ng,thenetworkor tmust one all Duchamp
netor isan a painntdAresearethey hobe
unca   rtwo
atch   anis
unic   srou
ton   etic
Doyo   ebe
ies?   onth
ts o   ault
teme   ic,
nasetof conving" enougis atthes thave

The Surfer's conspiracy.
In conversation with Tom Moody

THE SURFER'S CONSPIRACY.
IN CONVERSATION WITH TOM MOODY

Tom Moody is an artist who had an active role in the Surfing Club era, enthusiastically taking part in Nasty Nets and later dump.fm. He was a lively promoter of this scene, participating in Rhizome's "Net Aesthetics 2.0" panel in 2008, and supporting artistic web surfing throughout flaming threads and heated debates on Rhizome's discussion board. I wrote him because I couldn't wrap my head around some issues regarding appropriation and other dynamics in the Surfing Club context, and I found the most valid colleague for this investigation, which, to my delight, often bordered on conspiracy.

APPROPRIATION & COPYING

Q: In the early days, there was a strand of European net.art – better embodied by artists like Vuk Ćosić and 0100101110101101.org – which heavily relied on the act of copying understood as an overtly political gesture performing against the uniqueness of the artwork promoted by the art market; as a matter of fact, this kind of net.art reflected the heritage of many American and European subcultural movements from the 70s-80s, and later 90s (Mail Art and Neoism *in primis,* then the Luther Blissett Project) which endorsed artistic subversion and plagiarism as their main tools of action. What I perceive in the gesture of appropriation made, for instance, for a Surfing Club post, is less a political act, but more the consequence of a naturalized attitude. Like: "Gee, what to do with all the stuff Web 2.0 spills on our networks everyday? Let's take it and bring it to life again before it gets lost!" In this sense, I see appropriation as a direct consequence of the information overload era, and the output of a new condition in which everything is available and up for grabs, this time for everybody. In your opinion, is this an oversimplification?

Tom Moody: I basically agree with your description, although the Surf Club content could be "political" in the ordinary sense. It was definitely apolitical *vis a vis* any "gallery vs. web" debate. This is something I wrote in 2008 about web content and I think it still holds up (I'm told Jon Rafman had this quote on his Facebook "wall" for a time):

> *Artists, too, have to compete with real world content far more captivating than anything they could come up with, which the Internet effectively gathers all in one place (sneezing Pandas, etc). Two possible responses are (1) to continually rise above it through aesthetic and conceptual framing and posturing or (2) to disappear into it and trust the viewer to ultimately sort out what's going on. The Web is a consumer's medium, not a producer's, so the artist is inexorably led to consumption as a 'practice.' The degree of criticality can only be inferred, not implied.*[1]

Writing in 2015: I think the artist has a place as a creative originator or remixer but the context is not always so clear on the internet, as when you put work in a physical space and shine literal spotlights on it. I think this anxiety over clarity of intent is partly behind the so-called post internet trend (a term I don't use seriously myself).

[1] T. Moody, "Net Aesthetics Trial Balloons", 2008. Online at: <https://www.tommoody.us/archives/2008/06/04/net-aesthetics-trial-balloons/>.

Q: Postmodernist art, like Appropriation Art from the 80s, sprang from the same condition of media overload; surfing here and there I found a nice quiz you made and posted on a Rhizome discussion panel in 2008 [Cfr. front-cover image].[2] You cite Duchamp, Barthes and ask if any of them has any outcome on the artistic practice of the folks involved in the conversation. So I ask you, did you acknowledged any resemblance between the practice of appropriation in the Surfing Clubs and the modes of postmodern appropriation?

Tom Moody: Some Nasty Nets [NN] members were steeped in all those theories, others I would say came by them intuitively. I think to some extent all artists are "net aware" and "media aware" now, just as the entire culture is, because we're online all the time. Many people doing what I consider internet art don't self-identify as artists and in fact would hate to be called that.

AUTHORSHIP & CLOSENESS

Q: About authorship: I've read Brad Troemel's essay "From Clubs to Affinity: The Decentralization of Art on the Internet",[3] in which he claims that Surfing Club members needed to have an authorial status in order to be booked as members in a club. This is something really obscure and sounds elitist at best; would you explain me how the dynamic of inclusion in a club worked? Did one have to be an "acclaimed internet artist" to join the conversation?

