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[Biography] Marisa S. Olson is an artist, critic, and curator. Her site-specific installations have been seen in various North American and European cities, and her essays on contemporary art and visual culture have appeared in Wired, Afterimage, Mute, Rhizome, Art on Paper, Artweek, Surface, Planet, and other publications and academic journals. As Associate Director of SF Camerawork, Marisa curates exhibitions and edits Camerawork: A Journal of Photographic Arts. She has previously designed programming for several institutions, including the ICA, London; the American Film Institute (AFI); the Getty; and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in San Diego. Regularly consulting institutions of all sizes on the development of media arts programs, Marisa has served on several international boards, including the SF Media Arts Council, as program director and founding editor of their quarterly magazine, SMAC!; GenArt, as director of media arts; the Contemporary Art Society, London; and the EMMA (European Multimedia) Foundation. Marisa has held fellowships and artist residencies at the Smithsonian Institute, Northwestern University, the New School, the Technical University-Dresden, UC Berkeley, the Banff Centre for the Arts, and elsewhere.

Marisa Olson: Given that we're here under the pretense of talking about interface. I would like to problematize the term a bit by returning to a more fundamental definition of interface. Today I was looking at my favorite net art site, Dictionary.com and I decided to look up our word of the day. The primary definition of interface was that of "a surface forming a common boundary between adjacent regions, bodies, substances, or phases." This definition appealed to me because it is the sort of humanist definition that makes me think about Merleau Ponty's phenomenological idea that we are all connected to one another through a sort of "flesh" that is, at the same time, immaterial and yet something substantive that can be looked at and articulated--a slightly more romantic notion of human relations than the doom and gloom diatribes that we have all succumbed to lately but one that still bares importance in that it reminds us of the impacts of our actions, which these days may seem more anonymous or disembodied, given our situation within network culture.

Nevertheless, the impacts of our actions on others serves to remind us that we are always operating within a closed system so that those impacts and those impetuses unfold from the predetermined paradigm of actions within a heavily enforced force field of power. This is the real reason that I insist on using the term *network culture* fairly frequently to refer to our current context. The term serves to remind us that our work, ideas, and interactions are borne under the sign of the network, or what Lev Manovich likes to call *computer culture.* But then the term *network* really refers not only to the presence of the Internet but also the idea that we are all interconnected in this plane and in this field of power. We are very interdependent and at the same time we are reinforcing this power structure, connecting the variables, or 'power relations,' within this closed system. I tend to be a little bit of a cynic about that. As I go on I will talk about how computer networks may embody some of these relationships.

But first, stepping back, I wanted to focus on an area of interface that interests me, in relation to the media arts. Beyond what we might more explicitly identify as "new media," I have an interest in analog work that can be interpreted in relation to digital work, whether because of formal or conceptual similarities or because we now have an expanded vocabulary with which to discuss "old media." I am also interested in looking at interface as a practice rather than as an object. My sense is that we tend to refer to interface as a thing. So we say "Jane is an interface designer" or "that thing over there is a graphic user interface." Participating in the use of these so-called objects is what defines them and in fact defines us, reciprocally. That participation extends to authorship and readership, two largely-conflated categories... Interface objects then take on the position of a text and my tendency is to analyze text, be they visual or verbal, from the discourse of narratology. This is an important area that needs some updating in the discourse of the media arts. The idea of narratology within network culture has been really under emphasized as it has revolved primarily around hypertext theory. (Then again, most of the work theorized was never really "hypertext" in the true sense.)

Narratology can tell us how a text is structured and the rhetorical functions of its components. Just as our subject positions are inscribed in the ethos of the network, the conditions of authorship and readership are inscribed in a text in the structuring of conditions of narrativity. What are those conditions? First, we have to look at the wider context of speech acts. I am a big proponent of reviving very basic vocabularies to remind us of how we got to the point that we are

at now. I want to do a little speech act theory 101 and remind you that traditional speech act theory says that the speech act consist of two components elocution and perlocution. Elocution is where an utterance is comprised and executed according to the rules of grammar, phonemes, etc. Perlocution is measured by the reader or listener's response and is, in a sense, their interpretation. This binary can be applied to non-verbal acts of communication, kinetic gesture, painting and so on. The separation of the text and its effects is a history we have to remember. Scholars have given us a handful of binaries that we tend to toss around without really thinking about what ideas that language is encompassing. For instance, Ferdinand de Saussure gave us the model of the "signifier" over the "signified." There is the idea that one is utterance and the other the thing that it is supposed to mean. And though Saussure distinguished between language ("langue") and the way language is spoken ("parole"), which is a more nuanced distinction, he tends to neglect the sort of interpretive aspects that are involved in participating in a speech act as an interlocutor. Actually the underrated semiotician Charles Peirce had a really good idea for what it is that Saussure was neglecting here. He referred to something called a "sign vehicle," which is to say that a sign's interpretation is very much determined by the mode in which it is delivered. I think that this is something we can revive in network culture because we are thinking about new technologies and new disseminative vehicles.

The big problem here is the elocution/ perlocution schema does not index authorial intention. Authorial intention is so often overlooked and in this post post-modern world, we are taught that it is unfair to even try to consider or interpret an author's intention. It is interesting, here, to remember Aristotle's discussion, in *Poetics,* of the difference between thought and diction in trying to define what a tragedy is. He said that a tragedy has an internal component and external component, which is like the traditional narratological distinction between a *story* and its *discourse*. He says that thought is internal to a tragedy the way a plot or character is but that diction is something that is external. This means not only that the delivery is a structural mechanism but also that it is delivered along with lyrical song and visual presentment. He says, then, that diction is really defined by the audience. This is something I'd like to think about—our roles as receivers of these utterances and the fact that there is this production, or labor, that is happening in that reception.

