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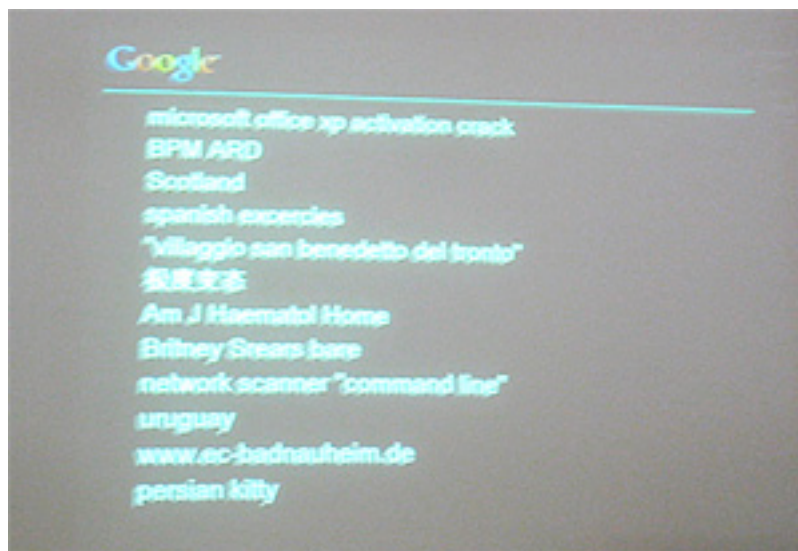
**Google and Art; A commercial / cultural new media art economy?**

In the last three years, Google the search engine company have become a phenomenon. Their business has soared, range of services and products expanded and they have without a doubt begun to immensely influence culture. Online we can all feel their influence. With vast amounts of data in almost any area imaginable they single handedly list more webpages than any other search engine (8.05 billion as of November 2004) [A] and are fast becoming a working Borges library of Babel.

Yet beyond this goal of 'simply' indexing everything online and shaping the internet for general users, offline language, popular culture, science and many other areas have also been influenced by Google [B]. Prominent examples include their name becoming a verb in the English language meaning to search the internet using their search engine [C]. Googlehacking has become the challenge to "find that elusive query (two words - no quote marks) with a single, solitary result" [D]. O'Reilly Media Inc. published a series of books dispelling mysteries around hacking culture, including one on how to hack Google. Nothing involving the heavily mediated misconception that hacking involves programmers infiltrating corporations computer systems for personal gain, instead handbooks on the use of existing tools, in ingenious unthought-of ways, by a cross section of people continually recombining them to suit their needs.

So why is it important to know about the developments of Google and its influences on society? What bearing has this on new media art? To date new media art has been an information based art form, but not necessarily an informed one. Information has been used in various ways, background noise, continuously flowing content, as a trigger to indicate a change from one state to another yet rarely has the information been used successfully as simply the information it is due to the complexity of presentation within the tools that access it and the difficulty to separate content from presentation other than how intended.

Developments, technical, commercial and social have opened the floodgates for a diverse set of people, artists included, to a mass of information and tools with which to access and use this information. Open source and non-proprietary formats have been crucial, but companies such as Google using these formats, providing the tools they do and controlling / leading whole sways of industry because of their ease of use are creating new economies around themselves which influence both the tools artists are using, how they think about and use them. We now have a rapidly growing information aware set of artists, self-trained and adaptable, working in / around / against this new economy. The new order has given them the ability to use Google's information, potential content with little embedded context; in anyway they choose allowing possibilities for an informed, contextualised and critical art. The ability to frame information as used in much of western society, a common commodity, has become a signature of new media art, net based art in particular, and this trend towards the use of tools such as Google, to create what we could call Google Art, while new, is far from unexpected or unique.



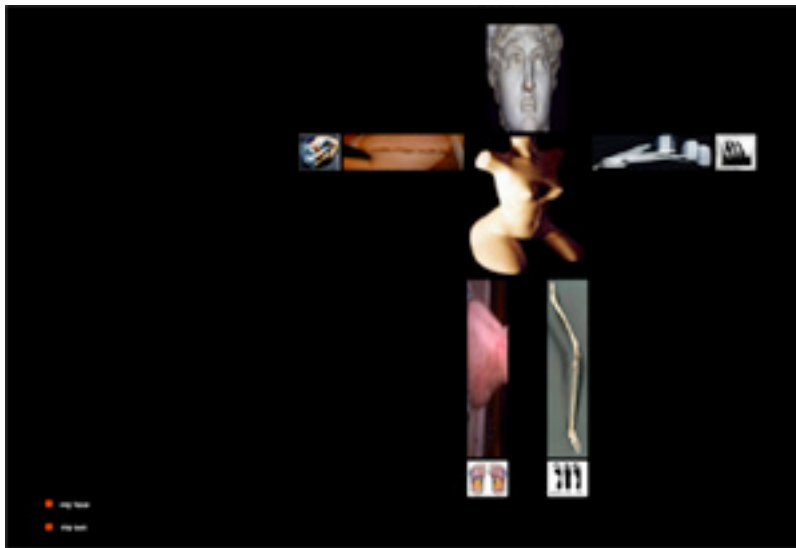
Live Query (2002) at Google Headquarters. Image courtesy of Aaron Swartz.

