

HACKING SEDUCTIONS AS ART

This interview by Cornelia Sollfrank with Jenny Marketou took place in Hamburg, Germany on July 25, 2000.

CS: Jenny you agreed to show up personally in this video interview. You are not a typical hacker who tries to hide her face. What kind of hacker are you?

JM: I would like to describe myself as an artist hacker, which means I am interested in operating as a culture hacker. I believe that there are two kinds of hackers. One is the cultural hacker, who uses computer hacking methods as an open source medium and strategy to reconstruct new systems, new creative environments on the internet. But hacking as art is also a means to infiltrate hacking culture and to contribute to the formation of new configurations of characters, space, time and play.

The other is the computer underground hacker that can be defined by its digital virtuosity, anonymity and skills, and who directly manipulates the code, breaking into the economy and system of the internet in order to access and manipulate certain information. In this case I am referring to the celebrity hacker, which I am not.

The second kind of hacker has received a lot of media attention lately. I think the reason why hackers have become the technological cause celebre ripe for media coverage can be found in the wider social and historical context of the information revolution and the current importance of information technologies in our economy. Therefore information technologies, by being a new economic, cultural and political asset have become particularly vulnerable to a unique form of crime. The activity itself embodies the elements of both fear and fascination, and the aura of anonymity makes hacking suitable for media hyperboles as it is sedentary, repetitive and non-photogenic.

My work uses information technologies and communication, and I appropriate hacking methods and strategies in my art process either as an esthetic experience or as an intervention of resistance. Hacking means reappropriating, reforming and regenerating not only culture but also redefining systems and processes, and it can account for a new coinage when the process is an open system. I believe that artists have always been cultural hackers.

CS: As I understand there were “hackers” even before the computer existed?

JM: I think hacking refers to any imaginative and unorthodox use of any artifact. “Hacking” means reconstructing a tool to understand its workings and to reconstruct it in a personal, creative way. How can art subvert and reappropriate given esthetics and technologies and what does this mean in culture in general.

I can make reference to the history of art when Duchamp took a wheel and put in the gallery space or snatched Mona Lisa. He snatched a product and reconstructed a new system of meaning and representation.

CS: But this is a conceptual thing without any skills. What do you think?

JM: The computer underworld is populated with young men and (almost no women) who live out their fantasies of power and glory on a keyboard. Of course, computer hacking requires technical skills, compulsive digital virtuosity and addiction.

CS: You say to “hack into something”, so there has to be something there ie, a system of some kind that you can “hack into.” What is the relation or what might be the motivation for breaking into a system which already exists, and make changes to it, whether it is a technological system, a server, a computer network, or even a cultural system?

JM: I have come to think of “hacking” both as an important phenomenon and as a metaphor for how we digitally manipulate and think through the electronic culture that engulfs us and how this demonstration of virtuosity can be addressed in the arena of theoretical, and cultural politics and esthetics. I believe hacking is a form of cultural activism, as a syntax for resistance and critical discourse.

Artists have always used their process as a strategy and methodology for resistance. This kind of activism has become very apparent on the internet, especially since information is becoming more and more valuable in our economy. In which case the intention and ethics which drive both artist hackers and underground computer hackers are the same. The intention is to dismantle the present economic logic of the Internet in order to take it forward into a state of free public space.

CS: What are the different kind of skills between the computer hacker and the artist hacker?

JM: As I mentioned before, I would describe the computer hacker by its virtuosity, mastery and ingenuity in breaking into computer systems and getting at encryption technology. On the other hand, like the sampling rap MC, hacker artists operate as culture hackers who manipulate existing techno-semiotic structures towards a different end, to get inside cultural systems on the net and make them do things they were never intended to do.

On a technical level, of course, the artist(s) avoids having to put in the extensive time required for programming and instead get a lot of technical support from computer hackers. Artists have a green light in using those skills. I strongly believe that hacking is not an evil act, but a very intelligent and creative process. There are straight out culture hacks whose mere existences underscore the viability of this subculture, its affinities with other parasitico-critical practices, and the robustness of its free ware economy, a marketplace-bazaar for codes of all kinds. Game patching also implies and includes the act of tearing open a finished program to get at the underlying code and explore what new coinages are invented when the process is an open system.

