Never Ready
Meg Miller

At the beginning of June, international web designers met at the HFBK Hamburg to talk about the visuality of the Internet and to discuss experimental forms of design. And despite all justified criticism: The Internet is not dead!

"A website is never ready, it is subject to constant change," Konrad Renner (Professor of Digitale Grafik) said in his opening words in HFBK's Aula auditorium in early June. "Change, wanted or not wanted, is a substantial part of working with websites. It's intrinsic, deeply embedded in the DNA of the medium."

So began the aptly named "Never Ready" conference, organized by the Klasse Digitale Grafik, taught by Konrad Renner along with Christoph Knoth. Over the course of three days, with 12 presenters, 7 flat screen monitors, a packed room, and a lively and open dialog facilitated by the student organizers, websites were discussed, displayed, danced with, and documented by phone cameras and notes apps. The web was examined at different scales – from lines of code to small experiments and gestures to phone screens to browsers to the lifespan of a website and the career of a web designer. At their most zoomed out, the conference discussions swept across the history of the internet, and wondered about its future. If one "web year" is about three months, as Tim Berners-Lee suggested decades ago, then the history of the World Wide Web that he invented in 1989 contains far beyond just the 33 (offline) years. One constant in all that time is that the web changes, and fast.

How, then, should we approach this medium in constant flux – as web designers, developers, artists, theorists, and users? What is web design today, at a time when a handful of global companies control large swaths of the digital landscape, and when apps and social media capture much of our attention? How will artificial intelligence and web3 change things in the future? And is it nostalgic to look back on an older web? Is preserving it even possible?

1 Olia Lialina, "A Vernacular Web" art.teleportacia.org. January 2005. http://art.teleportacia.org/observation/vernacular/

← Lecture by Vera van de Seyp; photo: Marco Wesche
↑ Lauel Schwulst is broadcasted live from outside during her talk; photo: Marco Wesche

The conference speakers ranged from people who have been making websites for decades to those who are newer to it, though, on the whole, they skewed younger. There was a range of perspectives on these questions, and a few prominent threads of thought emerging throughout.

"It's not nostalgia, it's resistance"

In her talk, internet artist and theorist Olia Lialina laid out a "history of the WWW," but cautioned that it's difficult to write this history since the past is always defined "in relation to now." Web 1.0, for example, was not named as such until Web 2.0 was already coined, and people disillusioned by the present state of things became re-interested in the "old web." Lialina suggested thinking about the history of the web not in epochs but rather in trajectories. Hers were:

Web designer ––> front-end developer
Making a website for your dog ––> reposting someone's cat
Linking ––> search engines ––> linktree
My ––> me
Under construction ––> update ––> upload ––> u

The last trajectory traces a timeline from the first webpages, which were "bright, rich, personal, slow, and under construction,"[1] and built by individuals (everyone was an amateur) before the dot.com boom professionalized the web. Then there was the phase which saw those same websites going down because the people behind them couldn't update them fast enough, to the pressure of peers or technological changes. Then "upload:" CVs uploaded to professionalized websites, photos uploaded to apps – the phase that introduced the concept of individuals providing the content, while more websites were being owned and designed by companies. And finally to "u," when individuals became the product, and our own personas, work, feelings, reactions, and above all attention, became the main preoccupations for which websites were designed. This trajectory also dovetails with Lialina's "my ––> me" trajectory, which describes a shift from the possessive "my" – a website was "my world," my construction – to "me" as the product. Which is also to say, a loss of agency and control.

Of course, Lialina's trajectories work in broad strokes, describing the population at large. There are ways to resist that shift, and those who were speaking at the conference actively do. Web designer and educator Harald Peter Ström gave a talk in which he concluded that he was still ("or maybe again?") making websites the same as he did 25 years ago: with HTML, CSS, and some basic JS. He has indexed and archived[2] all of his websites from 1995–2002, many of which are only half working at this point. That led Ström to start Preserving Design[3], an artistic research project on the preservation of digital design, still in its early stages. The project prompted questions like, Should websites be saved forever? And who should preserve them? Should we archive just the browser or also the code? – questions that echoed throughout the rest of the conference. Several other presenters showed archival projects, Lialina encouraged everyone to use web recorders to preserve their own and others' work, and artist, writer, and educator Laurel Schwulst advised web designers to take screenshots of their own work, but to also not get too emotionally attached – it's just the nature of the web that things are always changing.

