

*Public and Private Space on the Internet: Mouchette.org and Life Sharing*

Abstract:

This paper seeks to address the discourse of the blurring of public and private space in new media art, specifically in Mouchette.org and Life Sharing by Eva and Franco Matteos. Both of these pieces utilize an understanding of the social systems inherent in new media art as a set of relations that require the user to complete. By using the social relations in their work they have created, as Nicolas Bourriaud elucidates it, a relational work of art. This in turn set up a system in which the art becomes an open work of art and requires the user to complete the system of relations, which utilizes different modes of interactivity. By examining each piece through Carolyn Jones' Taxonomy of New Media Interactivity, this paper explores the modes in which both Mouchette.org and Life sharing create a discourse via their interactivity. Furthermore, this paper posits that the very set of relations between the user and the work of art put forth in both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing creates a discourse on the boundaries of public and private space and this discourse is inherent in the work of art that utilizes technology to complete the work of art.

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Mouchette.org sends me an email inviting me to a webpage made just for me. I open it, view the flesh filled page and am told that I can never come back. It is a strange world of bits and flickering notions: a world where the art is only finished when I interact with it. The page exists before I view it on a server awaiting my opening. However it is the act of opening it, of engaging the work that then triggers its completion. This work of art requires the viewer to enter into its digital space, its world that still need to be completed. Similarly, the world of Life Sharing by 0100101110101101.ORG requires an audience's direct interaction to be complete. Here the artists Franco and Eva Matteos made their entire computer accessible to anyone via data downloads. The act of viewing intimate details from personal emails to financial statements is not complete, until the user downloads and interprets the raw data. The data existed beforehand, but it was the act of downloading and viewing the information that completes it. Theses two net art pieces highlight an important development in net art, that is that viewer participation with the pieces of art are required to complete the work of art. It is through these acts of participation that both works of art have created a discourse on the boundaries of public and private space.

This paper seeks to address the emerging discourse, that is the system of relations in net art that blurs the boundaries of public and private space between the art, the viewer

and the artist. It is this phenomenon of relations, the discourse, within the medium of net art that speaks of the blurring of boundaries between the public and private space.

The interactivity of both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing, not only opens the work to individual and private experiences with the work of art, but the users interfacing the public realm via their private computer creates a set of social relations that further explore the blurring of public and private space in net art. It is through the interactive modalities that the intrinsic nature of net art and the use of relations between the viewer, the art and the artwork via the medium, that the public and private exchange is fully explicated.

## ON RELATIONS

Both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing contain within their structural strategies modalities that utilize the conception of a relational work of art.

Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational art as,

“A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space”<sup>1</sup>

In Bourriaud's definition the exchanges that relational art create between the art object, the artist and the viewer is in effect the work of art. The very constructs of social relations created by the interaction with the work of art, creates a discourse on the social context in which the viewer is participant. It is through the exchange of relations that human relations are reified, and it through this practice that both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing create a discourse on the boundaries of private and public space. However, both

of these works not only create a discourse of relations, but the very relations that they reify are dependant upon the use of new media to engage the viewer participation, which in turn then creates a work of art that is at its core a meta work. That is, a work of art which articulates the idea of relational art itself through mediation. It is at this intersection that both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing by 0100101110101101.ORG find their works of art. Both pieces create a meta discourse on the very nature of public and private space that is intrinsic to the nature of net art. By utilizing the net for their discourse, and problematizing the concept of public and private space, Mouchette.org and Life Sharing have opened the work of art to create a set of relations that are reliant upon the interaction of the viewer to finish the work, and a discourse on the blurred boundaries of private and public space.

## NEW MEDIA ART

The space that both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing occupy is that of new media, which encompasses a wide class of artworks, including everything from video installations to net art. However within this broad class, one of the defining factors of new media art is interactivity. It is the mode of interactivity that both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing rely upon in their relations with viewers to create the interactivity through infiltration of private space with public space. To understand either piece of art, one must understand the specific nature of the medium, that is net art's interactive modalities. New media has attracted numerous scholars who work with the interaction of new media. Prominent amongst these is Lev Manovich, who in his book *The Language of New Media* has writes that,

“New media is interactive. In contrast to old media where the order of presentations is fixed, the user can now interact with a media object. In the process of interaction the user can choose which elements to display or which paths to follow, thus generating a unique work.”<sup>2</sup>

As Manovich points out, it is the nature of new media art to create a discourse on the boundaries of interaction, of man’s interaction with machine and to the work of art generated by machine. Furthermore, the essence of new media, that creates a “unique work” with each viewers interaction is inherent in the very materiality that new media and specifically net art incorporates.

