A celebration of twenty years on the Web: *My Boyfriend Came Back From The War*

Annet Dekker in conversation with Olia Lialina

Educated as a journalist and film critic, and curating experimental film programmes in Moscow, in the mid-1990s Olia Lialina quickly embraced the Web and started experimenting with its unique qualities. She made her first net art piece, *My Boyfriend Came Back From The War* in 1996. Four years later she set up the *Last Real Net Art Museum* – an initiative to oppose museums that were presenting the first ‘Internet art exhibitions’, and a place on the Web where she could collect and exhibit the projects that responded to *MBCBFTW*. Ten years after she made her first net artwork, in 2006, in their popular book *New Media Art* (Taschen) Mark Tribe and Reena Jana wrote about *MBCFTW*: ‘One indicator of the historical significance of Olia Lialina’s 1996 Net art project, *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War*, is the numerous times it has been appropriated and remixed by other New Media artists. (...) Perhaps it resonates with other artists because it is among the earliest works of New Media art to produce the kind of compelling and emotionally powerful experience that we have come to expect from older, more established media, particularly film.’

In the meantime, Lialina had moved on and in addition to her online art practice, wrote about new media, Digital Folklore, the vernacular Web, co-founded the Geocities Research Institute, and became an animated GIF model and a professor at Merz Academy in Stuttgart, whilst the ‘mini-drama in hypertext’ *MBCBFTW* continued to be of interest to many artists, curators and critics. For its fifteenth anniversary, The Creators Project described *MBCBFTW* as a ‘charmingly simple yet poignant work’, emphasising its importance for the history of net art and its longevity through its interpretations. At the moment, as Lialina tells me, the project is discussed on Twine – an open source tool for telling interactive, nonlinear stories – where people communicate with each other about this ‘early Twine’. It is therefore not surprising that 2016 starts with two anniversary exhibitions, opening almost at the same time but in different frames, of *My Boyfriend Came Back From The War. online since 1996*. In what follows I asked Olia Lialina to reflect on the lasting popularity of the work, her intentions for making it, and her ideas about ways to go forward with it.

**Can you tell me something about your background, how did you end up being an artist and a professor?**

Twenty years ago I was absolutely happy with what I did: writing about films, curating film programmes, trying to make my own films. But as with many who embrace the World Wide Web (or were embraced by it) when it left academia in the mid-1990s – I was lucky to have a sudden new life and career. I became an artist only because *MBCBFTW* became a piece of net art. And I could become a professor four years later because of it :)

**Could you briefly describe what the work is about?**

In my teens I came up with the sentence ‘My boyfriend came back from the war, after dinner they left us alone.’

Мой парень вернулся с войны

И вот мы остались одни

And I always wanted to complete it as a poem, but the next lines never came. Years later, still confused about the phrase, I made it into an ambivalent dialogue with the browser: dividing it into frames. It was never about a war, but about a difficult conversation that doesn’t lead anywhere, and of course about the browser. I wanted to make something that people would spend time with and look at in the browser. This was also possible back then because the connection was much slower – so it took time to go through it. This has changed a lot now: HTML adapts to faster speeds, and most of us aren’t used to waiting – or loading time – anymore. You cannot click slowly if something is fast. That is also why we artificially slowed down the Internet connection for the exhibition.

**When you started working on the Web, you came from a background in journalism and film. What sparked your interest in HTML frames?**

They were very new at the time, not every browser supported them and you had to install the Netscape 3 version that had just been released – although in specifications I see now that it also worked in Netscape 2, but I remember that it didn’t back then. So, at the time it was cutting-edge technology – even though there was already a ‘I-hate-frames’ movement on the net, which I only discovered later. For me, it was interesting to see that a browser window could be divided up: you could assign coordinates, partition the screen and have multiple HTML documents within the same window. It sounds naive now, but at the time it was very empowering: I felt like a hacker, I could decide what it looked like and how it functioned.

And it reminded me of celluloid. I used to work with experimental 16mm film: cutting and pasting frames together. The editing was a way to work with the material, not just a concept. So, the connection between film and browser frames was something exciting. At the time I always talked about *MBCBFTW* as a net film. Someone more familiar with CD-ROM art, programming or interactive art would probably see it differently, but for me using frames inside the browser was a way to edit – it was a direct transition from being a filmmaker to a net artist.

