



# Art and practice-based research in the post-internet era: the example of POR-POL NET project

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The following publication results from the POR-POL NET project initiated at the end of 2022 as an attempt to present a critical overview of the most recent phenomena related to net art, software art, and electronic literature. Recognising that many of such works are a product of the intertwined realms of contemporary culture and technology, especially as regards experimentation with communication media used both as tools and objects of creative examination, the initiative intended to put artistic curiosity and academic inquisitiveness in dialogue. Its other objective was to confront the approaches of at least two different generations, along with two conflicting notions of the internet as, on the one hand, a vehicle of subversion while, on the other, an epitome of uniformity and globalisation. This last dichotomy – which essentially boils down to a variation on the theme of the tensions between the periphery and the centre, the grassroots and the formal – resulted in the idea of taking a closer look at the borders, edges and other liminal spaces as these areas where the arrival of major influences often coincides with the emergence of unique variations. Consequently, the project focused on Poland and Portugal as two extremes of the European continent and was developed in cooperation with both well-established institutions and some smaller, independent galleries. Within this setting, the perceived distance between East and West (be it geographical or symbolic) overlapped with the shared experience of marginality, which in turn carried a promise of retracing some original strategies for bridging gaps and making connections, while highlighting the points of convergence and radical difference.

At these crossroads of high and low culture, cutting-edge technologies and amateur inventions, sophisticated creations and improvised solutions, the specialised tools and terminology of either History of Art or Literary Studies soon proved ineffective. The variety of materials, techniques and conventions employed in the works gathered for the exhibition made it apparent that approaching a complex set of questions that they are posing – especially as regards the matter of how they play with and transform communication media, be it old or contemporary ones – required looking at the problem from a broader perspective. A natural direction was to employ the apparatus of Cultural Studies, with special emphasis put on the works dedicated to netnography and digital folklore (Trevor J. Blank, Lori Emerson, Robert Glenn Howard, Gabriele de Seta, Ashleigh Steele), comparative media studies (Johanna Drucker, Alexander R. Galloway, Terry Harpold, N. Katherine Hayles, Jessica Pressman) and computational creativity (Joseph Tabbi, Piotr Marecki, Nick Montfort, Rui M. Tavares).

In this particular context, special focus was placed on how older technologies get reappropriated and reworked in the internet era, and how pioneering solutions in programming and creative experimentation in the artistic fields overlap. This turn seemed all the more appropriate in the post-pandemic reality – a time of recovery after a period of intensified examination of the possible forms of adapting traditional cultural activities to digital means (from virtual tours through galleries to performances staged via video platforms) that coincided with a rediscovery of all kinds of traditional handicrafts (from baking and gardening to sewing, knitting and carpentry). This sudden revival of the do-it-yourself ethos was all the more curious as it relied on the culture of sharing and the establishment of collaborative networks – features characteristic of the early years of the World Wide Web. Although it can be argued that this utopian vision of the open web of contributions had once again proven to be short-lived, to us it became an important source of inspiration that called attention to networks as a locus of competing ideas around the nature of social interactions and media ecology.

Soon we realised that also the project itself could serve as a case study in networking and testing the limits of analogue and digital environments as contexts for making connections, exhibiting artworks and conducting academic research. The initial excitement of two doctoral students who found a niche where their academic competencies complemented one another, turned out to be contagious enough to result in 10 exhibitions organised in seven cities around Poland and Portugal, three accompanying events and a one-day, international colloquium. On this occasion, we collaborated with over 40 artists and scholars from both countries and established partnerships with 15 institutions. Given both the initial scale of the project and the limited resources available for executing it, these numbers can be seen as good indicators of the topic's major importance – be it in the artistic or academic context, alternative or official circuits.