In a time when it has become common to discuss "the death of the author," it is important to remember these productive relationships. An

author's labor is often concealed in this context, as it falls under a Marxism paradigm wherein an author's labor has neither use value nor exchange value. Its role is really to just fulfill a place in the system of interpolation. As Louis Althusser would say, an author's work is really just another ideological state apparatus. Althusser believes that, in this depressing way, we are all kind of cogs in machine. Our schools, our churches, our institutions are all meant to just reproduce systems of labor, while labor reinforces the state's authority and keeps the state running. We are not really supposed to think for ourselves this way, of course. We just kind of march along blindly like the people in Plato's cave. It is depressing, indeed; yet, there are alternatives. We can even think about it in this context... We are here under the rubric of a fine art program. The art school context is one in which thousands and thousands of MFA's are getting churned out every year and there is really not much that most of those people can do other than turn around and teach and produce more and more artists. Of course now we have started producing these curatorial studies programs and that just means that there are more and more people out there with only a trade school background in how to curate and not any background in art history thinking that somehow there are going to be spaces to curate all of these new MFA's. It is a sticky predicament and soon you may find yourself with something that is all *discourse* and no *story*. This also manifests itself specifically in relation to narrative. We find that speech acts are restricted by our language. The language I am using is literally and metaphorically restricted by my vocabulary and our rules of grammar.

Janet Murray, who wrote *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* spoke specifically about this agency-lessness in relation to computer environments and said that narrative environments typically endows their inhabitants with very little agency and that when we are interacting or "interfacing" with the computer, we are really performing a "call and response." A call and response is a classic term, used particularly in African American literary studies and folk art studies, to refer to the idea that, in many performative texts, the rhetor and audience work within a paradigm of predetermined "calls" and audience responses.

In the case of the computer, let us say, we are working in a situation where there are limited number of calls put out there. Whether it is a pre-fixed menu or GUI or whatever, what we are looking at is a call that goes out and we have a limited number of responses that we can make to them. This is not just a question of how many avatars I can be when I am running through a space. If you think about how someone is trying to use language to construct their identity and how

they are trying to engage with or interrogate these systems, these limitations complicate the matter. Althusser argues that we find ourselves always-already a subject of the state and the choices that we make within these closed systems are really non-choices. Yet, there *are* actually some interesting choices that we can make and, in particular, the choice that interests me is that of using language to interrogate itself. Yes we may be stuck within a closed system, but we can use the objects of that system to critique itself. We can create a rational identity or cause the artifice that we are inside of to implode rather than explode—we cannot blow the system up, but we can make it fall in on itself.

In a few minutes to talk about a show I curated with this goal in mind. First, I wanted to look at one other narrative condition in *network culture* that also relates to the exhibition, that of spatiality. The implosions which I find myself attracted to executing are spatial interventions and they are successful when they are aware of their narrative spatiality. I have found it ironic that film studies likes to use the term *diagesis* to refer to the "world" of a film. Do you know this term? *Diagesis* is the original Greek term for narrative but it has become a very specialized term. There is a sequence in "American Gigolo" where the protagonist's character is built through a series of shots (him shopping, driving, working out, etc) set against the Blondie song, "Call Me." One assumes that the music is *extra-diagectic*, meaning that it is not a part of the world of the narrative, yet, at the close of the sequence, he stops working out when the phone rings, gets up, walks over to the radio, and turns the radio off and the music stops. This is actually an example of using a language to interrogate itself. (Not only are we skewing the *diagesis*, but we're listening to "Call Me," until the phone indeed rings and the "call boy" answers it.)

I am using this example as a means of demonstrating that we really cannot think about a narrative as being anything but spatial. Many classical critics have tried to say that narratives and images are distinct from each other, that—as G.E. Lessing said—images are always spatial and narratives are always temporal, but ne'er the twain shall meet… There are always relations that can be mapped, whether physically or theoretically (another aspect of *network culture*) and narratives are always spatial, whether they are linear or *curvilinear*.

It is these more abstract relations that let us exploit the fixed order of metaphor and metonymy. I like the example in the book *The Order of Things* where Foucault asked 'what is a dog?' and his answer was not just- it's a furry creature with four legs, but-it is not a cat, it is not a

house, it is not the number nine. We remember that things are defined through a play of difference and through this play of difference we use metaphor and metonymy. Things that seem paradoxical do in fact make a leapfrog effect (just as I moved from "dog" to the number nine) that can implode the system within which we are working, while still following linguistics rules.

With that, I want to look at a show that I curated over the summer, for SF Camerawork, [http://www.sfcamerawork.org/], called Same/Difference [http://www.sfcamerawork.org/past_exhibits/same_difference.html]. The idea was to curate an exhibition in a hotel room. As a curator I find myself seeing work over an extended period of time and just being interested in it and sometimes not knowing why I am interested in it or what I would really do with it. It registers and eventually a show develops. In this case, I started seeing a couple different artists working around the theme of hotels and I started thinking about the fact that all hotels are the same—right? Just as Andy Warhol said that "all Cokes are the same and all Cokes are good." I started thinking about this idea and the fact that there is a pretty strict and distinct language to hotel space and there is a weird anonymity to it and this weird interpolative effect wherein the hotel acts as a portable domestic space.

There are these weird narratives inherent in the space and in all the peculiarities of the hotel, as well. You go in there, I do anyway, go into a room and wonder about who else was there and what they did. It occurs to me that I am not able to have a relationship with those people. We have occupied the same very intimate space—we showered in the same space, we slept in the same bed, we fondled the same remote control, we have talked on the same phone, but we can't communicate with each other. This show evolved out of those concerns. The title is *Same/Difference* which is an expression that always makes my skin crawl. I actually thought it was perfect in pointing out that everything is the same (from one room to the next, one Holiday Inn to another, and across the spectrum of hotels, the textiles, the logic of the furniture placement, the accoutrements, etc, remain the same) and yet we persist in aspiring to make things more personal. I think there are many overlaps with specific *network conditions* with this space that we are looking at.

The idea was to curate a show that would be a site-specific installation in a room where people would have to go and pick up a key at the front desk to look at the work. I really wanted it to be in a Motel 6 or some place very generic. None of those people got it, though. And they wouldn't do it. Only the "boutique" hotels were interested. We

ended up at the Hotel Triton in San Francisco at the corner of Grant and Bush, right at the big lion gates to Chinatown, a very very touristy spot. I thought that I would show a couple of images from their website [http://www.hoteltriton.com/] so that you can get a sense of the space and the way that they brand themselves, particularly in relation to "art." The Triton has celebrity-designed suites. There is the Jerry Garcia room, the Santana room… You get the language. If you go back to the front page you see a watercolor that was in every single room that we looked at—and I looked at so many different rooms trying to pick "the one." That little sun mirror was also in every room. So, okay, you have the idea of the space that we are in. Let me show you what we did. It is funny that I am hearing myself talk about this and saying "we" because I have a hard time drawing a line between my own practices as a site-specific temporary installation artist and my work as a curator because, really, as a curator in the best sense, you are really creating site-specific temporary installations.

