

# FOSSILS AND MONSTERS: ARTISTIC COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL NETWORKS EN IN THE SPANISH STATE

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## INTRODUCTION

Communication is one of the principle aspects of artistic creation on the Internet and it also characterizes that medium. This text focuses on the creation of **social networks on the Internet as an artistic resource and practice**<sup>1</sup>, providing an overview of how these communication platforms have evolved and the resources that were determining factors in that process. Centred on initiatives arising in Spain, it examines creations from the early days of the Internet (late 1994) until the present (October 2006).

An analysis will be made of communication platforms (decentralized alternative channels) constructed by artists or for artistic projects using their resources and tools. It will take a chronological look at different projects related to user networks that have developed along with the Internet, from BBSs to the Semantic Web. Given that their primary purpose is based on creating social communication networks, those projects have a large social component, fostering the use of resources that make users the main producers and managers of information. Communication and collective creation, characterized by the simultaneous action of different users in real time, stand out as the protagonists of these artistic events.

Two different periods have been defined: the first, where the prevailing concept was that of archives and globalized access to information (E-lists, E-zines, and directories); and the second, where what predominates are collective creation, remixing, and classifying information so that it can be recovered and subsequently re-used (folksonomies, blogs, and wikis). Both periods include the idea of an archive where community contributions are gathered and classified. In order to gain a better understanding of the classification concept inherent to the idea of archives, we will review different attempts at order throughout human history.

In his essay *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Michel Foucault establishes three significant phases. The first is based on the idea of similarities (as exemplified by the figure of Don Quixote). The second responds to the Classical conception (until the 18th century) that posed an artificial, unique and unchanging order characterized by identities and differences, which introduced

the possibility (it's just a matter of time) of gathering all human knowledge into one room. Different thinkers as of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have contributed to the breakdown of the Classical model rooted in Cartesian rationality: Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution; Karl Marx and historical materialism and Marxist economics; Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis; and Albert Einstein and the theory of relativity. Foucault mentions a third stage, comprising two ways of constructing natural history. In the first, time *“draws a line perfecting the set of a classification table”*, a sort of memory built piece by piece that ensures continuity (fossil: stable set). The second is constructed out of cases that together form a continuous network of species. That continuity is not assured by memory but rather by a project (monster: emerging set). Foucault demands a place for aberrations, given that, in his opinion, that is where differences emerge.

This double conception of evolution comprised by the figures of fossils (the idea of continuity, memory) and monsters (the idea of aberrations as an element allowing for emergence) can be applied to the two primary models of virtual communities: the first, where the idea of archives is foremost (E-lists, E-zines, and directories) which suggests the continuity of a linear, fixed, and immutable history; and the second, represented by monsters, something mutable, infinite, and emergent. This second idea places us in what is known as Web 2.0, in the construction of archives and social hierarchies of knowledge that attempt to solve problems like information overload and its heterogeneous character.

## **1. THE “FOSSILS”: ARCHIVES, E-ZINES, AND E-LISTS**

**Forerunners** in Spain are few within the binomial “art and communication”. They include two local communication actions led by Antoni Muntadas: Cadaqués Canal Local<sup>2</sup>, 1974 and Barcelona Districte I, 1976, in which the artist altered the programming on local channels to broadcast a programme he produced; and the action carried out by Marisa González at the Circulo de Bellas Artes in Madrid: Fax Station, 1993. The majority of projects on the Internet can be defined by three key concepts: globality, communication, and interactivity. They were already present in currents of thought and artistic practice prior to the appearance of the new medium. The birth of the Internet only meant the solution to some technical problems involved in devices that were already in existence.

During this first stage, virtual communities, of which **e-lists** were the chief exponent, had two aims: to gather information of interest to the community and to create

meeting spaces for criticism and reflection. On the international scene, [Nettime](#)<sup>3</sup> and [Rizhome](#)<sup>4</sup> must be mentioned. They served as examples for experimental sites such as [Aleph](#)<sup>5</sup> headed by José Luís Brea, which arose with the aim of becoming a Spanish language “Rhizome”. His e-list, [Eco](#), was embraced enthusiastically by the artistic community. However, massive mailings of *spam*<sup>6</sup> made many subscribers drop out, which led to its closing. This section must also include *netart* (artistic projects), *e-shows* (on-line exhibits) and *thought* (texts). Projects following Aleph included [Estudios on line: estudios sobre arte](#) (*On-line studies: Studies of Art*) by Ana Martínez-Collado, which gathered texts on cyber-feminism and highlighted the Internet’s importance to that collective. Nettime, Aleph, and Estudios on-line, although their archives are still available on-line, have become inert memories (data storage sites).