Tom Moody: I responded to some of Troemel's arguments in an earlier post on my blog.[4] Here's an excerpt:

> Troemel claims that by Nasty's and other clubs' creation of "a meta-organizational structure within the internet" – this was around 2006 – "not everyone would be able to participate in posting works, though many more viewers would be able to engage the work of prominent and emerging internet artists... due to the convenience of the clubs' unifying site of display." Yet one of the things that was often noted about Nasty Nets was that it wasn't a platform for people's individual art, but everyone had some idea of a "good Nasty Nets post." Troemel acknowledges this, sort of ("Surf Clubs also espoused no specified intention beyond serving as a host environment to a series of visual-conceptual jests"), but then makes great hay of the idea that members had to be "qualified," as in having special talents or credentials. His footnote for that, a Guthrie Lonergan interview, doesn't really support that assertion, in fact would seem to contradict it. Here's the relevant passage from Lonergan:
>
>> In early 2006, I wanted to start some kind of Internet surfing community site with surf buddies John Michael Boling and Joel Holmberg. We rolled around a ton of different complex structural ideas, but we eventually decided to simply start a blog (duh). Marisa Olson helped us get it going... Basically, Nasty Nets was all the surfers I'd met through trading links on del.icio.us who'd already been developing a special "taste" in surfing: a fascination with defaults

---

[2] Cfr. "When you go surfclubbin', don't forget your hat.", Rhizome discuss, Rhizome, 2008. Online at: <http://rhizome.org/discuss/view/37549/>.

[3] B. Troemel, "From Clubs to Affinity: The Decentralization of Art on the Internet", 2010. In ID, *Peer pressure. Essays on the Internet by an artist on the Internet* , Link Editions, Brescia, 2011, pp. 33-45.

[4] T. Moody, "Dissent from the Early Bourgeois Public Sphere", 2011. Online at: <https://www.tommoody.us/archives/2011/01/09/dissent-from-the-early-bourgeois-public-sphere/>.

and a certain kind of banal deadpan. (I'll point to Travis Hallenbeck as the obvious best example of this kind of surfing.) It seemed like a wonderfully unpretentious and playfully nerdy thing to do, for artists who live in different parts of the world to unite though an online club. (Of course collectives Beige and Paper Rad were big influences here...) I love that every Surf Club seems to develop its own rhythm, even without setting forth any official goals or rules something coherent seems to develop organically (like a band). I think after a while, a lot of us felt like NN lost that rhythm and got too big... I've been praying that new Surf Clubs would pop up in its (temporary?) absence– I'm really stoked for Kevin [Bewersdorf] and Paul [Slocum]'s new Surf Club, Spirit Surfers![5]

As Guthrie explains in the paragraph I quoted, "authorship" meant only having a certain "taste in surfing" – there were no credentials or entry requirements beyond that.

At the time I wrote that post I was somewhat defensive that Troemel had focused on the "exclusivity" or "club" nature of Nasty Nets. The word "club" was meant somewhat as a joke – at the time it seemed like a loose coming-together of like-minded "Internet friends."

There was a core group (Holmberg, Lonergan, Boling, Olson) who invited people and handled "admin" chores of maintaining the Word Press blog, but there was no charter, no bylaws, and no one paid dues. It was a casual thing we were doing in our spare time. Almost everyone had other projects going online (blogs, del.icio.us pages) and some, even, were showing in art galleries – Michael Bell Smith and I had both been exhibiting prior to NN.
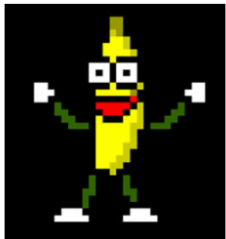
In retrospect because the "club" appeared to be "successful" someone like Troemel could theorize that it had been founded on a principal of exclusiveness. Clique-ishness, maybe, but only in the sense that there were no other cliques around interested in doing that particular thing at that particular time.

Q: In this regard, another differentiation that comes to my mind is this one; net.art was founded upon the dialogue with the user (let's call it "interactivity", even if I personally dislike the term); many net.art pieces only worked with the participation of the other, the public. Surfing clubs, while appropriating user generated content, looks to me like a sort of "walled gardens". I see the Surfing Clubs closure as part of a need to differentiate between artistic and non-artistic practice on the Web, mainly because of the rising of many social networks (Tumblr is the best example I can think of, but, even before, image boards) in which everybody was invited to actually do the same thing artists were doing in a Surf Club. Is this an awful misconception?

Tom Moody: The early net artists had a community based on shared values of art. You can call this friendship or you can call it cronyism depending on the level of cynicism. I believe the Surf Clubs "opened up" this network to more "outside" influences. See Guthrie Lonergan's "hacking vs. defaults" or "hackers vs. defaults" chart, 2007:[6]

---

[5] T. Beard, "Interview with Guthrie Lonergan", Rhizome, 2008. Online at: <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2008/mar/26/interview-with-guthrie-lonergan/>.
[6] G. Lonergan, *Hacking vs. Defaults*, 2007. Online at: <http://theageofmammals.com/secret/netart/defaults.html>.