Questions of whose web was being archived and whose history was being written were also raised. ("To archive presupposes an archivist, a hand that collects and classifies," as Arlette Farge has written.[4]) Some of the bigger efforts to archive the internet from the U.S. tend to prioritize American websites, to the exclusion of other countries. Computational designer Laiqa Mohid, in her talk, also pointed out the differences in the trajectories of the internet in the West – where "the web was meant to be about connections but turned into a commodity" – and in the East, for example, in India, where many first learned about the internet through Whatsapp (already a commodity). Relatedly, artist, designer, and educator Sebastian Schmieg noted that only about one-third of the global population has access to the internet, a problem being addressed by companies like Facebook and Google. In his project How to Appear Offline Forever[5], Schmieg gathered the oral stories of people from people from Zambia (the country in which Facebook's Internet.org premiered), Sri Lanka (the first country that will utilize Google's swarm of balloons), and Silicon Valley (the de-facto epicenter of our digital lives)," in order to explore questions of visibility, labor, and colonialism in a networked world. These mentions, however brief, that added perspective and texture to the history of the internet felt essential for a conference that began with the student organizers naming their intention to "create the context for a dialogue from diverse perspectives of the design world."

At a time when the web is being "designed to be fit into so-called 'digital' society, a global network of virtual projects, companies, and a few gatekeepers," as Renner put it, it's necessary to look back and preserve the work and ideas of an older web, as well as to complicate that history, as some pointed out. There's also the question of nostalgia – when does looking back become regressionist or comparing today's web to the past become nostalgic, given the potential of new and constantly evolving technology? To this point, Lialina didn't flinch: "It's not nostalgia, it's resistance."

"Standardization happens — we're just not interested in it"

Resistance, or a kind of "positive friction," as digital art director Kim Boutin termed it, came up again and again throughout the three days of talks. The web today, when compared to the past, is designed to be seamless, to recede quietly in the background, to allow for smooth transactions and interactions, to be templated, scripted, and constructed by someone else. But there are also ways to interrupt this seamlessness, and there are designers and artists who are building "websites where [you] can feel a connection to the people who made it," as Sebastian Schmieg put it. Web artist and designer Yehwan Song put a finer point on it, presenting a concept she termed "anti-friendly design," which guides some of her work. "User friendly…predefines 'user' and simplifies user behavior," she said. "There are so many people on Earth, and they have their own behavior – when you simplify, the user is then forced to follow that behavior." Similarly, Kim Boutin, who runs the studio DVTK along with David Broner talked about

being "against" utilitarian design – or the way that templates, responsive design, app store requirements, and data-based user-friendly design shapes the way the web looks and functions. Instead, DVTK is more interested in "design that provokes."

Laiqa Mohid spoke on similar themes, terming her practice of resistance "serendipitous design." Inspired by navigating space in India, where she noted that oral directions from someone on the street might draw on colors, smells, signs, and familiar sights as guideposts ("sensorial directions"), Mohid became interested in the idea of "walking the web," and of designing interventions that allowed for one to get lost. "Serendipity" in this sense, means to make something "that does the opposite of its intended purpose" – more meandering than mindlessly following (invisible) instructions.

Laurel Schwulst, whose talk took the mural in the Aula auditorium as a point of departure, spoke similarly of the colors, links, and relationships that knit the web together. "Surfing is harder now that we spend so much time searching," she said at the beginning of her presentation. Throughout her talk, which dug into her own and others' color choices and looked into the culture and history of color on the internet, Schwulst showed how thoughtfulness toward even minute design decisions can open up a world of opportunities for a more poetic, personal, and creative web.

Another way of resisting a bland, utilitarian web took the form of adaptive reuse: both visual artist and designer Kexin Hao and designer and educator Marco Land showed projects that reused images and graphics that already existed online in new ways. Hao called these materials "internet leftovers" and positioned her prac-

2 https://skale.peter.stream/
3 https://preservingdesign.haraldpeter.se/
4 Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*. 1989. https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300198935/the-allure-of-the-archives/
5 http://howtoappearofflineforever.online/

↑ Lecture by Kim Boutin (DVTK); photo: Marco Wesche


single serving site =
essence of the web?
1) idea
2) design
3)

tice as a kind of performance working with the internet as co-designer. For Land, these ideas of reuse came out of thinking about attribution and originality on the web, where images get shared, reposted, and repurposed, many times becoming completely decontextualized from their original source.
In Sebastian Schmieg's talk, he noted how "Google took the web, broke it apart, and sold it back to the people who built it," as the web went from "my —–> me" on Lialina's trajectory. All of the works presented at the conference can be seen as a kind of refusal to accept what's being handed back to us, and instead construct the spaces we want to see ourselves. While Boutin noted that in some ways utilitarian design makes websites more accessible or available to more people, and that can be a positive, it also doesn't make the refusal from web designers less necessary. "Standardization happens – we're just not interested in it," she said about DVTK, before adding, "We know AI is after our jobs anyways …"

