

ARTFORUM

In Search Of By Ed Halter November 2014

Way, way back, in the near-Pleistocene, pre-iPhone year of 2005, Guthrie Lonergan was playing around. The programmer and artist was taking the Internet's presets and plug-ins and stock images—caches of photos, video, and code that were merely given and everywhere available—and investigating their early promise of social connectivity and sensory plenitude in tandem with their degraded, schlocky aesthetics, their illusions of choice, and their veiled mechanisms of control. His work would come to question the very divides between online and offline, to probe the strange and inextricable relation between the two experiences, and he would become legendary among other artists, if remaining virtually unknown to the larger art world. Lonergan tried to enter that world in earnest, to make his ephemeral work stick, make it solid, “print it out”—a strategy that would be darkly mirrored when the problematic term “post-Internet” was used to brand and sell a wide variety of art production. But by then Lonergan had moved on. Ed Halter tells his story.



“SOMETHING REAL COMING THROUGH”

Visit Guthrie Lonergan's website at theageofmammals.com and you'll find little but a long index of links, rendered in Times New Roman on plain white, ordered for the most part by year, in reverse chronology, stretching back to 2005. Scroll to the bottom. One of the earliest of the hyperlinks is titled “LONELY LOS ANGELES.” Follow the link, and it leads to another simply designed page, this one populated by two adjoining columns of screenshots that record MapQuest images of LA. The top row shows a pair of busy grids of red highways and spindly black streets. Beneath these shots are the words “Lonely Los Angeles” (again in Times New Roman) over an animated GIF of a tiny blue automobile, slowly creeping across the page. Below lies the heart of the piece: sixteen maps of underpopulated parts of the city with barely anything to chart. In one, Mulholland Drive forms a wobbly horizontal barrier between expanses of pure beige and green. In others, bits of roadway jut inward from the edge of the shot, like hairs stuck in the gate of a film projector, dead-ending in featureless fields. One map is merely a rectangle of green, bordered like every one of its neighbors with the MapQuest logo, a minuscule icon denoting scale in meters and feet, and a copyright notice.

This last example from Lonergan's *Lonely Los Angeles*, 2005, has its literary precedent in a map famously described by Lewis Carroll in his narrative poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876). In this mock epic, the captain of the ship engaged in chasing said creature employs "a large map representing the sea, / Without the least vestige of land," completely devoid of latitude or longitude lines—devoid, for that matter, of any features at all—presenting "a perfect and absolute blank." Indeed, on one level *Lonely Los Angeles* is an exercise in Carrollian nonsense, subverting the utility of a mapping service by isolating portions of the city to the degree that they become illegible, thereby altering the site's function from conduit of information to generator of abstract compositions. But the piece's title, and the character of the poky little car driving solo underneath, impart a melancholy to these images that goes beyond both their obvious absurdity and interest in form. The viewer is put in the position of a Web surfer near the middle of the last decade, searching through street maps of Los Angeles for *something*, but choosing roads that lead nowhere. In fact, this reflects how the project was created. In an interview with Light Industry codirector Thomas Beard in 2008, Lonergan says he made the piece (while still an undergraduate at the University of California, Los Angeles) "before I learned to drive, so in a way I was using the computer lab to cruise around the city."

The deft economy of *Lonely Los Angeles* typifies Lonergan's best extant work. Elegant yet humble gestures like this, generating maximum emotional resonance from minimal arrangements of found online media, made him something of a legend among fellow artists engaged with the Internet in the past decade or so. A few months ago, Cory Arcangel—an artist known for his sustained and groundbreaking involvement with new media—told me that he thought Lonergan, though little known in the greater art world, was "our Bruce Nauman." If Nauman asserted that anything that happens in an artist's studio can be art, Lonergan updated this claim for an age in which the artist's studio had become a laptop.