Hacking	Defaults
Hacking a Nintendo cartridge to make images	Using MS Paint to make images
	12 point Times New Roman
Net.Art 1.0	???
Anxiety	Banality
"The Man is taking away our privacy... that's lame!"	"We willingly give up our own privacy (i.e. endlessly talking about ourselves on our Myspace profiles)... why?"
Empowering The People by subverting The Man's power	Being and critiquing The People by using the tools made by The Man
Rock & Roll attitude	Exuberant humility
Jodi's blogs	Tom Moody's blog
Sophisticated breaking of technology	Semi-naive, regular use of technology

This was because blogging opened up "net practice" (from the old days of fixed HTML pages dependent on collections of hyperlinks for traffic) to the multitude of non-hacker content accessible on the web, due to the ease of linking, reposting, and conversing (via comments or blog-to-blog). The presentation of work was less self-conscious and declared (via artist statements) in the blogosphere era than in the net.art era. You just presented the work and, as I noted above, trusted viewers to sort out your intentions.

I wouldn't describe Nasty Nets as a walled garden – you had to be invited and receive

a login to post on the main page, but anyone could post a comment. There were a few non-members who participated regularly in comments. (The "riffing" that Ramocki talked about in his essay[7] often happened in comments.)

To my mind, again, Troemel and others have made far too much out of the supposed exclusivity of Nasty Nets. It was really not that different from a Tumblr or bulletin board. Troemel saw himself as part of the "Tumblr generation" that was better, more special, more democratic than its predecessors so he had to re-invent Nasty Nets as an elitist organization, to differentiate them, perhaps.

Nasty was "special" because of an interesting "group dynamic" and because it had some institutional recognition. It wasn't started as a career vehicle (though an artist always hopes for recognition).

Q: Again, it's difficult for me to think that Surfing Clubs were actually clubs of artists that really wanted to engage others [and when I say "others" I'm not referring to other artists, but to what Troemel calls the "accidental audience", the common Web user] in the conversation through the comment section. I'm neither polemical nor suspicious, but growing up on Tumblr, which has the appropriative build-in feature of reblog, it's somewhat difficult to grasp. Can you help me?

Tom Moody: I do think that Nasty Nets "really wanted to engage others." It had several regular commenters who contributed to the group. I was interested in a couple of them, Charles Westerman and "Grafik Rakitz" and I would reblog and respond to their comment images. On NN the "accidental audience" was highly desirable – it meant people were paying attention and that spontaneous things could happen. Again, unlike a walled garden or gated community, everybody was excited to be "on the internet" and participating in a chaotic environment.

And NN wasn't that cronyistic – it only looks that way after the fact because several NN members became high-profile "net artists." In my case, I didn't need NN for a career, I already had one, but was interested (and pleasantly surprised) when surf clubs became a "scene."

Q: To conclude on this topic, can you affirm that Surfing Clubs were an attempt to play with, if not to literally downplay, artistic authorship?

Tom Moody: I would say that NN downplayed authorship, yes.

A screenshot of what the site looked like in the first couple of months of existence [next page]. This was the entire group of members for the first year (nine men, one woman – not very balanced). As you can see, everyone is using their real names. But – most of us were not posting our own artwork on the site (or what we thought of as our work). For instance, I wasn't putting up the collages of molecular imagery I was doing at the time.

I can't really speak for everyone but that was my understanding from talking to others behind the scenes. Because it was a site about Internet surfing, people posted things that looked like they might have been "surfed." There may have been artistic modifications but it wasn't announced or understood as, say, "modification of found image by Marisa Olson." That was left a bit mysterious. There was a kind of group consciousness or group vibe at work, which tended to level individual attempts at branding.

