Net Art and the Missing Percent at Traditional Museums of Art in Portugal

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Since the 1990s, a few traditional museums of art throughout the western world musealize Net Art, which is an important indicator of its artistic, cultural and historical value. Despite the respectability that it now deserves, in Portugal the initiatives that contribute to enjoy and understand art practices related to the internet are still scarce. Traditional museums of art have paid little attention to it, and barely any to artworks by artists and technology experts based in Portugal. In this paper I reflect about the absence of Net Art in these cultural institutions. I present the interesting case of Museu do Chiado – the National Museum of Contemporary Art first website and the online gallery Site-Specific created along with it, in the early 2000s. I then provide a context to the initial technological environment in the country and problematise the "gap of institutional invisibility" that the only interactive and generative artwork commissioned by a museum has fallen.

Net Art in Portugal. Museu do Chiado. Site-specific online gallery. LIA and Miguel Carvalhais. Museum websites.

1. INTRODUCTION

Net Art developed with the stabilization of the internet infrastructure in the 1990s. Since then, working with networked computers has attracted several artists enthusiastic about the creative potential of computers at the intersection of art and society.

For some Portuguese artists, the internet became an extension of their conceptual art practice, leading to freely exploring the possibilities of visualization, interaction, experimentation, and communication that this medium promotes. Despite the existence of a small but active community of artists and enthusiasts, Portuguese traditional museums of art have paid little, almost none, attention to it.

The exhibition and collection of digital art, where Net Art is included, has developed at different speeds throughout traditional museums of art. In 1995, the Whitney Museum of American Art was one of the early institutions to acquire Net Art. The Centre Georges Pompidou began acquiring digitally born objects in the early 2000. The Victoria & Albert Museum first born-digital and software-based artwork came into the collection around 2011.

Since early, curators, artists and related experts have discussed the challenges digital born art practices, such as Net Art, pose to traditional museums (Paul 2008, Cook 2010, Dekker 2018). Much research has already been conducted that problematizes this phenomenon (Depocas et al. 2003, Serexhe 2013, Grau et al. 2019, Artut et al. 2021).

Figure 1: View of Museu do Chiado entrance hall from Rua do Capelo, in Lisbon, Portugal. Photo by the author, 2024. © Sofia Ponte.

However, the Portuguese cultural context dedicated to digital art, has been radically alienated of such discussions. This paper presents an early, if not the only, attempt to collect Net Art by a state museum in Portugal, Museu do Chiado – The National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC), Figure 1, and reflects about the lack of awareness for safeguarding digital born artworks in the country.

2. NET ART AND ITS EARLY DAYS IN PORTUGAL

Apart from the exhibitions "Inter[in]vention" (2013) at Fundação Eugénio de Almeida, in Évora, "Under the Clouds" at Serralves Museum of Art, in Porto, "Electronic Superhighway (1966–2016)" (2017), "Playmode" (2019) and "Cybert Art – Works from the Itaú Cultural Collection" (2022) at Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT), in Lisbon, art practices related to the internet have received very modest attention in Portugal. Here, as in any other place with a steady internet infrastructure, Net Art initially took place in peripheral meet ups and get togethers.

Figure 2: *Visitors at the exhibition of Net Art organized by the Prévia Festival at Forum Romeu Correia, in Almada, 19-21 November 1999. The exhibition included artworks by Miguel Leal, Fernando José Pereira, Ricardo Eschevarría and Jodi. Photo by Nuno Ferreira de Carvalho © Nuno Ferreira de Carvalho.*

Many of these events were organized in an anti-institutional, experimental, and collaborative way. One of their visible faces was stimulated by Virose, a cultural association founded in Porto, in 1996. It fed its "Arena" mailing list and organized activities dedicated to art and media technology. Other of the visible faces of art and media technology were the festivals *Atlântico,* organized by Zé dos Bois, in Lisbon, with editions in 1995, 1997 and 1999; *Pré-Via: electro music, video art, net art,* in 1999, as in Figure 2, and *VIA,* in 2000, both taking place in Almada; and *Número,* from 2000 onwards.