"ONE BIG DATABASE"

About twenty-one years old when he uploaded *Lonely Los Angeles*, Lonergan would make his most important connections well beyond the confines of his native city, in the dispersed communities of the emergent social Web. Finding other people online was a more peripatetic affair at that time, when the oligarchy of megaplatforms that now exists had yet to fully take hold of online experience. For example, YouTube was still in its infancy when Lonergan compiled *Babies' First Steps*, 2005, a montage of amateur videos (pixelated by the exigencies of compression) by parents marking a milestone in their children's development from newborn to toddler; to gather the footage, he used the Lycos search engine to locate video files on individual homepages. As an homage to its origins, *Babies' First Steps* can be found today embedded like its source materials in the center of an otherwise empty page, the background of which is shaded a nursery-wall pink.

At the time, the clean institutional spaces of Facebook remained restricted to college students. Its predecessor Myspace then typified the adolescence of the Internet itself: awkwardly designed, uncertain of what it should become, but open to experimenting with extreme (and often questionable) forms of self-expression. A series of Myspace pages customized by Lonergan, collectively titled *My Myspaces*, 2005–2006, is now effectively lost, thanks to successive changeovers in the social network's architecture. One of the few of the set that were recorded on the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine was fittingly located under the username ghostsofmyspace: The page seems to have depicted a flattened map of the globe surmounted by a trio of identical animated ghosts, each GIF enlarged into a pulsating cloud of soft pixels, hovering over a set of nearly information-free frames. Encountering an old website like this is a strange experience now; not only are many of its hyperlinks dead, but dead, too, are its connections to offline reality, since the greater social world within which it was made to function no longer exists.

Though he tinkered off and on with Myspace, Lonergan made his most important discoveries on the barer-boned del.icio.us, a “social bookmarking” project designed by Joshua Schachter that allows users to quickly share links to pages as they surf them. It was on del.icio.us that Lonergan developed a taste for the most banal of online ephemera—a page celebrating its author’s collection of Super Soaker squirt guns; a photo of two floppy disks, one marked MARILYN MANSON PICTURES DARCY’S with a tiny hand-drawn pentacle; a video of kids gliding down a Slip ’N Slide. Through this ongoing research, Lonergan found a circle of fellow Web surfers who shared an interest in collecting such things and egged one another on to find the ultimate examples of digital artifacts that might prove astonishing in their typicality. Lonergan then joined a few of the most ardent del.icio.us posters, including Travis Hallenbeck, John Michael Boling, and Marisa Olson, in creating the blog Nasty Nets, an Internet “surf club” predicated on the sharing of such links, as well as of the new videos, animated GIFS, and other digital-detritus assemblages they would create from the raw material provided by the Web. The classic Nasty Nets post was something that hovered in its strangeness just below the threshold of meme spreadability, too understated in its awkwardness to be noticed by the Internet at large, yet subtly enhanced by the barely there surf-club context.

The bulk of Nasty Nets’ activities transpired between 2006 and 2009. The first few of those years also marked, arguably, the cultural apogee of Internet browsing itself, before such pleasures would be challenged by competing activities—our attentions corralled into mall-like social networks, highwayed over by serial-television bingeing, or processed through a toy box of apps. For desktop users, it was the age of the first big flat screens, vast vistas powered by broadband connections, on which the user might roam fast and free, able to enlarge old twentieth-century pages so their primitive elements seemed to float within these bright new expanses. The neo-Deco design of specialized computer desks in the years leading up to this period reflected the luxurious nature of Web surfing. These units’ bodies of pressed wood pulp, shaped into vaguely *Metropolis*-like recesses for drives, speakers, and DVR spindles, promised kingly convenience to the user as he kicked back in his ergonomic task chair.

The domestic architectures of this period are preserved in Lonergan’s “music video” *Domain*, 2006, a slide show of photos depicting users’ self-designed media centers—makeshift clusters of screens and devices surrounded by piles of clutter—intercut with standard-definition footage zooming over a jankily rendered virtual ocean. The work’s dirgelike midi sound track reinforces a sense of solitude, of wandering alone through digital space. Such was the feeling of that era, for even if the user multitasked, surfing with an open chat window, socializing was a discrete activity that had to be turned on rather than opted out of. In other pieces by Lonergan, the desire to communicate is articulated with understated desperation. One of two videos titled *Acapella*, 2009, presents clips from a stock-footage library, still bearing their time codes, of objects such as an apple, a basketball, and a burgeoning pile of popcorn, morphing over chroma-key-ready single-color backgrounds. Lonergan sets this collection to Sting’s a cappella version of the Police’s “Message in a Bottle.” That song’s refrain of “sending out an SOS” seems to echo Lonergan’s Web collage *brb*, 2008, made from merely two elements: the lowercase letters of its acronymic title, scrolling right to left, placed over an embedded, looping sound file of what one at first assumes to be the Morse-code distress signal (three short, three long, three short), but upon careful listening discovers to spell out “brb” (one long, three short; one short, one long, one short; and one long, three short). *Be right back*.

