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***Otherness in Net-Communities:  
Practising Difference in Post-Soviet Virtual Context***

*Introduction*

Rheingold, a pioneer in the systematic study of virtual communities defines them as "social aggregations that emerge from the internet when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". He was also one of the first to suggest that such virtual communities and the communications therein are efforts to compensate for the inadequacies experienced in real-life communities. He vehemently states that virtual communities are "in part a response to the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities around the world". My article seeks to analyse how net communities reproduce and mimic rather than problematize and compensate for existing notions of real communities. I will show that insofar as real communities form the structural and discursive basis for the development of net communications, the net communities that derive therefrom are unlikely to become the borderless, heterogeneous and free communities cyberutopians like Rheingold dream of. The first part of the paper will examine the ways in which the structural, discursive and practical conditions that mediate the formation of net communities tend to erect serious impediments to the growth of heterogeneous social formations. The second part of the paper examines how the conventional theorizations of community are founded on what I call 'a logic of homogeneity' that discursively organises the associations within these communities by a necessary and systematic exclusion of some 'others'. I will present a critical unsettling of these theories and formations of community through Jacques Derridas notion of hospitality as a deconstructive and dissociative gesture that perpetually responds to the ethical demand of the heterogeneous, that is, of 'others'. In the concluding session I will present some examples of net-art and net-communities in Russia that in reverence to the homogeneity of real communities actively suppresses and disguises their cultural and geographical specificities.

## Homogenizing Communities

Historically the notion of community has been theorised through notions of collective consensus based on homogeneity forming the ground thus for unity and harmonious social interaction; significant examples being Durkheim, T'nnies and Parsons.

Durkheim provides the classic example of such a consensus-based community. His concept of mechanical solidarity that is supposed to have mediated community formation in pre-industrial society is based on *similarity* in beliefs, activities and social forms. His concept of organic solidarity introduces social differentiations deriving from a complex division of labour which in turn resulted from rapid industrialization, population growth and the rise of capitalism. This concept, which could have been foundational for the theoretical renovation of the heterogeneous presence of the 'other' in community formation, is very quickly submitted to what I call the 'homogenizing logic of community'. Durkheim claims that such differences generated by division of labour create a greater sense of one's interdependence with others in society but warns that there are those anomic individuals who are unable to adequately reconcile their differences with the rest of society. It could even be argued that the Durkheimian anomic individual is in a sense, the 'other' who is marginalized by way of irreconcilable differences. Another important theorist of community is Ferdinand T'nnies. T'nnies also espoused to a dual model of community development. His notion of *Gemeinschaft* is characterized by an organic sense of community, fellowship, family, and custom, as well as a bonding together by understanding, consensus, and language. *Gesellschaft* is characterized by a form of hyper-individualism in which relations among people become mechanical, transitory and contractually oriented. T'nnies argued that the processes of urbanization and industrialization would result in the destruction of *Gemeinschaft* and consequently in the destruction of traditional community, security and intimacy. While there are clear resonances with Durkheim's differential concepts of solidarity, T'nnies seems to be ideologically and morally opposed to the *Gesellschaft* community which fails socially because of its inability to adequately police the differences within.

Such theories that conceive communities as essentially based on unity are problematic because the very concept of unity implies 'sameness' whether assumed or sought after and 'sameness' itself is more of a theoretical construct than an empirical fact. As such, in all gestures to unity (unify) there is implied a *principle of homogeneity*, whereby things are submitted to an equation that cancels out their individual differences so that a larger unity based on some chosen feature(s) of 'sameness' could be *forged*. The history of communities is therefore seldom one free of violence - for the heterogeneous elements that are not proper to the homogenizing logic of a certain community are necessarily and violently erased.

The effective achievement and maintenance of homogeneity demand a vigilant policing and removal of the various heterogeneous elements that threaten to contaminate it. The historical development of real communities as well as of net communities that are sustained by them have been based on protection and surveillance of their limits through the use of policing techniques that include censorship and exile of deviant users. Terry Harpold points out that there is a tendency to equate 'freedom to connect' with 'freedom to surf' even though the *possible* movements of data within any net domain do not always equate with its *actual* movements. It is a historical fact that the political regimes charged with the management of any nation's net connectivity have policed the kind of information made available at any point in time. Such policing could be motivated by a variety of rationales ranging from racial and

religious sensitivities, to existing moral, ethical and legal codes. As I have argued elsewhere (Aristarkhova, 1999), net communities were not, even in their heydays, spaces for free access, play and negotiation. They were from the very beginning ‘governed’ (another often-forgotten etymological meaning of the term ‘cyber’ - *kubernare* as in ‘govern’) spaces with clear notions and demarcations of *propriety* (the ‘dos’ and the ‘don’ts’) and *property* (rightful ownership). It is for the safeguarding of its own definitions of propriety and property that net communities institutionalize policing mechanisms; and these inevitably mark them out as exclusive communities. In fact, Nikolas Rose, in his most recent book, *Powers of Freedom* (1999), proposes that the notions and constructions of community in its contemporary form actually constitute a sector of government; what he terms, *government through community*. Drawing extensively on Foucault’s notion of governmentality, Rose argues that it is a mistake to frame this mobilization of the community as an elaborate system of social control, even though such control necessarily accompanies it. He claims that “in the institution of community, a sector is brought into existence whose vectors and forces can be mobilized, enrolled, deployed in novel programmes and techniques which encourage and harness active practices of self-management and identity construction, of personal ethics and collective allegiances.” (Rose, 1999:176) Following Rose’s arguments, these practices of net surveillance, net policing as well as the active mobilization of the net for the purposes of articulating notions and experiences of ‘community’, need to and can be analysed in terms of what I call, “a governmentalization of net communities”. And as this is an ongoing project of mine, I beg your pardon for not being able to elaborate further on it here.