Along with these get-togethers, some influential academics in the field of Communication Sciences organized conferences and meetings as well

promoting discussions between intersections of art, culture, communication, and technology. These initiatives provided opportunities to discuss interdisciplinary approaches, bringing together local and foreigner artists and technology experts.

A few landmark conferences, such as *Inter@actividades*, in 1997, *Cyber 98* and *Cyber 99*, gave emphasis to the enthusiasm felt around digital art which was "more easily accepted by the public than other forms of traditional visual arts" (Fraústo da Silva 1998,ß 3). Fraústo da Silva's remark is a relevant demonstration of the expectations felt by a young generation of artists eager for a greater democratization of the fine arts in Portugal.

2.1 Net Art definition

In this research I consider artworks that use the internet as their main medium, i.e., that depend on a computer network to function and that cannot be "experienced in any other medium or in any other way than the network" (Brøgger 2015, 20). But also, artworks that mirror a wider-reaching art phenomenon that is produced "for" and "by" the internet. I do so because there are offline artworks that use the computability mindset, protocols and specific tactics that come out of the use of the internet. Such works include surveillance cameras, communication graphics, links, video games, net radio, NFT and GPS systems, that sometimes appear in the shape of an installation in a physical space.
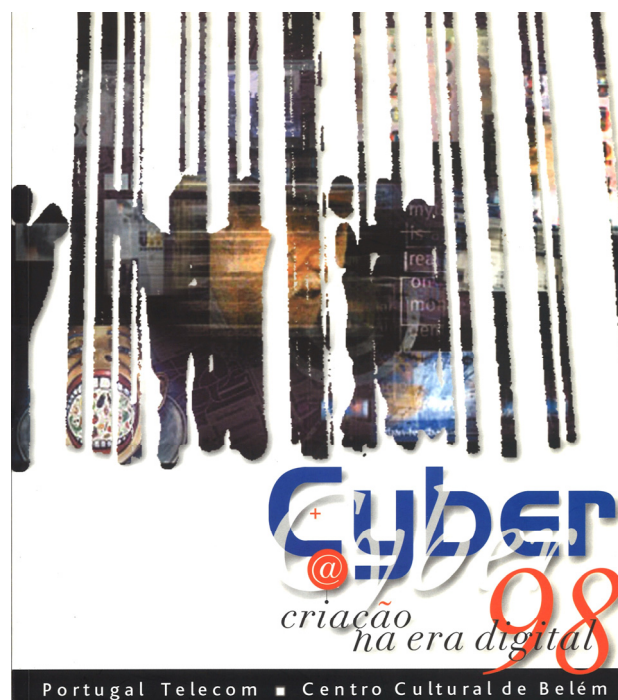

Figure 3: *Cover of the catalogue Cyber 89 conference organized by Portugal Telecom and Centro Cultural de Belém, in 1998.*

Contemporary art has progressed in ways that allows one to consider other extensions of Net Art "that revolves around the appropriation of web-based content" (Olson 2009, 274), bringing extra values to its enjoyment and understanding. Technology is embedded in infrastructures, and cultural contexts that have become influential in the way one thinks and behaves. This is the case, as well, of some of the early Net Art in Portugal.

At the time "Cyber", as in Figure 3, was one of the most frequently used prefix to name activities that related art and computer technology networks. However, this is not the case in other cultural contexts as examined by Bosma (2011), Connor (2015) and Brøgger (2015).

3. MUSEU DO CHIADO – THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

The integration of net artworks in traditional museums' collections has not gone through a homogenous musealization process. Each institution has its history, and a legacy of decisions made by the people part of it, that impacts what is collected. The Whitney, for instance, includes net artwork in its collection of "Net Art and New Media Art," the Pompidou fits Net Art in its "Film and New Media" subcollection, and the V&A integrates it in its "Digital Art & Design" collection.