“HACKING VRS. DEFAULTS”

During these years, Lonergan made the majority of his public output, including his most

accomplished works. Some are formal experiments in stripped-down HTML, such as *Carpet in Carpet* and *Marble Mirror*, both 2007, made from overlapping animated-GIF squares bearing contrasting textures in motion, each built from no more than twenty-one lines of streamlined code per page. Other pieces reflect on the vernacular aesthetics of the Web as it blossomed into a true mass culture. *Internet Group Shot*, 2006, is a vertical collage of cutout snapshots, collected from homepages and forums, showing groups of everyday people grinning for the camera; *Halt, robot!*, 2006, is a similar arrangement, this time of multicolored strings of CAPTCHA text, those familiar look-and-retype user-identification tests that help computers tell we're human. Both reference, through a kind of pop cybernetics, standardized human responses cued by interfaces with machines. *Artist Looking at Camera*, 2006, further pursues this theme. Appropriating stock footage of anonymous actors playing painters, potters, and architects who glance up from their (notably traditional) crafts to smile into the lens, Lonergan's video still bears the Getty Images watermark, which interrupts the cold gaze of each well-lit face as it attempts to make an emotional connection with a hypothetical viewer.

Perhaps Lonergan's most influential work is his piece *Hacking vrs. defaults chart*, 2007, a two-column HTML table attempting to parse what he saw as the two main modes of Internet art at the time. The left column, titled "Hacking," is typified by "Hacking a Nintendo cartridge to make images" (a reference to early work by Arcangel, such as *Super Mario Clouds*, 2002), "Rock & Roll attitude," and "Sophisticated breaking of technology," and it is counterposed with "Defaults," the right-hand column, which offers instead "Using MS Paint to make images," "Exuberant humility," and "Semi-naive, regular use of technology." The chart was received as an aesthetic manifesto of its moment, even read at times as a generational line in the sand. As it circulated, *Hacking vrs. defaults chart* sparked reaction and debate on Rhizome.org and blogs devoted to new media, upping the term *defaults* as a key critical concept in discussions about artistic engagements with technology. Blogger Tom Moody, himself an active Nasty Nets participant, later interpreted Lonergan's dichotomy as "meant to distinguish artists who use 'off the shelf' software from the older type of net artiste who insists on hand-coding everything." Lonergan himself, however, indicated that the phenomenon he described had application beyond mere artmaking. "There are defaults in our culture," Lonergan told the *Wall Street Journal* in 2007, for an article on "internet-inspired art." "MySpace doesn't set up something for you to create an introduction video, but kind of like a telephone answering machine, you assume a certain kind of voice and say certain things."

Like many artists' declarations on the general nature of art, *Hacking vrs. defaults chart* can also be read more specifically as a self-analysis of the author's own practice. Had there been any doubt about this in Lonergan's case, it would have been dispelled by a lecture the artist gave at Light Industry in Brooklyn in 2009, titled "We Did It Ourselves!" (As one of the curators of Light Industry, I invited him to speak.) This event grew out of a series of performances Lonergan gave in 2006, in which he "surf[ed] the Internet in public," sharing his own work, the work of fellow artists, and materials he had collected online. In his lecture, Lonergan describes how the do-it-yourself aura of indie music had become far less compelling when such music became, suddenly, widely available to all on the democratic spaces of the early Web. In the process of exploring these issues, Lonergan came to think about the Internet as "one big database," a sentiment he had expressed somewhat differently a year earlier in his interview with Beard, in which he remarked, "I guess a lot of my work approaches the Internet as though it is one singular being (whoa)."