[Showing slides, now] So this is room 206 at the Hotel Triton, across the hall from the Creative Zone conference room. If you went into the hotel only one person or one group can get a key to see the show at a time. I heard stories about people having to wait at the lobby on busier days for a half hour and wondering whether that was part of the performative aspect of the show—like maybe they were waiting for something that really didn't even exist. But when you walk in you see to the left is the bathroom. We tried to take it from the top down and approach every possible distinctly coded aspect of a hotel room. There is a video and sculptural installation in the bathroom and two closets with installations. There is stuff on the bed. There are things on the floor, crumpled up Kleenex with text on them. This is the bathroom where Tommy Becker had the video that you just saw. He created this fictional video where he is talking on the phone with someone but he is just really just talking to himself and he is doing it while sitting on a toilet in a bathroom and there is water running down a bath tub with a clog of hair in it that is keeping the water from going down and there is this specific Bathroom Moment and it is installed here in such a way that you realize it's in a similar bathroom but you are not sure whether it is the same bathroom. You later realize that it is in another bathroom that is the *same* but *different* and it is the first indication that you get that there is a toying with the language of the space going on.

This is Geof Oppenheimer in the first closet. Those T-shirts say things like "I love these gray skies," "I love these modern times," or "I love all the colors." They are produced in a way that is very mass-

produced, a la "I [heart] New York," a la hotel, a la Motel 6... There is a certain kind of specific subjectivity to them. Geof was really trying to boil down the portability of personal space from the hotel room to the space that is occupied by even a small portion of your corporeality and think about what that portion of your body has to do with your identity. What you also can't see in this slide is that on shelf above the bar he had a Gideon's Bible and books on Buddhism, the Torah and some other samples of religions of the world (including "Harold and the Purple Crayon," which Geof interprets as a religious text) and a disco ball. Two of those books were taken from the desk that is in the room.

In the second closet is Heather Johnson. She is the same artist that did the Kleenex and the sheets that you are going to see in a minute. Heather checked into this same room and lived there for a night and continued to work on a project that she calls *Telling Time by Remote Control.* It is travel documentation about what it does to you to live in these impersonal spaces and what it does to your sense of time and space. Those linens, which are the rooms' original linens, are embroidered with words like mildew, lipstick and other things which you might find on those towels & wash cloths. This is the bed. These were the original sheets that were there in this highly-polished hotel room when she stayed. So she circled the stains on the sheets and she embroidered drawings of the television, an electrical outlet, and other parts of the room. And there are little texts sewn in that relate to her own memories of staying in different hotel spaces.

Behind the bed are two pieces. The telephone is a piece—or the vehicle for a piece... A Detroit based artist named Jeff Karolski did this project where he forwarded his personal answering machine messages to the phone for the month duration of the show. You could listen to the messages, which were often really crazy, like "I need you to lie to my friend Sara about blah blah blah" or "I am sorry to have hurt you" or really interesting bizarre messages of his friends calling about court appearances or to say nothing at all. Jeff is a musician. His friends would call, playing music over the phone. I really sort of commissioned this piece to approach the idea that I talked about where you and I may have used the same phone in the room but we are really unable to communicate with each other. In this case the almost-fictional identity of Jeff Karolski unfolds over the month that we are in the room.

The photo is by Laura Larson who has gone into various hotel rooms around the country after people have checked out and before they

have been cleaned. She looks at the traces that people leave behind and the stories that those objects tell. That weird thing on the floor is a funny balloon sculpture that somebody left in the room. What is interesting is that a lot of projects in the room were very site specific, like Heather's embroidery on the sheets but then, that hotel room, I believe, was in Atlanta, Georgia. In one sense it is referring to another, *different* space, but it, and much of the work was really made site specific by virtue of its installation here. In the case of Laura's photos, colors and surfaces bleed off the photos and into Room 206. There was a point when we were installing the show, moving the furniture around endlessly—trying to fit so much into such a tiny space, and we got so muddied in the process of thinking about how the work was critiquing the space with its own language, and someone said something about the reflection of the doorknob in Laura's photo referring to the reflection in the sun-shaped mirror hanging on the wall. You know, the space began critiquing itself and we had to get the hell out of the room for a while!

This is Graham Parker's work. Those are stamp pads that you can stamp on the hotel stationary and they bear different renditions of a story of famous Irish football player whose his name is George Best. He was a pretty famous international playboy and there is this one scandalous story about him in a hotel room with a lot of money and some alleged prostitutes and so it became this huge thing. (He even went on Johnny Carson and talked about it…) Graham is from Manchester and does a lot of traveling. He has gone to all these different towns and collected people's renditions of this story and this is the first in the series of projects on stationery where you can kind of take the story away with you in a site specific way on a piece of paper that say Hotel Triton. He is also did a slide installation which projected two narrative performances in which you couldn't tell where the narratives started or stopped. They were sort of mythic moments being recreated in public spaces.

This is last slide is of two different artists. On the wall are two photographs by Thomas Chang. He has a series called *Decadence* where he has gone into 5 star hotels and looked at the absurd lengths that people go to decorate every last inch of the space. On the left is a Bromeliad, those really expensive flowers that don't live every long. The entire lobby space is dedicated to this small flower. On the right is this mural painted on the wall. You can barely see that there is a fire extinguisher built into the mural. The suitcase is Sam Kraus's work. Each of those keys hanging there is a key to one of 50 different hotels in the country. Each hotel's name and address is on it. She has given

them all a specific "identity number." There is this play of all these multiple definitions of identity and, obviously, the way that identity relates to a specific space.

Those are some of the aspects of our project to go into a space and critique it in its own language. The use of visual work to affect that linguistic act, communicative issues that translate into these analog contexts and are really heightened or seemingly more present in *network culture* are things that are concerning me, extending into my writing and curatorial practice right now. Those are the things that I would throw out there to start a conversation…

Slayton: How exactly does the public access the hotel rooms?

Olson: They would go into the lobby and present their driver's license and sign a sign-in sheet. The sign-in sheets were actually very interesting because some people really didn't want to put their names down. I wanted to make the process as similar to checking into a hotel as possible and that is why if you and I didn't know each other and came in within five minutes of each other, I would still have to go out and wait for you to go up and come back. It could only be one person or one group at a time...