In addition to the active measures that police the propriety of activities on the net, there are also certain homogenizing conditions and conventions that are structurally intrinsic to net technologies of communication. Siegfried Zielinski (1996: 279-290) claims that the primary proprietary conventions of net communications are, what he calls, *algorithmic* which are necessarily adverse to an actual heterogeneity of experiences. The Boolean ‘algorithmic’ of ones and zeros, which forms the operational basis of computers and therefore the net, is a “signifying practice of unambiguity” (283) where definite computational procedures are worked out for effective and generalized applicability to a specifiable set of problems. He argues that while certain aspects of knowledge and experiences can be “communicated exceptionally well by the means of electronic networks” because they submit well to algorithmic conversion - i.e. they are “capable of being generalized, reproduced, serialized - processed in symbolic machines” - there are certain ‘other’ kinds of experiences and knowledges which would always elude such codification. He claims that these experiences are not very unlike what Bataille termed *the heterological*, which, in being attentive to ‘the other’, is very often characterised by *excess*. In fact, he says that “excess...is bound up with a specific place and in the presence of the Other, the extreme muse, the experience of a duration tied to a specific locality, the accident, the surprising turn of events, passion, pain...For these unique events the networks are an impossible place, and this impossible place is already fleeing from them, before they have even had time to approach it properly” (284).

While Zielinski’s argument of heterogeneity being necessarily antithetical to algorithmic conversion seems too essentialized, it does make sense to acknowledge that the proprietary conventions of ‘the algorithmic’ do not entirely cohere with those of ‘the heterological’. Thus, in addition to the highly intentional schemes of net policing, it seems that the very operational foundations of computers and net communications may be inherently inimical to and thereby exclusive of heterogeneous experiences and knowledges. Such policing and exclusivity constantly problematize the euphoric optimism that surrounds the notion of net communities among users and activists. Zielinski advises that “the claim made for the universality of

telematic networks and the digital code as its informative content include an exaggerated and misleading promise of use value, namely, the existence of the possibility of an all-embracing, one-for-all order, that in the course of the history of human thought and nature has always been a hollow dream and often evoked by the culture industry for its own ends. One-for-all is not the great whole, but the complexly individual, the heterogeneous” (284). However, it is noteworthy that this ‘one-for-all order’ Zeilinski speaks of is more often operationalised on the net not by its restrictive algorithm, but by the homogenizing proprieties of the dominant languages that are used within.

According to 1999 statistics provided by *Global Internet Statistics*, the most commonly and extensively used language in the net is English followed by German, Chinese, French and Dutch. The historical development of English as lingua franca of the internet as well as its seemingly overwhelming use on the net, is related to the fact that the US, which technologically initiated the net revolution has also understandably been the most active to culturally integrate and embrace net communications. The average *internet node intensity* – meaning the ratio of active nodes to overall population – in the US is nearly 1 to 6. Comparing this with the average internet node density worldwide is 1 to 40. In shocking counterposition to these figures is that of the Democratic Republic of Congo which is as high as 1 to 440, 000. (Mike Jensen, 1998; cited in Harpold, 1999: no. 23). That the cultural hegemony of the English language in international net communications has historically instituted a homogenizing influence in the development of net communities is a well documented fact that does need to be rehearsed here. However it would be useful to cite briefly two case examples of linguistic hegemony on the net – one from Japan with reference to the transition from English to Japanese and another from the Russian Federation where the Russian language has had a homogenizing influence on the net communications of its various ethnic minorities.

Kumiko Aoki, in her 1994 article, “*Virtual Communities in Japan*”, though beginning with a rather problematic assertion that “communication and computer technologies has enabled networking of people regardless of their geographical and temporal differences”, provides us with a rare and excellent account of one non-English based net communities. For example, JUNET (Japanese Unix NETwork) is the first nationwide non-commercial computer network designed for e-mail / e-news exchange. It was started in October 1984 by two public universities (Tokyo Institute of Technology, and Tokyo University) and one private university (Keio University) through public telephone lines (at 9600 bps) using UUCP (Unix to Unix copy protocol). When JUNET began international communications it had to be in English or romanized Japanese, and it was not until much later that kanji support in the form of a windowed user interface to the messaging systems was included. Interestingly, the amount of public traffic as well as JUNET membership has increased dramatically since then. Of course this data is old by today’s standards of technological developments (Aoki wrote it in 1994) but the point that I would like to make on the issue of language differences and encoding difficulties stands for non-English speaking virtual communities. And even with the introduction of kanji there are technical peculiarities that impede the easy transition to and use of Japanese. One important impediment of Japanese net communities to internationalizing their net links is the problem of *encoding*. Aoki shows that a few encoding systems that emerged in Japan and developed by the Japanese and American companies, very often are incompatible. For example Japanese Industrial Standards (JIS) encoding is being used for external information interchange, but it is not very efficient for internal storage or processing on computer systems. Another encoding system, Shift-JIS encoding, was originally developed by ASC II Corporation in collaboration with Microsoft and mainly used as internal code for

Japanese PCs and KanjiTalk (the Japanese operating system for Apple Machintosh) as well as the millions of inexpensive Japanese language *waapuro* (word processors) that have flooded the market. Since it is using a combination of a one-byte eight-bit code and a two-byte eight-bit kanji code, while JIS uses two byte seven bit code, the conversion between Shift-JIS and JIS requires a very complex algorithm (Aoki, 1994). And this is only one of many examples of encoding difficulties that slow down and frustrate the development of effective net communications in Japan.

Another significant element of heterogeneity, seldom analyzed, is that of the cultural differences in communicational strategies employed by different net communities. Aoki stresses that Japanese culture places tremendous importance on the context of communication that results in text-dominated cyberspace being perceived by many Japanese as an inappropriate and even an asocial substitute of flesh meetings and real community. Aoki writes that Japanese tend to read between lines more than net-users in the West, with the help of such cues as facial expressions, tone of voice, the posture, etc. Thus what in the US is perceived as the most celebratory of net communities might be seen as irrelevant in other cultures. Though Aoki's account borders on somewhat essentializing Japanese cultural differences, there is a genuine need to not avoid or obliterate such differences by some utopian image of borderless net communities, where geographical location and cultural background do not matter.