"These websites I was attracted to never completely look like crap," he told the audience at Light Industry, "but there is an antiseptic, corporate foundation to the material. Certain defaults in the software are always present, and I found myself attracted to these defaults." By focusing on the tensions between the anonymity of technologically standardized

templates and their counterintuitive use as vehicles of personal expression, Lonergan homed in on a phenomenon peculiar to that moment of Internet culture yet generalizable to the human condition as a whole:

I'm in love with the struggle as something real coming through this structure. I hate utopian fantasies of the Internet as this totally free, democratic space that will make our lives better. We're all using this preexisting foundation that will always be there no matter what. Defaults are also a reaction to the "infinite" choices and possibilities offered by the virtual (letting the computer choose for you). You can't get off the grid, but the struggle of normal, basic Internet users to get something real through this existing grid is really exciting. On some level, I think of default as a metaphor for all kinds of mediated distance, for the way we feel dissociated from war, money, art, and music.

"INTERNET AWARE ART"

It would be incorrect to imagine Lonergan as a sui generis digital native, unmoored from any tradition or school, who realized the potential of new technology by dint of an inherently generational genius. In fact, he was exposed to the ongoing history of Internet art even before attending UCLA, where, he told me in a recent Google Hangout interview, he'd had a poster of Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* above his bed freshman year; and he followed influential figures like Paper Rad and JODI early on. Moreover, his work has had an intermittent but prominent presence in galleries and museums. In 2009, he curated a show with artist Paul Slocum at the latter's Dallas gallery, *And/Or*, for which they collected and exhibited examples of template-driven, user-made animations from the media-sharing site YTMND (yourethemannowdog.com, established by Max Goldberg). Created from only a few elements each—typically a tiled animated image, a looping sound file, and up to three lines of text—YTMND compositions were early versions of the funny memes today shared on Tumblr and Facebook but, in their raw minimalism, could easily be mistaken for works of Net art. *And/Or's* exhibition proposed that such distinctions are irrelevant. In an essay written to accompany the show, "Picture. Sound. Text.," Lonergan argues that, while "YTMND wants nothing to do with art," it nonetheless "sort of can't quite be defined as anything but art . . . its 'singular focus' format is as sharp as any cultural appropriation in the art world."

Lonergan's work appeared in two major survey shows at the New Museum in New York, its opening exhibition, "Unmonumental," in 2008, and its first triennial, "The Generational Triennial: Younger Than Jesus," in 2009. For the latter, Lonergan presented his *Myspace Intro Playlist*, 2006, a YouTube playlist of found Myspace videos in which (mostly) teens introduce themselves to visitors, as a two-channel installation; this was also the form in which the piece had appeared in "The New Normal," a group show at Artists Space in New York the year before. After critic Ben Davis, writing for *Artnet*, glossed Lonergan's work as being "about' social media" but not itself "social media art," arguments about the validity of this fine difference powered an extended discussion on Rhizome's forums. One of Lonergan's former collaborators, Nasty Nets' Moody, contended that *Myspace Intro Playlist* had been "transformed by stages from an expression inside social media into standard museum video art fare," thereby losing much of its original meaning. This claim led to further debate on Rhizome, including responses from Lauren Cornell, one of the curators of "Younger Than Jesus," and Lonergan himself. "While I understood the work had an original form & location, I also felt it could have different versions in new contexts that were valid," Cornell wrote. Here, she may be referencing a concept popularized by artist Oliver Laric in his video essay *Versions*, 2009, which features a voice-over by Lonergan in the character of "The Internet." In his own response to Moody, Lonergan wrote that he "agree[s] that the original online Myspace Intro Playlist on YouTube is the better version of the piece," but he also thought that the "DVD version is a more permanent documentation of a 'live,' linked YouTube playlist piece that will slowly disappear."