The true importance of these communities is that they serve as a meeting point for criticism and reflection, a task reserved until now to festivals. In addition to e-lists, there are what are known as **discussion groups**<sup>7</sup>, which arose out of email and allow people to subscribe and unsubscribe freely, keeping one’s email inbox free of spam. They usually offer a brief description of the contents of the list and access to previous posts. The list of subscribers is available only to subscribers, and authorization is needed to access their administrative interface. An example of these groups is [Copyleft-arte -- Debate y reflexión sobre copyleft en las artes visuales](#) (*Copyleft-art – Debate and Reflections on Copyleft in the Visual Arts*), administered by Natxo Rodríguez of Fundación Rodríguez, which arose based on a conference on intellectual property and copyleft held at Arteleku.

Other resources based on the notion of archives are e-zines and directories. Of all the **e-zines** or electronic magazines, [Artnodes](#) is currently the most influential publication on electronic art. Pau Alsina heads this magazine, which publishes articles, interviews, and a full catalogue of the intersection of the arts, technologies, and sciences. Other examples include [Forward](#), the electronic magazine by Zemos98 and [SalonKritik](#), also headed by Brea<sup>8</sup>, a repository of texts on art criticism in blog format. The **directories** are conceived as working tools on the Web, living archives that must update their links. Examples include [El transmisor](#) by Laura Baigorri, defined by its author as a “*working tool aimed at facilitating the free circulation of information as well as access to certain almost inaccessible news items, whose dissemination is ignored by media corporations*”<sup>9</sup>, where she offers

a vast list of annotated links on activism. Along similar lines, [Arte.red](#), by Roberta Bosco and Stefano Caldana, offers a chronological and theme-based history of net. art.

## 2. BLOGS AND WIKIS: “MONSTERS” UNDER THE EFFECTS OF CREATIVE COMMONS

Tim O’Reilly, in 2004, coined the **Web 2.0 concept** to refer to a second generation of the Internet which allows people to collaborate and share information online, using new tools and services: social networks, wikis, blogs, folksonomies... The new formats for virtual communities coincided with the objectives proclaimed on what is known as Web 2.0: the developments of autonomous languages and technologies on the Web have overcome various attempts to control the Internet. This second phase has two key characteristics:

1. Classification and indexing with the aim of enhanced information recovery
2. The step from archives to *remixing*: collective construction of information where users’ collaboration and interaction takes on a crucial role; they form a complex adaptive system highlighting values such as self-organization, emergence, relations, feedback, adaptability, and non-linearity<sup>10</sup>.

**Folksonomies**, or collections of metadata<sup>11</sup> generated by users, offer a new form of indexing information based on social patterns. They represent a step forward, from hierarchical content classification to a social one; in addition, they transfer the responsibility of the author (one or several authors) to an emerging collective. Web sites based on folksonomies allow users to publish archives of different types – videos, photographs, and bookmarks – which are then organized and shared via the Web thanks to the tags or labels that describe them. These social tabs’ influence is so great that they are better known than the famous PageRank algorithm used by Google. That explains the importance accorded this type of social indexing tools by companies such as Google, currently the owner of [YouTube](#)<sup>12</sup>. The fact is that Youtube (used by Sinapsis) or [DailyMotion](#)<sup>13</sup> (the European competitor of the former, used by Mediateletipos and Zemos98) are the protagonists of audiovisual content on the major blogs. Moreover, many blogs insert automatic links to add tabs to [del.icio.us](#),<sup>14</sup> a very popular site that hosts social bookmarks.

Just as popular as tags is **RSS**, a language based on XML that makes it possible to identify a series of *metadata* with which contents can be specified for syndication (dissemination). Through this easy-to-use language, it is possible to share headlines

and news, which is why it has had widespread acceptance *bloggers*. Processing, sharing, and re-using data, adapted to users' preferences, have become common tasks. Although some tend to differentiate wikis from blogs, both phenomena are replacing the traditional format of e-lists like Aleph. These new formats, under the flag of **Creative Commons**<sup>15</sup>, have become popular on the Internet: they are open intellectual property and management systems, which allow work to be copied, distributed and publicly disseminated, and even allow derivative works, provided that the author is recognized, even, in some cases, when they are not made for profit.

