IN AT THE DEEP END

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE WORLD'S BIGGEST INTERNET PIRATES INVADED ONE OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST ART EXHIBITIONS? CURATOR **JAN AMAN** SENDS US AN EMAIL ABOUT PUTTING TOGETHER THE VENICE BIENNALE'S FIRST VIRTUAL ART SPACE, THE 'INTERNET PAVILION'... AND HOW WEB ANARCHISTS **THE PIRATE BAY** BECAME INVOLVED

PHOTOGRAPHY **MATTHEW STONE**

"PadiglioneInternet.com is the first ever internet pavilion for la Biennale di Venezia. Conceived by the Greek-born artist Miltos Manetas, it is the opposite of a pavilion being defined by borders and nations. It will open its virtual doors at the opening of the 53rd Intl Art Exhibition and close down at the end of the Exhibition as any other pavilion. The event is curated by Jan Aman."

Padiglione Internet by Miltos Manetas, from June 7 to November 22

— *Exhibition Programme*

Re: *Padiglione Internet – some simple starting points...*
From: *Jan Aman, 12/07/09*

In 1855, the French artist Gustave Courbet submitted his now-famous painting "The Artist's Studio" to the World Exhibition in Paris. Although nobody realised it at the time, Courbet, the prophet of Realism, was making history by calling his painting "a real allegory". Instead of the old symbolic figures, he was painting people from real life – not just those writers, thinkers and poets that had influenced him (Proudhon, Baudelaire, Champfleury), but also priests, prostitutes and workers. All of those people portrayed were based on real, living characters, but also carefully chosen to tell a story – Courbet wanted his painting to display his thoughts about society at that time... what were the consequences of this new industrial society? And what could art's role be in it? The painting was refused. But, using his own money, Courbet rented a venue just next to the world fair, and displayed the painting anyway.

Fast-forward to 2009 and our Courbet-inspired *"Padiglione Internet"* (Internet Pavilion). It digs into a series of contemporary issues – threats of political restriction, the future of the internet, copyright, the art world itself; of borders, markets, curators, collectors, city marketing, and artists... the list goes on. It does so because of the fact that it is a *virtual* art pavilion, and as such the first of its kind at the Venice Biennale. All of this was clear to me when my co-curator, Miltos Manetas, came up with the idea, and it has become more and more evident as the journey has unfolded.

It all began when Daniel Birnbaum offered us the chance to be an official part of the Venice Biennale, but to be there as an independent (although still part of the official structure – a "collateral project"). Miltos paid for this independence out of his own pocket. The Internet Pavilion therefore had a special position – in Venice, these collateral projects are the official sideshows, evaluated and accepted by the Venice Biennale, but not paid for. To be collateral denotes official status, and comes with a spread in the catalogue, and some promotion. Except for the Internet Pavilion, all the collateral projects are produced either by nations that do not have a national art pavilion of their own, or by large, official organisations.

The rest of the Biennale consists of course of the national pavilions, with their invited artists in the main curated exhibition (this year, under the theme of *Making Worlds*), all of which is organised on commission and under supervision from the board of directors. So, all artworks at the Biennale have gone through a series of evaluations to become an official part of the exhibition. That's how it works.

The Internet Pavilion is an outsider by definition – there has never been anything similar at the Venice Biennale before. The *Padiglione Internet* is a collateral project inside the Venice Biennale, but from the point of view of an independent artist, with an independent curator. Miltos (with me as sidekick) understood the possibility of being collateral – so, I asked my old friend Daniel Birnbaum if it was possible. He was very enthusiastic about the very idea. Miltos paid the fee – and, almost without knowing it, we were a collateral project and an official part of the Venice Biennale 2009. This gave us what we wanted – the opportunity to act in a different way. The

internet points directly towards Gustave Courbet and art's strange relationship with the world beyond the art world, with "reality". And that reality is why the internet and art are not an easy match. The internet is fluid, changing, connecting, without borders and not at all tangible. I guess that is why there is so much at stake, globally, regarding the internet at the moment. The internet's existence is in opposition to a world that relies on industrial control. It is, quite simply, a new global reality, attracting millions and millions of users, and producing more statements per minute than anyone can handle.

The internet is all that the art world claims to be... or wishes it was. But the art world is, in reality, small. It is confined. The art world has not changed much since Courbet exhibited that painting in 1855. Its *raison d'être* is to produce saleable, physical objects within a small industry of connoisseurs. But the art world is schizophrenic – it may be confined, but its marketing value is that it promotes ideas of "reality", "change", "freedom", "the new", "transformation"... People go to Venice to experience this "freedom" of art, and to get a glimpse of the reality from the point of view of the artists... but what is not so evident is that it is all launched from a confined art world and displayed within the walls of controlled exhibition spaces. The art world loves, in the tradition of Gustave Courbet, to embrace reality. In fact, the Venice Biennale could be seen as a huge "real allegory", with loads of artworks that claim to show the reality of today's society... but without Courbet's carefully planned scheme.

We decided to use the internet pavilion to let in this much talked-about reality, which is hard to avoid when dealing with the internet. Daniel Birnbaum understood

INTERNETS
The internet is now producing "Internets". These are situations that exist not only online but also in real space. They are governed by what is happening online.

INTERNET
Internet is our "country", the only territory it makes sense to defend, to protect and explore. Internet is our second chance for a New World, a real "America", a potentially democratic and fair country where the resources are exploited by everybody.