The disposition of a net art which facilitates interactivity and a discourse on the boundaries of public and private space through the interaction or relations of the work with the viewer is reliant upon, not only in the execution of the work, but also in the system on which the work of net art is built. This system of interaction is a recent phenomena that has developed during the last two decades and has exploded on to the art scene via the net art phenomenon. The term net art denotes artwork created on and disseminated by the internet<sup>3</sup>. By using the internet to create and distribute interactive works of art, net art has created a discourse on the nature of interaction and on the users interaction with the boundaries of the private and the public space. This discourse is facilitated by the material aspects of the delivery system of net art. The system of delivery, the internet has profound implications for the boundaries of public and private space.

The vast majority of computer users interface with the computer by themselves; it is by and large a solitary pursuit. Sitting at a desk, in a single chair the viewer moves a

mouse and clicks on it, which in turn, navigates through the digital space of the web creating paths. These paths are singular in their execution, each viewer of a net art piece has a discrete experience. The mechanical structure of the interface for net art then can be ascertained to be a private act. That is, only a single person can engage the work, although of course, many people can watch a single person engage the work of art, it is still the navigation of a single person who creates the experience. The implications for the system employed in net art are framed very effectively by the significant scholar Oliver Grau. In his book *Virtual Art from Illusion to Immersion* writes about the implications of the interface. He writes,

“ The physically intimate design of the human-machine interface gives rise to such immersive experiences that the artist speaks of reaffirming the participants’ corporality... Prerequisite to the attainment of this goal is immersion experienced in solitude, a subjective experience in the image world.”<sup>4</sup>

The dichotomy of the solitary experience of the human-machine interface and the system in which the interface creates a discourse of the solitary, private experience with the work of art and the public access system of the internet creates a discourse not only on the interface, but the set of relations between public and private space. Only one person can truly interact with a single computer at a specific moment in time, but that is not to say that there are not numerous people looking at the same website at the same time, however the other viewers are not corporally present and sharing the experience. Therefore, the act of interacting with net art via the computer-machine interface is essentially a solitary experience. For all intensive purposes, other users do not exist for the individual who accesses net art. Thus, the singular and solitary pursuit of the internet

interface makes interaction with net art as such, a private act. But this private act, of the solitary person interfacing with the computer is physically accessing a public space, that of the internet which anyone with a computer and a connection can access. Thus, the internet is a public sphere which fundamentally establishes net art as a public art genre, which then in turn creates part of the discourse on the public and private space of the internet. The nature of the internet and the nature of net art creates by its very essence a discourse on the boundaries of public space and private space as it is accessed through the medium. Dirk Paesmans of the art collaborative Jodi.org writes ruminates on this idea. He writes that,

“We explore the computer from the inside, and mirror this on the net. When a viewer looks at our work, we are inside his computer.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the nature of the interaction between net art creator and net art viewer is a space that allows the private to become public. The user is inside the system, looking at the work of art from inside the artist’s private computer. To access a piece of net art one must move through the public space of the Internet. The very nature of public and private are mutable in relation to the Internet and the practice of net art. This aspect has profound implications for the users role in net art and the understanding of public and private space. The implications of the public private discourse created by the new media and specifically net art is predicated upon the feedback loop of interaction. Linda Carolli in her article, *Virtual Encounters: Community or Collaboration on the Internet?* establishes the idea that the interaction via new media is reliant upon the idea of cyberspace as a social system that by its essence explore the boundaries of public and private space.. She writes.