Moreover, although having many predecessors,<sup>1</sup> POR-POL NET proved to be a fortuitous child of its own era: by mere coincidence, the project's first draft was delivered to scientific committees at the University of Lisbon and Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń by mid-November 2022 – just two weeks before the release of the Open AI's ChatGPT. While the hopes and fears associated with the new, potent tool were not addressed in the proposal directly, the aim of calling attention to the complex relationships between humans and technology (especially as regards the use of analogue and digital

<sup>1</sup> Among them the 2015 P2P Exhibit curated by Piotr Marecki, Álvaro Seiça and Rui Torres, and the [http://sztuka.net 2.0](http://sztuka.net2.0) conference organised at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in 2019, to give but two examples.

media and the dynamics behind the creation of different kinds of networks) turned out to be disturbingly fitting. Similarly, even if only a few artworks presented throughout June 2023 made use of or referred to AI, the ongoing debate on its threats and potential was impossible to ignore, posing itself as yet another context through which the exhibition could be read. In this light, Ana Matilde Sousa's poster for BO gallery in Toruń could be seen as a representation of the machine's subconscious, Madalena Anjo's Warburgian collection of free associations gained a quality of an archive produced by a human-machine hybrid, and Piotr Kopik's *The Chatter* suddenly morphed from an innocent and somewhat dumb chatbot into a stubborn, self-centred interlocutor with an agenda of his own.

Since one of the important goals behind the project was to enhance the collaboration between artists and academics, the Contemporary Net Art Colloquium that took place at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Lisbon on the June 23 2023,<sup>2</sup> was intended, on the one hand, as a critical extension to the exhibition and, on the other, an opportunity to put various methodologies in a comparative perspective. The three panels followed by a round table with the invited artists and curators were organised around different topics, from those related to materiality and embodiment (presentations by Prof. Ryszard Kluszczyński, Prof. Piotr Kopik, Ana Matilde Sousa and Bruno Ministro), through those centred on style and artistic techniques (Prof. Domenico Quaranta, Lorena Ramos and Rafaela Nunes), to the history of media and the challenges behind various systems for archiving net-based artworks (Prof. Pedro Alves da Veiga, Prof. Patrícia Gouveia and Piotr Poldzian Płucienniczak). In the closing conversation, Natalia Dopkowska, Pedro Ferreira and Diogo Marques shared their personal experience of getting inspired by and employing elements taken from the internet in their artistic projects, while Magda Górka, Piotr Mańczak and João Pedro Azul – all representing different initiatives, institutions and periodicals that rely on the idea of networking – addressed the challenges of exhibiting digital objects.

In this context, the following publication can be seen as a central node of a unique system that POR-POL NET had established: a literal midpoint, where many months of collective work come to fruition. By choosing a rather unusual format – which is neither a conventional exhibition catalogue nor a collection of conference proceedings – we intended to stress that this particular book does not mark the final stage of something

<sup>2</sup> The full list of the speakers and the book of abstracts can be found at the POR-POL NET website: <https://porpol.net/colloquium/> [accessed: 02.12.2023].

but, rather, offers a place where the end and the beginning may meet and inverse their roles to restart the whole process anew. This introduction, which merges the foundational story with some preliminary conclusions, heralds the perverse chronology used for the organisation of the whole work, in which contributions from the participants of the colloquium come first and the catalogue of artists and institutions engaged in a series of exhibitions and accompanying events comes last. With this structure, we hope to satisfy two goals: first, to offer an exhaustive case study, with all of the stages of the project carefully retraced and documented; second, to propose a body of texts and images that – used either separately or in their entirety – could contribute to the current scholarship on net art while also having the potential of inspiring future generations of researchers and curators.

This last aspect finds reflection also in the choice and character of the texts included in the book: since one of our objectives was to encourage truly interdisciplinary and practice-based research, we gave priority to essays that followed this principle. For this reason, the works included in the publication come mostly from academicians who are also active artists, and they oscillate between in-depth analyses of specific phenomena, auto-reflexive descriptions of certain projects and meditations on the experiences of engaging with new technologies or being part of art collectives. While such a multiplicity of voices, methodologies and perspectives may seem controversial in a work that, at the end of the day, has the pretence to be recognised as scientific, we believe that this plurality reflects well the very nature of the object of study: just as the internet has never been homogenous, so the investigation on it needs to remain open and make its own attempt at embracing the notion of wide-scale connectivity.