"What shape can the web have? What kind of energy can be caught with it?"
Amid discussions of web design that goes against the status quo – that maintains the creativity, experimentation, and ownership of an older web, but applies new tools, technology, and thinking in an effort to push it further – artificial intelligence and web3 came up intermittently. At one point, OpenAI's DALL-E, which creates images from text descriptions, was summoned by Christoph Knoth to show the future of web design. Harald Peter Ström, who describes himself as a "slow learner and intrigued skeptic on all things web3," noted that it's a positive that web3 has renewed an enthusiasm about the web. Marco Land showed his NFT of a scanned office chair he was selling on ebay kleinanzeigen – so far, no takers.
It wasn't until Sebastian Schmieg, who spoke last, took the stage that the topic of web3 was met head on. Schmieg started out with a brief history of the web and the way it became centralized through a handful of global companies. He examined web3 as a promise of digital decentralization, taking us through his own experiment with creating NFTs. In the end, he said he didn't make any money from the project because the smart contract he got from the internet didn't stipulate a way to withdraw money. "It was stuck on the blockchain, and with the blockchain, there was no one to 'call,'" he said, leading him to conclude that he would rather have a "web of people." But Schmieg sees potential in web3 and room for people to shape this burgeoning landscape in the way they want. He reworked the term "decentralization" to become "decentered" – extending Lialina's "my —–> me" trajectory into a proposed new direction. "If the community is healthy, I'm healthy – it shouldn't be centered on 'u'," he said, also evoking idea of collectivity and redistribution. "We should own DALL-E," he said. "Maybe these images didn't exist before but they are made from the energy we put into the web."
Accessibility was the other major topic that came up throughout the conference in regards to the future of web design. When asked what he thought the future of web design would be, Marco Land said, in part, "simple and accessible," noting that web accessibility is a big discussion within many web designer communities.

← Charging station and resting installation in the entrance hall of the HFBK Hamburg, conceived and realized by the students of the Klasse Digitale Grafik; photo: Tim Albrecht
← Lecture by Harald Peter Ström; photo: Marco Wesche

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) defines web accessibility as "websites, tools, and technologies [that] are designed and developed so that people with disabilities can… perceive, understand, navigate, interact" and contribute to the web. Laurel Schwulst, when asked what she recognizes as important for making websites accessible, said above all that working with disabled designers and hiring disabled users as consultants was key.

One question that was proposed and remains is how design that resists user friendly UI and simple functionality can also incorporate accessibility. Another was how and what to preserve when it comes to web design, and whose responsibility it is to do it. And the future, of course, is an open question – whether web3 and artificial intelligence are good or bad for web design, whether a web designer's energy is better spent looking back or forward. To the latter question, this conference demonstrated what it might look like to do both. It also showed that approaching and building the web with thoughtfulness, creativity, intimacy, and resistance to the status quo is a collective effort, and undoubtedly necessary for a future in which the web is shaped by people and not commerce.

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"Never Ready: A Congress on the Visuality of the Internet"
Speakers: Kim Boutin; DVTK (GB/FR), Kexin Hao (NL), Marco Land (DE), Olia Lialina (DE), Laiqa Mohid (GB), Sebastian Schmieg (DE), Laurel Schwulst (US), Vera van de Seyp (NL), Harald Peter Ström (SE), Yehwan Song (KR) and Liebermann Kiepe Reddemann (DE)
Team: Prof. Christoph Knoth, Prof. Konrad Renner together with Moritz Ebeling, Stina Frenz, Wiebke Grieshop, Kim Kleinert, Karla Krey, Tigran Saakyan, Torben Spieker, Stephan Thiel, Leoni Voltz, Yulia Wagner (Klasse Digitale Grafik)
June 9 – 11, 2022, HFBK Hamburg

↑ Panel discussion with Christoph Knoth, Yehwan Song, Kim Boutin, Marco Land (from left); photo: Marco Wesche
→ Michaela Ott im Gespräch mit Souleymane Bachir Diagne bei der Konferenz *Situated in Translation* in der HFBK Hamburg, 2017, photo: imke Sommer