Slayton: What do people do when they are in the room?

Olson: That is a good question. I thought seriously about setting up a nanny cam or something like that, but I didn't. What happened in there when I wasn't there? Well, I would go into the room and find that people peed in the toiled and did not flush. People left trash. There was a post-it pad that said Hotel Triton with a Hotel Triton pen next to the phone. They transcribed the phone messages that they listened to and they would leave notes for other people. They didn't mess up the sheets too much which really surprised me because I had pictured and wanted people to get into the bed. Really what pissed me off were the people who tried to turn off the slide projector or the lights or the video. I would think "oh my god! How long has this been turned off?!," and I'd have to turn it back on.

Mays: It was interesting that one of the artists said that you couldn't photograph the work?

Olson: Yes

Slayton: Did you just say ok?

Olson: Yes. That is something that I do myself, too. Just lately I have had to get over it because it is really hard to apply for a residency or build documentation as an artist. I submitted only articles or reviews of my work for the longest time. I would not photograph my work because they were architectural pieces that were site specific, meant to be temporary and broken down through a viewer's interaction with them. Photographing them changed the entire context. So, the artist's request didn't really bother me.

Schleiner: It is kind of a tangent but I was struck at the beginning when you are talking about interface and langue and parole and how there is too much emphasis placed on langue and not as much emphasis place on parole. Langue is the group of rules that make up a language (can be visual language etc) and shared assumptions by most speakers, parole is how a person individually uses language, individual speech acts. Thinking about that in relation to interface, a lot of work that I do is with computer games in which a transparent interface really is just an interface that uses language conventions that we are used to. It's based on langue versus the way that certain people will customize their interface and I was thinking about games like *Counterstrike* where people buy into certain keys and certain actions, a completely individual sort of looking in the parole area, the transparent or langue area, of interface. Anyway it just sparked me about thinking about that. I am also wondering how you would be talking about langue and parole in the relation to this exhibit that you just were showing?

Olson: Well...one of the things that interested me about what you were just saying is, this is kind of an old point by now, the fact that for whatever reason in these practices of reading in *network culture* we have paid so much attention to the physical aspects of them. Pressing the key is engaging with them physically. I don't know why people weren't talking about the physicality of turning pages so much before, but whatever. I think that the same was very much true for me in the process of putting this show together and thinking about the fact that the show and its... whatever it had to say or do was defined, as I said, by the reader and also by the way the reader or viewer engaged with the space and the specific physical decisions that they made. It is hard to convey that idea through the slides and I wish I had taken video but you have to make very distinct choices about how you are going to look at the work because it is such a tiny room. You had to be there. There are only a few ways to position the body and you can only look at one thing at a time. I think that that is interesting because

our physicality, our identities, and our language are also closely bound. It is really important to look at the sort of systems that are created for that kind of interaction as the hotel room was being designed or when a network is designed or when an interface of any kind is "designed." What sort of ideas are pre-inscribed in the structure of that network and there in the hotel room? It could be a network or an interface, which are not mutually exclusive...

I tend to have a psychoanalytic approach to things. There is this idea in psychoanalysis that we have a *phantasmatic*, a sort of grid that bears all of our fantasies and desires. All of the things that we do in the world are an effort to make our reality fall in line with our phantasmatic. I think that you know all the arguments about, let's say…the way that protocol is bound up in *network culture* and the way that cultural hegemonic stipulations are enforced or created through a network structure. It is very similar to the way that we try to make other things in our life and reality coincide with the phantasmatic. It translates into hotel architecture and video game structure and probably this horrible pattern on the carpet upon which we now sit.

Stallbaum: One of the things that I am curious about is your notion that network culture draws... at least from what I have heard so far, and please correct me if I am wrong, from Althuser more than anybody else. In other words, your notion of network culture has to do with social stipulations about how space is organized in a hotel, cultural assumptions involved about how it controls other people's behavior, and another things related to that notion of network theory is the way that people have taken network infrastructure itself, not only the interface elements but how packets are routed…the Carnivore [http://www.rhizome.org/carnivore] project is related to this… and network interfaces that lie under the user interface as metaphors for *network culture*. I wonder if you can relate those two theories of *network culture* to your notion of *network culture*?

Olson: There are a couple of different issues there. I would say that obviously my ideas have been influenced by Althusser. But I wouldn't necessarily say that my conception of *network culture* is specifically influenced by him. It is more that I subscribe to the notion that we are working within certain fields of power and certain relationships are intertwined and relational, so to speak. There are aspects of *network culture* that are unique to that system. My notion is also influenced by things like Habermass' discussion involving the structural transformation of the public sphere where you have these new forms of mediated communication that conflate "public" and "private," with

de Certeau's ideas on reading as a spatial practice, or even with Walter Ong's ideas on the impact of writing systems on your relationships with other people…

In terms of the *Carnivore* project, it is pretty interesting. It is a really good example of what I was talking about with using a language to interrogate language. There was a New Museum show that Steve Dietz and Jenny Marketou curated, called Open Source Art Hack [http://netartcommons.walkerart.org/NAC/02/05/28/1934249.shtml]. Alex Galloway, who founded the *Radical Software Group,* said that he didn't really feel that *Carnivore* was trying to point out negative aspects of surveillance but what they were actually doing was showing that surveillance can be used for positive reasons or that it can be spun in positive agency-endowing ways.--I am sure that is not the way that he put it but the point is that surveillance systems and the attendant discourses and all the conditions living in a surveillance culture can be looked at in a positive light.

Stallbaum: If that was what Alex meant to say, I would certainly agree with him. Can you maybe talk a little about how you see the Internet as a specific network entering into the discourse about network culture for the theory... general theory of networks?

Olson: I feel compelled to say before I begin that I am really disenchanted by "*net art"* right now. That is probably because so much *net art* isn't really *net art.* So much of the work that is on the Internet is just design. It is not really site specific in any way. It doesn't really reference the conditions of the networks within which it is living and being experienced. To me, for some reason I want to insist that *net art* does do that, even though I don't insist that a photograph refer to the fact that it was created with a camera or that it was printed in a certain way. It is completely unfair, but I just want to insist that *net art* does that. Right now, I don't find anything else interesting.

