most cases). The Open Source Initiative, founded in 1998 in reaction to the increasing dominance of Microsoft is based on three principles: The software... 1. is available in legible and comprehensible form. 2. ...may be copied, dis-

seminated and used by anyone. 3. ...may be altered and circulated in altered form.

12 The site is still online at <http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/dx>, but the projects are not.

13 <http://www.tate.org.uk/netart/mongrel/home/default.htm>.

14 On the theme of culture hacking or culture jamming, cf. e.g Thomas Düllo and Franz Liebl, eds., *Cultural Hacking. Kunst des Strategischen Handelns*, Vienna and New York, 2005, p. 15. On the theme of brand hacking/culture jamming, see also the articles in ibid. by Wolfgang Ullrich, pp. 333–41, and Franz Liebl, pp. 181–228. For culture hacking in the Internet, see Florian Cramer, 'Social Hacking, Revisited (1.4.2003)', in *Net.art generator: programmed seduction: programmierte Verführung*, texts by Sarah Cook et al., Nuremberg, 2004 <http://cramer.plaintext.cc:70/essays/social_hacking_revisited_sollfrank/social_hacking_revisited_sollfrank-deutsch.html> accessed 7.11.2005.

15 E.g. 'Cracking the Maze: Game Plug-ins and Patches as Hacker Art' (curator: Anne-Marie Schleiner, 1999; <http://switch.sjsu.edu/CrackingtheMaze>).

16 The poor marketability of Internet art probably played a not insignficant part in promoting this role of the Internet.

17 <http://www.adbusters.org>.

18 <http://www.critical-art.net>.

19 The Surveillance Camera Players are a New York theatre group that act their plays only in front of surveillance cameras. <http://www.notbored.org/ the-scp.html>.

20 Holger Kube Ventura, 'Zeige, Beweise. Bilder und Wirklichkeit', in *Nine points of the law. Bild, Macht, Besitz, Verhältnisse*, exh. cat., Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin, 2004, no page.

21 Branding functions according to this pattern: 'A "branded" identity can be "better than nature" (advertisement for orange juice) – or certainly more attractive than the dull life dictated by reason: little girls feel childless without their *Barbie* dolls, *Armani* shirts become the wearer's second, if not first skin, *Pepsi-Cola* has instilled entire cohorts ("the Pepsi Generation") with a rebellious attitude, the cowboy in man would waste away without *Marlboro*, and what woman should have any doubts about her body when

Triumph "beautifies the figure"?' etc. etc. Häuser and Fach 2005 (see note 4), p. 33.

22 See Peter Weibel, *Inszenierte Kunst Geschichte. Mise-en-scène of Art History*, Vienna, 1988, pp. 187 ff. 'The pictures of Appropriation Art complemented the cognitive purism of the conceptual art of the 1970s with a luscious visuality that could by all means compete with the consumer fetishism in advertising.' (Ibid., p. 194).

23 E.g. ®™ark: 'Since 1996, the RTMARK brand has accrued value by providing key services to artists, activists and the intellectual community. The RTMARK system supports the incubation of cutting-edge cultural ventures, while providing a unique opportunity for private investors to sponsor these activities. By working with the RTMARK company, activists enjoy anonymity, limited liability, and increased exposure to resources and other activists. Furthermore, RTMARK creates awareness of the corporate citizenship model by imagining an investment system driven by cultural capital.' ®™ark's 'assets' include 'the RTMARK brand, associated service marks, and webdentity; intellectual property rights to corporate sabotage schemes; proven public relations methodologies; valuable media industry relationships; a dedicated and critical user base' as well as 'verifiable art-world cachet'. The group thus makes possible the first 'real-time cultural capital trends analysis'. <http://www.rtmark.com/rtcom/success/newsroom>.

24 Düllo and Liebl 2005 (see note 14), pp. 30ff.

25 <http://www.ora-ito.com>.

26 <http://www.ingoldairlines.com>.

27 Stefan Römer, 'Heben Sie ab mit: ingold airlines', in *ingold airlines – more than miles*, exh. cat., Zeppelin Museum Friedrichshafen, 2.11.2000–4.2.2001, p. 239.

28 Ibid., p. 241.

29 <http://www.0100101110101101.org> (otherwise referred to as 01.org).

30 <http://www.vuedesalpes.com>. Studer/van den Berg have been realizing joint new media projects since 1991, and Internet projects since 1996. *Hotel Vue des Alpes*'s basis in reality includes a livecam on the Seltengrat.

