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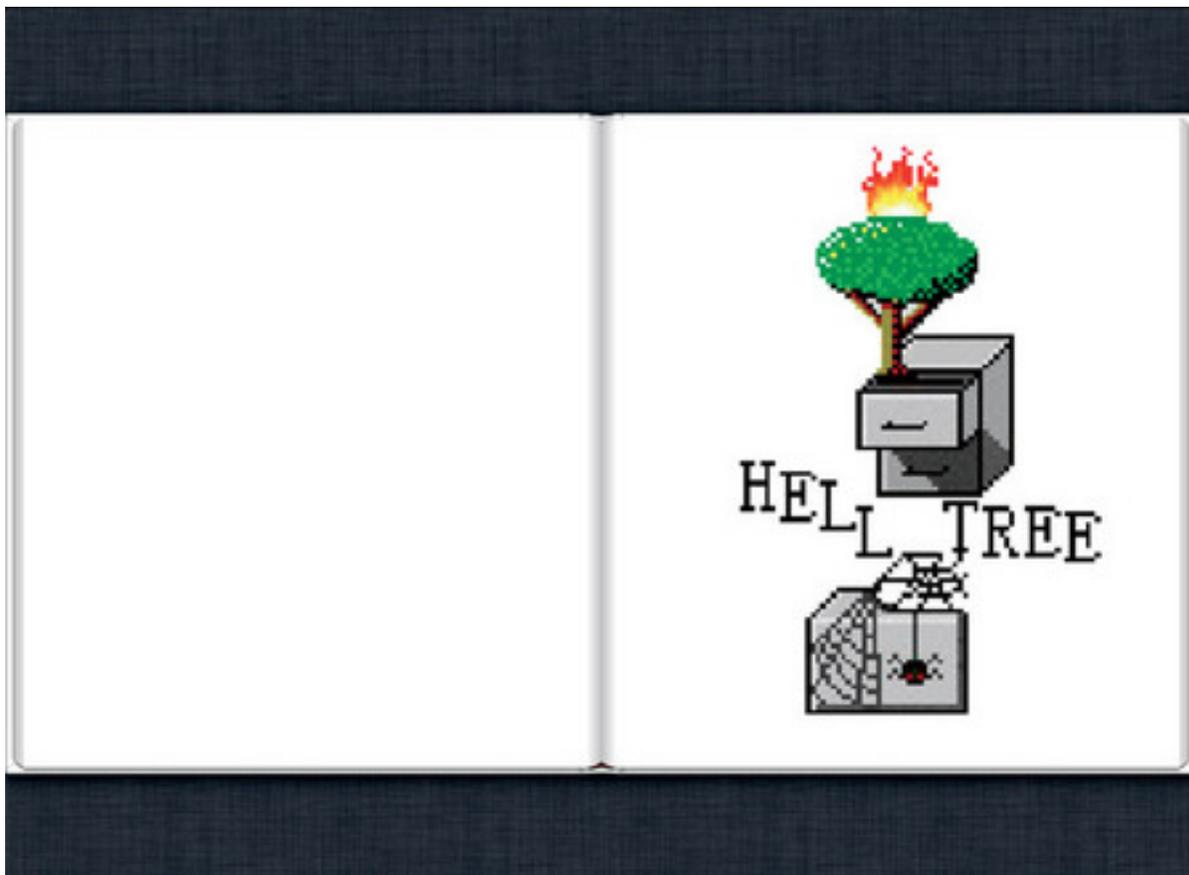
ARTFORUM

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CLOSE-UP

Data Mine

BRUCE STERLING ON PETRA CORTRIGHT'S *HELL_TREE*, 2012



Petra Cortright, *HELL_TREE*, 2012, e-book.

EARLY NET ART was like building ships in a bottle: arcane, difficult, and little appreciated. It was generally best pursued when cooped up in a state-sponsored computer lab in newly liberated Estonia.

Petra Cortright is a contemporary Californian Net artist, born in 1986. She's had a computer since she could walk, and was spared the earlier era's ideological warm-ups and tortured justifications. For Cortright, computers and social networks are as convenient as a watercolor set.

