MATERIAL PRACTICE
FROM SPROCKETS TO BINARIES

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JODI: *STREET DIGITAL*

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"We are dead serious," said Joan (with JODI's usual deadpan affect) in response to the last question at their talk at EAI (Electronic Arts Intermix) in April. Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans make up JODI, the Dutch-Belgian art duo, whose work recently occupied a large gallery at the Museum of the Moving Image in Queens with several excellent pieces repurposing new technologies, entitled "Street Digital." Struggling to find an end to the talk, JODI clicked on a link to one of their YouTube videos which had been taken down, producing an error message. This was appropriate, as JODI's work emerged from the school of net.art in the mid 90s that embraced the ephemeral. Net.art artists (such as Alexei Shulgin and Vuk Ćosić) worked with specific moments of browser conventions, software, and interfaces as material, conditions that would exist for only a short time and then become obsolete.

When JODI first came onto the scene in the mid 1990s – called the "heroic period" of net.art by some – they were the mysterious hackers whose website of flashing and broken-looking source code appeared to take over your computer, creating a vortex of fascination that kept you clicking to see what would happen next. Their off-kilter work offered a paranoia inducing but fresh reprieve from the more utopian expectations of the time that technology would be seamless, immersive and give the user total control over every task. As media theorist Florian Kramer has written, these works that foregrounded code, which was usually tucked neatly beneath the computer's interface, "reflect the uncanny underbelly of network communication..." After infiltrating the Internet browser, JODI created their own misbehaving version of OSX and created formalist mods to popular video games. Beyond embracing the ephemeral, JODI's work is guided by the urge to exploit the error or glitch. This reveals not what the computer can do, but an aesthetics of computing itself, an aesthetics that can be seen as both formalist and irreverent – irreverent like punk rock.

Unlike other art entities who made their name with net.art in the 90s, JODI has continued to hack their way through the cacophony of successive technological innovations. Over the years, their playful and exhaustive reworking of hardware, software and popular media has led to a comparison with the work of Steina and Woody Vasulka. Since the 90s, computing has become more ubiquitous and integrated with the physical world, thanks to Wiis, mobile devices and smart architecture. Computing has also become more media rich, a condition enabled by broadband, consumer-friendly media making tools and social media. JODI has embraced these physical and popular aspects of computing, moving away

RIGHT JODI, *SK8Monkeys on Twitter*
(2009/2012), A visitor performs *SK8Monkeys on Twitter,* an installation work.

BELOW JODI, *LED Puzzled* (2012), Installation view.

BOTTOM JODI, *Burnout (History of Car Games)* (2004-2012).

Part of "JODI: Street Digital," at Museum of the Moving Image, March 31-May 20, 2012. Photos by Daniel Love, courtesy Museum of the Moving Image.
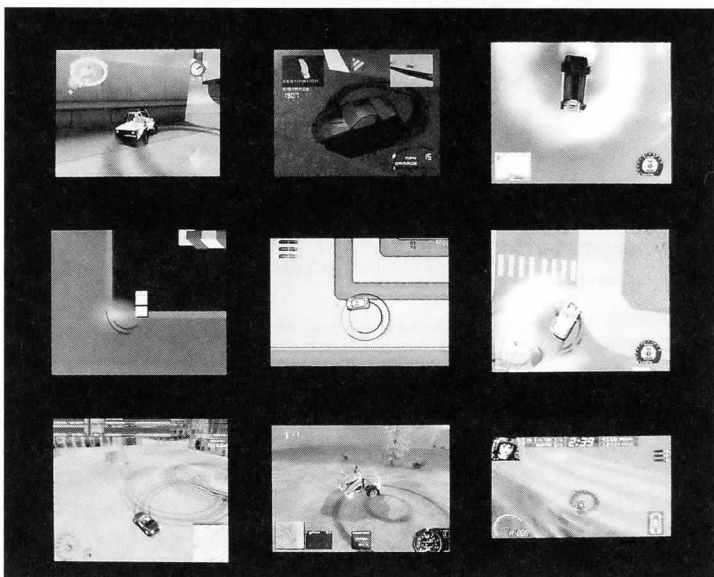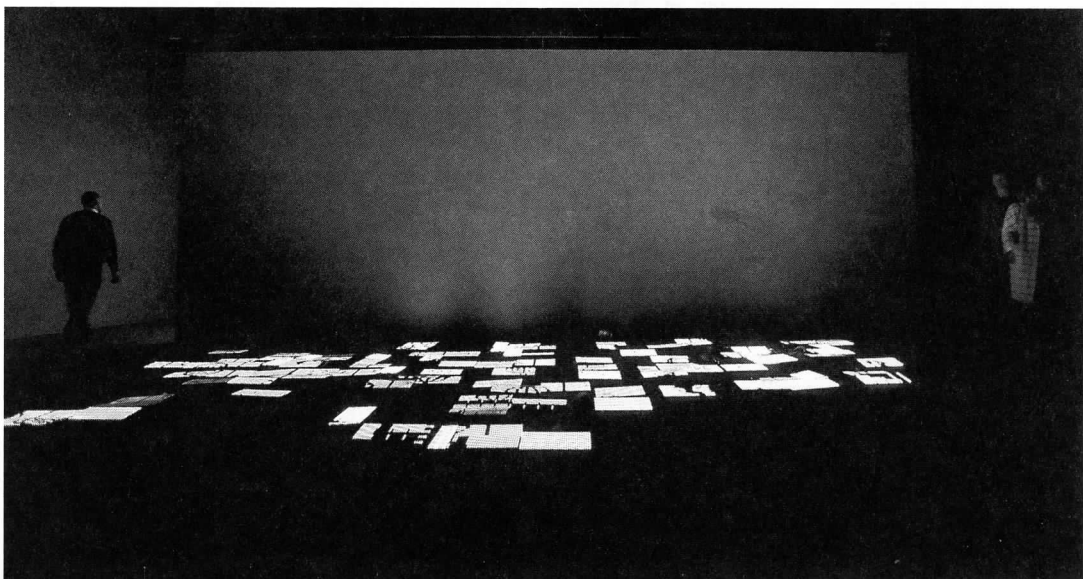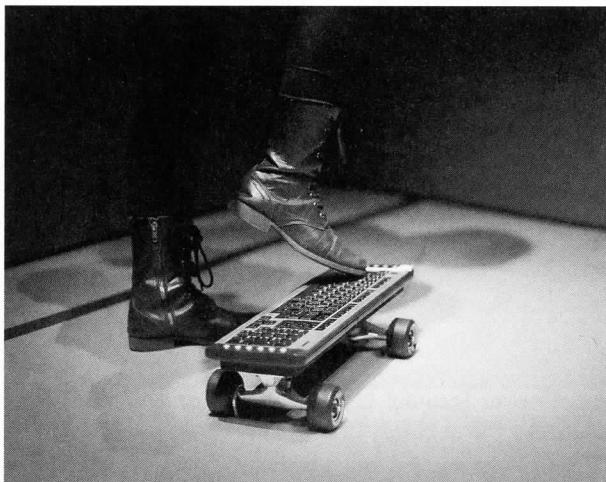
from the aesthetics of code to the aesthetics of other malfunctioning or misappropriated platforms. But as "Street Digital" reveals, JODI has drawn the delicious thread of irreverence practiced by earlier net.artists through these computing evolutions.