“The adoption of cyberspace as a distinct social space of interactivity renders it indistinguishable as either public or private space. It is represented as the seamless extension of the private and public into each other or as interstices between the public and private into which a range of identities can be projected.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the very system in which net art is created can be ascertained to inherently render the distinction of public and private mutable through the interaction with the work of art via the system of social relations employed, and predicated upon the medium of the internet itself. Which in turn creates a discourse on the nature of public and private space that is inherent in the medium through its relations of interaction.

Furthermore, this interaction causes profound implications for the participatory nature of a work of art, or its relations. Soke Dinkla writes in her *essay From Participation to Interaction* that,

“The widespread judgment that interactive intercourse with computer systems prepares the ground for an emancipation from the media context, via the development from ‘passive’ to ‘active’ reception...”<sup>7</sup>

It is this factor, the emergence of the active user, via the media that has profound effects on the discourse of relations created by the work of art. By engaging the user, changing the dynamic of interaction of the work of art, new media art has blurred the boundaries of the work of art itself and with that blurring the boundaries of public and private space. Furthermore, as Michael Rush has previously explicated, new media work requires the act of participation, the interaction for it to be complete.<sup>8</sup> Not only is it necessary for the participant to engage the piece to complete it, but also the fundamental interaction with the piece itself becomes a private affair. In his essay, *The Poetics of the*

Open Work, Umberto Eco speaks eloquently about the fundamental shift from the passive work of art that the viewer only receives, to the active work of art that the viewer alters. Here he writes,

“...the author offers the interpreter, the performer the addressee, a work to be completed. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own. It will be a different work, and at the end of the interpretive dialogue, a form which his form will have been organized, ...in a particular way that he could not have foreseen.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus the fundamental shift with the interaction of a work of art is not only the shift of passive to active, but the alterations that each participant affects on the work of art dismantles the boundaries of the work of art and with that the notions of public and private space. If a work of art is meant to be altered by an individual, it becomes by its very nature a participatory work, and as a participatory work it breaks the boundaries of the artist and the user, and concomitantly breaks the boundaries of the public and private space of a work of art.

## MOUCHETTE.ORG AND LIFE SHARING

The boundaries of public and private space in net art are uniquely exhibited in two works of art, Mouchette.org and Life Sharing by 0100101110101101.ORG. Both works of art blur the boundaries of public and private space not only in the interactivity with the sight, but on a meta level, that is in the systems that each utilizes to engage the viewer from passive to active.

Mouchette.org is an anonymous web site begun in 1996 and is continuously updated and changed, that is there is no discrete end to the site, and as such is timeless.

The creator of the Mouchette.org site has remained anonymous through out the last decade and the gender, age, and identity of the creator has remained private and inaccessible to the public who view the piece. The piece itself is in the guise of a personal website of a thirteen year old girl. Here, the public personae of the private artist manifests itself through the interaction with the website as the user interacts through questions which create a unique system of interaction for each user. Furthermore participation with the site for the user is via email, thereby crossing the boundaries of public; that is the Mouchette website transgresses the boundaries the users private space via the internet with its email. Thus, the public persona becomes a private interaction between users on the site, which then penetrates the private users space with the continued interaction via email.

Conversely, Life Sharing by 0100101110101101.ORG. is the private materials of the artist manifested as public. Here, the art duo of Eva and Franco Mattes, made public their very private files on their home computer from the year 2000 until the pieces' end in 2003. Everything from their financial records to their intimate emails with their friends had been made into public data for the specified time period. The private data of Life sharing is then accessible to the public via their persona computer that by virtue crosses the boundaries of the public and private. Thus the private material is made public through the interaction of the piece on the internet. Furthermore, the public site of their website then manifests itself on the user's computers further blurring the boundaries of public and private space.

These two divergent conceptions of the public and private discourse are manifest through not just the work of arts itself, but are reliant upon the user interaction. The

question then, is how is the system of relations, the interaction between these two works of art formed.