In Portugal state art museums, such as Museu de Serralves, Museu de Arte Contemporânea (MAC/CCB), or Museu do Chiado do not have a specific category for media art or digital art yet. Here the tales of these institutions are better represented by narratives of struggles to solve functional problems than by gallant gestures to collect art. Additionally, the museums still perpetuate the most common historization of art, which "has been widely criticized but not entirely put aside" as pointed out by art historian Pinto dos Santos (2019, 37). The Museu do Chiado, founded in 1911, was initially led by well-known artists with a mix of advances and setbacks managing strategies that at the end produced a rather conservative museum and "ritual site" (Duncan 1995) detached of the progress of Portuguese society.

The development of the field of Museum Studies has increased an understanding of the virtues of state-run museums in Portugal, but also their limitations. In general, their modernization process has been characterized by being fragmented, non-uniform, and poor (Carvalho & Matos 2019). Many complex political and social phenomena are at the origin of this. The country's dictatorial regime, between 1926 and 1974, developed a sophisticated censorship system that limited education and cultural activity,

contributing to cultural shallowness for many years (Barros 2022).

The democratic revolution brought immediate freedom, however the first years of democracy in the country were marked by political instability. Cultural policies were neither consistently planned nor implemented, which is mirrored in the erratic development of the Contemporary Art State Collection (CACE) created in 1976.

After Portugal joined the European Economic Community (EEC), in 1986, a more sustainable investment in the field of culture was felt. In 1991, the Portuguese Institute of Museums (IPM) was created, structuring an integrated museum policy (Camacho 2014); The same year, the internet became steady through a project funded by the Fundação para a Computação Científica Nacional (FCCN), the Portuguese Foundation for the National Scientific Computing. And in 1995, its commercial access spread in the country accelerating its democratic usage.

When a sole Ministry of Culture was established for the first time, strategic and technological initiatives were created, reinforcing national plans to modernize state museums. The internet was part of this step. Initially it was used for the creation and updating of inventories, documentation of collections, their digitization and subsequent availability online, and later for the creation of museum websites (RPM 2002). It was in the context of this early step of digital transformation in state-run museums that, along with other nine institutions, Museu do Chiado created its first website.

Figure 4: View of the Museu do Chiado entrance hall from Rua Serpa Pinto, in 2024. Photo by the author. © Sofia Ponte.

3.1 Museu do Chiado first website

Like many other art museums in Europe, Museu do Chiado's initial purpose was to be a place for the education of young men attending the Academy of Fine Arts, that operated half walls with it. Students

would come to the museum to look and copy the artworks as part of their training. The museum holds a collection of Portuguese art, from 1850 to present day, i.e., from early Romanticism to Post-Conceptual Art, Figure 4.

In 1987, the museum closed its doors due to the degradation of its reserves and facilities. It reopened in 1994, after major rehabilitation works along with a renovation plan, at the time coordinated by art historian and curator Raquel Henriques da Silva. In 1996, art historian and curator Pedro Lapa was named its artistic director. Lapa was most engaged in bringing the museum's legacy closer to contemporaneity, while developing an acquisition policy for its collection.

He initiated the art program *Interferências* (1998–2002), that intermingled the temporary exhibition of contemporary art with works in the collection, to "review meanings that modern art contains and questions that it raises" (Netparque.pt 2000). This included exhibitions by Jimmie Durham, Stan Douglas, but also Lourdes Castro, and Francisco Tropa, for example.
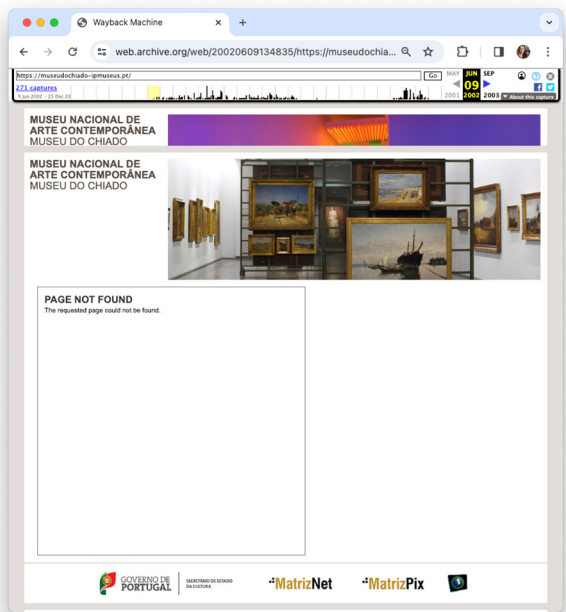