JODI may be not a part of the gaming community per se, but games are 'fair game' for their practice of *détournement*. In *Untitled Game* ('96 – '01) they have made several mods to the game Quake by altering something which makes the game illegible in a usual way. Gone are the images of monsters and corridors and guns and in their place are streaming numbers or beautiful black and white patterns that look like   an animated Bridget Riley op art painting. The four games are still playable and register the user's participation (the mechanisms of shooting, moving through space and score keeping are audible and intact), but reveal the aesthetics of the computer beneath the representational mode of the commercial video game.

Some of the work in the show earns well the title "Street Digital" and gets the viewer/user/player/participant away from the computer almost entirely. In *Sk8 Monkeys* (2009), JODI takes on social media. A hybrid keyboard and skateboard that people step on sends texts randomly generated by the visitors' feet to Twitter, alluding to the idea that monkeys typing for an infinite amount of time will eventually come up with a meaningful text like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In *LED Puzzled* (2012), JODI has rearranged the parts of a low-res LED sign board so the original textual message is no longer legible. What we are left with is a pile of urgently flashing fragments that are dramatic and disorienting in the darkened room – a broken, epilepsy-inducing spectacle. Though still embodying JODI's sardonic humor, these autonomous objects lack the synergy born of meeting the viewer/user/player/participant where they encounter computer technology more intimately, at home surfing the internet or clutching the controller in front of the video game. This synergy is reclaimed in *ZYX* (2012), JODI's iPhone/iPad app. With the most minimal interface – a stick figure, an icon for the gyroscope, instructional text and the camera turned on you – the game convinces the player to become the embodied (and ridiculous) performer, acting out physical directions such as jumping up and down or spinning around ten times in order to get to the next 'level.'

Recently JODI has turned their attention to networked, crowd-sourced video in *YCTC (Folksomy)* (2008/2010). "Folksomy" is a misspelling of the term folksonomy, which is the process of large groups of people on the Internet developing a taxonomy through collective tagging. Here JODI shares an impressive quantity of videos they collected from YouTube of "people doing strange things with computers." The few minutes that I watched included people of 'web native' age in suburban settings smashing things – hard drives, iPods, and other hardware – with a hatchet, skateboard, golf club, tennis racket, screwdriver, etc., transitioning into scenes of people putting electronic objects up their nose or in their mouth. Visiting their site folksomy.net myself later,s I found a diptych of homespun music videos about the internet and email with a strong recurrence of keyboards, MySpace and Google logos, surreal dances and creative uses of text. The JODI filter for internet video reveals today's absurdist underbelly of network communication that employs a recursion of narcissism and spectatorship. JODI's proclivity for exploiting both the aesthetics of the amateur and the excess of available video media highlights their genius ability to respond to the latest techno zeitgeist.

Curator Michael Connor writes that JODI's work updates structural film. Like structural film, JODI's experiments with computing platforms privilege the materiality of the medium and champion the anti-representational. Unlike the bulk of structural film, which employs a durational aesthetic that can be torturous to the contemporary viewer, JODI's aesthetic strategy is akin to the sensory rush of a casino – a different kind of flicker. Although it is very nice to see that with their museum show JODI is getting some of the attention they deserve, a major pleasure of their work is the sensation of a loss of control or unease prompted by the anticipated yet unexpected interruption, as in a horror film, and the museum setting has a neutralizing effect. I look forward to JODI's hack for this platform.

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IMAGE: A visitor performs *SK8Monkeys on Twitter* (2009/2012), an installation work by **JODI**. Part of "JODI: Street Digital," at Museum of the Moving Image, March 31-May 20, 2012. Credit: Photo: Daniel Love / Museum of the Moving Image.