The next example is from Russia, where I have been undertaking research on the development of net communities with particular reference to its complicities with Russian nationalism. Homogenization of net communication by the use of the Russian language (and English as an alternative) is a practice that is seldom reflected upon as problematic and/or limited. In a manner coherent with the governmental emphasis on *Russification*, a policy first introduced by Catherine the Great in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Soviet regime had made education in the Russian language compulsory for its many minorities since 1922. This institutionalized education in and familiarity with the language may seem like a good justification for the continued use of that language to bring about better net communications and thereby more unified net communities in Russia. However, the minority communities in Russia have historically resisted Russification and the Russian language was very often seen as an extension of Russian imperialism. While it may be argued that the minorities could in fact employ the dominant language to their advantage in the net, there is also much to be said about the systematic marginalization of minority languages that is justified and institutionalised by such practices. Moreover, the net practice of using English as an alternative to Russian shows that the existing net communities strive more for the English-speaking 'outside' than exploring or linking up with differences 'inside'. It seems thus that the net communities in Russia are more interested in achieving a sense of community if at all with those 'outside' Russia and while one may applaud in this the loosening of the thus-far impermeable Russian borders, one cannot but bemoan the institutionalised neglect of the 'others-within' perpetrated by such net practices.

The notion of homogeneous net communities has been sustained by the belief that net communications transcend and dissolve existing cultural, geographical and technological differences between and within real communities. However, a growing body of research is puncturing such illusions; most notably, research in cybergeography and the work of postcolonial cybertheorists.

### **Cybergeographical and Postcolonial Critique**

Martin Dodge, a chief proponent of cybergeography defines it as “the study of the spatial nature of computer communications networks, particularly the internet, the WWW, and other electronic “places” that exist behind our computer screens that popularly refer to as cyberspace.” This field encompasses “a wide range of geographical phenomena from the study of physical infrastructure, traffic flows, the demographics of the new cyberspace communities to the perception and visualization of these new digital spaces.” (<http://www.cybergeography.com>). In short, it is interested in analyzing the real-space concomitants and implications of cyberspace. Michael Batty, another cybergeographer, proposes a distinction between what he calls “cyberplace” and cyberspace. Cyberplace, according to him, is “the substitution, complementation and elaboration of physical infrastructure based on manual analogic technologies with digital” ones. Here he includes “all the wires that comprise the network that are being embedded into man-made structures such as roads and buildings” as well as “the material objects that are used to support this infrastructure such as machines for production, consumption and movement.” (Michael Batty, 1997: 346, on the site of [cybergeography.com](http://www.cybergeography.com))

Terry Harpold, in his brilliant essay, “Dark Continents: A Critique of Internet Metageographies” (1999) critiques the notion of free proliferation of net communities and CMC by pointing to the structural conditions of such ‘cyberplaces’ that mediate and support net connectivity. He argues that various maps that have been used to represent internet traffic, diffusion and distribution in the world, are discursively and historically complicitous in obscuring the socioeconomic and political differences between countries and the net communities they sustain. For example, he points out that the different conditions of access specifically bandwidth, speed of transmission and quality of access (e.g. image resolution, audio transmissions, video feed, etc) are not indicated in statistical and geographical data of internet connectivity. Harpold writes that there are huge differences in the operating bandwidths used by different countries and even within any one country (the most common bandwidth is in the range of 1544 kbytes per second which does not provide you with the full motion video, and some of the more advanced and professionalized ISPs offer up to 44736 kbytes per second – this is 1999 data). Such differences in access bandwidths and speeds result in significantly less sophisticated kinds of communications issuing from and within these geographically marginalized net communities. In addition to limiting the scope of communication, the temporal lapses and glitches in their communications tend to constitute them as ‘less advanced’ and ‘slow’ destinations for enacting net links with.

The conditions of actual net access is further complicated by a variety of social, political, cultural and geographical factors. Research has shown that a significant proportion of the *total available network bandwidth* in any country is reserved usually for MNCs with regional headquarters in the cities, and/or for university and government agencies. This means that network nodes that are geographically located outside the metropolitan centres have very little access to the full range of net facilities. Most of them may be restricted to simple store-and-forward e-mail only. Also in most of developing countries the lack of a comprehensive and well-maintained telecommunications infrastructure and power grid poses serious constraints to the development of digital networks.

For example, in Russia, the majority of all ISPs (Internet Service Providers) and the net communities that they support are based in and emanating from Moscow and St Petersburg. Such geographical monopolization is symptomatic of Russian history where these capitols capitalize on being centers of political and economic infrastructure jealously maintaining their

control over these privileges. The relevance of the geographical locations of net communities has rarely been addressed especially since too much attention has been placed on the borderless and placeless nature of cyberspace. However, the socio-political and economic implications of the physical location of net providers and operations need to be examined much more carefully before one celebrates the ecumenism of cyberspace. Russian urbanization has actively encouraged the centralization of activities and resources in either of these two major cities. This has created a situation where local and foreign investors / organizations investing into new technologies have tended to work from / with these more 'centralized' net groups that have subsequently come to represent 'Russian cyber-space'. Even the privately funded elementary courses in Internet usage in Moscow and St-Petersburg take for granted the cultural and linguistic homogeneity of those great Russian metropolises. Thus, women and men of other ethnic and religious backgrounds, so 'visible' today in Russian capitols, are left out from those programmes. It seems thus that the exclusionary practices of the Russian flesh communities have not been seriously challenged but merely reinforced in their net communities and their practices.

McLuhan has written that the development of electronic communication technologies has essentially abrogated space and time so that we can live in a borderless "global village". While many acknowledge the McLuhanesque vision of a global village to be a distant dream, their reasons for believing so have been predominantly technological. Many believed (and still do) that it is merely a question of the limits of present technology that stands in the way of realizing truly global net communities. In recent years however group of postcolonial theorists have begun actively theorizing cyberspace and net communities. Olu Oguibe, Tetsuo Kogawa, Guillermo Gomez Pena and Maria Fernandez are some notable examples of what I call, *postcolonial cybertheorists*. In addition to pointing out the fallacies in arguments for the globalization of free and heterogeneous net communities, many of these theorists actively advocate various 'local' net strategies for the appropriation and effective deployment of these communication technologies. For the purposes of laying down some of the central arguments of this very exciting group of thinkers and artists, I will quickly present the ideas of Olu Oguibe.