Figure 5: *Screenshot of Museu do Chiado's first website, archived in the WayBackMachine, by the author.*

Besides directing the Museu do Chiado, Lapa curated trailblazing shows, such as "More Works About Buildings and Food" (2000) at Hangar K7, in Oeiras, and "Disseminações" (2001) at Culturgest, in Lisbon, considered as opportunities to "re-evaluate everyday life and subjectivity" (Pinharanda 2001). Finally, a growing number of cultural institutions were synchronizing with contemporary art and its contemporality. It is in this context of somehow unparalleled institutional proximity with

daily life that Museu do Chiado's first website included an online gallery for Net Art commissions.

The website was launched on 17 May 2002, in a governmental initiative in the scope of the celebrations of the International Day of Museums. For a while, a computer was placed in the entrance hall of Museu do Chiado for visitors to access it from its facility.

Museu do Chiado's first website embedded the ambition of its director to strengthen the museum's footprint by providing space online that would be "an extension of the museum's exhibition space" (Ferreira de Carvalho 2019).[3] Its program of Net Art aimed at maintaining a "relationship with the public" beyond the museum's physical grounds (Matriz 2003). Following the conceptual approach of its artistic director it hoped to intermingle Net Art commissions to either Portuguese or foreign artists (ibid.).

Besides governmental reports and news publication, a few studies mention this pioneer online gallery. Curator Luís Silva refers to it in his text "Portuguese Net Art from 1997-2004", that follows an online exhibition he curated. Silva (2005) reflects about the lack of recognition of Net Art in Portugal "as a legitimate art practice", highlighting the only exception in the country, the Museu do Chiado "specific area for online projects on its new website" (ibid.). Margarida Carvalho refers to Museu do Chiado's website and its "section exclusively dedicated to net.art" (2009, p.117) in the single published study about art and the internet in Portugal, until today.

3.2 Site-specific online gallery

The website created in the early flow of what is designated as Web 2.0, was designed by studio revdesign, and embodied the great fervour cyberspace had at the time "as a poetic space infinitely expanded" (Carvalho 2009, p.116).

It was designed using HTML + CSS, PHP, and MySQL, which allowed segments of its webpages to display contents independently from their container. This permitted diverse types of information (text, video, image) to be dynamically viewed side by side and each section to be scrolled independently. Though incomplete, Figure 5, shows instances of the website homepage. In its header several rotating images are shown.

The website accommodated the online gallery *Site-Specific,* dedicated to "unpublished projects by artists interested in exploring the aesthetic, conceptual and technical conditions of this medium," as indicated in its presentation text, in Figure 6.

Although the museum planned to develop an international program of commissions, only one came to life. This was the interactive and generative

audiovisual artwork "%" (2002) by pseudonymous new media artist Lia and artist and designer Miguel Carvalhais.
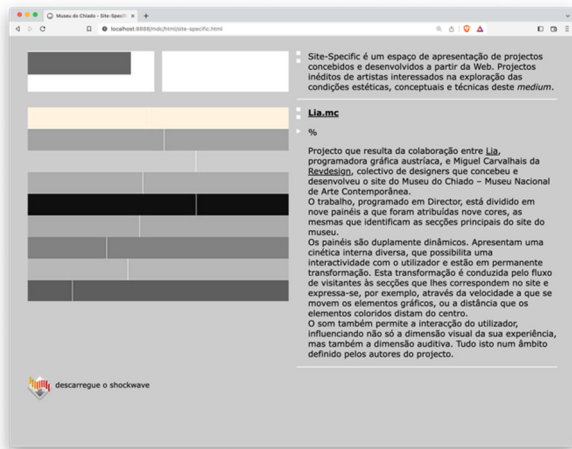

Figure 6: Screenshot of the Site-Specific online gallery - Museu do Chiado (2002–2007) and "%" (2002) by Miguel Carvalhais © LIA and Miguel Carvalhais.