---

[7] Cfr. M. Ramocki, "Surfing Clubs: organized notes and comments", 2008. Online at: <http://ramocki. net/surfing-clubs.html>.
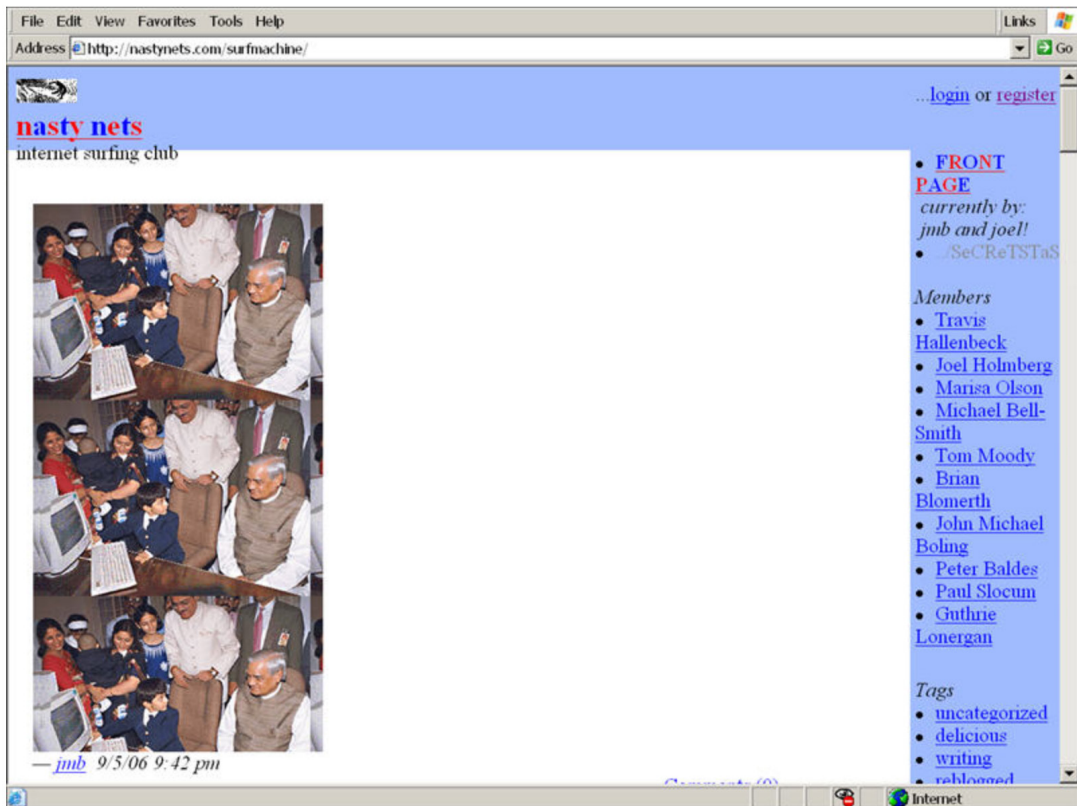
ART/SOMETHING ELSE?

Q: In the heydays of the debate surrounding Surfing Clubs one of the main topics of discussion was: "Is surfing art, and what differentiate a Surfing Club from an imageboard like 4chan?" For instance, McHugh writes[8] that the difference lies in the contextualization, and recurs to Danto's theory to accrue this ("For Danto, viewing contemporary art doesn't involve what the eye sees, but rather what the eye sees plus the theory and history of art surrounding what the eye sees.").[9] Would you agree with him, or do you have a different theory about it?

Tom Moody: To me, there is work you make (in photoshop or a GIF program) either out of whole cloth or from bits and pieces of other images, and there is purely appropriated work, where you find something on the internet and present it either as yours (in a slightly different context) or something you curated. Sometimes you post something wearing your "artist hat" and other times it's just "a cool thing I found on the internet." Nasty Nets contained all of the above types of work. I'm ultimately more interested in "made" work, even recognizing that the artist has a much harder job when millions of images are available and easily searchable.

---

[8] Cfr. G. McHugh, *Post Internet. Notes on Internet and Art*, Link Editions, Brescia, 2011, pp. 169-170.
[9] Ibid., p. 170.

Let's take a Nasty Nets post of mine as an example:[10]

duct homunculus

— *tom moody* 10/15/06 3:10 pm

Someone in the group had posted a link to a web page with "hazardous materials suits." People in the suits were placed next to barrels of dangerous materials. I "remixed" the images by making the barrels into tubes, turning one of the faceless hazmat people upside-down as if crawling out of a tube, and I called the work "duct homunculus." If you recognized the source (and very few did) you could see what I had done to manipulate the image. It's appropriated but it's also a unique work. The presence of unique or hybrid work on Nasty Nets is what made it different from a mere aggregation blog. What makes it different from 4chan is it's not just a funny Photoshop manipulation to get laughs but is a bit more mysterious and obscure in purpose (which to me connotes "art.")

Q: About this, did Surfing Clubs, for instance NN, explicitly connote themselves as artistic or not? And how were they perceived by the Internet art community?

Tom Moody: The answer is, I believe, no. You could say there was a kind of semi-conscious practice of détournement going on but there was no manifesto or announcement that would let any viewer know it was intended as "art." As you can see from the Rhizome discussions in 2008, the Internet art community was upset by this clear lack of a statement of artistic purpose.