The opening essays of this publication by Patrícia Gouveia and Piotr Puldzian Płucienniczak offer an insight into the hopes and limitations that characterised the early years of the net art movements in Portugal and Poland, respectively. Although radically different in style, both texts quite effectively demonstrate how the sheer curiosity and technological ingenuity that characterised the generation of software and electronic art enthusiasts have now transformed into the cynicism and the aesthetic mockery of the post-internet era. The authors reflect on the question of the accessibility of the new media, calling attention to the fact that the near-instant communication which now tends to be taken for granted, just a few decades ago was still more of a utopian dream. In the early 1990s, the ownership of a single, stationary computer was already a privilege – and even more so having it connected to the World Wide Web. For the

generation that accompanied the rapid technological progress, the visionary approach and experimentation seemed natural, resulting in creations that were not only formally original but often also socially engaged. At the same time, through the example of their own digital works, Gouveia and Płucienniczak make a strong claim on the necessity of self-archiving and retro-engineering as two strategies essential for ensuring the longevity of certain projects. Similarly to Marecki and Harpold,<sup>3</sup> they recognise the acceleration of technological progress and the obsolescence of particular programs and machines as a major issue in researching digital artworks and, while Gouveia enumerates various possible solutions to this problem, Płucienniczak spins a cautionary tale, demonstrating the extent of damage it has already caused in the context of Polish electronic literature.

The topic of obsolete media and works that got lost and found on the internet continues in Martyna Kopeć's essay, which focuses on the phenomenon of lostwave – a term used for songs, jingles and other musical snippets, whose author, title and year of production remain unknown, but when uploaded on video sharing platforms (such as YouTube or TikTok, gather communities of enthusiasts engaged in identifying them. These uncanny voices of the past pose questions not only on the nature of specific recording media and distribution channels, but also on the role that the internet plays in feeding contemporary retromania, be it through the rediscovery and the preservation of the artefacts coming from the marginalised cultures, the rapid exchange of information and the incentive for fabricating it. By referring to the notions of eeriness (Mark Fisher) and liminality (Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner), Kopeć investigates the tension between the appeal of mystery that lostwave introduces and realisation of the search engine's limitations. Furthermore, she makes a strong point on the role that the circulation of these once-overlooked gems plays in the revival of the spirit of old internet forums and the emergence of communities of anonymous users who bond over a shared interest, while also demonstrating how this romanticisation of the past often influences contemporary music industry, be it by blurring the boundaries between the competencies of music producers and consumers, the emphasis put on the materiality of the recordings or the trend of using the effects and samples that imitate the quality of sound characteristic to previous decades.

The question of the interdependence (or, at the very least, the mutual influence) of the old and new media is central also to Bruno Ministro's text. In it, departing from

3 See: Piotr Marecki, *Liternet: Literatura i Internet*. Kraków: Czytelnia 2002; Terry Harpold, *Ex-foliations*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press 2009.

McLuhan's call to always approach new technologies by taking a closer look at the preceding ones and identifying the impact they had on the current media environment, he compares the copy art from the 1980s and 1990s with the recent examples of electronic literature, performances and installations. The works of such artists as César Figueiredo, Jürgen O. Olbrich, António Aragão, Karl-Hermann Möller and Franz John are juxtaposed with those of Alinta Krauth, Jim Andrews, Eugenio Tisselli and Andreas Maria Jacobs. The analysis that Ministro proposes, centres on the notion of a glitch, traditionally understood as a minor malfunction in the programming or working of a certain machine, and here applied to showcase limitations particular to different inscription technologies, from xerography to digital text processors. By bringing attention to the specific ways in which various mediums modify textual relations, the essay aligns both with Johanna Drucker's idea of material performativity<sup>4</sup> and N. Katherine Hayles' recent observations on postprint,<sup>5</sup> especially in the context of the interweaving of print and digital technologies as essential to shaping our approaches towards language, writing and authorship.