Slayton: One might argue that you cannot make a photograph that doesn't know that it is a photograph in today. It is its own culture. Perhaps the Internet has not reached its level of banality that is required.

Olson: That makes it sound like it's a good thing. I don't think that it is. One of the conditions of it is its evolutionary cycle. Photography, video, sculpture, really every medium that you can think of has its own evolutionary process of course because of the technologies. Painting is really a pretty high tech process if you want to think about

it. But that evolution is happening in a weird and disjunctive scale with the Internet because you have two different things. You have a commercial system that dictates that operating systems, computers, hardware, and the software for accessing the work be constantly updated. Then again you have a lack of synchrony in the way that the software and operating systems are being updated versus the timeline of the equipment's development and so you have artists not really knowing who their audience is, or how their audience is seeing their work, or what sort of life their work will have. You have this keeping-up-with-the-Joneses effect where there is an impetus to be showing work that is at the highest level and artists are still using Shockwave... Even if it is cool retro minimalism at play they are really a "loser" to many in the field.

Stallbaum: It is really bad for people using Perl...

Olson: Yeah. Perl is really "old school." (Laughing.) You know I mean?

Stallbaum: One thing that you said that was really interesting is that you're tired of *net art.* I am too. I share that with you. And a lot of what passes as *net art* today is really just some kind of design which is sort of treating pixels like paper and interaction, as if that is the basis of design problems, and presenting as you said a keeping up with the Jones effect in design. That is kind of the work you see out there. I wonder if you would extend that to and I am referring to this position of how you consider narrative, as being specific to the Internet? I am really interested in the show that has been curated recently at SF Camerawork. How is narrative, and in conjunction with your interest in narratology, how is that really specific to the Internet?

Olson: That is a big concern for me. The show he is talking about is a show called *Net Narrative* [http://www.sfcamerawork.org/past_exhibits/net_narrative.html]. This show was really an effort to begin educating Camerawork's audience about work being done on the net and to establish a basic vocabulary of narrative issues. It is really a survey of some pretty old work along with some new work. The idea was just to look at various things that people are doing and various currents. What I can do is to touch on what some of those currents are and how they interest me. I can show you a site that changed my life and really affected my thinking about narratives on the net.

I started looking at what are called *digital stories* and digital storytelling. It is really a specific performative current and it involves more documentation and live performance and the relationships to

those documents, something that became popular in the 80s and in the early 90s with the internet becoming more widely used. I started getting into more things like the *The Lair of the Marrow Monkey* [http://www.marrowmonkey.com/]. This is the table of contents for *The Lair of the Marrow Monkey.* This happens to have been made in 1998 and, even at that time Eric Loyer, the artist, was defending his use of Shockwave versus Flash. I started looking at these kinds of narratives that live on the internet and they are what I would now really call design put up on the net in order of illustrate a text. There are a couple of clear examples that show you what is happening in this site that illustrates what was happening at the time. [Demonstrates parts of the site.] I was doing research on (and even making a few of) these digital narratives and their structure, and specifically their spatiality, for about two years. I took some time away—as I encourage everyone to do after working on anything for two years—but I was still really intrigued by personal narratives and text on the internet and digital poetry and other kinds of really specific uses of the internet as a vehicle of communication. But let's go to *Net Narrative* and I can show you what I am more interested in now, something that I think is a really important current: database aesthetics.

This is *The Secret Life of Numbers* by Golan Levin and a few collaborators. The project embodies an important current in narratives on the internet, right now—database aesthetics and information visualization. What you are getting is a situation where the discourse becomes the story. The way in which something is structured has a content of its own. It tells a story. In *The Secret life of Numbers,* what you're looking at is the popularity of integers between one and a million. And it's that data that is visualized based on the use of search engines. Another project on the *Net Narrative* site is Jenn and Kevin McCoy's *201 a Space Algorithm* which results from them actually writing down every possible shot in *2001 A Space Odyssey.* And those are actually all in the current issue of *'Smac!.'* The McCoys created this remix engine where you can go in and create new sequences out of those scenes or shots. *2001* has its own content, has it's own story. But, the way that you're choosing to restructure it authorship conditions the structural aspects and all of those things tell their own story. I think that it's something important to look at. At the same time, I have this cynicism about art practice right now where so much of the work I'm seeing (in every media) is all artifice and so empty, and so much work is just referring to the context of other work and that work is in the context of another work so that you have all context and no content. And I think it's that post-postmodern condition. It's pretty... disenchanting.... especially for someone whose

life is in the arts and then starts becoming disenchanted with art. But I think that it's something that's carrying over to net art in a bad way.

Hechenberger: You mentioned that there are some aspects of hypertext which are not realized. What is the other part of hypertext we're not using?

Olson: Well, the thing that we're not using is the fact that ... in true hypertext you're supposed to be able to go backwards and forwards in the links. In the work that we're looking at as hypertext you really can only move forward.

Hechenberger: So do you think that Google solved that problem with the back link?

Olson: No because that is more of a historical reference and not really a narratological structural thing. You can see the trace of the information but you can't really see the information and the relationship to the other parts in a way that traditional hypertext does.

Hechenberger: Will a two-sided link solve the problem?

Olson: Yes, but more importantly…we don't have the vocabulary that we need to talk about this work.

Mays: To bring in one of our other speakers… In Douglas Englebart's paper that he wrote in '62 he talked about the Worfian hypothesis, that thought is controlled by language. That the thought is occurring in and he ... in his paper offered what he called an extension to the Worfian hypothesis, where he said that thought is affected not just by the language but the tools that are used to manipulate the symbols of that language. And this is sort of thinking is the genesis Englebarts' idea of *boot strapping* where he said that... if you develop tools to allow the manipulation of language that linkage allows the manipulation of thought coming from those tools. Could you comment on that? Do you think that is a valid framework?

Olson: Not having read the paper I can try. I'd be interested in hearing what he is thinking of in terms of tools but it feels to me like there is some kind of slippage there. It is true that there is that sort of relationship between language and thought but I actually think of it in the way that I was talking about the phantasmatic affecting the structure of something. That thought really comes before language.

That thought really is the tool that is affecting language and our interpretations are really more preconceptions.

Hechenberger: But do you think that, as he said, certain tools can enhance the thought?