Olu Oguibe, in his, *Forsaken Geographies: Cyberspace and the New World 'Other'*. (1996) presents a sweeping critique of what he calls "cyberism", with its promises of the "brave new world" and a "digital nirvana". He writes "Electronic mail and the web-browser, with all their unarguably positive potentials, nevertheless become veritable tools for the construction and fortification of an other world, outside the borders of which everything else is inevitably consigned to erasure and absence." He considers existing cybercommunities to be not only unaware but more importantly, irresponsible in relation to those who "do not and cannot belong" to it. He states thus that, "Cyberspace as we have seen it, is not the new, free global democracy we presume and defend, but an aristocracy of location and disposition, characterized, ironically, by acute insensitivity and territorialist proclivities." In an interview "On Digital Third-Worlds" from that same year Oguibe speaks of how the developments in information and communication technologies have followed the contours of bygone colonialism and global capitalism. Oguibe does not dismiss cyberspace and the net communities hosted within as simply sites of neo-colonialism and nothing else. He sees his task as a postcolonial cybertheorist to be one of presenting "the challenge to all those who possess and understand this new technology; namely that we begin to explore with greater seriousness and humanism, means of extending the numerous, practical possibilities of this new technology to the greater majority of humanity". According to him, these neglected

spaces, what he calls, “forsaken geographies” need to be embraced by a systematic extension of cybertechnology and net connectivity to these areas; in short, the excluded needed to be included. While there are acknowledged dangers of economic neo-colonization in such quantitatively driven expansion of net connectivity by the importation of net technologies, Oguibe argues that such risks must be taken in order to invalidate and redress the existing hierarchies of net access and communications.

It has been argued thus far that the structural, practical and discursive conditions of net communities are centred on notions of association by homogeneity, exclusivity and closure. *One common thread in all of the abovementioned criticisms is that the notion and ideal of community is itself desirable and that the removal of those disruptive conditions and impediments to community would make possible free net communities. The structural and cultural differences identified between sociopolitical entities exemplified by their specific national borders, languages and identities are seen as temporary impediments deriving from their post-colonial conditions and the global capitalism. The technological limits to community formation are bemoaned as significant but surmountable problems on the road to dynamic global net communities.* However, throughout these carefully considered criticisms ***the notion of community itself remains ‘unthought’***. The question whether the notion of community itself is constitutively incompatible with the formation of free and heterogeneous social formations in real life and on the net is yet to be posed. The problem of closure and exclusivity is not unique to net communities, I would argue that *insofar as they are communities they are exclusive*. The associative conditions that have been historically deemed fundamental to community formation need to be re-examined. I would like to frame the various critiques mentioned above as having presented a call for an attention to those conditions that fissure and unsettle net communities from within; what I would like to call, following Derrida, the dissociative conditions for community. Each of the criticisms highlighted the failure of net communities to somehow address the differences that arose from and / or were intrinsic to the communities as such; the difference and heterogeneity of the ‘others’. Thus, in the next part of my paper I will, using Derrida, deliberate on the notion of community by posing difference, heterogeneity and otherness as the very constitutive and dissociative conditions of community formations, both net and real.

### **The dissociative condition of community.**

Jacques Derrida has presented several scathing critiques of such unity-based notions of community in many of his works. He claims that “if by community one implies, as is often the case, a harmonious group, consensus, and fundamental agreement beneath the phenomenon of discord or war, then I don’t believe in it very much and I sense in it as much threat as promise.” (1995: 355) He says that “the privilege granted to unity, to totality, to organic ensembles, to community as a homogenized whole...is a danger for responsibility, for decision, for ethics, for politics” (1997: 13) exactly because of their negative implications for “the relation to the other.” Derrida thus presents the possibility of thinking of a community based not on unity but instead on dissociation.

Derrida’s critique of community, as well as those of a variety of other French theorists, have been largely based on their continuing critical engagements with the writings of Bataille on community. It is noteworthy that the earlier works of Jean Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (1991) as well that of Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* (1988; partly a reaction to and reading of Nancy’s text) have structured much of the contemporary Continental debates on community, including those of Derrida (though the latter has not been

particularly forthcoming in acknowledging this debt). In both the works of Nancy and Blanchot, there is a clear interest in articulating the dissociative presence of the other instead of actively denying it, though the individual arguments of Blanchot and Nancy as to how the other presences itself within the community differ significantly. Due to the lack of time, let me just briefly present the views of Nancy as exemplified in his book, "*The Inoperative Community*".

In the early parts of the book, Nancy reflects that, "The emergence and our increasing consciousness of decolonized communities has not profoundly modified the givens of community nor has today's growth of unprecedented forms of "being-in-common" through channels of information as well as through what is called a multi-racial society triggered any genuine renewal of the question of community." (p. 22) And it is the question of community that Nancy elaborates and deliberates upon in the rest of the book. According to Nancy, the notion of community, both in its philosophical and sociological guises, has traditionally been centered on a fusion of beings creating a unified organic whole wherein a "dream of transparent social organization based on a specular recognition of the self in the other" is realized. Such a community he labels as "immanentist" in so far as it seeks to produce its own *essence* as a work; that is a community is realized through the work of its members to actively create it based on notions of what is predefined as essential and proper to it. In opposition to such immanentist community Nancy sought one based on an attention to the alterity of others. This so-called "inoperative community" is workless and idle because it refuses to create itself as a work. It is a community of *partage*, which means both sharing as well as division, where the very sharing is sustained by the recognition of division between the me and you (*toi est tout autre que moi*).