While preparing the inventory table with all the elements of *MBCBFW* for the exhibition and reviewing the HTML code, I saw so many mistakes that I felt a bit ashamed. Mona Ulrich, one of my students, and I noticed warning after warning while reading through the code. So, it’s not only an old code, it is also very buggy, but despite all that it still works! That is the great thing about HTML, it has a very high tolerance, and it’s very forgiving if you write ‘bad’ code. It allows you to make mistakes: it’s not even that it was easy to learn, but rather that you didn’t really have to learn it at all.

**In 2000 you started the *Last Real Net Art Museum*, as an initiative to collect and present interpretations of MBCBFTW. Could you explain the context and purpose of the *Last Real Net Art Museum*?**

The *Last Real Net Art Museum* was a provocation to museums who in the late 1990s and early 2000s started making their own online net art exhibitions and collections – and at first they seemed to succeed, but it turned out they didn’t. In my title, ‘Real’ meant that an online collection should be based on links, because the net was about making links to people, information, etc. A good example was äda ’web designed by Vivian Selbo and curated by Benjamin Weil for the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis between 1995 and 1998. Because this and other projects ended, another phenomenon started with museums like the Guggenheim, Tate and Whitney who acquired copies of Internet art and just kept these somewhere on a floppy or a CD, or showed the work in a pop-up window on their website – for me this was not real, and rather disrespectful of the artworks. And ‘Last’ meant that this previous method was completely disappearing.

The *Last Real Net Art Museum* was also sort of self-referential because of the *First Real Net Art Gallery* that I made in 1998, where I sold net art. It wasn’t a gallery selling offline art online, but people could buy online art for the first time. Since the *First* gallery was still well known in 2000, and to make the connection between the works, the second one became the *Last*…

**Talking about museums and collections, was *MBCBFTW* ever acquired?**

Yes, there is a copy at Telepolis, which was sold for what I thought back then was the amazing sum of 300 German Marks, but it was above all a statement. It’s also in a museum collection, MEIAC (http://www.meiac.es/) in Spain, and has been bought by a private collector, too. There is one more edition left. For this one I think it makes sense to sell the complete package: a computer, a monitor with the right resolution (800 x 600) a slowed-down server connection, an emulator with the old Netscape browser and all the other settings. Everything is emulated, simulated and fake, but the work is alive in its most precious state.

I have also adapted the work at certain times, for example around 2006 I added Google Ads to the website, not to become rich, but to reflect the Web of that time. Without the Ads it seemed old-fashioned and I wanted it to be alive and contemporary. About a year ago I removed them, because they made the work look outdated. It was interesting to see what Google thought suited the site – mostly non-governmental sites. Unfortunately, I never captured this version. That’s the irony – part of me is very much involved in preserving the Web, but when it’s about my own work, I change things immediately and forget how it was before.

**The adaptations to the medium are striking in all the different interpretations. Seeing all the works next to each other illustrates a historical technical lineage of online practices: from HTML frames to blogs, games, video and VR. In a sense the Web seems almost to be little more than a constantly changing technical environment. Many have argued that this emphasis on medium specificity is one of the reasons why it took/is taking so long for net art to be taken seriously by the traditional art worlds. How do you view the relationship between the concept and the technical or formal aspects of the work?**

For me the main concept and message of the work is the medium specificity. When thinking about the *MBCBFTW* exhibition we noticed now that it is also about the development of the Web. Yes, it has many technical translations. For example, the work by Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn (previously known as *Entropy8Zuper!*) was made in Flash; it was interactive and had sound, and for that time it was the most obvious software to use. Then Blog and Twitter versions were made, people kept changing it to other realities of the Web. What is interesting though is that the last interpretation, by Inbal Shirin Anlen, brought it back to its original classic HTML structure. The variations are some sort of tribute to the medium: these can range from manifestations of particular elements, to an aesthetic message or a personal statement in the medium.

I strongly believe that there is no contradiction between medium specificity and a mature conceptual message. For that reason I also think that it’s important to always emphasise how the work is made – it just being ‘art’ is not enough; I cannot forget about the Web or the net. In my article ‘Flat against the Wall’ of 2007, I wrote that while it is fine that Web art is part of the art market now, it would be a tragedy if we lost its connection to the Web. It can be a topic of contemporary art but it should stay part of the new media art scene.

