PRACTICES IN CONTEXT

WHERE IS E-LIT IN RULINET?

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Rulinet, Russian Literary Internet.

Almost two decades of Russian literary Internet (Rulinet) evoke observations about the directions it is taking and the communities shaping it. Runet (Russian language Internet) started as a literary phenomenon in the early 1990's (Gorny 2007) with Dmitry Manin's *Bout Rimes* and Roman Leibov's *ROMAN* (Novel), *Zhurnal.ru, Moshkov Library*. The initial reason for this was technical – a low bandwidth internet meant it was necessary to engage audiences through textual means. A secondary reason was the emergence of Runet at a particular point in Russian history (according to different sources, simultaneously, or following, the collapse of the USSR) and in a particular Russian cultural context of lite-raturecentrism. Traditionally, Russian literature embraced the realm of social critique and thus served the function of the public sphere, reduced significantly under regime's censorship. Digital freedom of speech led to the emergence of a 'samizdat' conception of Runet, as an alternative to the official 'print' establishment (Gorny 2006).

Historically, the Russian Internet followed the 'thick literary maga-zine' (such as *Novy Mir, Zvezda* or *Druzhba Narodov*) and video salon culture of the 1980s and early 1990s, at the time of 'perestroika' and 'glasnost'. The Internet in Russia began with *Glasnet* (Glasnost Network), a US-based non-commercial orga-nization providing teachers, human rights activists, scholars, ecologists and other guarantors of the open society with access to the web. Since a lot of underground, unofficial and 'Western' writing was censored in the USSR this was a breath of fresh, unfiltered air.

Thus the metaphor of *samizdat*, a practice of 'unprofessional' publishing, using carbon paper and a typewriter, was projected onto an understanding of the Internet. However, grassroots and anarchic this may seem, samizdat had its own hierarchy and lite-rary prizes. The Internet brought about an easy and cheap means of spreading such writing. Its openness and the lack of selective mechanisms generated a lot of criticism from the professional literary community during the late 1990's. A factor influencing this was that the pioneers of Internet publishing were computer scientists, often mistrusted in the humanities as unauthorised to handle literature.

Dmitry Kuzmin, founder of the Vavilon literary portal (Kuzmin 1997) and an apologist for 'professional literature', states that non-hierarchical independent space is 'a harmful utopia' (Kuzmin 2000). In the 1990s professional literary scholars such as Dmitry Kuzmin and Sergey Kostyrko were also infamous for their belief in a 'non-differential tonus' of net and paper literature, while critics and writers such as Genis and Alexandre Romadanov (Alexroma) insisted on the existence of 'neterature' as a specific phenome-non. The Kuzmin's critique is both grounded and not grounded at the same time. These literary contests on the Internet appeared five years after its introduction in Russia in 1990 (Gorny 2007) and well before its widespread use in 2000's. The oldest and the most influential of them was *Teneta*, organized by Leonid Delitsin (a geography major student) and Alexey Andreev (a math major student) in 1996. Both studied in the US at that time, with the aim to structure literary work published on the web.

Secondarily, the metaphor of the noosphere, the space for ideas, was also very influential in the course of the early development of Rulinet. Dan Dorfman states that an uncensored virtual reality has always been the dream of Russian literature. This utopian notion of the ideal virtual space is close to conceptions of sobor-nost (ecumenism) of Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900), who was dreaming of an all-encompassing unity of humankind under the *aegis* of one church; this was supposed to evoke emancipation from a material world subject to the destructive effects of time and space. The cyberpunk ideal of transformation of matter into the energy of thought and spirit is reflected in the theories of Russian biologist and geologist Vladimir Vernadsky (1863-1945) who was developing the concept of a gradual transition from the material world (biosphere) to an ideal, nonmaterial sphere (noosphere), at the beginning of the twentieth century (Schmidt 2001).