Though this argument on community and its relation to Derrida is itself worthy of some careful discussion, it is well beyond the scope of the present paper. Derrida's dissociatively structured community is the real focus of my paper today and that demands beginning with Derrida's critique of Heidegger. The privilege that Heidegger places on the 'gathering' (*Versammlung*) as opposed to the notion of dissociation for the constitution of community is heavily criticised by Derrida exactly for its negative implications to 'the other' and to difference(s). He says, "once you grant some privilege to gathering and not to dissociating, then you leave no room for the other, for the radical otherness of the other, for the radical singularity of the other." In fact, Derrida redefines the notions of 'dissociation' and 'separation' as not "obstacles to community", as they are commonly conceived, but the very condition of possibility for any community. "Dissociation, separation, is the condition of my relation to the other. I can address the Other only to the extent that there is a separation, a dissociation." Derrida also argues that such a relation does not and cannot entirely overwhelm or possess the other through knowledge, understanding or emotional investment. This is because the other remains itself throughout the relationship. This is what he calls, along with Levinas and Blanchot, "*rapport sans rapport, the relationless relation*", where the "the other remains absolutely transcendent. I cannot reach the other. I cannot know the other from the inside or so on." And this relationless relation based on a separation is not a bad thing, Derrida says, for "this is not an obstacle but the condition of love, friendship and of war, too, a condition of the relation to the other. Dissociation is the condition of community, the condition of any unity as such." (Derrida, 1997.) However, dissociation only provides the initial condition for any community since it establishes heterogeneity as a necessary ground upon which to build community. What is required, he proposes, is a whole new way of thinking about and constituting communities. This Derrida seeks to articulate through another concept - that of **hospitality**.

## Hospitable Community

Derrida provides an interesting way of addressing the notion of community with dissociation as its condition in his recent yet-unpublished article: “Questions of Responsibility: Hostility / Hospitality”. Here he opposes a community based on **unity** that results from **fusion** and **identification** and which is therefore necessarily against some other. The community of unity is for him based on an “unity-against”. It invokes an etymological connection between “*communio*” as a gathering of people and a fortification (*munis*); an arming of oneself in opposition to some other. As such, the erection of a community is inherently allied to the construction of a defense mechanism which is **vigilant to** and **exclusive of** SOME other as foreigner and outsider. The homogenizing logic of community development is constantly attentive to those heterogeneous elements within itself only to enable their effective elimination or assimilation. Community as based on unity, fusion, identification, defense, closure and exclusivity needs to be redefined through, what he calls, **hospitality**.

Derrida points out that etymologically the term ‘hospitality’ is related to the notion of ‘hostility’ since the root of the former, *hospes* is allied to an earlier root of the latter, *hostis*, which interestingly meant both ‘stranger’ and ‘enemy’. Thus hospitality, as in *hostilis*, stranger / enemy + *potes*, ‘(of having) power’, came eventually to mean the power the host had over the stranger / enemy. John Caputo, in an interesting commentary on Derrida’s notion of hospitality notes that “the ‘host’ is someone who takes on or receives strangers, who gives to the stranger even while remaining in control” (Caputo, 1997 : 111). It is clear that the ‘host’ is in a necessary position of power insofar as he (she?) circumscribes the parameters within which the needs and comforts of the stranger / enemy is attended to. In addition to this circumscription, the host’s ‘power over’ the stranger, Derrida suggests, results from his (her?) ownership of the premises that is thus offered up. Given the fact that hospitality is dependent on ownership before it is offered hospitably to the other, Derrida argues, an essential tension is built into its structure. This is because it is difficult to give over to the other when you continue to own. The aporia for the giver is the tension of wanting to give but also having to have what is given away, for it is having that makes possible the giving. Derrida says that this aporia which could well paralyse any efforts at hosting the other is exactly what needs to be worked through rather than be denied.(3) In fact, hospitality is only possible when one resists this paralysis by moving towards what Derrida calls a “hospitality beyond hospitality”, wherein the very impossibility of a hospitality based on ownership as limit-condition is pushed to/at the limits. In having erected its possibilities on their very impossibility, Derrida claims, hospitality, like deconstruction, is a *to come* (*avenir*). The aporia of a hospitality *to come* is constituted by one’s inability to know entirely or surely its specific qualities and as such, it is to be struggled with *performatively*.

Derrida’s critique of communities is aimed at their tendency to construct a defensive unity, a ‘we’, based on the negation and continuous marginalization of some others. Communities are, Derrida believes, essentially *inhospitable structures*. Thus, lodging hospitality as a deconstructive *graft* within this structure of the community promises to keep it open to / for others. Hospitality allows communities “to make their very limits their openings” and thus ensures that there is always a possibility of hosting the other. This issue of how to host the other is today more pertinently raised with reference to net communities which have inherited not only some of the promises of earlier flesh communities but also their problems.

## Disavowals of Cultural and Geographical Specificities

I would like in the concluding section to discuss certain trends in Russian net-art and the developments of the Internet that symptomatise the homogenizing logic of net communities we have discussed thus far and suggest some ways of incorporating the notion of hospitality to critically acknowledge and *situate* its geographical and cultural specificities.

Lev Manovich, artist and theorist, in a 1997 article on Russian new media art presents what he calls the "Microsofting of the planet" that casts a "digital aesthetics over national visual cultures" (<http://www.ctheory.com/a50.html>). This digital globalization is characterized by the usual inescapable 'cute' icons, animated fly-throughs, and rainbow color-palettes. And this homogenizing movement assumed as such by Manovich is compared with what he sees as specificities of Russian new media. While Manovich notes in the beginning that "it would be dangerous to reduce heterogenous elements to a single common denominator, some kind of unique "Russian New Media", he says that there are a few common threads within Russian cyberaesthetics that provide an alternative to a supposedly homogenous Western what he calls "default thematics". So in his attempt to be culturally sensitive to a variety of existing new media internationally, Manovich from the start assumes homogeneity of Western new media art.

For one of the most well-known Russian media artists, Aleksei Shulgin, working mainly in English (a common characteristic of Russian net-artists that I will elaborate on later), net-art is a specific manipulation of the audience, that is masked under the notion of 'interactivity'. This aspect of manipulation for Manovich represents the reality of post-communist subject (meaning, homogenous by default, undifferentiated in cultural or sexual terms). Manovich writes: "Having grown up in a society where truth and lie, reality and propaganda always go hand in hand, the post-communist artist is ready to accept the basic truisms of life". Thus an attitude of suspicion and irony (and I would add, of cynicism) is what separates post-communist net-artist from its Western colleagues, according to Manovich.