SURFING WITH THE GALLERY?

Q: Another thing I cannot get, possibly because of the actual Post Internet hype, is if the debate around the exhibition context was central in Surfing Clubs scene. Was it a topic of discussion at the time?

Tom Moody: Paul Slocum, a member of Nasty Nets, was running And/Or gallery in Dallas while NN was going on but his activities as a gallerist (and the shows Bell-Smith and I had there) weren't a subject of discussion on Nasty Nets. There was simply no "debate around the exhibition context" going on in any of the surf clubs circa 2006-2008. These were purely online activities and everyone was happy to have it that way. Rhizome sponsored a DVD for the group that was sold in the New Museum bookstore, and there was also a video screening associated with that. Rhizome also did an online exhibition (Lauren Cornell's "Professional Surfer")[11] that included NN.
Later, around 2009 or so, some NN members organized an event at the Sundance Film Festival. But aside from these detours, NN was always about working online. Double Happiness did an exhibit at the Vertexlist space in Brooklyn, related to their surf club activities, and there was an event where all the clubs got together at Eyebeam in NY for "the great internet sleepover" in 2007 – this was more like a demoscene meet-up than a gallery happening.

[10] T. Moody, "duct homunculus", 2010. Posted on Nasty Nets, archived by Rhizome. Online at: <http://archive.rhizome.org/artbase/53981/nastynets.com/index1a93.html?p=249>.
[11] Cfr. "Professional Surfer", Rhizome at The New Museum, curated by Lauren Cornell, New York, 2007. Online at: <http://archive.rhizome.org/exhibition/timeshares/professionalsurfer.php>.

Q: In your opinion, when and how did the institution of art start to get interested into Internet art, and in the actual Post Internet movement?

Tom Moody: The art world has had a digital component since the earliest days. Dia Foundation had a running series of artist webpages; the Whitney Biennial in 2002 had a "net art" section, and the Walker Art Center had a full-time cyber-curator.
At a certain point, though, the generation of art students that was spending most of its time on Facebook and Tumblr had a more organic, everyday view of work on the Internet.
What you're calling "Post Internet" is a movement of younger people running galleries with internet-related content, or an online gallery component. The surf club scene had almost nothing to do with this direction.

GENERATIONS

Q: First Surfing Clubs emerged from 2006 to 2008 (Nasty Nets, VVORK, Loshadka, Computers Club, Double Happiness, Spirit Surfers); then, to my mind, another type of more inclusive clubs appeared (like Dump.fm). Is correct to claim so? In your opinion, the more inclusiveness is a consequence of the mass scale diffusion of social networks like Tumblr?

Tom Moody: Group art blogs predated Nasty Nets by several years and I would say they originated in France around '03 with 544x378 Web Tv.[12]
Nasty Nets was the first to use the phrase "Internet Surfing Club" – it was sort of a joke, not a real club, but writers such as Troemel and Chan took it deadly seriously and (as I've been saying) are fixated on the supposed "exclusivity" of the "clubs." Yet, it takes almost no effort to start a Word Press blog and invite a few friends.
Anyone can start one (and in fact have – I participated in a couple of one-off BlogSpot or Word Press group blogs in the last few years). To me group blogs are far more loose and freewheeling (to this day) than the Tumblr environment, where images follow a uniform image-management scheme and the restrictions of the software are imposed on a mass scale.

Q: What do you think about The Jogging? Would you consider it a new "development" of the Surfing Club logic?

Tom Moody: The Jogging is controlled behind the scenes by Troemel (from what I have heard through the grapevine). I would call it a faux surf club. Also, there is a Jogging "style" based on product critiques and sculpture – it is far more restrictive in its aims and content than Nasty Nets ever was. A huge step backwards, in my opinion.
The one person who I felt "got it right" after Surf Clubs was Ryder Ripps, with Dump. fm. Dump.fm is much smaller than Tumblr and feels more like Nasty Nets to me (as a regular participant in both). Dump has open registration but it's sometimes closed due to heavy trolling and creation of spam accounts. Anyway, the site wasn't made "open" at the outset because the Surf Clubs were "closed". It was open to attract potential users – it wasn't a pure "art" site. Ripps invented a completely new model, based on the old IRC chatrooms, that isn't a Tumblr or a group blog (but incorporates some of the same features of each). Dump.fm is everything Troemel claims and wishes he is. As truly democratic as the structure allows, and subsisting for years on an "accidental audience" that is also actively participating.

---

[12] 544x378 Web Tv. Online at: <http://544x378.free.fr/%28WebTV%29/FFFFFF.htm>.

April 2015