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# Digital Debris in Internet Art:
# A Resistance to the Epistemology of Search

**Abstract**

The paper, explores the idea of digital debris in Internet Art. Here, I will understand digital debris as words typed in search engines and which then disappear; bits of obsolete codes which are lingering on the Internet, abandoned web pages, broken links or pieces of ephemeral information circulating on the Web 2.0 and which are used as a material by practitioners. While many anthropological and ethnographical studies are concerned with the material object of the computer once it becomes obsolete, very few studies have analysed waste as digital data. The study intends to demonstrate that such instances of discarded hidden, elusive and ephemeral pieces of information are to be found in art practice. More specifically, it is within the framework of Internet Art practice that digital debris are frozen in their fluctuating course and gain visibility. The paper will focus on two works, symptomatic of two different eras in the development of Internet Art, i.e. *Jodi.org* by Jodi (1993) and *Data Diaries* by Cory Arcangel (2003).

**Keywords:** debris, digitality, information, ephemerality, memory.

If German media theorist Wolfgang Ernst has stated that the future of media archaeology lies in data trash excavations (2013: 140), the essay will depart from the object-oriented ontology defended by Ernst and will examine at the methodologies deployed in the recycling of digital debris for artistic purposes. Accordingly, the critical focus will shift from a cultural investigation of discarded data through the contexts in which a piece of work is produced to the internal logic and processes at play within a piece of Internet Art. It will be shown that digital debris can be used as a critical tool to undermine

what art historian David Joselit calls the "Epistemology of Search", the act of recycling, re-framing images instead of producing new ones. As such, I'd like to argue, that the appropriation of digital debris deploy a strategy, which creates a halt, a pause or a slowing down of the logic of networks. The essay will be an opportunity to map out the ways in which the Epistemology of Search is subverted by digital debris. In order to question the status of digital debris once they are incorporated, and considering that the notion of digital debris I'm submitting is a contingent conglomerate of information, I will anchor the argument in a historical perspective by referring to precedents in the manipulation of language and will consider to what extent the method employed in the retrieving of digital debris is a renewal of the *procédé* used by Raymond Roussel in his *New Impressions of Africa* (*Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*). The paper will also underline the consequences of the system developed by Jodi and will address the onto-logical parallel that can be drawn between Roussel's language and Jodi's in which artifices are instrumentalised to subvert networks.

In his book *After Art*, the art historian David Joselit asserts that contemporary images hold power in their capacity to replicate, remediate and disseminate at 'variable velocities' (2012: XIV). Joselit hopes "to link the vast image population explosion that occurred in the twentieth century to an epistemology of search" (2012: 89). For him the Epistemology of Search symbolises the 'breakdown of the era of art' where 'art', 'defined as a private creative pursuit leading to significant and profitable discoveries of how images may carry new content, has given way to the formatting and reformatting of existing content.' (Joselit, 2012: 89). Thus the author shifts the critical focus from art production to what images do once they enter circulation in heterogeneous networks. The book is an attempt to identify the circulation of images and the configuration of links and connections they create in heterogeneous environments. The pattern of dissemination and connections of these images is what Joselit names formats. It reads:

> formats are nodal connections and differential fields; they channel an unpredictable array of ephemeral currents and charges. They are configurations of forces rather then discrete objects. In shorts, formats establish a pattern of links or connections. I use the term link and connection advisedly because it is through such modes of association, native to the World Wide Web, that composition occurs under conditions of image population. (2012: 55-56)

The format defined by Joselit doesn't take into account the content of what is connected but stresses that 'in economies of image overproduction' the key is 'connectivity'; this is the Epistemology of Search' (Joselit, 2012: 55-56). Following the idea of connectivity regardless of what is connected, Joselit also explains that what matters now 'is not the production of new content but its retrieval in intelligible patterns through acts of reframing, capturing, reiterating, and documenting. What counts in other words, is how widely and easily images connect.' (Joselit, 2012: 55-56). At first sight, it seems that the re-appropriation of digital debris seems to echo the act of reiterating, retrieving

and reframing that Joselit is articulating. It could even been argued that digital debris would act as agents which, by connecting bits of information from different contexts, facilitate an Epistemology of Search. However, on closer inspection, I'd like to submit that the two examples of Internet Art studied here are actually manifesting signs of resistance to the Epistemology of Search.