In November 2002 an article appeared in the New York Times on Google's ability to track search queries [E]. It suggested that Google had the ability to show current trends and foresee future ones. It's intro discussed an artwork at Google's headquarters entitled Live Query [1], which triggered much discussion on new media mailing lists. The piece consisted of a live feed of scrolling queries in many languages from the search engine's use all over the world, a sampling of what the world was asking, yet censored to ensure its appropriateness for presentation at such an important corporate location. A day later a posting appeared in mailing lists from a T. Whid entitled, When Google has achieved the

net art masterpiece, what are the artists to do? [F]. Google seemed to be using culture, art works, to promote its business and in terms of this sort of hybridised networked art, a generative piece heavily reliant on a commercial tool yet paying particular care to presentation and context, unlike the online tool counterpart, it far exceeded anything the independent art world had created without the patronage of companies such as Google.



Googlehouse (2003) by Marika Dermineur and Stéphane Degoutin.



My Google Body (2003) by Gerard Dalmon.

While immediately worrying for artists, Live Query was a perfect demonstration of what could be created by rethinking the use of online tools, what they can and could do. Not alone were Google predicting trends with their services but they were also creating them, generating them directly in popular culture through their

listings but also covertly influencing them within culture through the inspiration to and patronage of art works. Artists realised that there was in fact much to do and in the last two years we have seen works including Googlehouse [2] and My Google Body [3] relying heavily on Google's image search for their content. The Google Adwords Happening [4], which uses Adwords the Google advertisement program and Newsmap [5] using the Google news stream. These are art works, which can be considered new media art of the highest calibre. 'Net works' which without the network simply wouldn't function, technically or conceptually. Their position to Google the search engine, Google the company and Google the pending worldwide trademark is considered by some artists as almost a patron / artistic one, not in the traditional sense of a monetary exchange but as a facilitator where art works can coexist with commerce, using it, questioning it. As the creators of Googlehouse, Marika Dermineur and Stéphane Degoutin explain, "Our position to them [Google] is like a kind of parasite, or a graft"... "If Google stops, the Googlehouse stops too. Googlehouse is the mirror of a data search engines activity".

Art works such as these are certainly mirrors of our individual use of information technology but they also become maps, not topographical but social maps, collective and often collaborative, of the search engines content and ordering. The artist provides a framework, a context yet without both Google providing content, actual (text, images etc.) or subject matter and users to navigate through this content they would remain static empty shells. The relationship between artist / user which occurs in the majority of new media art as a result of interaction, a key term that necessitated a change in terminology from spectator to user with the advent of computers in art and media, is further complicated by a third party, Google, providing content. This split between context, content and narrative will no doubt cause continued concern to art historians and critics over the 'ever diminishing' role of the artist yet it continues a trend since the works and performances of Dada. Google is certainly providing the inspiration for new art works and new directions within these but since Google is a private company and like any other has financial demands and restraints, how true is the individual reflection, the social map of our societies use of its information? Are we really googling the internet, or in fact goggled, our field of vision restricted by business and one companies vision?

Works of Note:

[1] Google, 2002, *Live Query*. Image available from: http://www.aaronsw.com/photos/google/IMG_1559.JPG/view [Accessed 15th January 2005]

[2] Dermineur, M., Degoutin, S., 2003, *Googlehouse* [online]. Available from:

<http://www.googlehouse.net/> [Accessed 20th December 2004]

[3] Dalmon, G., 2003, *My Google Body* [online]. Available from: <http://www.neogejo.com/googlebody/> [Accessed 20th December 2004]

[4] Bruno, C., 2003, *The Google Adwords Happening* [online]. Available from: <http://www.iterature.com/adwords/> [Accessed 9th January 2005].

[5] Weskamp, M., 2003, *Newsmap* [online]. Available from: <http://www.marumushi.com/apps/newsmap/> [Accessed 9th January 2005].

Reference & Notes:

[A] 2004, *Wikipedia* [online]. Wikimedia Foundation Inc. Available from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google> [Accessed 20th December 2004]

[B] Piper, P.S., 2004, *Google Spawn: The Culture Surrounding Google* [online]. Information Today Inc. Available from: <http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/jun04/piper.shtml> [Accessed 20th December 2004]

[C] Dictionary.com lists the word as a verb: “to search for information on the Internet, esp. using the Google search engine” with the example: “We googled to find the definition of the new word”.

2004, *Dictionary.com* [online]. Lexico Publishing Group, LLC. Available from: <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=google> [Accessed 20th December 2004]

Offline dictionaries including Oxford, Cambridge and Webster have yet to list the word doubtlessly connected to the fact that Google the company are contesting their trademark name from entering the English language in America.

Duffy, J., 2003, *BBC News Online* [online]. BBC. Available from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3006486.stm [Accessed 20th December 2004]

[D] A full history of searching for the “elusive query” or Googlewhacking is available here:

Stock, G., 2002, *Googlewhacking: The Search for 'The One'* [online]. Available from: <http://www.unblinking.com/heh/googlewhack.htm#20020108> [Accessed 20th December 2004]

[E] Lee, J. 8., 2002, *Postcards From Planet Google* [online]. Available from: <http://tech2.nytimes.com/mem/technology/techreview.html?res=9D07E1DF1538F93BA15752C1A9649C8B63> [Accessed 9th January 2005]

[F] Whid, T., 2002, *When Google has achieved the net art masterpiece, what are the artists to do* [online]. Available from: <http://www.endnode.net/pipermail/endnode/Week-of-Mon-20021125/000372.html> [Accessed 20th December 2004]