**For the exhibition you choose specific interpretations. What were your criteria for this selection?**

We had to make a selection because some things have been lost. At the time of the *Last Real Net Art Museum* I thought it was important to just have the links to the works rather than showing copies of the works. So, unfortunately now some works are missing because nobody saved them, the Internet Archive didn’t capture them, and the artists (some of them students at the time) said they didn’t have their work anymore. For example, Web comics were popular at the beginning of the century and someone made a version in that style, which unfortunately didn’t survive either.

In the exhibition we left out works that had a similar structure, but almost all of them are featured in the book that was made for the show by *House of Electronic Arts* (HeK) in Basel, for example, *Don Quichote Came Back From The War* (2006) by santo\_file group. But we also left some out of the exhibition that – perhaps surprisingly – were just too difficult to show such as the beautiful animated gif by Mike Konstantinov. He made this animated gif in 2000 and it was widely used for and known as a website banner. This work was a typical banner, 468 x 60 in size, and because it doesn’t use any of the images from the original work is also mimicked the cheesiness of banners. In the book it is printed frame-by-frame, but it’s difficult to show the banner phenomenon in an exhibition. We thought of several ways: put it on a random website, or against a black background, but in the end we decided not to present it at all. It just didn’t work.

Another example that isn’t included in the exhibition is Roman Leibov’s work. Leibov is the unofficial father of the Russian Internet. In the mid-1990s the Web in Russia had a strong literary tradition, it was all about games with words and meaningful and innovative hypertexts, including of course many references to Russian literature. I made *MBCBFTW* in English to intentionally distance myself from this tradition. I wanted to create something very formal because I’m very interested in the structures of the browser, the frames, etc. Had I made it in Russian it would have ended up in a different culture. At the time it was a massive effort, because English wasn’t my language. Then I asked Roman Leibov to make a text version and post it on the Russian Internet, which he did. He took every frame and described it like a film critic, and it ends with a monologue, making it into a piece of literature.

**How do you see this type of approach now? To me at times it seems there is much less experimentation with templates or in the browser**

Yes, it’s more difficult to be curious now. The browser is still generous, you can open the source code and look at it, but it’s very complicated to change the code, if you can do it at all. The gap between people looking at and those making the pages has become enormous now. At the time it was easy to copy and modify other people’s pages, but now it is much more difficult to do this.

In this sense, perhaps, Blingee is my favourite place to go at the moment. It is a creative community where people fulfil their wish to make something themselves, where they can construct something from other people’s material. It isn’t because they can’t afford Photoshop, it’s about finding things made by others and reusing them such that they become completely different, and also that those layers can be made visible again, showing the elements that have been used. All the layers in the images have value and they are there to be admired. You can also see the tricks people use to fool or misuse the system. Unfortunately, there isn’t a Blingee version of *MBCBFTW* yet.

**What I like about the work from an historical point of view that it consists of two types of archives: the table with all the information and components that are necessary to reconstruct the work, and the living archive of different people’s interpretations. Which method do you prefer?**

The archive is an interesting part. *MBCBFTW* consists of many files, yet it is only 72 KB in size, which is smaller than a small image today.In the early 2000s I wanted to write about the life of a work of art, its making, what is important to keep and its preservation, even though I didn’t think it was necessary for net art. Now I see that it does make sense to write down all these details, so Mona Ulrich and I updated the old table for the exhibition. The table shows all the files, their sizes and which one is used in what frame. Even if someone has never seen the work, it could be reconstructed by following the information on the table. Maybe someone should try it sometime.

However, thinking about the future of the work, I prefer the interpretative approaches, because they are closer to my way of working. I’m also happy, and proud, that people take it as a structure and build something else out of it. I also think it’s interesting to see to what extent it can still be recognised as being an interpretation of *MBCFTW*, what are those elements? For example, Ignacio Nieto made a tribute for the Chilean soldiers who died in the mountains, it’s his story, and he merely used the same frame structure, but he asked me whether he could make and show the work. It is a bit strange of course, because I don’t have a patent for the frames, yet the specific use of the frames is one of the work’s main characteristics. I also noticed that most people keep the left frame intact and the frames to the right proportionally become smaller. Perhaps it’s similar to the golden ratio in design, but then for frames. A final characteristic is that all the interpretations always end with nothing, with black frames.