*Data Diaries* offers a contemporary account of a work, which explicitly deals with digital garbage, i.e. documents that are necessary to run a computer but which are hidden under the sleek interface of the software and which are left aside in the RAM of the computer, which may be why British art historian Julian Stallabrass argues that there is no trash in digital information (2009: 180).[1] *Data Diaries* is an exercise of *RAM fishing* which consists in looking for pieces of information, which are stored in the RAM of a computer. Data in the RAM never gets erased but is re-written until the computer shuts down and restarts. As a result, data, which have been generated and accumulated during the use of the computer, is accessible. At the time when the work was produced, a QuickTime file was made of two components, a header and the data. In *Data Diaries*, Arcangel disassembled the header from the data and then erased the data each header corresponds to. Since a QuickTime file has no error system, by activating only the header, Arcangel tricks the computer and forces the machine to play any kind of data stored in the ram. The artist repeated that action every day during a month and thus revealed the hidden data that has been generated. The result is eleven hours of video material fragmented in 31 short videos, one for every day of the month.
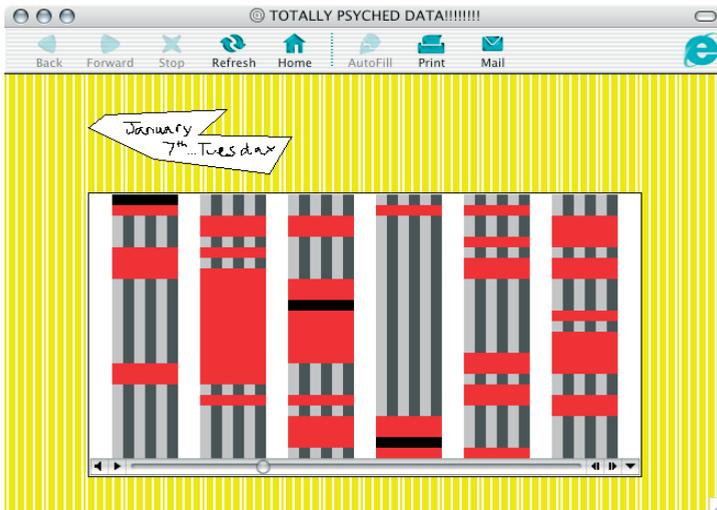


**Fig. 1.** Cory Arcangel, *Data Diaries* (2003) screen capture at http://www.turbulence. org/Works/arcangel/ (reproduced with kind permission of the artist).

The work is a collection of short videos with sounds that are data generated and time based. Interestingly, the procedure carried out by Arcangel recalls the systems

that LeWitt was setting up for himself in his late 60's drawings. Both start from creating a set of rules and instructions for the work to perform in and let the system doing the work. LeWitt's heritage takes on a new meaning for Arcangel is actually digitalising and thereby radicalising the approach that LeWitt initiated. Arcangel is setting up what Manovich calls a low-level of automation, "in which the computer user modifies or creates from scratch a media object using templates or simple algorithms" (2002: 32). Even if, in *Data Diaries* the computer doesn't start from scratch it nonetheless modifies, through automation, the "media object", here the debris, it retrieves by rendering them visible. It could be argued that the work, by conferring visibility to the data it is manipulating, undermines the transparency of the interface as a medium, which remediates. Ultimately one starts to realise that Arcangel's work is not solely about an aestheticisation of obsolete data but about an instrumentalisation of dismissed data. The instrumentalisation of data is rendered possible through what new media theorist Lev Manovich names transcoding. In his *Language of New Media*, the author stipulates that transcoding is probably the most substantial consequence of the computerisation of data. According to Manovich, New Media is comprised of two layers, i.e. the 'computer layer' and the 'culture layer', which can overlap and intersect with each other through transcoding (2002: 63). Arcangel, by offering to the viewer a psychological reading of his computer memory is turning digital debris into an autonomous system, which turns upside down the status of the interface. Since digital debris are themselves the projection of a cultural concept onto a technical reality, they allow dialogue that takes place through the interface between the computational and the cultural.