Olson: I don't know...I mean it is definitely interesting but I think that this is definitely putting us back in that domain of closed systems that I was talking about, where there are a limited number of options in any tools that we can think of. The tools would be the product of the system within which you were already working, so they wouldn't be effective unless they obeyed the laws of language and so what affect could really happen in that?

Slayton: I am interested in this encapsulation of network culture within a definition of a closed system. I think of net culture and the characteristics that I associate with it: it is a culture code or the coded, it is a culture of complexity. And what I mean is it is about self referencing, embedded systems and emergent behaviors and things like that, it is a culture of protocols and things that have to do with how stuff gets associated and how we deal with relationships and the rules that govern procedures. I would add it is also a culture of cooperation, necessarily. In your role as administrator/curator/artist where you imprint the hotel project, where is your position within that as an artwork? I think that it is interesting when you think about this in the context of a closed system of politics. You used the term that power is enforced. Where does the enforcement come from exactly?

Olson: Through the execution of the system. I mean the system was set up to keep the subject. One is a subject of the state and so, as we all sort of walk through Plato's cave, as I said, or as we all sort of write that code and read that code, we all fall in line. We are sort of patting that structure on the back.

Slayton: Do you see an insertion point or possibility for interference that disrupts that enforcement to create wake or tangent?

Olson: I think yes.

Slayton: Where might that come from? I certainly don't think it comes from artists.

Olson: You don't think that it comes from artists?

Slayton: Absolutely not.

Olson: Well. I think there are two different issues there—the wake and the rupture. I don't believe that a rupture can happen. That is what I was trying to talk about in terms of an implosion, drawing a line between implosion and explosion…I don't think that you can ever explode the system but you can cause it to fold in on itself for a moment or you can cause it to sort of scratch its head by using its language, its code, whatever, to do things that seem "irrational."

Slayton: But they are not?

Olson: They are not really irrational because they still...

Slayton: That is why I use that word complexity, because implosion is one of the central characteristics of complexity theory. Right? Wherein a system folds in on itself and collapses and reemerges as something else that is deterministic but not predictable. And you might call that irrational, but really it is just unexpected.

Olson: In this case, I think that it is different because the irrationalness of it is an illusion. It's the idea that you know you can say a sentence that is something like, "I am was yesterday," which really doesn't make any sense because you know you have split infinitives and because you are referring to yourself as a time. But it is not really all that irrational because we can sit here and figure out why it is that it sounds funny because we have a grammar and we have a vocabulary. But then the other thing that you might mention that is interesting is the role of the artist and the curator. We live in this really sort of funny world and this network culture that we are in is really funny in the sense that there are very few... even with all those MFA's out there and curatorial studies people out there… there are very few people that are making work that we are at all interested in. Not all of this work is influencing the other. And we do not have the proximity of other movements. We are not like the Surrealists that were sitting in each other's living rooms every night. As we were talking about at dinner, Google makes us feel like celebrities because we leave a lot of traces on the internet, given that this is the age of the digital trace, but in reality, we are not making much of a wake in culture at large. What you can do is to try to do something that is new for yourself, which I find myself doing. I was having this conversation with some people last night at this discussion salon hosted by SMAC and we were talking about the fact that the curator's role, right now in the media arts, is so different from that in other fields because you

really become a producer and a collaborator. And that is one reason that I said I feel like what I am doing as a curator is a certain kind of installation practice.

Slayton: When you first started talking this evening you used a certain classic definition of interface as a space between two planes. But when we talked about it, we never really talked about it with that definition in mind. The way it was discussed was only around an exterior, meaning the one side of the face that we are on. While the backside of the interface is something that for the most part is ignored. In other words there is something that is there that is taking place as a social relationship that may or may not adhere to the same sort of protocols and rules that the exterior face does. For example there might be the layer underneath the internet that is transparent and isn't intended for observation or for human experience, that isn't intended to be even thought about. Nevertheless there is this kind of architecture of space and protocol that perhaps lives there. And that notion of interface that is of the interior side and perhaps is a point where we can in fact rupture or fracture, perhaps?

Olson: It is a wormhole.

Slayton: It is a wormhole?

Olson: Yes...

Slayton: I don't know what it is.

Stallbaum: …..that interface, for example, the actual interface is a database where you are using a textual interface. Database such as a structured query language for example. The way that data is organized in the database under the covers. Actually Lev Manovich talks about this. The database has an impact on visual culture even though it is on the other side of the interface. The bigger idea of what Manovich presents goes back to semiotics. It is the semiotic shift between the syntagmatic axis which is largely associated with narrative and the paradigmatic axis. There is this axial shift where the paradigm begins to come forward and syntagmatic shifts to the background. In other words, in dealing with how the database is populated the syntagmatic order of the database is populated. Things like the first customer, the millionth customer are ordered as they are entered into the database. The narrative of the database kind of disappears in the background, as we see instead this is the model of the paradigm coming into the foreground. You know name, address, phone number. I think that the

level of interface there or what we are talking about or Joel is discussing. The front end or the explicit interface through with there is an exact point where humans interact with machines is actually inflected by what are the protocols of many layers of protocols that go on underneath. And the question of how that occurs is an important cultural one. For example, the very notion that was prevalent, I'd say 5 years ago, that graphical user interfaces will replace command line interfaces is disappearing now. The re-emergence of Linux is bringing the popularity of command line interfaces back even though they talk to the same underlying data. There is still a connection between both of those. They both still have to allow interface to take place between the underlying structures and the user. It is important to think about these things that are taking place behind for example Flash, Shockwave and other presentation layer technologies and about how those are inflecting themselves on a notion of network culture. I wonder how you can tie that notion into these cultural notions of Marxist ideas about how these sorts of cultural interfaces trap us as politically controlled?

Olson: Well. You know that is the reason I brought up the concealment of the author's labor. Under the Marxist paradigm there is this idea that something may have use value and it may be equivalent to the value of other things which are comprised of the same amount of congealed labor or that something may have exchange value. This is value being a code but there is also symbolic value and that is underrated and is only the potential value that an author's work can have, in the sense that an author's work exists in relation to another author's work or another reader's work. I think the distinction that Lev Manovich is making is fuzzy because what gets left out is pragmatics. The semiotic comes out of the paradigm just as I am saying that the phantasmatic effects the architectural structure. What is really more interesting is the way that those objects that get created are used or are not usable or are hacked, or whatever, because those are the things that tell us more about who we are and what we seek to know and how we seek to find it out or how we seek to tell someone else about it. But you are right, he has done some really interesting things in terms of looking at the way that database culture has pervaded cultural production at large.