The topic of machine error is further explored in Ana Matilde Sousa's contribution, in which the exploration of the aesthetics of glitch goes hand-in-hand with a reflection on the peculiar nature of the human-machine hybrids. By referring to the process of creating a series of works with an old-fashioned pen plotter, she offers a first-hand account of the challenges and surprises that may await anyone who decides to experiment with outdated technologies – especially when entrusting them with tasks that they were not designed to handle. In this particular case, the obsolete tool originally used for speeding up the process of signing documents is employed as a mechanical arm: a convenient and reliable craftsman whose work can be programmed and controlled by the artist or the network of other devices. Although the idea of leaving the actual production of a physical copy of an artwork to a machine may not seem particularly extravagant – and even less so when it comes to employing a tool created specifically to imitate traces of a human hand – in Sousa's experiment many things go wrong. From the amount of ink consumed, through the noise produced, to the constant supervision it required, the pen plotter presents itself as the opposite of an object ready-to-hand. Its subsequent failures and errors, however, inspire a reflection on the relationship that often occurs between the technology and its user: by acknowledging and assisting various shortcomings of

4 Johanna Drucker, "Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface", in: *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, vol. 7 no. 1 (2013), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/7/1/000143/000143.html> [accessed: 02.12.2023].

5 N. Katherine Hayles, *Postprint*. New York: Columbia University Press 2021.



the tool, Sousa finds herself strangely attuned to it, soon able to identify the alarming sounds, predict the exact moment for changing the ink containers and see other patterns useful for diminishing the chances of any malfunction. By patiently learning these things, she begins to accept her own body as a part of a complex, hybrid network.

Since Sousa has a rich background in the creation of comics and zines, her essay abounds in reflections on popular culture and the materiality of different artistic mediums. As the series of works she created with the pen-plotter are essentially compilations of still images derived from GIFs, they inspire questions about the role that the internet plays in the emergence of new aesthetics, the significance of remixing and repurposing the widely available contents, and the qualitative difference between the flatness of a screen and that of a sheet of paper. Moreover, colourful and busy with superimposed shapes and figures, her works seem to play with the tension between the apparent movement and stillness, the flow and amassment. This last aspect is further explored in Lorena Ramos' text, in which she examines the history of GIFs and their potential as an artistic medium. Departing from the notion of a loop – which she associates not just with cyclical repetition but also the concept of *mise-en-abyme* – the author juxtaposes works of such artists as Jan van Eyck, Marcel Duchamp, M.C. Escher, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman and Yayoi Kusama, focusing on how each of them, by employing different means, managed to achieve the effect of recurrence. This preliminary analysis serves as a backdrop for a more detailed review of contemporary examples, centred on animated images created in digital techniques. Although initially Ramos seems to be focused solely on aesthetic aspects of such experiments (the choice of technique, the features of a particular style, the strategies for manipulating the notion of space and time), often searching for the points of convergence between the so-called new and traditional media, she also calls attention to the place that GIFs occupy in the contemporary internet culture, not excluding its vernacular side.

The motif of recurrence and the importance of collectivity for the selection and circulation of contents is then picked up in the short text by Pedro Ferreira. As a visual artist interested in various phenomena related to digital culture, Ferreira offers an insight into the creative process behind the video and installation that in June 2023 were presented in Galeria UI in Gdańsk as a part of POR-POL NET project. *Things I do When I am Bored* – a compilation of snippets taken from hardly ever viewed YouTube videos, in which different users share the ennui they are experiencing – is as banal as unnerving. In it, the idea of the internet as the source of endless inspiration and the core of



