Variable Media:
Selected Readings on Mortality and Immortality

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1. Interview with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

DR: What has led you to devote so much of your time, skill and attention to issues of death and dying?

ELISABETH KUBLER-ROSS: It started in Maidanek, in a concentration camp, where I tried to see how children had gone into the gas chambers after having lost their families, their homes, their schools and everything. The walls in the camp were filled with pictures of butterflies, drawn by these children.

It was incomprehensible to me. Thousands of children going into the gas chamber, and this is the message they leave behind--a butterfly. That was really the beginning....

DR: Do you find that there are great differences between cultures regarding attitudes toward death? Which ones do you feel have the most healthy approaches?

ELISABETH KUBLER-ROSS: Yes, like Mexicans. They go and visit the graves. They bring food, they talk to them, they have a feast. There are lots of cultures who have much less of a hangup. The old, old, old cultures are also much more natural. In the more sophisticated, more materialistic Western world, even to die costs a fortune.

They put shoes on the dead that are comfortable to wear, and silk pillows, and put rouge on the cheeks, so they look like they're only asleep. It's so phony and so dishonest. But that's more of a modern day deterioration. In the old days, the farmers died here just like in Switzerland. They had what you call a wake. It was in the house, in the best living room. People came. I remember my neighbor. I was able to say goodbye to him, I was allowed to touch him. I touched for the first time in my life a dead body. My father talked to him, like he could hear him, and I was very impressed by that.

Nothing was covered up with rouge and lipstick and makeup and all that baloney. Things have really deteriorated in the last hundred years, and more in the big cities than in the country. There are still places in the country here where it's much more natural. But that changes very rapidly now anyway.

DR: Does the belief in reincarnation, or the lack of such belief, strongly influence people's feelings about death?

ELISABETH KUBLER-ROSS: It comes up very, very rarely with my patients. Very rarely. Those that believe in reincarnation, sometimes they're annoyed that they have to come back, you know, that they haven't done what they could have done and should have done....

Of the religious groups, there are some that have a much harder time than others.... I asked lots of rabbis...."You will survive in their memory." Well, after a hundred years, nobody remembers you. If you have not concretized your concept, then you have a heck of a time.

2. Tilman Baumgaertel on "Digital Decay"

Tilman Baumgaertel on <nettime> Tue, 2 Mar 1999 00:42:39 +0100 (CET)

My friend told me that the Mac was the first computer she ever used. She also told me a story about what happened after she took her first computer class, that I thought was stunning: She wanted to use this incredible, newly-discovered machine after her first computer class. She had never worked with a computer before. She wanted to use it for her first class assignment. But there was one problem: She didn't know how to switch it on. The instructor of the class had told his students how to use the paint programm in great detail. But he had forgotten - nerd that he was - to mention the most crucial thing: were the ON-button was!!!

The reason why I am telling you this kind of story is this: it made me realize all of a sudden that the encounter with a relatively easy-to-use computer like the old Mac had an important impact on a lot of people's life, an impact that I had never realized before. That's why I found the idea so intriguing to look at the old Mac and it's interface again. All of a sudden the old Mac looked like a piece of history - a piece of technical history, but also of a lof of people's personal history.

So my friend and I started to look for an old Mac - the lovely, beige box, that graced so many desktops in the 80ies. We went on a odyssee through the Berlin Art School. And like with any other odyssee we ended up just where we had started: with ourselves and the memory of the 'machine that changed the world', as Time Magazine called the Mac in a birthday article in 1994. We went to a lot of dark, dusty basement rooms and equipment storages that nobody ever looks at. There was always some system administrator or some caretaker who convinced us that there were 'some of those old Macs' just in this room on the other side of the hallway. We never found one.

Older students kept telling us that there were 'only MacClassics' in the school 'just a couple of years ago', but nobody remembered when exactly that was, or where they had disappeared to. After stumbling through a lot of dark back-rooms, it turned out that there simply wasn't any MacClassic left in the whole place.

When we could find any Mac Classic in Meatspace, I started to look on the internet. here is what I found on the Apple website about the Mac Interface: Nothing. Just nothing.

I wonder what this will do for our understanding of ourselfs and our own history. I guess that by now we are so hooked to computers, that they have become an object of everybody's history - at least in Europa and North America. I think that computers have become artifacts that should be studied and preserved the same way we keep objects from the industrial revolution: the steam engine, the locomotive, the loom. You can look at any of these machines at the Berlin Museum of Technology in Kreuzberg.