Slayton: Last week Margaret Morse was here. We were talking with her about the factor of *attention economy* on the human social level as being a fairly clear a conceptual framework for how power works and maybe therefore why many of the artifacts that are produced--from the carpet to the browser--look and function the way they the do. But

the *attention economy* might also function in a way that is also part of that underlying social fabric of how software relates to software, machines relate to machines. An economy of attention that humans are really not part of, not a node on that network in the sense that it is something that is quite external to us that seems to be getting larger all the time. That unleashed beast in the world that is ever growing that we were really not a direct part of. It is speaking to itself. It is talking to itself. It is emerging itself.

Olson: For me that manifest itself in two ways. On the one hand things are always vying for attention. That is always happening but now we have Times Square on our desks. But also there are so many manifestations of our laziness--when we send our listservers commands, we only have to send the first three letters of every word. Then what happens is that it is really conducive to a sort of context-based work that is contentless. There isn't much that you can capture in an artifice comprised of laziness and of not wanting to engage in something or not being able to engage in something because you don't have the endurance for or the vocabulary for it—the sort of physical vocabulary of being able to sit and look at something.

Slayton: It seems very paradoxical, in a lot of ways because striving towards content becomes one of the power controls of being locked inside a closed system due to redundancy and repetition and all the things that go along with that and at the same time, striving for a contentless structure leaves a lot of emptiness or lack of interest. Yet both of those things are interesting.

Olson: They are interesting.

Slayton: As a curator they both can be quite beautiful, insightful, and intelligent when done in certain ways. As a curator how do you actually try and distinguish? Is that part of the reason that curators have become facilitators and actors in the work? Because that's easier? I mean that in a good way. It is not a criticism.

Olson: In my own case it is something that definitely concerns me. Lately, I've been very concerned about the way people engage with video art, in general and in relation to the aspects of video art's production. Again, there are short attention spans and a lack of physical vocabulary. It's funny to go to a museum and watch someone watch Bill Viola, watch someone watch whomever. It's so performative. Everything is performative. It seems that people stand there wondering, "How long do I have to stand here? Should I sit?

Should I stand? How long should I stand? Should I stand over there? Have I stood here long enough?" You know it's a weird sort of funny thing, especially if you are the one who designs the thing to sit down to. Are you going to sit down on the gallery floor and watch all 20 minutes of Andy Warhol's *Blow Job*? If you do, you are "weird," you know?—People have to step over you….

I curated this thing recently, the content doesn't really matter, but it's called *Home Movies* and its all video art works that loosely relate to the domestic space. Very little of the work was narrative. Most of it was of a ninety-second loop of something that's infinite, like someone switching a light switch on and off, mixed with eight-minute experimental projects that are normally meant to have a more architectural installation. I sat people down in a room, in a theater, to stare at a wall and it was 82 minutes long. Most movies are that long or longer. Many people walked out. They just couldn't handle it. And I honestly couldn't handle it. I spent so much time editing it and trying not to make it too long. There were points where I just thought, 'I wish that I could fast forward this! I wish that I could fast forward this!' You know there's this group spectatorship that takes over your process of reading vs. the way that you would read something alone, which is something that film studies has looked at a lot. It's interesting that we don't know how to look at things, and we've been taught how to watch the analog arts, and we're taught the same things are not true any more for the media arts. That we are suppose to touch it or that we all are suppose to have some response to it or make it go. It is confusing for people. And I think attention span plays into that.

Stallbaum: Toward the cultural structures you were talking about earlier and the expectations that people take to the viewing of different types of art work. It's an issue of the conceptual speed of the work of how fast somebody will say, and lets call it a user or an audience member, can interact with the work and try to understand the concept of the work's functioning and move on to another piece. For example, in a theater, you're supposed to sit down and watch a wall in a dark room for 82 minutes. In a museum a few seconds on each painting. Maybe art projects on the internet get the same thirty seconds of that of paintings. I don't really think people spend hours and hours reading a hypertext because why, because people read the news and stuff like that instead, what do you think about this.

Olson: A couple things, getting back to the thing about people sitting in a dark room for 82 minutes. It is like that was the idea. This is mostly video work that people look at for 3 minutes, or much less than

three minutes and walk away. This was forcing them to sit down and look at it. I also think I have this sort of bittersweet luxury of not knowing how people look at net art because I only know how I look at it and I'm sure that it's quite different. I mean I'm looking at it through the eyes of a curator, writer or whatever. It's interesting and I value the experience but I think it's kind of disappointing that the first time I ever looked at it the artist walked me through it so I saw all the things I was suppose to discover on my own. I cannot tell you how many hours I have spent looking at certain sites and I assume other people do not spend as much time but I couldn't really begin to estimate how much time people do spend because I think I am abnormal in that way.

Stallbaum: Well, not abnormal, but you are a professional in the field, so you spend time with these works.

Olson: Yes.

Stallbaum: And in order to write about them, I don't know, I think a lot of artists think that people are going to spend a lot of time with their work. This is especially evident in a lot of Flash work that is often so disappointing to me... that people are really going to sit down and interact with it for a long period of time. The only kind of work going on out there that I think gets around that problem are the ones that use those types of interface technologies to immerse people in social environments where they understand that they are interacting with other people and by adding a social environment to an artwork, *Anime Noir* is one of Anne-Marie Schleiner's newest examples of that, *Sissy Fight* was another one, a pretty well known work that was very popular because of the social environment that it created. I just think it is important that the implementation of work be congruent with the amount of time people are going to spend with it. I think that is really one of the aesthetic qualities of net art that often a lot of people don't think about.

Olson: But I also think that you would be such a rock star if you could figure out how to control how much time people really spend with your work, or anybody else's work. I'm not sure what sort of tools, you could come up with for that.

Slayton: What does it matter? Why is it a testament if they spend more time with your work, or less time?

Stallbaum: It is not a matter if they spend more time or less time. It is about the work being congruent to the amount of work people actually spend. In other words if you have a hypertext that takes all year to interact with and nobody is going to interact with it. Isn't it better to have works that are focused on the amount of time that people are going to spend with them.

