

# ARTISTIC SQUATTING AS A RESPONSE TO SOCIO-POLITICAL CENSORSHIP?

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## ABSTRACT

This is a revision and updating of an artist's statement I wrote in 2009 for the magazine *Nictoglobe* for an issue titled *Friction Research - Investigating Ruptures in the Art-political Grid*. The magazine displayed a series of images online as well as a link to an exhibition titled *Artistic Squatting* that I launched at that time on GoogleMaps. *Artistic Squatting* was part of a series of digital interventions inspired by artistic practices from the 1960s and 1970s and re-proposed some of those artistic approaches in the field of new media art and over the Internet as an expression of online forms of immediate participation and engagement.

My interest was based on the opportunities that new media, in particular online media, were offering to rupture traditional hierarchical structures for the presentation of content within the fine arts. In particular the socio-political engagement that the 'squatting' exercise proposed was perhaps the most inspiring element. I liked the opportunity of creating an artwork and doing an intervention that bypassed the structural forms of 'tailoring' of the artistic production that are traditionally imposed upon the artist. *Artistic Squatting* was at that time - since GoogleMaps technology was not as developed as now and several times I had to re-upload artworks that tended to disappear or be displaced - a form of artistic intervention upon the online space that augmented reality technology has since made more diffuse and more easily implementable.

The reasons for these forms of interventions are diverse and divergent - but a few threads can be identified in the wide range of motivations and goals that underpin various artists' practices. Political ideology, freedom of artistic expression, disruption of hierarchical and economic systems within the fine arts, early adoption of a new technological tool: all of these evidence the clash between differing fundamental ways of perceiving the Internet. It is a tool of display and economic aggregation for some, while for others a place of socio-political engagement and freedom of expression. These contradictions are still unresolved as the Internet plays, through screens small and large, an increasing role in defining people's social lives.

## KEYWORDS

Censorship, squatting, digital media, Internet, online art, intervention, contemporary art, new media

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## AN ARTIST'S STATEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS

In my personal artistic practice I have always been wary when addressing the issue of censorship. Too easy, too problematic, not many people interested in it, too difficult to represent and visualize. The other issue is that artworks that deal with socio-political problems, when challenging pre-established frameworks of fine art behaviors, are automatically ostracized. Too controversial!

The Internet with its grid has proven to be, at least for my own artistic practice, an extremely interesting tool, being both a source of communication and a source of all censorships, offering the opportunity of virtually squatting in public museums or on public buildings.

The possibility of layering personal statements through the web onto the Internet grid allows a new form of interaction that, although personalized, fractures and ruptures the hierarchical structures that decide in real life what it is to be seen and what it is to be restricted. But the most interesting part of the censorship issue is not that it may or may not happen, but the modalities in which censorship is exercised. To be precise what is most scary to me is the 'who'. Who takes the decision to censor an artwork, a piece of literature or a political statement? And what criteria, if any, has this person followed? Is there a methodological procedure in order to exercise censorship?

*Artistic Squatting* was the 'object' of a temporary censorship and frozen activity for a few months in the summer of 2008, while it was decided what dangers it constituted for Google itself and

for the museum that I was squatting on. The whole event showed a lack of understanding of what the Internet can allow and what is not legally permissible. Something that may not be possible in real life is instead possible in a virtual environment. More importantly the attempt to freeze the squatting activity and the methods through which it was implemented showed the contemporary disregard for what should be considered fundamental rights: that of freely expressing an opinion as allowed in new media frameworks as well as not being obliged to interact with the grid within pre-established limits based on pre-new media approaches.

Increasingly, freedom of speech and the issue of censorship appear to be considered a marginal right in the case of the former and a venial sin in the case of the latter. The political engagement between the censored and the censor disappears and on the Internet the possibility of reacting without a political debate or consultation of the parties involved is shown through the *fait accompli* of the act of censorship, a method that has become increasingly common. The fact that there could be a political debate that may in some cases revert the censorship has little bearing on the wide spread issue of censorship.

The reality is that the Internet with its server technology has done away with the possibility of reaching a decision on the matter of censorship through a socio-political dialogue and interaction between opposing parties. The political discourse had disappeared and what the Internet community is left with is the *fait accompli* of multiple censorships decided by unskilled workers and shadowy committees who are not held liable for their actions.

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## BIOGRAPHY

**Lanfranco Aceti** works as an academic, artist and curator. He is Visiting Professor at Goldsmiths College, department of Art and Computing, London; teaches Contemporary Art and Digital Culture at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sabanci University, Istanbul; and is Editor in Chief of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac (the MIT Press, Leonardo journal and ISAST). He is the Gallery Director at Kasa Gallery in Istanbul and worked as the Artistic Director and Conference Chair for ISEA2011 Istanbul. He has a Ph.D. from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London. His work has been published in Leonardo, Routledge and Art Inquiry and his interdisciplinary research focuses on the intersection between digital arts, visual culture and new media technologies.

Lanfranco Aceti is specialized in contemporary art, inter-semiotic translations between classic media and new media, contemporary digital hybridization processes, Avant-garde film and new media studies and their practice-based applications in the field of fine arts.

He has worked as an Honorary Lecturer at the Department of Computer Science, Virtual Reality Environments at University College London. He has exhibited works at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London and done digital interventions at TATE Modern, The Venice Biennale, MoMA, Neue Nationalgalerie, the ICA and the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

Previously an Honorary Research Fellow at the Slade School of Fine Art, Dr. Aceti has also worked as an AHRC Post-doctoral Research Fellow at Birkbeck College, University of London, School of History of Art, Film & Visual Media and as Visiting Research Fellow at the Victoria and Albert Museum.