RESOURCES
The land of the internet is one of information. Men should be able to use this land freely, corporations should pay for use – a company is definitely not a person.

VIRTUAL AND REAL
"There isn't anything 'natural' in nature, my son," says a fawn to a young man in a film by Pasolini. There isn't anything "virtual" in virtual space either – it just unfolds around us and envelops us, just like real space does.

CENSORSHIP
Censorship is the main business of power. The fact that, in our part of the world, the internet is not yet attacked as brutally as it is in many other countries, is only a side-effect of the economy. It also depends on the fact that those in power haven't yet found the exact science that will give it control of everything, in the way the church was doing in the Middle Ages through religion.

INFORMATION
Information wants to be copied. Digital information wants this even more. In terms of digital, we can give everything to everyone at once – we can finally *share*. Around this realisation, a new social class is instinctively rising up – not a working class, but a class of producers of content and software. It's not a coincidence that many artists, programmers, musicians and writers are creating and supporting things like Napster and The Pirate Bay.

SLOGANS
"Websites Are The Art Of Our Times". "Outside Of The Internet There Is No Glory".

FUTURE
There isn't any "Future". I hate Futurisms because they are simply the tale that power tells to people so they will keep working even harder than they had been before.

NAMES
Everything in my life starts with a powerful name. I spend huge amounts of time in projects such as the one called "Neen", and now the Internet Pavilion. Names and terms are the closest realities we have to gods and spirits – from a mere fantasy they take up life, and they require dedication and sacrifice. I was ready to spend the winter in Argentina, doing pretty much nothing, when the idea of an Internet Pavilion knocked on my door. The Biennale was an excuse to launch the project; the exhibitions are not relevant anymore.

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that it would be difficult to introduce an internet pavilion that did not reflect the internet itself... but he had a tough time when the Pirate Bay's "Embassy Of Piracy" opened (a collaborative online art project created by the notorious Swedish peer-to-peer filesharing website, promoting freedom of the internet). The Biennale people wanted what they have always had, the one thing that has enabled them to maintain their brand – control. Rumour has it that they phoned from Rome on the morning that news of our pavillion went out. So, while we were talking with different stake-holders of the internet (commercial, non-commercial, pirates...) to see what their reaction was to the idea of an internet pavilion, we also remained a little vague to begin with, so we didn't get kicked out of the Biennale.

Essentially, the *Padiglione Internet* is a container rather than an exhibition – it is a platform. It's not propaganda in itself, but a host of different other entities, such as the Embassy Of Piracy. It collects different modes, attitudes and wishes that want to bring the art world together with the internet. It does all of this to create a platform for observations. In some ways, we acted as a Trojan horse for reality... for the reality of the internet, such as the Embassy Of Piracy. This way the internet pirates became part of the Venice Biennale. The EOP acted as its own entity. There was no way of stopping them. And God knows, we never tried. The EOP also made it clear that they themselves did not know where it would all end.

"WE ACTED AS A TROJAN HORSE FOR REALITY...THE INTERNET PIRATES BECAME PART OF THE VENICE BIENNALE. THERE WAS NO WAY OF STOPPING THEM"

So, there was suddenly a project within the official structure of the Venice Biennale that nobody could control. Not us. Not the Biennale. Not even the pirates. Nobody. The Embassy Of Piracy brought in the world, and they brought in action and activism. And it brought in a way of being that is based on collaboration instead of the "I" of the individual artist. It brought in the New World. Suddenly things became visible, tangible. The art world. The world of the internet. The world of politics.

The *Padiglione Internet* has its roots in a tiny, confined art world – but it made a connection to the big world. We invited in a virus, something uncontrollable – that energy around the Pirate Bay – just to see what would happen. We did invite others but it was really only the pirates that responded. They wanted to go to Venice. Nobody else cared. Or were too scared. To me, the EOP is not primarily about copyright issues. It is about the possibilities of a new world. But it is produced by people that understand marketing – and the issue of copyright is one that gets the attention. In the context of the Biennale, the EOP was all about letting in a new reality – one that tells a different story about the future to an art world that is still stuck in 1855.

A couple of weeks ago, the Pirate Bay temporarily renamed itself the Persian Bay – installing proxy-servers and many other elements designed to help the preservation of the internet and free communication in Iran – well, then it was obvious. The Embassy Of Piracy, the pirates, and a whole generation of internet users are "digging into" and

even changing reality. For me, getting a glimpse of the "pirate generation" has been a learning experience – the world truly is changing and big things are at stake. We are at a crucial moment. The pirates are confronting it all, they are not letting reality down. They act. And they do so with a smile.

So, the *Padiglione Internet* has only just begun. The other entities, the internet shows on this site, the AIDS-3D performance, the stuff that will be added during summer and up until the closing of the Venice Biennale, will all add to the story, forming a "real allegory" of today – Palle, Kristin and Tobias of the Pirate Bay... laughing; Daniel Birnbaum smiling, the board of directors behind him, worried; François Pinault (art collector) as the new Walt Disney of Venice; Joseph Brodsky; Jay Jopling in a boat taxi; the people in Iran... and, in the middle, the artist, still alone, with a desert of black screens and the sound of an ever-changing wind.

Previous pages: internet artist Rafael Rozendaal testing the water in Venice. Above: all of the artists and musicians associated with the Embassy Of Piracy at the headquarters of the project, SALE Magazzini del Sale, a squat near the Pinault Foundation in Venice