## TAXONOMY

The question of how to understand the interaction and the implications of Mouchette.org and Life Sharing can best be understood through Caroline Jones taxonomy for interaction in new media. The taxonomy is from Caroline Jones' book *Senorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*, which is the companion to the 2006, the visual arts exhibition of the same title hosted Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The exhibition explored the senses in contemporary art production, and for the exhibition, Jones created taxonomy of interaction, which proves constructive in understanding the modes of interaction with art occur with new media in general and specifically with Mouchette.org and Life Sharing. Her taxonomy of interactive modalities in new media art is as follows:

*Immersive* ~ the cave paradigm: the virtual helmet, the black box video, the earphone set

*Alienated* ~ taking technology and "making it strange," exaggerating attributes to provoke shock, using technologies to switch senses or induce orientation

*Interrogative* ~work that repurposes or remakes devices to enhance their insidious or wondrous properties; available data translated into sensible systems

*Residual* ~ work that holds onto an earlier technology, repurposes or even fetishizes an abandoned one

*Resistant* ~ work that refuses to use marketed technologies for their stated purpose: work that pushes viewers to reject or subvert technologies

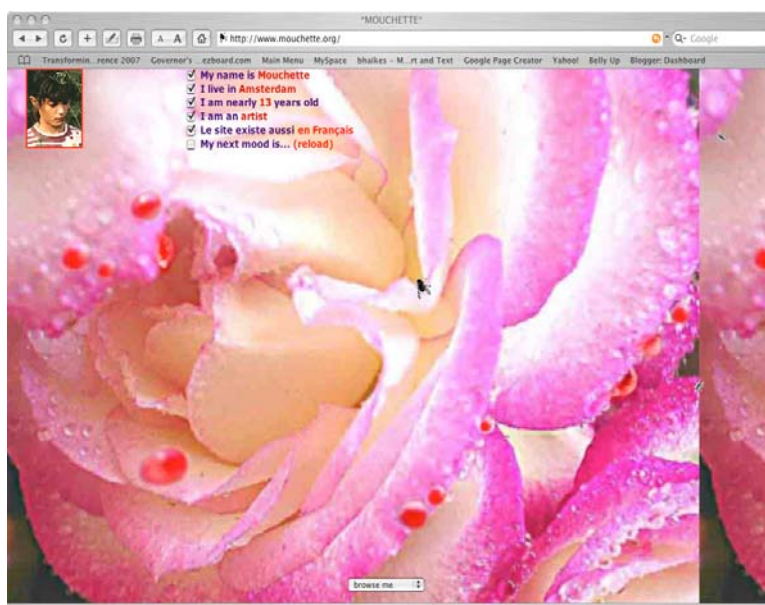
*Adaptive* ~ work that takes up technologies and extends or applies technologies for creative purposes, producing new subjects for the technologies in question<sup>10</sup>

To ascertain the implications of the blurring of public and private boundaries within the system of relations of the interaction, the modes of interaction created by Mouchette.org and Life sharing require a close examination employing Jones' taxonomy. Fundamentally, the two models of Mouchette.org and Life Sharing by 0100101110101101.ORG utilize opposing modes of public and private interaction, however their discourse is on the boundaries is the same. The model of Mouchette.org which manifests the public personae of an anonymous artist not only through the website, but in the continued interaction with the private space of the user's computer contrasts with the private material of the artists Eva and Franco Mattes made public through the users interaction with Life sharing. However, a close inspection through the taxonomy will reveal their similarities.

## MOUCHETTE

Applying Jones' Taxonomy reveals that Mouchette.org's modes of interactivity are *alienated* and *adaptive*. Upon first interacting with the site the interactive mode of alienation assaults of viewer. That is Mouchette.org "takes technology and "makes it strange," exaggerating attributes that provoke shock, and using technologies to switch senses or induce orientation"<sup>11</sup> This can be ascertained in the very first moments of

opening the web site. Here a groan not quite human plays as the page the screen is filled with a close up photograph of a flower with flies fluttering on top of the technicolor flower. Each time the page is reloaded the flower changes, but the groan remains. The aural experience of the groan juxtaposed with the technicolor flower provokes for the viewer a sense of strangeness by assaulting our senses with two very different aesthetics and thus creating a sense of disorientation. The viewer has a hard time assimilating these two significant elements together. Furthermore, the cultural significance of the innocuous flower, that of innocence, love and a representation of the female is subverted by the bestial groan, we become aware that the visual innocence, the child the flower is questioned and made alien. Above this O'Keefe like flower, on the upper left of the screen, is a small photograph of a young girl glancing down. The image of the close up flower, coupled with the intense and surreal juxtaposition of the bestial sound creates a shock to the user. This strange assemblage creates for the viewer a sense of disorientation, which in turn leads to the users sense of alienation, thus aligning with Jones' models of interaction of as that of alienated.