He concludes an essay with a noteworthy question. He writes: "Will Russia be able to stop the march of Bill Gates' aesthetic imperialism (in) the way she previously froze out the armies of Napoleon?" In this question Russia is assumed to be a single entity undifferentiated either geographically or culturally held in opposition to another single entity, the West=Bill Gates=Microsoft aesthetics, also taken and assumed in its undifferentiated homogeneity, sameness and singularity. Despite its reliance on naive conceptions of culturally homogenous entities, I think what Manovich attempted here, that is, to think through cultural specificity of some media artists, is very important. While realizing that there is a danger to speak of Russian net art as homogenous, he wrote without hesitation on singular Western net art, that is even more difficult argument to sustain. His attempt showed, however, that there are differences among net-artists that are derived both from the construction of their culturally specific subjectivities and also from that cyber-place that sustains their cyberspaces, that is, specificity of their geographical locations and embodied practices.

Being blinded by his too-neat opposition "Western/Russian" Manovich did not pay much attention to the differences in gender, ethnicity, class or religion among Russian net-artists themselves. For example, without fail, they all come from either Moscow or St-Petersburg (just like Manovich himself or myself), and this 'minor' geographical fact has always played a decisive role in their lives as Russian net-artists, as many of them reveal in their writings and interviews. Thus a relationship between a cultural specificity and a production of net-art cannot be separated from the questions of artist's subjectivity, artist's embodiment, artist's

geographical location. I am afraid I do not have time to elaborate on this importance of embodied spatiality for discussion of net-communities, though I will try and consider here some of its implications [3].

Lev Manovich dramatically changed his position on this issue recently denouncing his attempt to link cultural specificity of artist's subjectivity with cyberspace and net-art (<http://switch.sjsu.edu/web/v5n3/J-1.html>.) When asked "How does the discourse in Russian electronic culture differ from that of Western Europe or the United States?" he says that after the publication of that article in 1997 on Russian New Media, Russian artists he referred to there objected to his analysis. They claimed that they were part of an "international media scene and do not think of themselves as "Russian" artists'. Manovich says that he "came to the conclusion that we should not expect to see some 'national school' of Russian media art anymore'. Though he did not himself speak of such national school in his article, and it would be really rather problematic to speak of any homogenous national school, Manovich goes further and denounces any of his attempts made earlier to think through the specificity of geographical location. He connects such attempts with direct construction of some kind of closed and clear "national school", that is, of course, not the same. Thus, he says that "The Internet is a way for people to enter into a singular socio-linguistic space, defined by a certain Euro-English vocabulary. It is a way for people in different places to enter modernity - a space of homogeneity... And this is why we, in the West, should not expect to culturally-specific Internet art... This simply would be a contradiction in terms. To expect different countries to create their own national schools of Net artists is the same as to expect them to create their own customized brands of Coca-Cola. The sole meaning of Coca-Cola, its sole function, is that it is the same everywhere." However, next he tries not to fall into direct utopianism or solipsism linking embodied subjectivity with this Homogenous Internet. He states: "Net art projects are materialization of social networks. These projects make the networks visible and create them at the same time. It is a way for young people in Oslo and Warsaw, in Belgrade and Glasgow, to enter modernity and to become its agents for the rest of society.", and we all pay some price for this Disney-fying ourselves: we are exchanging person-to-person communication for virtual communication, etc., in short, writes Manovich, "exchanging the light of a candle for the light of an electric bulb, with all the consequences".

Thus for Manovich it is not that geographical locations do not exist ñ on the opposite, they are a pre-requisite for the formation of net-works on the net, - but as soon as we are on the net, we automatically become a part of some Bill Gates imaginary, a part of Euro-English-American colonization of the net, with all its consequences (positive and negative). There is a vision here of a transition from traditional communities to new globalized order, from many to one, and back to many, some kind of messianism of those young people who do not understand themselves that they are a part of their country's modernization process. However, all those different locations that are the basis for the Internet sameness and unity, that are mentioned by Manovich, are not actually that different, since they do not need to enter into modernity ñ they are already there, they are all a part of Euro-English (pre-supposed again) sameness ñ Seattle, Bucharest, Berlin, Odessa, Oslo, Warsaw, Belgrade and Glasgow. Manovich obviously tried to be geographically diverse, to show how Internet unites and homogenizes all those youngsters from those countries, "entering modernity", though their geographical locations are very specific. They belong to the modernity by default for theirs are the spaces of modernity - Christian worlds of Europe and North America.

To expect culturally specific net-art for Manovich (I am a bit suspicious of the word 'expect' that presupposes some desirable result) is to deny the fact that modernity is a space of

homogeneity, and Internet is a most obvious example of it. It is also to suggest that technology is culturally non-specific, and that technology is neutral: computers do not have ethnicity or sex, just like Coca-Cola or a car, though at the same time, according to Manovich, they promote Bill Gates's aesthetics and Disneyfying of the Internet. There are many tensions in such analysis and claims, and one of the central tensions, I believe, is the disavowal of the 'cultural specificity' as something of the past, of tradition, of the candle-light, something gone, swallowed by the Internet and new technologies. Some people are bemoaning it, others are celebrating it, but very few question the validity of this argument as such.

I would like to elaborate now a bit more on the fact that Russian media artists protested against Manovich's attempt to contextualize their art works historically and culturally. What these Russian media artists were protesting is not so much against "being cast as building Russian school" of media art, they were protesting any association with or fixation to their cultural specificity, since they do not think of themselves as Russian artists, but generally as "artists" belonging to supposedly neutral and homogenous art and net-community. What is interesting for us here is not so much to argue against it (that would be naive, since Internet does have a capacity to neutralize differences), but rather to look into this desire to leave a specific location or cultural difference behind. And the more there is a desire to part with one's cultural specificity inscribed in geographical and embodied locations, within language, within subjectivity, to leap into supposedly neutral and homogenous Internet, the more we come to realize how much all those locations and specificities dominate our desires and creations. It seems that we are still fascinated mostly with the fact that cyberspace can overcome, outgrow, leave behind, the body, with all the space it needs, the geography it inhabits, the differences it represents socially, politically and culturally. And in this very gesture we are closing down rather than opening up the possibility of thinking through the importance of cultural locations for net-communities. We are not completely entering modernity, which has by the way, never been homogenous, but rather we are constantly and sometimes violently negotiating with heterogeneity, that is always a pre-condition for any net or real community, a pre-condition for this utopias of young people from Oslo and Belgrade becoming one and the same. They have to be different in order to form a community. They have to be hospitable to each others difference which is at the core of their desire to form such a community.