31 Monica Studer and Christoph van den Berg, 'DPI – Dirt Per Inch?' <http://www.vuedesalpes. com>.

32 Like Thomas Ketelsen (in *Böhmen liegt am Meer. Die Erfindung der Landschaft um 1600*, Hamburger Kunsthalle, 1999), Ludwig Seyfarth sees Studer/van den Berg's compilation of objects as a digital continuation of the tradition of 'constructive' landscape painting that began in about 1600: 'To use a modern term, landscape painting has always been a kind of collage.' In Andreas Baur, ed., *Monica Studer/Christoph van den Berg: Being A Guest*, Basle, 2003, pp. 60ff. Unlike the classic collage, however, Seyfarth notes a superficial 'relapse into conventional illusionism' in digital landscape 'painting', as areas that have been cut or glued are retouched. The proximity to other representations of the landscape rather than to nature is what renders *Vue des Alpes* so post-modern in Seyfarth's eyes: 'Pictures come from pictures, not from nature. After all, Friedrich's Watzmann painting also did without any natural original at all.'

33 Monica Studer and Christoph van den Berg, 'Aneignung einer Site' <http://www.vuedesalpes .com>.

34 See 'Farewell – Zur Lust am digitalen Reisen. Monica Studer und Christoph van den Berg im Gespräch mit Andreas Baur', in Baur 2003 (see note 32), p. 30.

35 Dorothea Strauss, 'Wenn ich Bilder sehe, fange ich an zu denken', in Baur 2003 (see note 32), p. 88.

36 www.theyrule.net. In 2002, the project won the Golden Nica award at the renowned international Internet art festival Ars Electronica in Linz.

37 I would like to thank lic.phil. Alexandra Gerny, Amsterdam, for this information.

38 Blogs linked with the site are, however, clearly activist – and Josh On after all justifies his work with the words of Leo Trotzky (see <http://www.aec.at/de/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID =11803>).

39 <http://www.nikeground.com> → link 'Vision'.

40 Patrizia Caspari, 'Ausweitung der Kampfzone', *Rheinischer Merkur*, 25.7.2002, p. 19.

41 Friedrich von Borries, *Wer hat Angst vor Niketown?*, Rotterdam, 2004, p. 19.

42 Ibid., p. 54.

43 See Patti Waldmeir, 'Nike fights for the freedom to make mistakes', *Financial Times*,

7.12.2002, p. 4; Wolfgang Harrer, 'Gericht nimmt Klage gegen Nike-Werbung an' (20.1.2003) <http:// www.welt.de>; David Stout, 'Justice dismisses Nike appeal', *International Herald Tribune*, 27.6.2003, p. 5.

44 Tilman Baumgärtel, *net.art 2.0. Neue Materialien zur Netzkunst*, Nuremberg, 2001, p. 204.

45 Ibid., p. 206.

46 Roger Behrens, *Die Diktatur der Angepassten. Texte zur kritischen Theorie der Popkultur*, Bielefeld, 2003, p. 10. Original German phrase: 'Lehre des Daseins im Verwertungszusammenhang'.

47 <http://www.etoy.com>. The Prix Ars Electronica 2000 was awarded anonymously to all those involved in whatever form with the etoy campaign; in formal terms it was awarded to the 1,800 agents on the *Toywar* platform. For detailed information on etoy, its makers and campaigns up to and including the Toywar, cf. Adam Wishart and Regula Bochsler, *Leaving reality behind. The battle for the soul of the Internet*, London, 2002.

48 Etoy was awarded the Golden Nica at Ars Electronica for this.

49 Initially, this also included mirrored pilot sunglasses and shaven heads.

50 Baumgärtel 2001 (see note 44), p. 223.

Summary

Web art was the subject of public hype at practically the same time as the dotcom euphoria. As a result, this new media art form was rapidly institutionalized. Nonetheless, demand and public interest soon declined. Internet art now takes place in niches, primarily in those that have opened as a result of the anti-globalization movement. The main reason for this is the fact that web art has celebrated its greatest successes at the interface between artistic expression and political awareness, primarily with criticism of the aggressive methods employed by the business world to create added value. Web artists like etoy, 0100101110101101.org, Mongrel or ®™ark unmask business strategies and denounce the constitutive character of modern marketing: branding no longer simply means advertising, but has become part of our social identity. There are also the purely aesthetically motivated projects such as *Ingold Airlines* or *Hotel Vue des Alpes*, which aim to raise general awareness of collective perceptions of brands.