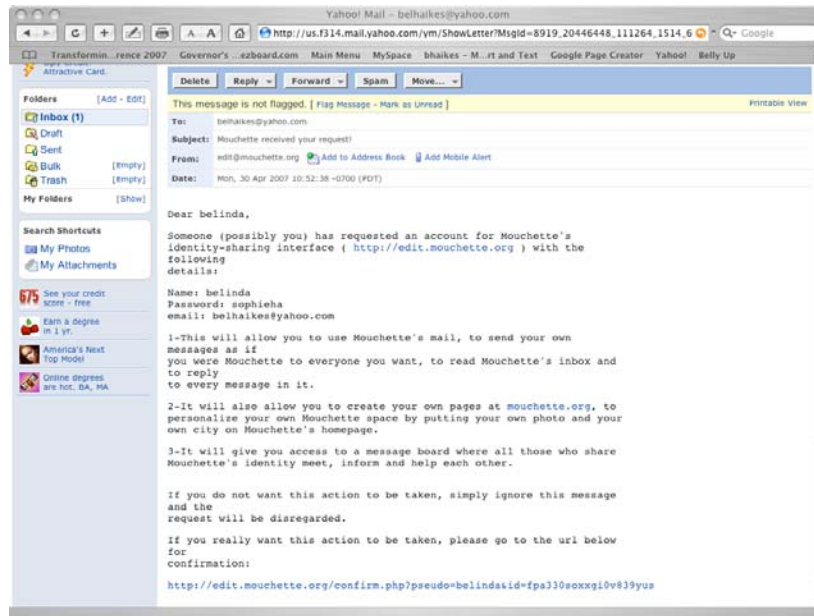
Not only does Mouchette.org utilize the mode of alienation, but also the system in which the viewer interacts with the site is *adaptive*. That is, Mouchette.org “takes up technologies and extends or applies technologies for creative purposes, producing new subjects for the technologies in question”<sup>12</sup>. This is established in the extension of public and private space that Mouchette.org utilizes through its system of networks. To begin, to the immediate right of the young girl are six text lines with check mark boxes. The first reads, “My name is Mouchette.” Upon clicking this, the user is linked to a new page where they are asked to join Mouchette’s network. When clicking on either the Members or Non- members link at the top left of the screen, the user is taken to the home page of Mouchette.org where the photograph of Mouchette in the upper left has changed. If that image is clicked the user is linked to a different artists page. And significantly, each artist that is represented in this linkage is an artist that has joined the Mouchette.org network, this is not the author of the Mouchette.org website, but rather the public website of an outside artist penetrating the Mouchette.org network. This link is changed with each browser is refreshing, seeming to have no particular system for deployment of these artist pages. And significantly, like the identity of the creator of Mouchette these pages are completely anonymous. Thus the public website of outside artist remain completely private. This discourse into the public and private uses of the Mouchette.org website establishes it as adaptive by extending the creative purpose of the website to outside artists and by then applying the extended network for the creative application of blurring the boundaries of public and private space.

A further use of the *adaptive mode* of interaction is the extension of Mouchette.org into the private computer of the networked user, which further complicates the boundaries of public and private space. Upon joining the Mouchette's network, the user is sent an email establishing the user's ability to interact with the Mouchette network. The email sent to the user confirms three major modes of interaction that go beyond the normative point and click of the mouse. The first adaptive mode allows:

The users access to Mouchette's mail, to send their own messages, as if they were Mouchette. The user is able read Mouchette's inbox and to reply to every message in it, as though they were Mouchette.

