"PROBABLY TEN THOUSAND LIKES" : AN INTERVIEW WITH CORY ARCANGEL & OLIA LIALINA

It's been over a decade since Russian-based net art pioneer Olia Lialinawrote "A Vernacular Web," the first in her series of essays that detail elements of the World Wide Web and its relationship to ordinary users. Lialina has continued to write and produce work about the slow decline of user agency on the Internet over time. As a medium for free self-expression, the web, as a platform, has become increasingly pervasive and uncannily static, as we swipe easily from friendships to followers and abandon the former.

Today, the whole gamut of human exploration online has been observed by a slew of creatives — sifting through accumulations of digital culture, finding nuggets of truth amongst discarded cellphones, virtually extinct wallpapers, glittery gifs and homepages. One of the foremost among them is self-professed Internet lurker and post-conceptual artist Cory Arcangel, whose work speaks as much to the Atari generation as it does to the Post-Internet generation.

Cory and Olia met on the evening before Y2K, and have since continued to collaborate, tweet, text and email one another cool links. They each seem to contend with obsolescence as a subject in their practices, using appropriation as a form of preservation. We caught up with them during the installation of their latest exhibition, *Asymmetrical Response*, to talk about the Internet and marvel at their cross-genre artworks from wallpapers, to LCD screens, to pool noodles.

Olia: We'll start with the carpet and the wallpaper.

Cory: The carpet is a work of mine called *Diamond Plate* and it is this repeated diamond plate pattern. Diamond plate is usually kind of metallic. In fact the elevator of The Kitchen is coated with it (see below). This is part of a series of works that I started a couple of years ago, noticing that often carpets come in the same repeated patterns that were once popular on the Internet for people to put on the background of their websites. So diamond plate was once a very popular web background, and it was actually the background of my first website.

Ace: Your homepage?

C: Right, my homepage. So that's what this is, and it's just a ready-made. It was ordered from some carpet company.

O: [gestures] And what you see on the walls are also backgrounds of what one can say now, are early web pages. But it's not that early, it's 1999 — when Yahoo bought Geocities, and then they started to bring order into everything. So they said that if you have a dog, and you're making a webpage for your dog, then use this template: "Meet My Dog." If you're making a personal website, "Personal Page Blue" is the best template. It also existed in other colors —green, pink, and something else — but the blue one was used the most. So people really tried to fit themselves into this format.

Ace: That seems pretty consistent with Facebook today.

O: Yes. And later, when Facebook came along, it was also blue with the line on the top. But this was in '99, 5 years or so beforehand. And it was one of the first attempts, really, online, to say how things should look. To say "don't make this, make that." This template here is for fan pages — so this was a suggestion for a page about Backstreet Boys, Spice Girls or Britney Spears.

O: In each of these projects there are slides of websites. Here are sites where people promise that they will make the website soon. This is people promising, or asking for more time. Not just sites under construction, but I collected more sophisticated sites, where people really promise, or really ask for something. It's very narrative.

Here are eighty slides where people say "no, I am not interested in making this website anymore. I'm not a Hanson fan anymore," or "school just started, so I am done with my page." So these are very clear statements, and that is quite rare. Usually they are not so spectacular, these pages, but they are very clear messages. And when you see them next to each other it can be very powerful.

Ace: I'm also very interested in this web page "visits counter", or ticker. It's sort of like the early "like" notification that produces a little bit of dopamine when you receive them.