In his highly influential essay “Dispersion,” published in its earliest form in 2002, artist Seth Price describes a hypothetical scenario in which artists might better engage with the situation of twenty-first-century capitalism by creating work that can vanish into the structures of mass distribution; for Price, this included practices such as book and music publishing, as well as the newer possibilities offered by the Internet. Engaging these processes, Price offered, could extend the legacy of Conceptualism into a new era through a game of ontological brinkmanship between art and non-art, played out in the public sphere. In some ways, the activities of Lonergan and his Nasty Nets peers could be seen as a realization of Price’s proposal. But Lonergan reverse-engineered Price’s prophecy. Rather than starting out as a gallery artist, then moving on from that context to exploit the mechanisms and forms of mass media in creating and disseminating his art, Lonergan began his work online and only later attempted to adapt his practice in order to participate in meatspace exhibitions.

In 2008, concluding his interview with Beard, Lonergan stated that finding a way to work in galleries was then an active project. “Right now I’m scheming how to take the emphasis off of the Internet and technology, but keep my ideas intact,” he reported. “Objects that aren’t objects . . . I got a couple of books and a t-shirt in the works. Right now I’m really into text (not visually/typography . . . just . . . text . . .), and lots and lots of lists . . . ‘Internet Aware Art.’ :)” This last phrase, too, became a focus of debate online, seeming at first to point to a new phenomenon of formerly Internet-based artists entering the commercial-gallery system. But much of the argument was over what precisely Lonergan might have meant by his cryptic statement. In their roundup of Rhizome highlights from 2008, artist John Michael Boling and curators Ceci Moss and Caitlin Jones defined “Internet Aware Art” as “an attempt to describe the tendency for artists to translate behavioral or situational tendencies occurring online to other contexts, particularly offline,” noting that the term had already “gained some significance in describing the approach of other artists,” a claim that came under fire in ensuing comments. Lonergan, for his part, clarified (somewhat) the meaning of “Internet Aware Art” in his 2009 lecture, saying, “I’ve sort of defined it as related to these ideas of the big database that I was trying to talk about. And just being aware that even if you’re not making Internet art, that your art is going on the Internet, probably. And somehow any attempt to be aware of that will change your work, thinking about that Internet context.”

Disagreements such as these over “Internet Aware Art” presaged discussions over the similarly slippery moniker “post-Internet.” But Lonergan’s 2009 elaboration on his own previous statement points to a more precise issue, which remains contentious. Just as cinematographers have long framed their compositions with both big and small screens in mind—knowing that TVs, computer monitors, smartphones, and the like are where most will see their images—so, too, Lonergan argued, have gallery artists subtly shifted their own practices, consciously or otherwise, to take into account an Internet-enabled audience. Certainly, few artists today can be oblivious to the fact that more people will view reproductions of their work online than the originals in person, but does this knowledge significantly change the way such work is conceived, fabricated, and exhibited? That such a claim continues to be controversial is reflected in the mixed reception to art historian Michael Sanchez’s essay “2011: Art and Transmission” (published in this magazine’s summer 2013 issue), in which Sanchez argued that the increased availability of high-resolution images of new art, viewable on the iPhone IPS display and circulated via aggregator sites such as Contemporary Art Daily, has changed the internal rhythms of the art world and created new vectors of influence between artists.

In any case, Lonergan’s activity, both online and off, has petered out in the past half decade. In our recent Google chat, Lonergan chalked this up to shifts in social media, which made the special dynamic of surf clubs untenable in the age of mass sharing on Tumblr and

Instagram, and to his own declining interest in entering the gallery system full force. “In general I’m a very confused person and certainly much more confused about Net art now than I was five years ago,” Lonergan told me. “Net art’s relationship to contemporary art as a whole and to the art market gets more confusing every day. It’s pretty fascinating to watch, though. I tried for years to figure out how to ‘print it out,’ to make something super-salable, but I could never quite figure it out, and I don’t think I ever will.”

Theageofmammals.com’s lists indicate that Lonergan has made public only a handful of projects since 2009, and nothing past 2012. But he has let one piece trickle out through his Twitter account. On April 2, 2014, he tweeted a link to a hidden page on his site, where he had created an ascii diagram transcribing the introductory riff to the jingle for the HBO GO streaming service as a tablature for guitar. Two months later, he tweeted the following message, which currently remains the most recent tweet from his account. It reads: “update: my hbo go tab has been accepted into ultimate-guitar.com’s preeminent tab database.” It’s as if Lonergan has dissolved back into the flux of online media from which he emerged, now just another Internet user among billions.