CS: A lot of the bad image of hacking has to do with the media. Why do you think society needs this dark side of information technology?

JM: We have been always fascinated by the “black box” and the technical virtuosity of hackers who manipulate them, but at the same time we are fearful of their lack of transparency and the fact that our conventional concept of technological experts may be fatally undermined by largely anonymous, unaccountable and potentially subversive technological whiz-kids. The perennial nature of techno-anxiety is illustrated by the historical range of cultural expressions that give it voice. It is present in the fate of such Greek mythological figures as Prometheus and Icarus; it is vividly portrayed in Mary Shelley’s gothic classic Frankenstein. The Zeitgeist that hackers personify has been vividly expressed in the fictional genre of cyberpunk novel Neuromancer and science fiction films such as Blade Runner , Terminator and Matrix.

I also think our government has helped in promoting this fear by the way information has always been controlled, yet any information we get about cases of hacking through media is not real and the government purposely keeps the truth of what is really going on from us. So it is very convenient to perpetuate this “evil image” of hacker. But the mainstream always creates this kind of alienation with anything marginal or any form of resistance until it is embraced and domesticated by it. Making hackers celebrities advances their disempowerment.

CS: At this point, Jenny, I would be interested in learning more about your work.Can you give me an example of your way of hacking?

JM: In my my most recent work,I am creating artificially intelligent agents, bots, with hacking and tracking behaviors, which vary from IP snatching and reappropriating codes, to getting personal information from privately networked environments such as CUSEEME chat rooms. My goal is to develop website controlled, electronically based installations and environments that use transformational imagery to explore the fluidity of personal, cultural, and historical identity, and what kind of new coinage can be created through the open source agency of information hacking, classification, and snatching.

What has always interested me is the body, embodied and disembodied, its relation to space and time as well as the potentiality and meanings of embodiment within an environment built around and within communication technologies, with a special regard to the relationship between technology, body, and subjectivity - the alienation,dislocation and liquidation of subjectivity all experienced within networked environments.

CS: Can you give me a concrete example ?

JM: A good example of IP snatcher and code hacker is the artificial intelligence of CHRIS.053 the protagonist in my web based project SMELL.BYTES TM.

SMELL.BYTES TM was originally conceived and produced as an on-line project, since the internet has become a fantasy generating dream machine for the wired man. The project can be experienced part on-line and part as a hybrid physical environment through three panoramic streaming video projections. Through the hacking virtual persona of Chris.053 , SMELL.BYTES TM explores human subjectivity on the net. Chris.053 is an invisible bot and has been programmed to be driven by its insatiable olfactory desires, relentlessly lurking, and sniffing on the net and gaining unauthorized access to servers and IP addresses of participants in CU SEE ME teleconference environments and chat rooms on line.

Visitors can enter the "odor lab" on the SMELL.BYTES TM website to witness Chris.53's hacking virtuosity, peruse graphics based on the molecular structures and data of 7,000 odors and witness the constant downloading and processing of grabbed unaware human portraits. Accordingly, those with the most beautiful faces-the most symmetrical-are assigned seductive odors. The narrative of the interface scripting and design was based on my research on current studies at The Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Urban Ethology,Vienna .The studies support that beauty and symmetry in humans is correlated to body odors. In other words,if you are symmetrical you are beautiful therefore you have beautiful body

odors.SMELL.BYTES TM of course takes a critical stance on this kind of biological classification and Frankensubjectivity.

CS: What happens to the information ?

JM: The information from each CU SEE ME hacked participant has been processed and classified in the “stinky gallery” as a series of numbers and corresponding odors.However the viewers do not not have access to the code. I do.

I created the video projections by appropriating Chris.053’s hacking skills, and as an invisible agent, I can hack into IP addresses and access codes of teleconferencing networks , and also log on onto CU SEE ME chat rooms. Invisible and anonymous, I can join these chat rooms and download patches of live video streams from those teleconferencing participants on line. These patches are recorded, processed, manipulated and projected. As the viewer interacts with the website of Chris.053, the artificial intelligence simultaneously is surrounded by these stolen processed profiles of unaware participants. In SMELL.BYTES TM I have always felt that the author/artist of the project is really Chris.053.

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