By allowing the user to become in a sense Mouchette, a blurring of identity, of who is Mouchette occurs. This action then extends the technology in an adaptive mode by utilizing a discourse of user as the artist/author. These extensions of the technologies create an interaction that blurs the boundaries of public and private space by complicating the notion of authorship. That is, because we become the private personae of Mouchette in interactions with a wider public the user acts as an agent to blur the boundaries and create a discourse on the notions of public and private space. Users generating content, actual webpages for the site create the second major interaction of the adaptive mode. The second *adaptive mode* is as follows:

The user is also given access to a message board where all those who share Mouchette's identity meet, inform and help each other.<sup>13</sup>



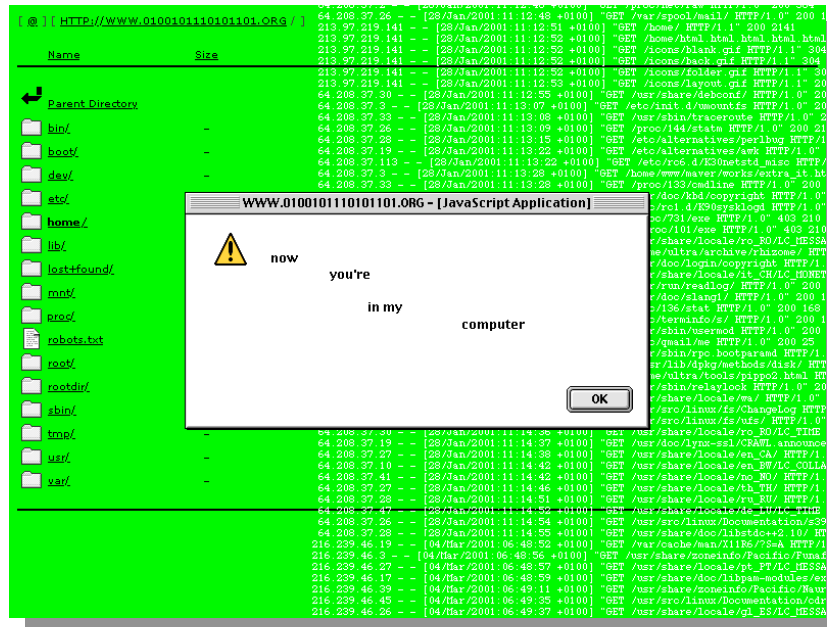
The significant implication with the access of the message board is the fact that the user adopts the identity Mouchette on the message board. By adopting Mouchette's identity the user once again blurs the boundaries of public and private space. That is the private identity is made into a public multi user identity, all the while the users and the actual artist behind Mouchette remain completely anonymous, retaining their private identities.

These two forms of interaction utilize the *adaptive mode*, that is the user via the Mouchette network “ extends or applies technologies for creative purposes, producing new subjects for the technologies in question”<sup>14</sup> Not only does the form of interaction extend the mode of interaction so that it is adaptive, but the very nature of this interaction creates a feedback loop that calls into question the public and private space of the personal computer of the user and the public space of the internet. By that I mean, the private space of the user's computer is infiltrated by the website Mouchette.org via the

email system thus blurring the boundaries of the private with the public. Furthermore, the interaction that the user is able to create with the website, that is becoming Mouchette through responding to the website's email and creating pages further destabilizes those boundaries of public and private space by using blurring the boundaries of identity. This is not unlike the strategy of and visual and aural alienation in its execution. The effect of the strategies of alienation and adaption creates a discourse on the nature of public and private space, not unlike that which is created by the net art piece Life Sharing by art duo Eva and Franco Mattes who go by the moniker, 0100101110101101.ORG.

## LIFE SHARING

Life sharing by Eva and Franco Mattes questions the space of the public and private through the interaction of the user with the site. Like Mouchette.org, Life Sharing is uses Jones' *adaptive mode* in that it "that takes up technologies and extends or applies technologies for creative purposes, producing new subjects for the technologies in question"<sup>15</sup> However, unlike Mouchette, its interaction model is very much resistant. Jones writes that resistant interactivity is, "work that refuses to use marketed technologies for their stated purpose: work that pushes viewers to reject or subvert technologies."<sup>16</sup> In Life Sharing the user is able to download to their desktop the entire contents of 0100101110101101.org's private computer, including their personal financial information, their software and even their private emails<sup>17</sup>.