Olga Lialina, another Russian net-artist, currently residing in Germany, in a recent interview with James Allan and Florian Schneider insists that Runet (Russian net) has nothing to do with Russian geographical location (<http://www.telepolis.de/tp/english/inhalt/5819/1.html>.) The reason for this is the primacy of the Russian language in Russian culture. New net-territory is another totally Russia, and consists of people living in Israel, America, Germany, etc. It is a community of people speaking, thinking and writing in Russian who might be actually very far from the Russian Federation. According to Lialina, Russian online culture was created by students of famous Literature Department of Tartu University in Estonia, with strong connection to semiotics and linguistics. Leibov, one of them, added to this that they were emigrants (that is, not living in Russia) and the web became for them a way to form "Small Russias" that would substitute for RL in Russia.

Lialina herself uses mainly English for her net-art projects. She explains it by the fact that 'English words are only signs for her', and since English is the language of the net 'she can concentrate on ... its structure and logic'. There is a constant tension in Lialina's answers between the denial of the importance of geographical location, that is, the stress on the use of the Russian language as the unifying principal of Russian net-community, and the desire to be

seen as a part of the net, that is, the use of English since "English as the language of the net". On the one hand, Russian language is used to compensate for the absence of RL Russian community (by emigres and Russian minorities abroad, within so-called Small Russias in the Internet), but on the other hand, there is a constant desire to deny the importance of cultural specificity and geographical location that grounds their longing for "Small Russias".

One of the significant consequences of such reasoning as Lialina's is the assumption of cultural neutrality of the English language on the net. It has been noted already that the usage of English is neither culturally irrelevant nor culturally homogenous. There are many different kinds of English languages. And very often American Internet is taken as a kind of metacultural construction, without history or cultural specificities and diversity, what Manovich referred to "a place of modernity", homogenous and pure.

One dramatic example of cultural disavowal among Russian net-artists is the case of Namniyaz Ashuratova (<http://namnyas.blade.ru>; all translations from the Russian are mine). When first I wrote to her an electronic letter, indicating my interest in her work and also in the topic of ethnic and sexual difference, I misspelled her last name. She replied immediately saying that she does not care about such differences, however despite that her name has a very special meaning to her and suggested that I should be more careful next time. What interested me in her work is precisely the issue of otherness and obsession with the other as an enemy. Her work is significantly different both in its form and its content from other net-artists, namely Lyalina and Shulgin. In her project (which was one of the winners in *DA-DA-NET* Moscow competition for Russian net-art) called *Enemy Processing System* one can choose an enemy and then virtually eliminate them with a click of the mouse, then can also fill-in an explanatory form why and for what one hates this enemy. Her categories of hatred include sex, age, skin, nationality, sexual orientation, profession, their words and actions. She did not just provide so-called "Unique Gallery of Enemies" but gave those suggested enemies names under each portrait, leaving very little to chance and to a participator - she named our enemies for us. Interestingly there is even a certain sense of hierarchy among those names. First four are named by their ethnicity, or what Russians call "Nationality" - Jew, then goes Chechen, after him Serb, and the last one is Russian. All of them represented by well-known men from Russian Federation except Milosevich. Then we have a pedophile, after that simply a woman and a man (woman first in this category), then we have a teenager, then suddenly an Arab, then a capitalist (Bill Gates), homeless, artist, fascist, etc. The second and last woman in this series is Monica Lewinski who is identified as 'a whore', after her Clinton, who is identified as 'an American'. The last one is a word 'Me' without any visuals supplied.

Hence with all the problems associated with Namniyaz's work *Enemy Processing System*, I found it revealing some deep-hidden aspects of cultural specificity. There was in her communications with me an almost fetishistic relationship to her name; as if she did not exist anyhow else but in this name. She, in fact, happens to be a certain Andrei Velikanov, a Moscow-based net artist. This is a significant twist in the story.

It has been very common for Russian net-artists to use various types of pseudonyms. However, this case is different by the way this artist himself rationalizes his choice of the name. Velikanov, in a schizophrenic imaginary dialogue with his creation, explains the work and life of Namniyaz. The reasons for a separate artistic identity with a separate web-site and artworks are:

"First, there is an ordinary life reason, - it is comfortable to have a pseudonym to participate in art festivals and competitions under different names. You have made some money for me. Thank you! You have no body and hence I do not need to feed you... On the other hand, I envy endlessly your quality of disembodiment. There are other aspects of your birth why you are a woman and why you have such a strange name... The fact is I feel terrible not just as a result of having a physical body, but also to have a certain sexual and national (ethnic) identity. To be all life a Russian male, my God, is so boring! That's why you are a woman, and Namniyaz... I could not have made you into an American or European woman, despite of my disdain for my nationality, for the only language I use creatively is Russian. That's why you were born in Orenburg and you are a philologist. But your main characteristic, of course, is being without body. Imagine, what kind of opportunity I have given to you - to make art "without a cunt", literally! "

This constant denial of embodiment and physical differences, what he calls differences of "appearance", like sex or ethnicity, leave us with a sense of the obsession with them in Russian post-Soviet subject. Being unable not to be a 'boring Russian male', and feeling that it has to be overcome somehow, Velikanov chooses a female name that hints for those who are grown-up in Russia at the Russian ethnic minorities. It's an example of the illusion of the freedom of cultural specificity of cyberspace and net-art. This supposed fleeing from ethnic or sexual difference is actually an exploitation of Russian colonial history, of a particular fashionability with otherness and with international attention to the question of minorities and gender. Rather than proving his own metatheory of homogenous information Creator and a field, Velikanov, I believe, is a striking example of current anxieties and repressions within Russian national identity, translated into cyberspace in such interesting forms. He is stating that he did not want to explore his narcissism or it is not a schizophrenic gesture, thus trying to distance himself from famous "exploration of femininity" in modern Western literature and art. He *simply* created Numniyaz to consciously exploit privileges that such name and such gender can give him for applying to art festivals and competitions and for daring with some art-projects that he felt uncomfortable to put under his name till they started to bring dividends. Namniyaz was useful to him.