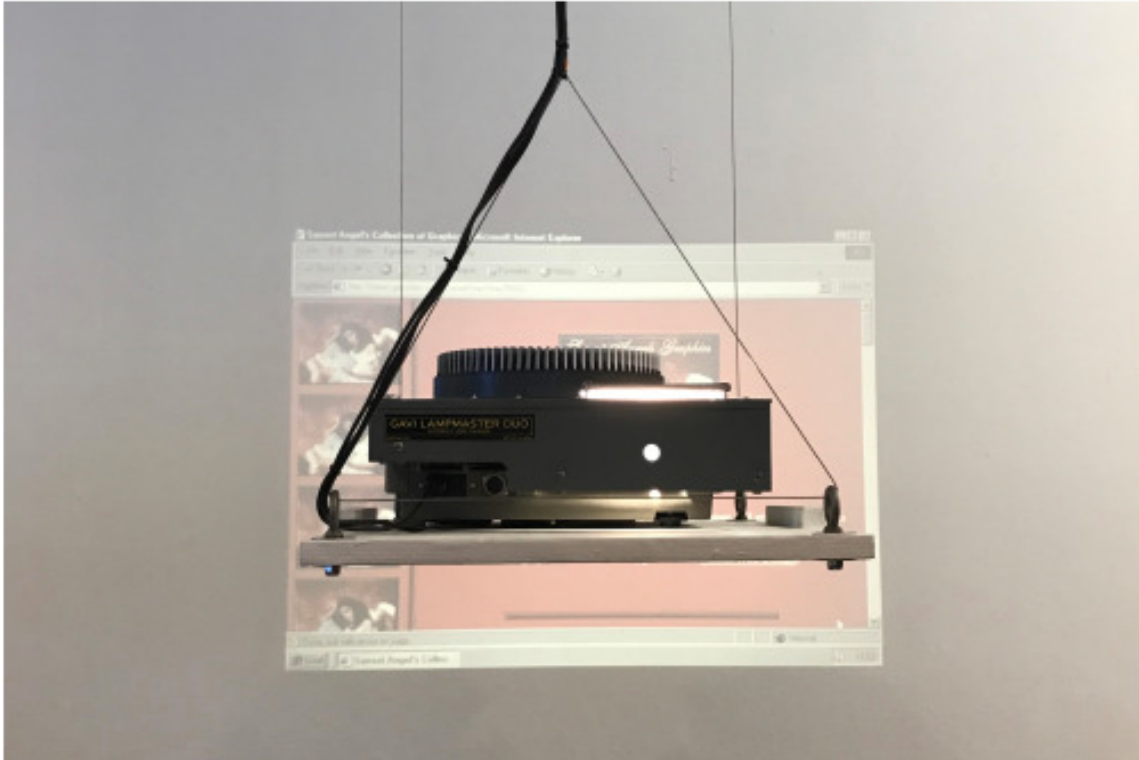C: I've never thought about that actually — just a page visit is a "like".

O: We can't see it now because it's just a screenshot, but this is a fake counter. It's a joke about counters because it's constantly rotating. The websites are quite different themselves, but I chose them based on the text. I selected the sites where people promise they will make the website soon— and sometimes they say exactly when. My research shows that most commonly people say it will be two weeks. I don't know what this hope or deadline means. And these are pages are from '95, and the dates are from 2000.

Ace: And you've archived these from Geocities?

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O: Yes, and actually everybody can see them on the tumblr, *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age*, but I'm selecting them to show as slides. On *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age,* there is one screenshot uploaded every twenty minutes — and right now it's on Christmas of 2000.

Installation view

Ace: Wasn't that around when you two met? Around Y2K? Can you tell me a little about how you've collaborated over the years since then?

C: Well, our first time meeting was in Munich in 2001, in the fall. Olia was doing Make World, a festival and poltical art and concert series in Munich and invited me and my friends — we had a band — to play, and also exhibit. I had to get a passport for it, I remember. So that's when we met and we stayed in contact since then. We've shown together a bunch —

O: But not intentionally.

C: Oh, not collaboratively, yeah.

Ace: Is this your first two-person exhibition with one another?

C: Yes. And we are in constant contact on twitter.

O: on WhatsApp…

C: on email…

Ace: Just sort of exchanging ideas?

C: Yeah actually, the show came out of…Olia was trying to print out an easyJet pass.

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O: Boarding passes. And they didn't work. I had three failures, and the fourth one worked.

C: So she tweeted about it as a joke saying, "I'm trying to print this boarding pass" and I tweeted back that I'd love to have those for my collection. So we had a back and forth.

O: We started to talk about what he would give me in return — and then it started to become about these responses we have with each other, and that work is what's visible here.

C: Because I just said "I have something similar," and she said "I have something similar to that," and the great part of this story, is that the boarding pass piece has turned into a sculpture and it'll be in the show. And the sculpture that I made in response is in the show too.

Ace: So it's come full circle.

O: And of course the title is *Asymmetrical Response*, so it has this kind of personal connotation. But when we started to conceptualize all this, one and a half years ago, it was very clear that the situation in the world is getting more and more similar to when we were kids — like the Cold War.

C: And when we started talking it wasn't even on the radar, but all of a sudden we're back to it.

O: And "Asymmetrical Response" is also a diplomatic term [correlating to power dynamics between nations].

Ace: A lot of the remains of the early web have shifted from being seen as merely nostalgic or amateur. Today, they are looked at as forms of "required digital heritage" or important archival ephemera. Can you speak a little bit about that shift?

O: I started to collect early web elements long before the hype, long before it came back around, just to show students how things looked a year, or a few years ago. That was around the start of Web 2.0, when it became clear that there was another part of the web now — with social networks and an exact place for everything — it became clear, like a cut, that there was the web of the 90s, and then the web of the 2000s. I think around that time, all of these earlier elements had another sort of great moment. A lot of work was made around it. But for me, it has nothing to do with nostalgia. I am still absolutely convinced that it remains a web that is made for people, and by people themselves, and it is still possible that it will come back to that.