Following up Arcangel's account of discarded data, it appears now that digital debris represent a conflation of the computational, the cultural and the interface. According to cultural and media theorist Alexander Galloway in his book *The Interface Effect*, interfaces are spaces in themselves. The computer screen is no longer a passage such as a window or a door for communication to get through nor is it a point of mediation or a connection between physical space and virtual space. For Galloway, the interface contains another layer: the intraface. Galloway defines the intraface as a zone of indecision between two opposite directions the edge and the centre. The intraface is a not a threshold but a zone which belongs to the aesthetic and within which the edge and the centre are "subsumed and contained within the image" (Galloway, 2012: 41). As Galloway states it (2012: 26), communication is absolutely successful when completely transparent, when the means of communication become unnoticeable, as in Arcangel's *Data Diaries*, the interface becomes intraface and delivers an imperfect communication. It is that imperfect communication which resists the Epistemology and Search. Consequently, the intraface becomes an autonomous zone of activity, which also impacts, among other relations, on the interaction with the viewer.

Interestingly, it seems that there is also the aestheticisation in which the debris are inscribed, once they are incorporated into art practice, that allows a slowing down the Epistemology of Search. Among the first generation of Net artists, Jodi's practice with

its viral aesthetics represents the most striking implementation of the waste aesthetic. In 1993, The Dutch/Belgian duet of artists working under the name of Jodi created a piece called *http://www.jodi.org/*. The piece represents an instance of early Internet graphic design and has been subject to several reconfigurations throughout the years. The website opens on an unintelligible jumble of green texts, figures and punctuation which are all flashing and mimic the appearance of a computer virus. The webpage then leads to an enigmatic map of the website where links redirect to a series of dead ends filled up with Internet debris which send the viewer back to more dead ends. The piece, in its aesthetic, borrows elements from a military vocabulary and as such reminds the viewer of the origins of the Internet. *Jodi.org*, comprised of various fake webpages, broken links and constructed glitches, deliberately nurtures an aesthetic failure which is also viral, where technology imitates technology and mirrors itself in an endless maze riddled with digital debris that have been created for the piece and not always retrieved from the Internet. Thus Jodi's deploys an allegorical stratagem, which aims at blurring the lines between artifices and the architecture of the web. Such an allegorical or to put it differently detoured approach to the debris Jodi is using, is what enables the duet of artists to install a halt within the Epistemology of Search. Such a pause of the Epistemology of Search is rendered possible thanks to the implementation of artifices in data, which lures the viewer and creates a fiction out of codes, thus undermines the functionality of codes by employing them just for their aesthetic qualities.
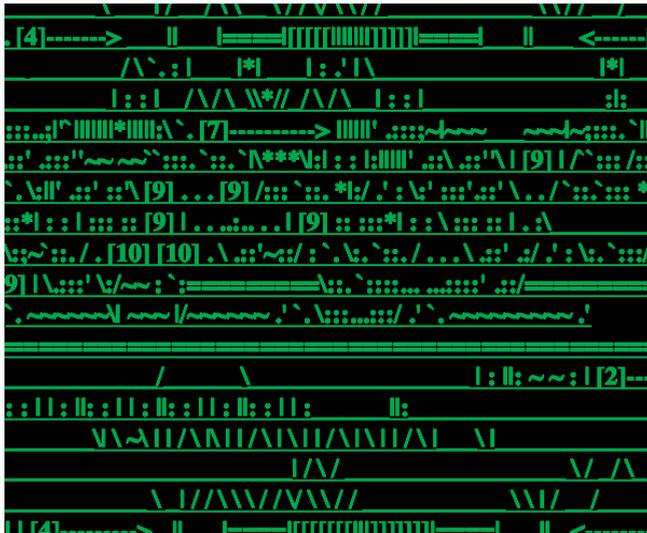