The artwork interacted with navigation data from the website and was described as

> Divided into nine panels that have been assigned nine colours, the same colours that identify the main sections of the museum's website. The panels are doubly dynamic. They present a diverse internal kinetic, which enables interactivity with the user, and they are in permanent transformation. This transformation is driven by the flow of visitors to their corresponding sections of the website and is expressed, for instance, through the speed at which the graphic elements move, or the distance the coloured elements move from the centre. Sound also allows user interaction, influencing not only the visual dimension of their experience, but also the auditory dimension. All this within a scope defined by the authors.

The work followed the conceptual practice of the artists. Lia is an Austrian artist, considered one of the pioneers of software and net art, whose artwork highlights "the relationship between code and image as an opportunity to play with chance, in the tradition of Duchamp" (Walsh 2021). Miguel Carvalhais' art practice spans computer music, sound art, live performance, audio-visuals, and sound installations. The artists performed live concerts under the artistic name @C+LIA. Together their art projects engaged with casual and uncontrolled outputs, contrasting to more traditional art practices. As recalled by Carvalhais (2023):

> This work was a formal experiment, very much in line with other works we produced around that time — as "LMLB03" for the Lovebytes Festival in 2003, "The Rules of Attraction" for thisisamagazine.com, in 2002, or other works

from 2001 to 2004. We experimented with the aesthetics of the web, or of the personal computer as a medium, with generative visual and audial outputs, interaction, etc. Although there's no deep meaning in the piece's title, I remember that % was related to us using access statistics for the MNAC site to affect the piece, reconfiguring some of its structures dynamically based on that data.
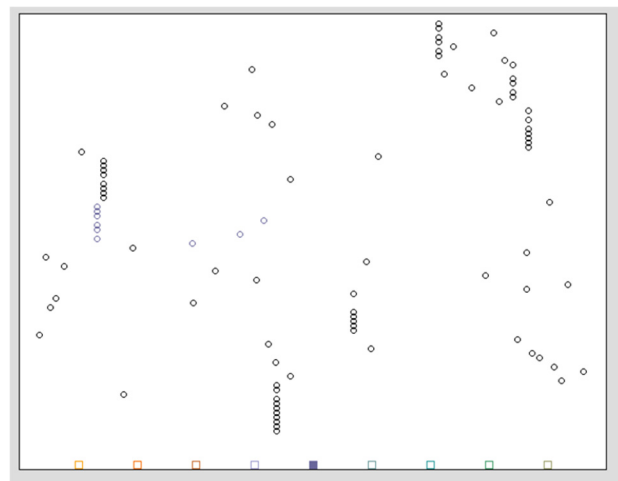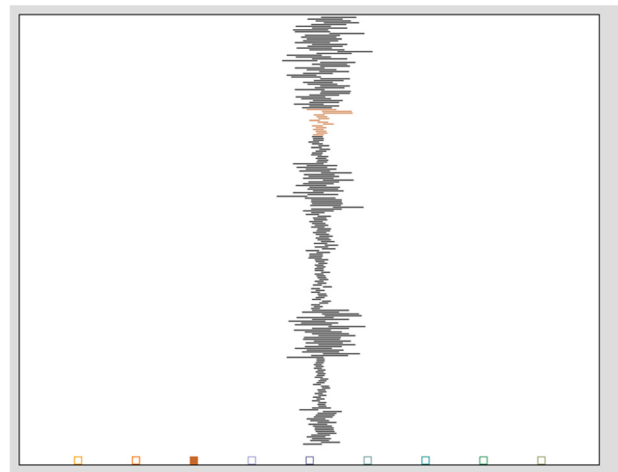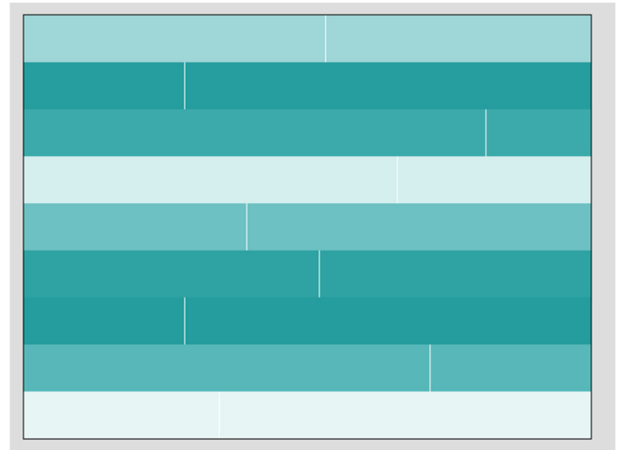
At the time, Net Art was very uncanny to enjoy or understand under the institutional umbrella of any museum in Portugal. Nevertheless, the artists recall having positive feedback concerning "%," "not only with the work itself but with it having been commissioned by a museum" (Carvalhais 2023). The artwork was online until 2007 when a new website was launched. Since then, it has "fall into a gap of institutional invisibility" (Bayley 2021, para.10).