Ace: Possible that people can kind of regain control and agency over the web?

O: Exactly. And these elements are symbols for this control — of the presentation, of the sort of modular culture. It's not about the animation of the .gif, it's about seeing that you can take this file and put it somewhere on the page yourself. You can decide if it's on the bottom, if it's on the top, if it appears three times.

Ace: Rather than just posting it?

O: Yes. These are signs of a web that belongs to the people.

Ace: A lot of operating system upgrades lend themselves to seamlessness or user-friendliness. It's like they want users to forget about the interface, forget the cable, and maintain very close, quasi-

relationships with these products that record our every digital move in some distant cloud. I wondered if you have any other ideas, like putting a gif anywhere on a page, about ways to disrupt that sort of mediation?

C: I was always against upgrading. I wouldn't upgrade until finally, something, that I needed didn't work. That's been my policy for twenty years. Only recently, in the past few months, you can't do that anymore. Because your computer will ask you every day. My computer's like, "Do you want to upgrade right now, or in two hours? We'll totally do it in the middle of the night, between 2 and 4, when it's plugged in…" There's been a huge shift, and it's exhausting. My iPhone is exhausting me right now: "Oh, we saw that you weren't plugged in last night. Totally cool, just plug it in tonight…"

O: In 2012, I actually started this User Rights Campaign, and one of the suggestions was "the right not to update" and there was quite some discussion there. I came back to this idea some days ago, when Samsung said that they are now running this update for their Galaxy 7 — the one that explodes. 93% of all these phones were returned, and for the remaining 7%, what they will do now is an update that won't allow you to call anyone, or to charge the battery. It's not a situation that you could say "oh, evil corporations" yeah? they are doing it for good, but it makes you think of how it all functions. It's just a software update, but it can make it all obsolete. Even this battery. It's all controlled.

C: What is the phrase? Everything phones home now. All devices.

O: But what we see now, Cory's *Lakes:* that is an example of a work that is made on a computer that does not update. Otherwise it wouldn't be possible. The snow here, you can't see it on the browser anymore. Because it doesn't support Java Applet.

Ace: So do you have a computer that allows you to insert those effects?

C: Yeah, we have one computer in the office that Java works on. And we just don't touch it and pray that it doesn't break. So we have a time capsule in the office, that I make these on.

Ace: How does humor come to play in each of your individual practices? Do you think it provides a sense of relief from our hyper mediated lives, or does it instead make it more apparent, or uneasy?

O: I can't say that I'm trying to make something humorous, ever. Interestingly, quite often I am criticized by my colleagues who say that everything's too playful. But it's because people often think that if something, like this .gif, is animated, or if there's glitter, that it's humorous. But it's not. Everything here is rather…not sad, but melancholic.

C: Yeah melancholic would be an okay term.

O: But it's not nostalgic.

C: I'm in a similar position where my work is always seen as playful. For me, humor can work in a lot of different ways, and it doesn't have to be an "lol" kind of humor. Humor is a different way to communicate, basically. It's a different structure of communication. It's about expectation; at the last second you take a right or left turn, and it shifts people's perception. My work, because it's not "lol" humorous, where your perception is shifted in a split second — maybe it works more on our time. It's a lot slower. Again, humor doesn't mean that the work is funny. It's just a

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type of communication. So what each work is communicating could be different, but the work is most often melancholic.

Installation view

Ace: So it's about that play on expectation.

O: It's so often that we take things that many see as funny, or ridiculous, but we take them very seriously. I have web design manuals from the 90s, from my collection, but it's not a collection of funny books. It's my library that I studied. I did not take it seriously in the 90s, I would never read it at the time. But now I see that sometimes, they are the only source to see how the web looked at that time, because these are things that were not saved by archives or by anybody.

There, you can see those precious screenshots. Or you can see how great minds, at that time, suggested that the rest of us make web pages. So I really read and re-read these books now, not just to laugh at how they used to make web pages.

Ace: It's the only way to conceive of how the web used to be approached, as an innovative, or utopian, space. This also reminds me of the patents that technology companies have for different screenic gestures today, like the movement of your fingers across an interface, a pinch to zoom, and apple's new "force touch." I wonder, what do those documents look like, and what will they look like to us in ten, twenty years?

C: Oh my god.

O: Have you ever seen those documents?

Ace: I've seen some renderings but I'm sure they're pretty well concealed. It's not humorous, it's absolutely serious actually. Because what you're talking about is human gestures being patented. Do you want to talk a bit more about the pool noodles, Cory?