Cortright's artwork is commonly all about being Petra, a unique state of contemporary being best explored through YouTube videos, graphic FX, slider bars, and pull-down menus. She comes across on screens as a Mariko Mori figure, although younger, blonder, suntanned, down-market, and with a subjectivity thoroughly fractured by social networking. Her "sick" aesthetic is all about digital media systems being coaxed, warped, tricked, or shoveled into unplanned and unplannable performance spaces. Unlike most new-media artists, who are as fussy about their precious hardware as any touring synth band, Cortright will work on almost any gadget available. Any venue is great, too. Art galleries, communal meetups, Twitter, Flickr, LiveJournal, Myspace, Facebook, Tumblr, YouTube—New York, Berlin, Los Angeles, Mexico City—they're all good.

Her material is scraped from the abyss of Internet pop culture: 8-bit clip art, animated GIF files, free screen savers. Polka dots, dinosaurs, sparkles, fake flames. This dazzling clutter is deployed within a twentysomething Millennial cam-girl universe of back rooms, torn stockings, black fingernail polish, lizards, kittens, chickens, and pug dogs. The affect here is not so much nostalgic "retro" as bottom-feeding punk thrift store, or, better yet, one of those giant, folksy automobile-crushing facilities from the Tarantino Los Angeles of *Pulp Fiction*.

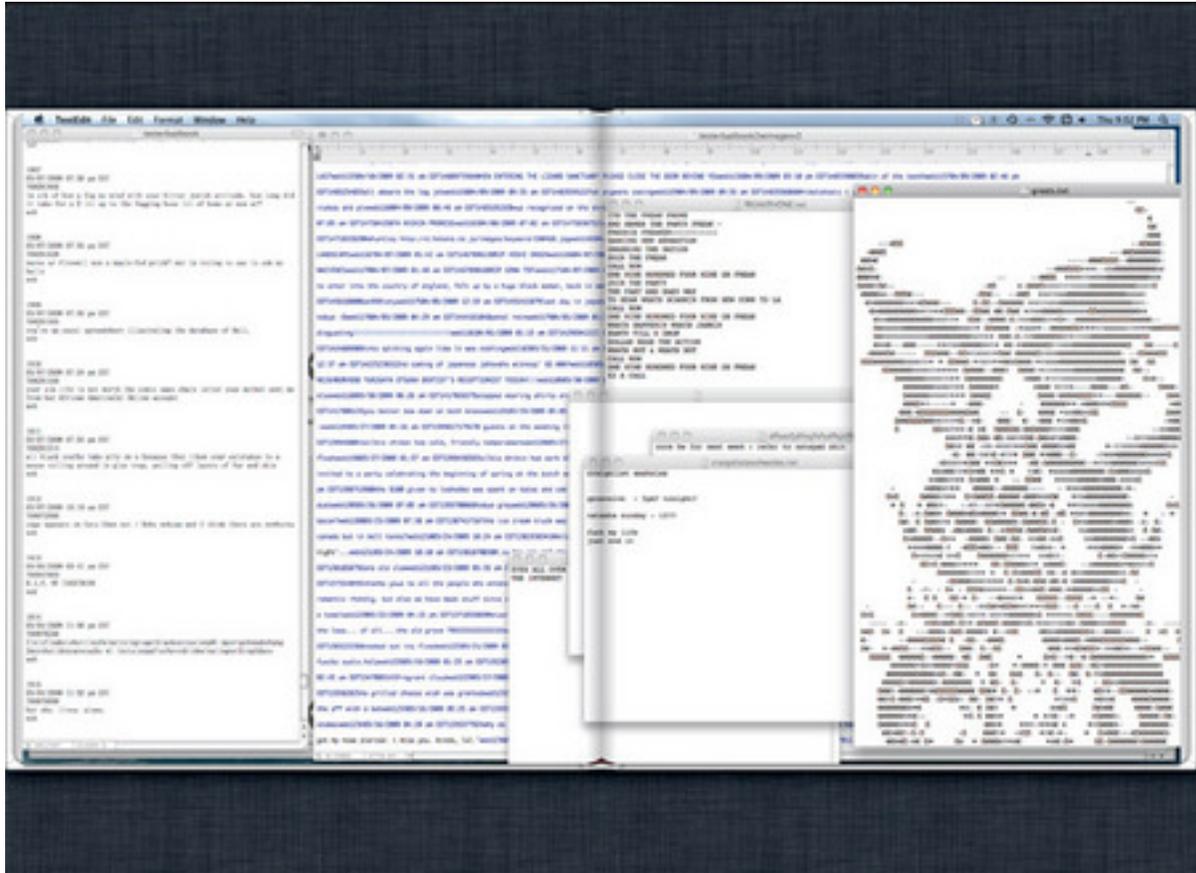
Mind you, these are pulverizingly effective works of Net art. Clear-eyed, dainty, and intuitive, they're weird in a way that Net art has never been weird before. The stiff technical constraints and hacker bravado have been blown away and replaced by a polymorphous digital-native approach in which software feels gooey and ductile, all spray cans and airbrushes.