Vladimir Vernadsky's and Vladimir Soloviev's theories and orientation on the written word, in the forums and guestbooks of the free discussion spaces in the early Rulinet, gave rise to a number of highly literal virtual characters, or 'virtuals' (Gorny 2007). Unlike the Western analogue of virtual personas, often subject to role-play, the properties of Russian virtuals can be best compared with literary characters. The first of these was the legen-dary *first pensioner internet surfer May Ivanovich Mukhin* (crea-ted by Roman Leibov). Since the Virtual Character was one of the Art-Teneta nomination categories, Leonid Delytsin carefully collected all the posts of the *virtual lover Lilia Frik* (an allusion to poet Vladimir Mayakovsky's life-long *femme fatale* lover Lilia Brik) in order to present her for the contest in this category (Gorny 2007). Virtuals also played the role of a writer's nickname, such as *Mary Shelly* by Alexey Andreev and Victor Stepnoy, prominent authors of the Web, a novel describing early Runet and its inha-bitants, *Allergen the Cat*, poet and essayist, *Leonid Stomakarov* by Leonid Delitsin himself.

What is not Russian electronic literature?

It is not easy to find Russian electronic literature in the contem-porary Runet.

As mentioned above, one of the first projects marking the begin-ning of Runet was *Moshkov Library*, where a collection of classi-cal and contemporary literature is available for free. Commercial digital publishing portals like *Litres*, *Bookmate* and *Imobilka* struggle to sell literary works to a community where people are familiar with having free digital content and do not contribute to the creative potential of the computer as a medium.

Under the title of Netpoets (2002) there exists a rather classical, but not belonging to the official printed literature union, group of poets. Under the name of 'electronic literature' the portal Virtual Reading publishes traditional prose. Also, the popularity of Stihi.ru and a number of similar self-publishing platforms, illustrates that self-expression, or samizdat, remains popular in Rulinet. Such work is understood as not being innovative and experimental, but rather as in opposition to the official literary establishment, dupli-cating it in a new domain.

What is Russian electronic literature?

In Russia the spread of personal computers coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and spread of Internet technology. Thus the notion of electronic literature is oriented towards a notion of network literature, 'neterature', and discussion of the virtual space of the Internet.

The term 'electronic literature' itself wasn't brought into play in Russian discourse to designate a digitally born work of lite-rary art for reading on the computer screen until 2011, when it was symbolicallly first used by Mikhail Vizel in his review of N. Katherine Hayles's book *Electronic Literature: New Horizons of the Literary*. Enrika Schmidt applies the term 'digital literature', opposed to 'digitized' (Schmidt 2006), which treats the computer as a type of archive. 'Neterature' or 'cyberature' (Riabov 2001) are used by the Net Literature portal community (Vizel 2011).

Leonid Tyraspolsky and Vladimir Novikov, in *Aesthetics of the Internet* (Tiraslolsky & Novikov 2001), and Henrike Schmidt in *Literal Immobility* (Schmidt 2006), stress the material quality of the digital media, allowing it to realise literary tropes. The essen-tial qualities for a work to be considered a piece of neterature are summarized by Gennady Riabov, in *Net – or – rature?* (Riabov 2001), as:

1.   Creative nature

2.   Use of 'letters' [буковки] as the key means of expression
       (as in Gerdiaev's *Drama in the Forest* (Gerdiaev 2001)

3.   Use of hyperlinks

4.   Dynamic nature

5.   Use of multimedia

6.   Number of authors

7.   Transparency of the authors

8.   Author reader interaction.

Cyberature, part of the Net Literature portal, embraces the selection of Teneta award-winning works and continues to pub-lish e-lit, although less vigorously. Since the Teneta archive is no longer available online, Cyberatura provides the best selec-tion of Russian e-lit from 1998 to 2008. The genres represented include:

•   hypertext, *Waste Land* (1999) by Julia Morozova, Shatters
      (2000) and Voyage X (2000) by Vladimir Tatarintsev;

•   hyper media, *In the Subway (and Outside)* (2001) by Sergey
      Vlasov and Georgy Gerdiaev, *F.M.DostoevskyIDIOT* (2001)
      and *Starfall* (2000) by Alexroma; networked art, *Boutes
      Rimes* (1995) and *Garden of Forking Hokkus* (1997) by
      Dmitry Manin;

•   flash poetry, *Drama in the Forest* (2001) and *The City*
      (2008) by Georgy Gerdiaev, *Signs* (2006) by Ivan Levenko,
      Sonets (2004) by Igor Loschilov and Georgy Gerdiaev;

•   poetry generator, *Cyber Pushkin* (2002) by Sergeij Teterin
      and *scholarly essay generator Robot Datzuk* (1997);

•   poetry shooter, *Sharp-set Angels* (2003) and *Poetry Puzzle*
      (2000) by Alexroma; PowerPoint poem, *The Till* (2003) by
      Maxim Borodin.