interconnectivity, slowly crumbles, revealing the downside of the apparent abundance. The expressions of anxiety, fatigue and loneliness, which turn out to inhabit many of its channels, present themselves as the polar opposite of the promise of free, efficient access to information and enhanced opportunities for networking. While Ferreira is far from making any moral judgements, his contribution – especially when read in relation to Gouveia's and Płucienniczak's essays or Federico Campagna's observation on the age of Technic as one of metaphysical nihilism<sup>6</sup> – invites reflection on the social effects of the rapid popularisation of a complex tool whose inner workings are not only hard to grasp for a common user but often also programmed, structured and presented in an optimised way that is likely to dissuade the urge for experimentation.

In past decades, the necessity for learning how to navigate and manage new technologies in a creative way has been a widely-discussed topic – even if only within a few, highly specialised fields.

The juncture of remediation and data manipulation which lies at the heart of many computational works, happened to be particularly inspiring for media archaeology and literary theory, as it serves as a reminder of the value that the interplay between the material properties of a carrier and the structural organisation of the content have in the process of both meaning production and its transmission. Preoccupation with these matters, close to Bernard Stiegler's division on technics and technologies,<sup>7</sup> can be traced in books and articles by various contemporary scholars, from Jay David Bolter, Jussi Parikka and Siegfried Zielinski, to Serge Bouchardon, Yra van Dijk and Rui Torres, to name but a few. Given the response sparked by the release of the already mentioned ChatGPT, it can be stated that similar concerns have become all the more worthwhile nowadays, as we have officially entered the era of AI-based technologies that change our understanding of language, authorship and knowledge. The closing essay of this publication marks this moment by offering an example of the successful collaboration between the artist and AI.

In her contribution, Rafaela Nunes proposes a detailed description of all stages behind the creation of digital objects or – as she prefers to call them – artefact beings. In this case, the insistence on the label is not purely incidental as the forms she creates – even if stylistically resembling raw pieces of valuable stones or minerals – are interpretations of a very specific set of data which includes names of feelings and personality

6 See: Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality*. London: Bloomsbury 2018.

7 See: Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, vol. 1, *The Fault of Epimetheus*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998.

traits, umbrella terms used for defining political or philosophical inclinations, as well as references to colours and textures. Their combination is entirely random, being an effect of a prompt inserted into ChatGPT, later paired with a fragment of a pastel work or a painting made by Nunes and processed through Stable Diffusion, an AI-based image generator. The very idea of using that which could be considered the essence (or, maybe even more appropriately, the very nature) of a thing as a parameter, while simultaneously transferring images created by traditional means to the digital environment, presents an interesting twist to the usual attempts at translating the immeasurable onto the visual.

By constantly shifting between qualitative and quantitative values, the physical and the numeric, and the human and non-human input, Nunes brings into being objects whose inherent eeriness seems to originate in the difficulty of labelling them as unequivocally real or artificial. Suspended in between disciplines and realms, the models she creates become a perfect expression of modern hybridisation: the state of final collapse – or a lasting suspension – of traditional dichotomies. Supported by a careful overview of classic theories on intermedia (including works by Jean Baudrillard, Rosalind Krauss and Lech Manovich), and well-aligned with the latest scholarship on the creative uses of AI (here, especially the presentations at the subsequent editions of xCoAx<sup>8</sup> or the 2023 edition of the Absolutely Interdisciplinary Conference),<sup>9</sup> Nunes' contribution offers valuable closure to the reflections on the contemporary forms of networking explored within the POR-POL NET project – and an inspiring invitation to any future, practice-based research aimed at gaining a better understanding of the relationship between the artistic practice and the ways we engage with the new technologies.

8 The Conference on Computation, Communication, Aesthetics and X, <https://xcoax.org/> [accessed: 04.12.2023].

9 Polly Denny and N. Katherine Hayles, "AI and Creativity", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1YhXV-NrO4> [accessed: 04.12.2023]. Presentation at Absolutely Interdisciplinary Conference 2023.

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