C: Oh, that series of work started just a few years ago. The series is called *Screen-agers, Tall Boys and Whales*, and they are simply pool floaties which have been accessorized. Actually, they come in three categories, "Screen-agers," which are teenagers (this show has teenagers), "Tall Boys" which I like to describe as kind of like Kid Rock — so camo and American Flags and Miller Beer Cans —

Ace: So there aren't any Tall Boys in this show?

C: I brought some tall boys but they didn't make it into this show. Although the Hooters one is getting into tall boys territory. And then there's this whole subset of "Whales," which are sort of like Wall Street Guys, who play around with big money.

Ace: Like a finance dude.

C: Yes. There are also no Whales in this show. But to me, they are sort of like portraits of different tribes of people. So we put them in this show as a response to Olia's piece on the large LED screen that takes place at a sort of EDM concert. We wanted a group of people that would be at the concert.

Ace: So there's an exchange there too.

C: Right. I've also made a new one that's a webmaster. So that's a new category.

Ace: I love it.

O: I've made clothes too, my collection is called *Webmaster Summer*.

C: Yeah so we both have these clothing lines — Olia's is *Webmaster Summer*and mine is called *Arcangel Surfware*. Mine is for relaxing at home. It's clothes that are comfortable for computing at home. And Olia's are work clothes. So the locker represents the transition there. And the one noodle has my first collection – Arcangel Surfware. The bedsheets are also from the first collection.

O: For this show, we aren't just collecting things we have that rhyme with each other but we're responding to each other, in position and in selection. On this table are new sculptures — it's like the Cold War table, with the iron curtain allegories.

Ace: The title, Asymmetrical Response*, engages the topic of power dynamics of the Internet over time. After its start as the ARPANET, which had somewhat of a military focus?*

C: Well it's in the news, again, as a military focus. Not in the same way.

Ace: Yes there's this seizure of control of the web that relates back to its original function.

O: There's an old Nintendo game from the 80s. When I was a teenager in the late 80s, we had this one portable Soviet game, and we always thought that it was *our* Soviet game. But you can see here that it's been — not stolen, but… what's the word for it?

Ace: Re-appropriated?

O: Yes, what you can see on the Nintendo screen, it's Mickey Mouse. They rebuild it, but it looks the same, it just says Nintendo on one, and Electronica on the other.

Ace: It's the same game?

O: Yes. There is this Iron Curtain right? But this is the *Liquid Crystal Curtain*. And this is something I really didn't know when I was a child. I thought it was our great game.

C: This is displayed on the table, like it would be at a cell phone store. These are running on Nintendo Emulators. So this is a work I made in 2005 called *Mig 29 Soviet Fighter Plane*. It was a modified Nintendo Game where I clearly just took the plane out of the game. It was a bootleg Nintendo game where you were a Soviet fighter bombing the Middle East. It was a game that existed when I was younger. I made the work ten years ago but I didn't play this game, I played Top Gun.

Ace: Its reciprocal.

C: Yeah. I mean, I clearly remember standing at the Top Gun arcade machine at the pizza place, bombing Russia.

Ace: So there are these different narratives being driven…

C: Yeah there was this whole scene of bootleg Nintendo games!

Ace: As the art world sort of relies more and more on social media platforms like Instagram to promote and share work, how can we move beyond a generation of likes? Do you feel that people are really engaging with these images?

O: I don't know how to answer this in relation to the art world. I have a personal answer. I am not on Facebook. On twitter, I would never click 'like'. I either respond, send a direct message or write an email. It's really to keep myself conscious. Because I'm afraid that I will degrade. And I'm not on Instagram because I am afraid that I will not be able to write even 140 characters/words. So I stay on twitter to at least *make something*.

C: I'm asymmetrical. I have a problem. I'm compulsive about liking tweets. If you look at my account there are more likes than anything–probably ten thousand likes. I think the way people understand images on Instagram is a new way to understand images. It's a new type of communication.

Ace: What is your favorite website right now? It doesn't have to be your most visited…

O: I spend most of my time on *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age*. It's my own site, but it's not my own, because I see websites from other people. It's like going to the Internet for me.

C: That's a very hard question for me, I might have to get back to you. Where do I spend a lot of my time?

O: If you can call it a website.

C: What are websites?

Cory and Olia's exhibition *Assymetrical Response* continues at The Kitchenthrough February 18. Ace Hotel New York is proud to be The Kitchen's hotel sponsor. If you're coming westward for the exhibit, you can book a room with us using the code KITCHEN for a limited-time friendly rate.