When did Russian electronic literature appear and what happened next?

The Teneta (Teneta 1994) literary contest marked the begin-ning of the Russian e-lit community. Apart from poetry, prose and translation, it included nominations in Hyperliterature, the creative arts, and games. Teneta positioned itself as a 'pure Internet contest'. The best texts, published first on the Internet, were to be nominated. This was intended to guarantee the qua-lity of the literary works. Teneta was known for a wide spec-trum of work, as exemplified by the variety of communities the nominators, such as Artemy Troitsky, Anton Nosik and Alexey Andreev, belonged to.

In 1997 Teneta merged with Art-Peterburg and became Art-Teneta, which allowed it to attract such celebrated writers as Boris Strugatsky, Alexandre Kushner, Alexandre Zhitnitsky, Victor Krivulin and Sergey Kuznetsov. However, respectable and established writers didn't tend to have basic computer skills and the web published works had to be printed out for them. As Petrov also points out, in Literary Contests in Russian Internet (Petrov 2002), Teneta had a flawed judging system. Since Teneta failed to attract funding and the judges were working in their free time it came to an end in 2002 with the optimistic justi-fication 'due to the enormous amount of works'.

The years 2002-2004 can be characterised by the commerciali-sation of the web; this didn't lead to the development of inno-vative Teneta ideas. Computational experiments, like language generators, are used for utilitarian functions like congratulations and insult word generators or Poet's Helper, finding the neces-sary rhymes and rhythms, or as found in the Yandex Pushkin Poetry Generator (Pushkin Poetry Generator 2006), celebra-ting the birth date of the poet. *Cyber Pushkin* (Teterin 2002), by Sergeij Teterin, nominated for Teneta 2002, processed the poetry of various authors to produce rather unusual non-sense output.

Where is electronic literature now?

Currently, the Russian portal Net Literature and German Russian Cyberspace (Russian Cyberspace 2012) are the two main sources where electronic literature (cyberature) in Russian, and critical writing about it, can be found.

The development of Russian Interactive Fiction (IF) was delayed by the linguistic difficulties of adapting the parser's employed in such works. Currently, the IF community seems to be the most vibrant in Russian e-lit. It was in early 1998 when the first Russian Language menu-based interactive fiction platform Universal RipSoft Quest (URQ) was developed by Timofey Basanov (a.k.a. RipOs) and Viktor Koryanov for Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) games. Since Russian is an inflective language the design of parser-based platforms appeared to be a more challenging task. However, this was successfully underta-ken by Andrey Grankin (Grankin 2002) who, after several failed attempts at translating Inform, finally designed RTADS. Rinform was developed during the years 2003-2005 by Dmitry Gayev (Gayev 2005). Eighteen IF contests have been more or less active since 2002. At the moment three of them are the most important: Golden Hamster (Golden Hamster 2009), an ana-logue of XYZZY Awards, Mini IF Competition, and QSP-Compo 2012: Mamonth Within (QSP 2012), annual QSP(Quest Soft Player, a menu-based platform developed by Valery Argunov) platform game competition.

Meanwhile, by 2004, the development of Russian media art led to mediashift and a number of festivals in Riga, Perm, Kransojarsk, Mosow and St-Petersburg have taken place over the last decade. Portals like Asia Nemchenok's blog Videopoezija (Nemchenok 2012), SELF-ID (SELF-ID 2012), and Videopoezija.ru (Videopoezija 2012) have also been established. There have also appeared a number of creative groups, like the Laboratory of Poetic Actionism (Laboratory of Poetic Actionism 2012) , Machine Libertine (Machine Libertine 2012), Zlystra and Pupstrip (Zlystra and Pupstrip 2012), amongst others.

Currently, two important e-lit communities can be located on the web: 'neterature' and IF. Since Teneta, the first Internet literature contest was closed, its inheritor Net Literature has not been as dynamic, while IF, on the contrary, started gaining authority since the millennium.

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THINKING IN NETWORKS: WESTERN/NON-WESTERN INTERACTION

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The article discusses artists' practices that in aesthetical-technical ways intervene into computer networked environments. I am interested in Japanese media artists who, in interactive installations, rethink the use of technology that we encounter in the industrially-culturally compressed spaces of the metropoles, like Tokyo. These technologically saturated spaces have created super-density as a new cultural form of the present. The focus of my discussion is on artists' interventions in networks that in different ways make us aware of the possibilities for approaching and reflecting upon our behaviour in such media-cultural and ubiquitous mediascapes.