Although Ferreira de Carvalho, the person in charge of the online gallery and the communication and publications office of Museu do Chiado, recalls having produced documents related to "%", its records are missing or in inaccessible. The "History section" of Museu do Chiado in its current website has no mentions to the Site-Specific gallery and "%" artwork is not listed in the collection, demonstrating that its integration "has not really happened" (Ferreira de Carvalho 2019).

LIA suggests that "if there was feedback, it probably went to the museum directly" (LIA 2023). As, any report, email, notes, screenshots, whatsoever, could help understand the artwork and how it impacted visitors and the museum, I asked the staff at Museu do Chiado for help. I was faced with gloomy replies from museologists averse to cooperate with my study. The few emails received included sentences like "unfortunately I don't think I can help", "as my colleague predicted, the help we can provide is practically null". My communication with Museu do Chiado unexpectedly ended when receiving a "554 transaction failed" message in my email box.

Even though "%" was part of an institutional initiative, the artwork was not included in the museum regular acquisitions protocol and so with the departure of Lapa, in 2009, and later of Ferreira de Carvalho, no one else in the museum took care of its existence or continuation.

Not fully aware of it, Museu do Chiado followed the shift inspired by the communication technologies environment "without the technological and conceptual infrastructure to support it" (Paul cited by Bayley 2021, para.19). This is just one more local story to add to the many already about the precarity of Net Art.

Besides the considerable lack of funding for state-run museums, their teams are made up, in general, of experts educated in History of Art, Curation, Collections Management, and Conservation practices in traditional art. Moreover, museums mostly hire external technology companies to deal with any technicalities related to their activity. Which limits immensely any digital artworks being integrated in art collections.

It is relevant to consider how museums of art in Portugal have already changed. Today they are much more interesting institutions than ever before. Still there is an endless need to increase stewardship awareness in relation to digital art. And this change needs to happen in a much faster pace because the country is on the verge of losing an exciting part of its art history. We are privileged to have access to the research that has already been produced in the field, and overcome any limiting understanding about the collection of Net Art.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Traditional museums of art have been inevitably forced to change to stay competitive in their activities and remain relevant cultural institutions in the 21st century, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Their leaders are aware of the need to be constantly reinventing ways to be closer to their communities, and in dialogue with the social movements raised.

The fact that these cultural institutions still have a central position in society increases their responsibility to develop greater collective efforts to exhibit and collect Net Art. Not only as a part of the diversity of digital art but because they play a relevant role in the endless need for creating "different contexts, which help articulate what Web art is about" (London cited in Cook 2010, p.189).

In Portugal, the spread of the internet followed the first decades of democratic engagement. In this country, the identity of the artists working with the World Wide Web may be retrieved from both their art practices, and their critical engagement with this novel social and political ecosystem. Cyberspace was an opportunity for experimentation that conflicted with the values museums promoted and disseminated, and so Net Art was easy to be dismissed.

Meanwhile so much has changed and artists are better equipped to deal with Portugal's geographical and cultural peripheral condition. But action is needed from the men and women in the government, museums of art, and universities to trigger the musealization of Net Art in the country.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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