The information that is accessed by the user comes in the form of data. Upon first entering the site (which is unfortunately no longer accessible) the user was confronted with a page declaring, “Now you’re in my computer.” The user has accessed the private computer of 0100101110101101.org, has effectively broken down the boundaries of the private via access afforded by the public interface of the Internet. This in turn causes the viewer to subvert the accepted notion of privacy on the Internet. The user in general does not access private information via the Internet (of course, there are always exceptions such as hackers) and thus must question not only the work itself, but also the implications of accessing private data through the technologies that assert themselves in Life Sharing. The extent to which the boundaries of the public and private in Life Sharing have been written about by Tilman Baumgärtel’s.. *In The Self on the Screen*, he writes,

“Since both the professional as well as the private life of 0100101110101101.org occurs, or at least is coordinated, to a large extent via computer, there are few aspects of the artists' lives which cannot be viewed by these means.”<sup>18</sup>

Of note, is that although there are “few aspects” left to the users imagination, one significant aspect is the form that the piece takes. Unlike Mouchette.org, Life Sharing employs not images or artistic interpretations, but rather it employs the aesthetic of the computer interface itself, data. This is significant in that the users interaction with the piece is one of decoding via the computer. The private materials, then are made public but require an interaction from the user to manifest the work. This act of decoding creates for each user a unique work, not unlike Eco’s concept of the open work in which he says of the open work,

“It will be a different work, and at the end of the interpretive dialogue, a form which his form will have been organized, ...in a particular way the he could not have foreseen.”<sup>19</sup>

The use of decoding the work, in effect creates a personal or private experience of the work of art that is not complete until the data has been interpreted. Life Sharing, like Mouchette.org creates a discourse that calls into question the boundaries of the public and private space through its use of interaction between the user and the work of art. Both utilize the adaptive mode to question the boundaries of the public and private space of the internet and both works require from the user interaction that creates a discrete experience for the user and effectively completes the work. This interaction is unique to the experience that technology is able to provide through new media art, is dependent

upon technology and effectively creates a meta discourse which problematizes the concept of public and private space.

## PRIVATE/PUBLIC

New media, and specifically net art is particularly suited for questioning the boundaries of the public and private space through modes of interactivity. The human computer interface is one of solitary exploration, but also importantly, an exploration that dictates that the user interacts with a work of art. This unique solitary experience creates for the user a unique work, not unlike Eco's concept of the open work. But utilizing the interactivity of a net art piece, not only opens the work to individual and private experiences with the work, but the users interfacing the public realm via their private computer creates a set of social relations that explore the blurring of what is public and what is private.

Mouchette.org and Life Sharing are two exemplary works of net art that blur the boundaries of the public and private space through their modes of interaction. Both net art projects utilize the *adaptive mode* of interactivity however, Life Sharing exploits *resistant* interactivity in order to facilitate the blurring of the boundaries while Mouchette.org utilizes the idea of *alienation* interactivity. And most importantly, both rely upon the feedback loop created by the exchange of information to explore the relations of the social system that is the boundaries of public and private space have profound effects on the understanding of a work of art. For 0100101110101101.org, the goal of the blurring between the public and private space in net art has profound effects through the interaction with the user. 0100101110101101.org writes,

“We must use an artwork in an unpredictable way, one that the author didn't foresee, to rescue it from its normal routine and re-use it in a different and novel way, otherwise all the paradigms of traditional art will impose themselves again.”<sup>20</sup>

The paradigms of net art then is to rescue the work of art from the normal boundaries of an artwork, and one way to accomplish this is to push on the boundaries of the public and private space through the users interaction with net art. Both Mouchette.org and Life Sharing not only accomplish this goal, but also fully engage in the process of extending the public into the private and the private into the public through interactivity, thereby collapsing the normative social system employed in our perceptions of public and private space on the internet and making the user implicit in the work of art.

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, Caroline A. “The Mediated Sensorium”. Ed. Catharine A. Jones. *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*. MIT press. Cambridge; Massachusetts. 2006. p.6.

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<sup>13</sup> Mouchette.org. “edit.mouchette.org: request new user.” Email to Belinda Haikes. 30 April 2007

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<sup>14</sup> Jones, Caroline A. "The Mediated Sensorium". Ed. Catharine A. Jones. *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*. MIT press. Cambridge; Massachusetts. 2006. p.6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.6

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.6

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