Cortright's what-the-hell, manic-pixie attitude extends to every possible aspect of computation. Her spelling is irregular, her punctuation barely there; files appear in no particular order and are named the likes of "SNOWFLAEKS" or even "35asgyewwm." Her works are created in surges of inspiration and composed on aging home computers maxed out with external hard drives, webcams, and Wacom tablets, not to mention iTunes, Chrome, Notepad, Skype, Photoshop, µTorrent, and After Effects all running in tandem. Every Cortright artwork possesses a ruptured facade, the result of digital methods that have been pushed until they break the surface and reveal the bones of the software.

There's an endearing slyness about this that is soaked through with the artist's highly personal sensibility. It's truly new and unusual for Net art to carry such an intimate stamp, such a trackpad full of smudgy fingerprints. Part of this arises from the work's diaristic, exhibitionist air, its willingness to flail away in a back bedroom, YouTube cam-girl style. Mostly, though, it's about a startling intimacy with the means of digital composition. Maestros of software are supposed to value its high

Formica sheen; they're never supposed to be tender, intimate, and forgiving about its bugs, stutters, freezes, glitches, and compression artifacts. Even glitch artists commonly play up the scariest, most alienating aspects of machine failure. Cortright's mouse, on the other hand, is like the yarn ball for a kitten—the playful failure is half the charm.

This brings us to Cortright's recent e-book, *HELL_TREE*, 2012 (published by Badlands Unlimited). This publication compiles hundreds of fitful, fragmentary human collisions with the machine, experiments that she had swept up, casually named by pounding the keyboard, and stuck into a single jam-packed folder so as to get them out of the way.



Petra Cortright, *HELL_TREE*, 2012, e-book.

A “tree” is supposed to be a neat and logical branching arrangement of files. “Hell” is what arrives when you know what a tree is but can’t be bothered. Once the folder yawns open, all these tree leaves—screenshots of computers in hopeless disorder, debris that might have been blog posts, to-do lists, lamentations, search terms, or gibberish word-processing experiments, a TextEdit window containing raw text from an entire Twitter archive, most anything that splattered out of the fingertips and onto the hard drive—are piled up in fungal compost heaps of ultra mess.

There’s a whole lot of lively Cortright “sick stuff” heaped inside *HELL_TREE*, mostly material that might be called “notes” or “poetry”—text with lines such as “waaaaaaay

too much tiger balm but i can't undo wats been done," "I swam off far, but here you are"—but it's safe to allege that even the "author" can't read it front to back. The "book" is not so much a "text" as a machine-warped portrait of geek girl as artsy cyborg in which she drags you onto the hard drive and abandons you to make your own way.

This work offers the precise opposite of the steely minimalism that Steve Jobs hoped for from his user base. It reflects, however, the true native attitude of Millennials. They grew up with computers and the Internet, and can watch stony-eyed and unmoved as vast billion-dollar enterprises such as Myspace and Nokia are discarded like hamburger wrappers. The entire computer enterprise is a centerless, auto-mangling hell tree where engaging in even the tidiest personal habits is like sweeping up after the bedrock's been fracked and is oozing goth flames. Why conceal the many skeuomorphic tensions in this destabilized rubbish? Even the sleekest, best-designed laptop is a California carnival of fake desktops that aren't desks, immaterialized trash cans, e-mail senselessly shaped like paper envelopes, and other campy tributes to an analog order now far beyond anybody's reach. The young adults among us know this best, because they've never seen computers otherwise.

Reading the book is like finding a lost, sticker-covered iPad, whose owner left its screen bewitched with hairy stains from her fur-lined Meret Oppenheim coffee cup. You kind of want to give it back, because it's got her e-mail and some personal pics and all that, but, well, old iPads don't work that well anymore, and besides, she already got another one and moved to another town.

Nowadays, that's just how it is.

Bruce Sterling is a writer based in Austin, Belgrade, and Turin, Italy.