### **Blogs (collective news)**

A **web log** *"is a periodically updated Web site with a specific theme or purpose which gathers texts and articles by one or several authors, presented in reverse chronological order, and whose author is always free to publish what he or she considers relevant"*<sup>16</sup>. Today's weblogs have replaced their predecessors, which were personal and biographical in nature, bordering on hobbies. They now include news (texts and articles) of interest to the wider community, organized chronologically or by subject. Somewhere in between the two is Tempus fugit, the blog by Raquel Herrera with the same name as her written piece, winner of the Espais<sup>17</sup> award. Weblogs basically consist of two different sections: a private one, published by its creator, and a public one, comprising posts about various news items, arranged in chronological order. Their popularity is due to the use of free, simple tools which allow anyone to build an information/communication platform, and require no prior knowledge; in addition, some servers offer free maintenance<sup>18</sup>. Weblogs have also evolved as audiovisual formats have replaced texts.

Although many people still think that the blogosphere<sup>19</sup> phenomenon is only a passing fad, the fact is that previously existing platforms have adopted that format. This is true of Sinapsis, originally a Yahoo discussion group called Ade\*e\*e/Sinapsis, which aimed to fill the gap left after the closing of Aleph and Nettime-latino. Mediateletipos, the web site of the artesonoro.org sound cluster, is, with Sinapsis, an essential reference point in electronic art in Spain. Elastico, a portal related to arts and culture in the digital era, is also of related interest, although it focuses more on movements in connection with free software. Also worthy of mention in the audiovisual area is the weblog by the Zemos 98 collective, hosted by Espacio Fílmica, which collects news about Festival Zemos98. This group of artists is one of Spain's foremost collectives working in that area. In addition to Zemos98, it includes several blogs by individual members of the collective: abrelatas, incongruent, and comcinco.

Wikis (collective encyclopedia)

**Wikis** are collaborative documents where visitors can participate by sending in their descriptions or editing those of other users. In general, wikis comprise a section called “article” which contains the text resulting from various contributions; in addition, there is a discussion section for subjects where disagreement exists, and a history which conveniently allows for the recovery of previous drafts. [Wikipedia](#)<sup>20</sup>, the best known example, aims to become a free encyclopedia, accessible to everyone. Wikis are free of the problem that plagued e-lists in the past and weblogs at present: moderating<sup>21</sup>. Many people, instead of considering that a generational accomplishment of Web 2.0, argue that the lack of filters favours the deliberate inclusion of erroneous data, or intentional erasing. The fact is that these self-organizing tools, in addition to offering a larger scale and being faster, provide the ideal breeding ground for the aberrations Foucault has called for.

Wikis, as [educational models](#), have been widely accepted in university circles. Since they allow for the creation and editing of contents, their use by research groups has grown in recent years. The TAG, Taller d’intangibles group, formed by David Gómez and Jaume Ferrer, has explored the limits of wikis. Their results are [Germinador](#), a project that aims to find the keys through experimenting with collective creation in networks; and various collective notebooks about net.art, such as: [Net.art wiki](#), [Aproximación al net.art](#), and [taller de creación colectiva en la red](#).

### 3. ARCHIVES AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

We would like to highlight those projects conceived as art works, with the same tools and objectives as the works cited in the previous paragraphs. They are mostly initiatives by artists interested in the creative aspects of communication. Antoni Muntadas, Antoni Abad and Daniel Andujar share an interest in access to technology and information. Antoni Muntadas’ [File Room](#), which comes closest to the concept of a collaborative archive, is a community based on the idea of censorship, and is considered as a pioneering project in net.art in Spain. The structure of its databases is like those projects.

A piece of *software.art*, Z.exe, is the artifice of [Comunidad Z.exe](#), a group of flies that inhabit the desktops of its members when they go online. Canal Z opens a communication channel (instant messaging) for this community: “*The ultimate goal of Z is to create a distributed communication network that is independent of any central server. Each fly is simultaneously a customer and a server, and Z’s users will soon be able to create their own networks*”<sup>22</sup>. In 2003, Abad added a second part to the