However, behind this screen of cynical utilitarianism there are some words, some phrases, in him and in other net-artists, that point out to a denialist trend in their claims on culturally homogenous or absent cyber-body. Differences matter for them so much that those net-projects that try to claim the death of individuality and author win competitions. There is a constant disavowal of sexual and cultural difference on the background of the same references: either to Russian cultural icons like Pushkin, to love-hate relations with the West, or to fashionable Eastern teachings as Buddhism, Taoism or Hinduism.

If cyberartists have a strong expressed desire to overcome their embodiment with its sexual and ethnic specificity, then we see that their focus is even by their denial still on this sexual and cultural specificities - in their fleeing, running away, disappearing, universalizing and homogenizing.

This year a new large project has been started <http://www.gif.ru>. Supported by influential political and commercial structures, it is a creation of Marat Gelman, the owner of Art Gallery with his name and a very influential figure in Russian mainstream art circles. This new website called "Art Against Geography" (in English it is put in a more obscure terms – "Art versus Geography"), that aims to become a collective propagandist of provincial contemporary art in Russian cities. Marat Gelman says: "The meaning of this project is one

phrase: We are not interested in regional art, but in phenomena of world art on the territory of Russia. This is a Russian project though its patriotism consists not in isolationist stance towards the world but in Russian art making difference within the world art. *In other words, our task is to overcome Russian distances*" (<http://internet.ru/article/articles/2000/03/15/2032.html>. Emphasis mine). Thus the net must serve as a redemptive space that would provide *Russian* artist with space to make *himself* seen and known.

I would like to stress two aspects here. First, the geographical location is again seen as something negative, that needs to be neutralized and homogenized under a banner of "contemporary world art". This world art is also cast in naively unified terms. The local and the regional as concepts are opposed to 'contemporary' and 'world-level'. By this, Gelman implies that contemporary American or German art are homogenous entities and they are pretty much the same, undifferentiated by cultural diversity within the US, for example, or in Germany, for that matter. Again, local specificity is linked to the notions of backwardness and inferiority. Inserting a demand of homogeneity on Russian geographical space, the Russian (especially Moscovite) post-Soviet subject still refuses to acknowledge cultural heterogeneity within its own borders, and also within the art world as a whole. While cultural specificity has been redefined in recent debates on art and cyberspace, being more sensitive and aware of the necessity to be hospitable to differences for sustaining our fragile heterogeneous collaborations across our geographical borders, many still remain convinced that the meaning of contemporary (and especially in its 'cyber' forms) is culturally neutral and homogeneous. And without much of surprise the judgment (what fits the notion of world art and what is not) comes from Moscow (and from international trips of Muscovite decision-makers). The place is very specific, and there is nothing *accidental* or *exchangeable* about it. The judgement is also made without any hesitation. Hospitality was proclaimed but never performed. Door has been shut even before the sign 'opened' has been removed. Thus on contemporary art in Kemerovo we read a verdict, a judgment from Moscow: "Due to historical and socio-economic reasons this city's cultural tradition practically does not deserve our attention. There are very few people who are interested not only in contemporary art, but in art in general. Hence there is no critical mass of art and it is therefore difficult to speak of some common tendencies in the city." (<http://www.gif.ru/kem/index.html>)

Hospitality is based on decision, on judgment - how much space to give, how to treat a guest, what to offer, how much to offer. The responsibility of decision-making is implied in hospitality. This project, "Art Against Geography", supposedly promotes contemporary art made on the vast territory of Russia. But its very concept already closes down any possibility of hospitality since it denies the difference and specificity the right to be welcomed, to be a part of an art world.

### *Conclusion*

In the age of globalization cultural difference becomes both subject to persecution and a subject of fascination; difference is required as never before: to form a global community. The idea of global makes sense only when there are distances to cover, only when there is a diversity to encounter, only when there is a fascination with the "other". The global depends on the local differences, depends on heterogeneity. But does it depend on it only to eliminate it later? Price for this homogeneity is not I am afraid the loss of intimacy or tradition within Russian (net) communities as it has been projected by many but rather an inherent violence in this drive to homogeneity, the murder of difference that creates by itself the possibility of any

community, the elimination of hospitality on which any community is based, and a shutting off doors for others who do not want to belong at the expense of their difference.

Trying to dissolve too fast into some homogenized net-community, with its only naively imagined absence of cultural and sexual specificity and borderless spaces, we are closing many openings made possible by cyberspace. This closure connects on-line communities with off-line communities that for centuries resisted their debts to difference and heterogeneity. In the sense of Manovich and many others we can conclude that so far the potential of cyberspace was not used in a way to offer anything new: the only condition for entering it seems to be an elimination of difference and forgetting Otherness. Unpredictability of the other seems to have been resolved at times in the production of the Other, in the mimicry of the Other. Speaking for both, writing for both, being both. Occupying both spaces: of the host and the other/guest, we do not have the two, but one and the same who is splitting into many ones.

Hospitality can be performed not only when we have something to offer (as owners) but also when we are not pretending that nothing belongs to us. Here cultural and sexual specificity does not imply sameness or fixation, belonging to one singular culture or sex, it does not imply some kind of disembodied imagined construction or an essence, but rather an openness to and an awareness of its own embodied heterogeneity, of the multiplicity and politics of what is called a "geographical location".

Notes:

[1] For example, Slavoj Žižek especially in his *Looking Awry* and *They Know Not What They Do* (1991) and Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* (1983).

[2] A primary aporia of Derrida's notion of hospitality is of how the host is to simultaneously (and generously) negotiate their exclusive ownership of that which they offer up inclusively to the other as guest. He asserted the need to deal with this impossibility by constant contestation of its limits enacted through acts of generosity that are performatively excessive to ownership.

[3] I am trying to use strategically the notion of embodied cyber-pleasure in my article "Cyber-jouissance: A Sketch for a Politics of Pleasure", on-line in *Telepolis* (German version is also available), at: [http://www.heise.de/tp/english/pop/topic\\_3/4126/1.html](http://www.heise.de/tp/english/pop/topic_3/4126/1.html)

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## BIO

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