In fact: You can also see the machines that powered the post-industrial revolution at the very same museum. They have a MacClassic. They even have a LIZA. You can look at them - at their boxes, that is. If they still work, you wouldn't know. They are behind glass, and nobody is interested if they actually function.

When I prepared this panel I called the computer curator of the Berlin Technology museum. She told me that keeping these machines in good operation condition or to preserve old programming languages was just a waste of time. 'Only programmers are interested in this kind of thing', I learned.

I don't think so. And I don't think that any of these 'thinking machines' should be left behind, because I think that they shape our life. If we don't pay attention, a lot of the things we thought and put into writing will disappear. Simply because we wrote them on computers that will be gone very soon, like the MacClassics are gone from my friend's art school.

When the 'digital revolution' was in full swing, 'computer experts' kept telling us, that information was forever - once it was put into digital format. But now I have a computer that cannot even read the old 5 inch disks anymore, that I 'saved' my master thesis on. 'Saved' - that's actually quite a concept, when it comes to computers, now that I think about it!…

The internet we know now is completely different from what it was like five years ago, and is most likely to be again very different in five years time from now. Software, hardware, protocols change constantly, and it is very difficult to think of any way to preserve all this, especially since a lot of net art deals with specific properties of particular software types. We have seen with video art how a lot of pieces have simply desinterated, and are not available anymore. It might be that the same thing wil happen to a lot of net art….

The other piece I would like to show is by Olia Lialina, and was made of the political group 'Across the Border':

> http://www.contrast.org/borders/abstract.html

You can't see it now with Netscape 4.0 (the browser software I am using) anymore, but with Netscape 3.0 the words would flicker back and forth over the lines of this tablet. Since the purpose of this group 'Across the border' is to get illegal immigrants over the german border, this was kind of an visual metaphor for what they were doing. But since the piece took advantage of a bug in a early version of Netscape 3.0, that is gone now, we cannot see it anymore, and it just looks like a messed-up web page. As Olia Lialina wrote in an Email to me: 'All my art is a bug in Netscape 3.0.'

I have been writing about net art for the last three years. They used to say that life is short, but art is long, but I am not so sure if this is true for art on the internet. I start to think that my watch will last longer than most of the things I have been writing about in the last couple of years….

For the time being there is little you can do as an individual. But you should print out every file that you really want to keep and preserve. And if you still have an old Mac Classic - why don't you go ahead and sell it to me?

3. Tjebbe van Tijen on "Traceless Art" (response to Tilman Baumgaertel)

Tjebbe van Tijen on Tue, 2 Mar 1999 02:26:00 +0100 (CET)
Re: <nettime> Digital Decay and traceless art

Is it for the pleasure of the moment itself or for posterity that we act?

We can not and need not keep track of everything..forgetting is a necessary basis for knowing... What if all the artifacts, all things judged worthwhile, for some reason at some moment in time, would have been still with us...

It is not so that we willfuly have to burn palaces and temples, to destroy museums and libraries, to create a new order, a new culture... as so many hot headed leaders have tried and dictatorial artists have proclaimed (but were afraid of doing, likethe futurists). But the other extreme also holds a danger... Too much preservation is suffocating, does not leave enough space for new creation.. Nice real time experiences should not all be made into objects of adoration, be commodified, be given 'eternal value'.

So to narrow my argument down again to the posting on the Nettime list of Till Baumgarten, one could ask if a lot of what is by some classified as 'Net Art' should not be seen as a broadcast, a life event... something that maybe is not happening in one moment but in many short moments during a quiet limited period of time... art for just for the moment itself...

I have the feeling that the pleasure is just that... that it fits in the long tradition of what I like to call 'traceless art', the singing of a song, looking at the funny shapes of drifting clouds, making traces in the sand...

Temporal silicon traces washed away by the digital tide...

See its function as the ceremonial sand drawings of the Navajo, only meant to exist during the ceremony, to be blown away by the northern winds afterwards.

Tjebbe van Tijen
Imaginary Museum Projects (IMP), Amsterdam

4. "Time To Die" (a Zen koan)

Ikkyu, the Zen master, was very clever even as a boy. His teacher had a precious teacup, a rare antique. Ikkyu happened to break this cup and was greatly perplexed. Hearing the footsteps of his teacher, he held the pieces of the cup behind him. When the master appeared, Ikkyu asked, "Why do people have to die?"

"This is natural," explained the older man. "Everything has to die and has just so long to live."

Ikkyu, producing the shattered cup, added, "It was time for your cup to die."