work which aims to transfer the digital network to an analogical one; coins, mailings, or press are some of the objects marked with a yellow sticker that links to Z.exe. Several years later, along these lines, he developed Canal accesible (*Accessible channel*), winner of the Golden Nica Award at the 2006 Prix Ars Electronica, in the Digital Communities<sup>23</sup> category. This project, carried out in various cities, consists of creating communication channels among marginal groups that have no voice in the media. On Canal accesible, 40 handicapped persons mapped out the architectural barriers they came across on their way around Barcelona. Provided with a multimedia mobile phone, they took snapshots and sent them to an Internet portal, where they were immediately published. This initial experience was followed by others including: Canal Sitio Taxi (Taxi Site Channel) with the taxi driver collective of Mexico City; Canal Gitano (Gypsy Channel), for the Gypsy community of Lleida and León; Canal Invisible (Invisible Channel), narrated by prostitutes in Madrid; and Canal Central (Central Channel) run by Nicaraguan immigrants in San José (Costa Rica). One of its accomplishments, as explained by Abad<sup>24</sup>, is that this project has allowed these groups to get organized.

We would also like to point out e-valencia.org, a project by Daniel Andujar, a member of irrational.org, presented at the exhibit *The Power of Security*, a work forming part of the legendary corporative type of organization, Technologies to the People. This work adopted the blog format to build a platform offering a critical voice in the Valencia area, and was joined by others in Spain, such as e-barcelona and e-sevilla<sup>25</sup>.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

These two reflections are offered as a sort of epilogue. Firstly, the new models of communities conceive of the Internet as a huge collective mind, where its components, like neurons in the brain, are governed by a non-hierarchical model that reinforces connections according to their interests, through their interaction and communication. Secondly, taxonomies and folksonomies should be considered as complementary tools. Stabilizing and destabilizing forces are equally necessary, given that, to cite Foucault once again, the former maintain continuity (fossils) and the latter leave room for evolution (monsters).

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BREA, José Luís: "Online Communities", *Aleph Pensamiento*, [http://aleph-arts.org/pens/online\\_communities.html](http://aleph-arts.org/pens/online_communities.html)

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#### LIST OF PROJECTS (CHRONOLOGY)

Consciously or unconsciously, I have forgotten to mention many "fossils" and "monsters", but time and the space for this text are running out. Here are 25,000 characters of efforts in art and communication...

##### **Fossils (1<sup>st</sup> stage): predominantly archives, e-zines and directories**

**1994:** *Antoni Muntadas*. The File Room: An archive of censored objects. <http://www.thefileroom.org>

**1997(abr) -2002:** *Ricardo Etxeverría and Jose Luis Brea*. Aleph: Plataforma de análisis de net.art. <http://www.aleph-arts.org>

**1997:** *Ana Martínez-Collado*. Estudiosonline: Feminist discourse about the Web. <http://estudiosonline.net>

**2000:** *Laura Baigorri*. El transmisor: Directory of alternative information. <http://www.interzona.org/transmisor.htm>

**2000:** *R. Bosco / S. Caldana*. Arte.red. History of net.art. <http://www.elpais.es/especiales/2003/netart/2000.html>

##### **Monsters (2<sup>nd</sup> stage): predominantly blogs and wikis**

**2001-02:** *Antoni Abad*. Zexe.net: Distributed communication network <http://www.zexe.net/Z/>

**2001 (nov):** *Daniel G. Andujar*. E-valencia.org: Platform offering a critical voice in the Valencia area. <http://www.e-valencia.org>

**2002:** *Pau Alsina*. Artnodes: Intersections of the arts, sciences, and technologies. <http://www.uoc.edu/artnodes/esp/>

**2003 (May):** *M. Peirano, J. L. de Vicente, I. Escolar, El Quinto Elástico*. Elastico.net: Platform for generating content about emerging cultures. <http://www.elastico.net>

**2004 (Feb):** *Colectivo Zemos*. Zemos 98: Weblog of the Audiovisual Festival Zemos 98 <http://www.filmica.com/zemos98/>

**2004 (Mar):** *Antoni Abad*: Canal accesible. Communication platform for various marginal groups. <http://www.zexe.net>

**2004 (abr):** *C. Longina, P. Jiménez, P. Sanz Almoguera, J. A. Sarmiento, J. Gil and J. Gómez* media-teletipos: System of teletypes [news] about sound art, video art, experimental cinema, and electronic art. <http://www.mediateletipos.net>

**2004 (Oct):** *José Vicente Araujo*. Sinapsis: Collaborative bulletin about digital art in Spanish. <http://dunadigital.com/sinapsis/>

**2004 (Dec):** *José Luís Brea*. Salon kritik: <http://salonkritik.net>

**2005 (Mar):** *Raquel Herrera*. Tempus Fugit: Personal weblog about digital art and new technologies. <http://www.raquelherrera.blogspot.com>