Olson: That idea is really sort of reliant on the traditional idea that, so why would I take a year to really interact with a hypertext? There must be a specific number of functions that you're going to execute or things that you're going to see, but why is my 30 seconds looking at it and experiencing a couple things not potent?

Stallbaum: It's only not potent if it's not sufficient to deliver the conceptual basis of the work so that people understand what the work is.

Olson: Well there's a funny thing about people understanding what work is because there becomes a point when you have an understanding what your work is and I have an interpretation of what I see in your work or what I get from your work but the two don't always meet up and sometimes we should just be happy knowing that we both got something out of it.

Slayton: The easy way around all that is that you tell them what you think they should think about the work. And you just make it very short and sweet, this is what I want you to think about the work. Think this, and then it doesn't matter how much time they spend with it or not, in fact they don't even have to look at it.

Stallbaum: The documentation about the performance is often more effective than the work.

Olson: It doesn't even have to be documentation. It can be the work itself. Remember Douglas Davis's project, when, initially, you just went to the website and saw only the title of the project, it says "We are about to complete the worlds first... collaborative sentence." The idea is that just in reading that we have created a collaborative act, that wasn't project documentation that was the project. It pretty much told you what it is that you were going to do. Also, before I forget because we had this discussion about authorship and back end of things, if you haven't already looked at it I would really encourage you to look at the *CODeDOC* project that the Whitney commissioned for their ArtPort as there are a number of very interesting artists who

wrote short pieces of code in various languages in response to an assignment. They all have very different visual manifestations but then you can go and look at the code and they are all so... even if you don't know very much about code or you don't know the code that they are written in... there are so many interesting traces of an author's decisions and an author's identity in their code. And then many of those artists wrote comments about each other's codes or wrote simulators or remixes of each other's projects. It's a really interesting site, you should check it out.

Slayton: We have time for one or two more questions.

Bruneau: I could add to the collaborative sentence project discussion. Some people actually hacked in so that they could add periods to it. It became a fiasco because once changed that aspect the art is different based on set-up.

Schleiner: So you're disenchanted with *net art* and you are working in physical spaces?

Olson: What am I doing now, eh? I'm still definitely engaged in looking at work on the Internet. I'm just not happy with everything that I am seeing. I'm not disconnecting. I am at this interesting moment in my career because I worked as a freelance critic and curator for six years before I started this job at SF Camerawork in March. It's been unusual and interesting to get back into working full time in a space. I have had this great opportunity. I was finding myself really pigeon-holed in new media, which is a term I don't even like, but that's indeed the pigeon-hole I was in. And so now I am able to get back to looking at photographs and video and sculpture and some other things that influence my interpretation of other media art or my interest in other things. I am able to affect a wider interpretation of all of the work through a wider curatorial and critical practice which is exciting for me. I just have even less time…

Slayton: How do you feel about this niche? Maybe part of it is self-created and some of it is being created around you here in the San Francisco Bay Area as an indirect result of your activities with *SF Camerawork*, the *New Fangle* exhibition*, GenArt, SMAC* etc.?

Olson: It is a weird thing.

Slayton: And then you get invitations to come to things like this, the CADRE Invitational on Interface.

Olson: I am such a star! (joking) I mean it is a weird thing, on a personal level. I am kind of just becoming aware of it. So much of our ideas become disembodied from us because at a time when we leave more searchable traces of our work, as I was mentioning, the name of the author has a new importance and so you meet these people who know you, or whatever and it's bizarre. It's something I'm trying to not let get out of hand. For instance I have been doing *New Fangle* since '98 but this is my last year and I just decided after that many years of Marisa picking the curator means that many years of Marisa's friends picking the artists. And even though it is such a small world that we're in, I just felt like it was healthy for me to step back, but I think there is *SMAC*, there is *New Fangle*, there's *GenArt,* there's *Camerawork* and there's other stuff. How can you not do multiple things at once in this culture and in this time and in the Bay Area? How can those things in this small world that we're in not influence each other? I quite like the fact that now I am able to kill multiple birds with one stone in having collaborative events among the different groups that I work with because that saves me a little bit of time. But, you know, overall, it is about building a community. Whatever small role I may in that, I am excited that I have been able to facilitate research and creative practices, that I've been able to bring artists & technologists together (as if they're mutually exclusive), and that I've maybe contributed to or spurred a certain dialogue. Obviously, I'm a bit of a cynic, so I try not to let my overly self-reflexive social experiments around issues of collaboration or networking thwart the bottom line, which is helping art—helping artists, helping arts audiences, and incubating a critical practice.

Hechenberger: One more question, would you tie your disenchantment with net art with the economic recession? For example I thought the Media Pamphlets, a publishing project by Peter Lunenfeld presented last week, to be really beautiful because they are such a complete understatement, a step back to text and illustration.

Olson: Do you mean zines? I was just looking at one of those the other night actually and it was Brenda Laurel's. I guess they are pretty slick for zines, but bracketing that, I love the idea and that is what I have been trying to with the SMAC 'zine. Returning to text, as you say, I have refused to put the content online. Lev Manovich wrote something for the last piece and I emailed him a PDF of it because he's been out of the US and I was like, "you can't send this to anybody because I don't want anyone to see this digitally." I have insisted on the funny paradox of media arts being presumably expensive and high

tech and this is very inexpensive and low tech, but I wouldn't say that my disenchantment with any field of art practice right now is tied to the economy. I mean I am definitely disenchanted with being a poor arts administrator but that doesn't affect my interpretation of work so much. Everything has an effect, but the only effect it might have is that because my little organization can only have four staff members and I have so many duties, looking at art is all the more important for me right now because it is the one more interesting thing I get to do instead of writing grants.

Hechenberger: I asked because I think the economic environment requires more understatement right now. For example net art use to brag so much that it just doesn't fit any more.

Olson: I think that I haven't experienced that so much. It is true to an extent especially when you get people like Eric Adigard or Amy Franceschini, with *Future Farmers,* where there's a very minimal line drawn between a corporate practice and an art practice, and when the corporate dwindles there is less money or whatever for the art. But I haven't seen that quality or concepts have really changed so much. Certainly the Bay Area, San Jose, the economies that we are in, all things have been affected by the economy but I don't know that the work has.

Slayton: Marisa. Thank you so much for your presentation and time. A very enjoyable conversation.

[Transcription Editor: Joel Slayton]