**Fig. 2.** Jodi, *www.jodi.org* (1993) screen capture at http://www.jodi.org/ (reproduced with kind permission of the artists)

The posture towards data that Jodi is experimenting seems to resonate with what French playwright and poet Raymond Roussel pioneered with language. The most visible trace of such an enterprise is, Roussel's *New Impressions of Africa*, which stands out

from his previous writings. The book is comprised of four cantos, which all together describe, for the most part Roussel travels to Egypt and his imaginative depiction of the battlefield after Napoleon's victory at the Battle of the Pyramids in 1798. The poem seems to function as a list, a sort of dictionary in verse an enumeration of debris found in the aftermath of the Battle of the Pyramids[2]. Yet, *New Impressions of Africa* wasn't composed according to the same principles as for instance his novel *Locus Solus.* Michel in Foucault in *The Death an The Labyrinth*: *The World of Raymond Roussel* points out that Roussel only partly revealed some of his stratagems. Indeed, *How I wrote certain of my books*, written by Roussel and published after his death in 1933 conceals more than it reveals. The book is meant to give clues to decipher some of Roussel early novels but completely omits some of the most important works as a playwright and poet. Thus no lead is given to understand *New Impression of Africa*. As Roussel declares it: "It goes without saying that my other works, *La Doublure*, *La Vue,* and *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, are absolutely outside of this process" (Foucault, 2006: 7). Here by "process", Roussel refers to the *procédé*, according to which for instance he substitutes some of the letters of a word that won't change dramatically its sound but which completely alter its meaning, leading to a playful sense of confusion in the reader. As Foucault stipulates, one shouldn't forget that *How I Wrote Some of my Books* is before anything else one of Roussel's book and as such one is led to think that his last book too, contains its own secret. In other words, the book is meant to be deceiving, refusing to clarify the poet's most important works by focusing on minor plays. Thus, according to Foucault, Roussel's *New Impressions* is partly allegorical since the meaning of the text is hidden, detoured in a system that inverts the structure of the poem by placing parts of the structure, the *procédé* what Foucault calls the horizon on the foreground and the meaning of the verses in the background. In a similar fashion, *http://wwwwwwwww.jodi.org*/ reverses the relationship between interface and network. Therefore the flashing jumble of green text that the viewer faces as she or he enters the website happens to be the HTML source code of the diagram of a bomb. The diagram appears in a new window if one clicks on the source page tab of his Internet browser. Thus, the message of the website is revealed underneath the *façade* of the work which is displayed online. I would like to pose that the strategy adopted by Jodi shares some of this enigmatic principle and throughout the revealing of data that they are undertaking, by highlighting some links and connections within the network of the web Jodi, in a quite Rousselian fashion conceals more than they connect with the network they are using. A little bit like Roussel, by explicitly displaying the structure of the opening page, Jodi are concealing some aspects of their work too. Indeed, like Roussel, with his planned strategy of revealing his practice, Jodi are turning their work in a form of oxymoron figure, which conceals as it illuminates, rendering the work even more impenetrable. The viewer is left to decide what is real and what is fake, what is a debris and what is an artifice, the secret of *Nouvelles Impressions* is not disclosed in *How I wrote certain of my books*, for as Foucault concludes, if it would be possible to completely explain Roussel's

poetry and plays by virtues of some codes and secret it wouldn't be a Rousselian piece. Indeed one of the specificities of *New Impressions* is the extensive use of parentheses that Roussel is performing. The poet builds a system of long sentences into parentheses, which are nested into several layers of parentheses. *Nouvelles Impressions*, unlike others Roussel early works, with its use of parentheses unfolds a process of elucidation. As Foucault puts it:

> In *Nouvelles Impressions* it takes the strange form of an ever-expanding elucidations always interrupted by the parenthesis of a new light shed on the subject. (2006: 9)

Each parenthesis that Roussel deploys is like another room in Jodi's website. Here the poetical parenthesis echo the use of < and > that each Html tag requires. For the author of *Death and the Labyrinth,* the reader of Roussel's poems is thus led to read them as one walks into a subterranean corridor. As in Jodi's website where the viewer is navigating in a succession of digital passages, Roussel's poetry becomes a mineral web that leads quickly from a 'banality to a treasure', from the real to the impossible. The expanding elucidations, not only form a labyrinth through which the reader's imagination evolves but turns the poem into a 'dark machine' as Foucault puts it which by use of repetition creates a void where meaning is swallowed up and 'words hurl themselves in pursuit of objects, and where languages endlessly crashes down', leaving the reader with an infinite indecision (Foucault, 2006:138); like in Jodi's work where the inner structure of codes, hyperlinks are crashing upon themselves as to create a viral aesthetic. In parts, *New Impressions* seem to have been exposed to some semantic explosions, which have turned, the whole poem into a battlefield scattered with fragments and consequently generates more and more debris. According to Foucault, the incorporation of all the parentheses, acts as, "explosive light[s]" (2006:9) that break the rhythm of the descriptions by promising to elucidate the examples Roussel chooses. However, the promises of elucidating the text are quickly interrupted by the intrusion of another parenthesis which instead of shedding "another brightness, originating from the preceding one" to the text, holds and, suspends time (2006: 9). The use of parenthesis is one the principles according to which Roussel is -for Foucault- immobilising meaning (2006: 24). Meaning is also immobilised through a pause that's occurring within the doubling of language and where an "enigmatic figure rises at the threshold of language: a motionless close-up which withholds its own meaning" (2006: 22). Foucault enthusiastically describes every Rousselian poem as a party, but silent parties, like a mute *fête galante*. At the same time still and frightening.

If Foucault describes *New Impressions'* meaning as being immobilised or as a fortress (2006: 9), John Ashbery also shares this point of view and describes the Rousselian poetry as being crystallised. He even borrows a metaphor that Henry James used in *The Golden Bowl* to translate the hidden relationship between the Prince and Charlotte. For James, the hidden relationship between the two characters is like an elaborated pagoda without any visible entrance. For Ashbery the analogy with the pagoda reflects the

understanding that "behind their polished surface an encrypted secret probably exists". Ashbery adds that it is "this persistent feeling of not knowing precisely what he is up to paradoxically adds to the potent spell of the writing" (1991:16). Jodi seem to have inherited from Roussel's intention. *Jodi.org* represents instances in which the viral aesthetic at play displays an incomprehensible grid of coloured codes which themselves open to a vast variation of codes. The codes seem to be partly readable and as such strengthen the frustration of the reader and the understanding that there might be some reason and logic behind what is immediately perceivable.

The generative aspect of the poem is developed as a stylistic device which aim is to duplicate language. Thus, throughout the 415 verses of the text and the 200 examples that Roussel is describing, the author has dislocated language to such an extent that it becomes doubled.