**2005 (April):** *TAG. Taller d'intangibles* (Jaume Ferrer and David Gómez) Net.art wiki: <http://netart.iaa.upf.edu/wiki/index.php/Portada>



**2005 (Oct.): TAG. Taller d'intangibles.** GERMINADOR. Proposals for collective creation in networks

<http://netart.iaa.upf.edu/germinador/index.php/Portada>

**2006 (Oct):** Natxo Rodríguez Copyleft-arte: Debate and reflections about copyleft in the visual arts.

<https://listas.sindominio.net/mailman/listinfo/copyleft-arte>

## NOTES

1 For more information about the creative aspects of communication, see: Lourdes Cilleruelo: "Arte y comunidades virtuales: el aspecto creativo de la comunicación". In Laura Baigorri and Lourdes Cilleruelo: *Net.art. Prácticas estéticas y políticas en la Red*. Brumaria 6, Madrid, Spring 2006.

2 For more information see: <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/canal-local/>

3 Nettime. <http://www.nettime.org>

4 Rhizome online platform for the global community of art using new technologies. <http://www.rhizome.org>.

5 For more information see: Jesús Carrillo: "La web como espacio de acción paralela", *Desacuerdos*, Arteleku-Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona-MACBA and la Universidad Internacional de Andalucía-UNIA artepensamiento. Complete version at: <http://www.arteleku.net/4.0/pdfs/aleph.pdf>

6 Mass mailings.

7 Although there are other services of this type, the most famous one is Yahoo Groups <http://es.groups.yahoo.com/>

8 Although several are mentioned here, Jose Luis Brea has begun other Web initiatives in addition to Aleph and SalonKritik including: arts.zin online criticism of new artistic practices; W3C, converted into a company engaged in cultural mailings, currently in blog format; agencia crítica, a critical blog about cultural and artistic policies.

9 <http://www.interzona.org/transmisor/sobre.htm>

10 D. Calvin Andrus: "The wiki and the Blog: Toward a Complex Adaptive Intelligence Community". *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol 49, No 3, September 2005. Available *on-line* at:

[http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=755904](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=755904)

11 Metadata is data that describes other data. Generally, a group of metadata refers to a group of data, called a *resource*. The concept of metadata is analogous to the use of indexes to find things instead of data. Source: wikipedia <http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metadatos>

12 <http://www.youtube.com>

13 <http://www.dailymotion.com>

14 <http://del.icio.us>

15 Creative Commons is a non-profit organization that offers a flexible intellectual property system for creative work. <http://es.creativecommons.org>

16 Source: wikipedia <http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weblog>

17 [http://www.fundacioespais.com/principal.php?seleccio=1&any\\_actual=9&idio=2&plana=premi](http://www.fundacioespais.com/principal.php?seleccio=1&any_actual=9&idio=2&plana=premi)

18 Examples include la Coctelera, "a community in Spanish made so that you, your friends and relatives can create your own blog or personal Web page, share your experiences and build a dynamic space for dialogue and meeting each other. It's easy, fast and completely free." <http://www.lacoctelera.com>

19 Terms like blogosphere focus interesting places on the Internet and designate a set of the blogs populating the Internet today.

20 Wikipedia is a free multilingual encyclopedia based on wiki technology. Definition taken from the Spanish edition <http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>

21 The problem of moderating has existed since the beginning of communities such as Nettime.

22 Roberta Bosco and Stefano Caldana: "Antoni Abad suelta 10 millones de moscas en Nueva York". *El País*, October 2, 2003.

[http://www.elpais.es/articulo/elpciboci/20031002elpciboci\\_2/Tes/Antoni/Abad/suelta/millones/moscas/Nueva/York](http://www.elpais.es/articulo/elpciboci/20031002elpciboci_2/Tes/Antoni/Abad/suelta/millones/moscas/Nueva/York)

23 <http://www.aec.at/es/prix/communities/communities.asp>

24 Roberta Bosco: "Entrevista a Antoni Abad". *Babelia*, September 23, 2006.

[http://salonkritik.net/06-07/2006/09/entrevista\\_antoni\\_abad\\_roberta.php](http://salonkritik.net/06-07/2006/09/entrevista_antoni_abad_roberta.php)

25 e-barcelona <http://www.e-barcelona.org>; e-sevilla <http://alojamientos.us.es/e-sevilla/index.php>

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