I will briefly outline the interwoven systems of communication, transport and information as they represent and remediate daily social interaction in Japan. I use the example of the Japanese art-architectural group 'doubleNegatives Architecture' to give an example of a creative response that considers networks as a different social model. Further, the installation works by Seiko Mikami are considered as a response to the quotidian experience of high density living and consequent lack of individual space. In her interactive installations we are targeted by programmed sensors and robotic devices, which invite us to engage in close encounter with the measuring and moving systems of the installation. In this human-machine-interrelationship, we will also achieve a sense of each other via a technological environment that becomes a perceptual space that makes us aware of social interrelationships.

Mediascapes in Japan

Media development in Japan initially derives from a close working context between technical-scientific research laboratories, the computer industry, education and research in the disciplines of information science, design, art and architecture. From an external perspective, it can be regarded as pioneering new connections between digital media art, national research laboratories and the computer industry. By international comparison, the engagement with computer media in Japan is characterized by the collaboration of developers, engineers, and artists, whereby media artists often have training in computer science and information theory.

Innovative experiments with interactive-virtual applications which use, among other things, components with LEDs, robots, GPS, digital video, sensors and command systems from the commercial-industrial and military sectors, originate in a Japanese cultural space, the everyday life of which is intensely permeated by these sorts of technologies. The above-named components are indeed, in themselves, present in the media sector around the world. However, Japan plays a leading role so far as the density of implementing these technologies in public and private space is concerned. In Japan, engineering and computer science have created a new way of dealing with technology in the everyday world. Overall, we can recognise a medial setting, which is strongly determined by the use of technology in public life. This ranges from life-size screens for video projecting animation, music, and advertising clips, with competing sound levels and an intensive network of digital signs with acoustic signals in public space, to private and muted use of personally configured mobile

technologies employed for computer games, the exchange of emails and internet communication on the street, as well as in traffic and transport systems. Precisely for that reason, the use of cell phones is felt to be disturbing in the constricted spaces of the underground and in the regional and Shinkansen high-speed trains and accordingly avoided. Communication is mostly via silent texting.

The particular nature of such connections in Japan occur in the narrowest of spaces and in high concentration. The super-density of communications, transport and information in the space of the metropoles, like Tokyo, creates the limits of the temporal-spatial compression, creating a new cultural model. Tokyo's super-density is an example of this cultural form:

> What seems at first as an extreme version of a city, successively reveals itself as the opposite, as not-city. In the end, there is the realization that, if super-density is to function at all, then only if it throws off anything supposedly urban, becoming a pure state of intensity, as we otherwise only know it from art, music, media.' (Koelbl 2000: 56).

Even if urban public space in shopping centers and transport systems is mostly an expression of an enterprise culture, saturated with densely packed vertical arrays of audiovisual information on LED screens ranged above and alongside each other, this super-dense electronic cultural space does allow other aspects of a culturally located understanding of aesthetics. This enterprise culture has similarly established itself in other Asian metropoles and at the same times allows an expression of the perceptual-bodily encounter with the real of the technology and its networks.

In this respect, the installation works of Seiko Mikami respond to the quotidian experience of high density living and the consequent lack of individual space. In her interactive installation *Desire of Codes* we are targeted by programmed sensors and robotic devices, which invite us to engage in a close encounter with the measuring and moving systems of the installation. In this human-machine-interrelationship, which is set out for multiple participants, we also achieve a sense of each other via the technology. The technological environment becomes a perceptual space, which instigates awareness and self-awareness, wherein individual position and behaviour is experienced in response to digital codes which are responsive to us.

Another example of creative invention and intervention in the technological environment is the work of Euro-Japanese art and architecture group doubleNegatives Architecture. They use automatic and self-modifying systems as a model to engage us, the participants, to closely investigate and rethink how handy technologies and complex military and political surveillance and control structures interact. This is evident, in particular, when the art group investigates self-organising mesh network devices that were initially designed for warfare. I propose to regard the open work structure of the architecture group as a way to initiate thinking about the purpose and mechanisms of connectedness and connectivity that have developed distinctly in Western and Asian cultures.

Western/Asian connections

The presence of technically elaborate works and applications from Japan has become noticeable at media and computer festivals around the globe, which have arisen parallel to technological development. But even when Japanese examples do