> The result is even more effective because the sentence being repeated no longer refers to things themselves but to their reproductions: sketch, cryptogram, enigma, disguise, theatrical performance, a spectacle seen through glasses, symbolic image. The verbal doubling is carried on at the level of repetitions. (2006: 25)

John Ashbery who talks of a "stereo effect, which enhances the experience", also comments upon the doubling of language in Roussel's work (1991:16). If, for Roussel words duplicate things and language lifts from itself the object it refers to when you repeat it, Jodi's manipulation of data separates the codes and the information it refers to in order to incorporate a separation with the medium which supports it. Language in both Roussel and Jodi's case has a revealing power. In the instance of Roussel's poetry, Foucault explains:

> It's as if the function of this doubled language was to insert itself in the minute separation between the imitation and what it imitates, to bring out the flaws and duplicate that imitation to its greatest extent. Language is a thin blade that slits the identity of things, showing them as hopelessly double and self-divided even as they are repeated up to the moment when words return to their identity with a regal indifference to everything that differs. (2006: 25)

According to Foucault, beyond Roussel's monotonous wave of language, there is a question regarding the validity of language to depict things and its deceptive nature. In Roussel's world, the loyalty of words is "imperfect" and the reader can't trust them. According to the poet words "should represent the things that are their proper masters but instead they distort and degrade them." Like the data employed in Jodi's work, "words are bad actors who botch their roles. They are copies made of used, leftovers, pre-fabricated and reprocessed materials" (2006: ix). Roussel was preoccupied with the prefabrication of words, and has exhausted their artificial quality in order to reveal their distinct betrayal nature. *Jodi.org* seems to bear some concerns about the status of words as visual artefacts. By aestheticizing digital debris, Jodi is creating an assemblage in perpetual oscillation between its statuses as a semantic object and a visual artefact. It is that unstable and on-going nature of digital debris as a continuum of infor-

mation that intervenes within the Epistemology of Search. The Epistemology of Search feeds on a saturation of the network it is located in. In order for the Epistemology of Search to function as a system, it needs to not only connect images between themselves and to re-capture them in different fashions, but it needs to do so by creating intelligible patterns of links and connections through the agency of formats. According to Joselit, formats have the capacity to be a "configuration of force[s] rather than discrete objects" or "nodal connections and differential fields" to "channel an unpredictable array of ephemeral currents and charges" (2012: 55-56). A format is the digital equivalent of an analogue medium, it "regulate[s] image currencies (image power) by modulating their force, speed, and clarity." (Joselit, 2012: 52-53). By their process-based dimension, digital debris, once they are displaced in a piece of work, undermine the capacity of formats to clarify the images they are connecting. Through the act of blurring they undertake, the digital debris observed here, complexify the task of formats that strive to isolate intelligible patterns of meaning within the saturation of networks.

   It was intended in this essay, to introduce the specificities of digital debris in art practice and to unpack the ways according to which they are infused with a form of criticality, which is disturbing the Epistemology of Search as, defined by Joselit. As a preliminary stage, I have outlined the conceptual framework of digital debris and have introduced the notion of Epistemology of Search. The aim of the study was to perform a microanalysis that would encompass the polyformic nature of the processes at play in the retrieval of digital debris in Internet Art. It has been shown that digital debris undermine the Epistemology of Search following three main strands. First, through the example of Cory Arcangel's work, I have demonstrated how digital debris were actually revealing the hidden underlying architecture of the web and how that affect the validity of the notion of a transparent interface. Then, the paper focused on the idea of artificiality and confusion as a way to distil the logic of the epistemology of Search. As such, digital debris, because of the displacement they've been through and the new meaning they acquire once displayed in another context, complexify the meaning of the interface and creates an assemblage of significance which weights down on the Epistemology of Search. As Jodi describe it in an interview with Net-Art theorist Josephine Bosma, "the work we make is not politically oriented, except that it stands in the net like a brick" (Bosma, 1997). In this instance, I would like to submit that the brick Jodi is mentioning is an assemblage of signification that, temporarily, creates a halt in the Epistemology of Search and which thereby renders their work political.

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1  The piece *Data Diaries* was commissioned by Turbulence in January 2003 and is still accessible through the site http://www.turbulence.org/Works/arcangel/.

2  The poem has been written in a caravan with blinded windows that Roussel had built for himself so that he could compose his poems without being distracted by the sight of the outside world.

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