Alessandro Ludovico interviewed by Marialaura Ghidini
July 2013

Alessandro Ludovico, chief editor of the 'historic' Neural magazine (1993-), and myself talked on Skype, from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK, to Bari, Italy, after a face-to-face meeting at ISEA2013 in Sidney, Australia, in June 2013. We discussed publishing and how artists have explored it through unsing network and computational processes. Starting from Ludovico's work as an editor, we talked about how this role is changing in relation to technological developments, its hybridity and relationships with curating and exhibition making

Marialaura Ghidini: In my opinion you are an editor, a journalist, an artist, a researcher, an entrepreneur, an activist and a curator. Could all these roles be encapsulated in one definition in the context of contemporary art production? Do you think that this multifaceted approach of yours is connected to your work with technology, with new media?

Alessandro Ludovico: I don't know if I can qualify for all of them. I think I am an editor. I know I can write a text very easily; I can "write my socks off", so journalist fits. Researcher? Yes, my main passion is to connect concepts and facts, and research them both in the past and in the present. Artist? A more difficult title. Even though I can't deny I am, I have always stressed that I don't feel I am, strictly speaking, an artist. I have made artworks collaboratively, in group, maintaining my role as the writer or the theorist of the group. Entrepreneur? I am not, or if I were an entrepreneur I would be a totally failed one! [Laughter] Activist? Through art. Curator? It's a stolen title — I didn't start as a curator. It is something I have done, but together with other things.
Is there a single definition that embodies all of this? I am not sure there is, because there are so many fields of culture that cannot just be summarised in a single title. Actually, I think this also reflects a contemporary problem, which is the need to engage with so many different fields at once. That said, I am still one of those people who strongly believes you shouldn't be — as the British say — a "jack of all trades, master of none". You should really focus on something, on the things you are passionate about; those you feel you do better. So, I usually define myself as a writer. This is the only thing I feel comfortable with. Even if there are some stolen titles that I play with, a definition that could be used [to define my work] is networker. It is kind of a lousy definition, especially if you consider the Italian concept of networker, which is used to indicate someone who cheats everybody. But the real networker is a person who is able to connect people, concepts, and situations — to connect other people without being part of the deal. In this sense I really feel that I am a networker, and I use my network to nurture other people's networks and connections, to facilitate whatever situation I believe is worth contributing to. So this could be the answer in a word.
You are also asking...

MG: ... if this might be connected to the fact that you work within the field of new media?

AL: On the one hand, the answer would be a straight "Yes". Being able to do all the work I have done in the past 20 years or so, from a city in the South East of Italy, Bari — which is not the centre of the world when it comes to new media or contemporary art (even though there are some remarkable examples here) — is living proof that with networks you can live and work anywhere. The networking possibilities that you have using a network makes you independent from where you are, and this can be tested in many fields. On the other hand, I believe we shouldn't fetishize the network at all, because there has been a kind of danger in what we could call the post-heroic net art period: the period in which the network is seen as something that can solve anything, the panacea for any problem or any limitation, or as the extension of your intelligence that can make wonders. This is true only to a certain, limited extent. I'd say that I strongly believe in networks which are not only digital, and I am always fascinated by the fact that for so many processes, digital ones and especially networked ones, you can sketch the same process without the network. So for me the network is more a cultural concept than a technological one.

MG: When you talk about post-digital printing you refer to two concepts I find fundamental when discussing artistic production online, a type of production that has now moved towards modes of production and distribution across the online and offline. The two concepts that you mention are hybridity and processual objects. Can you tell me more about this? I have been looking at hybridity in relation to contemporary artistic production and gallery display; can you give me some examples taken from your personal experience/research within the field of publishing?

AL: The starting point for me — even though I had thought about this before — was when I started my current main research into the relationship between online and offline publishing. There were quite a few questions that needed to be asked. The first one, the main one, was: why is online print only happening now? Why did Napster happen in early 2000 and the boom— if there is a boom — of e-books is happening only 10 years later? Why did YouTube happen in the second half of 2000 and online print now? One of the reasons I think I have found is that print is very strongly rooted in the physical object: it is completely physical and at the same time it is the oldest interface for cultural objects we have had, dating back 500 years. There is a saying that defines print as the perfect interface; in fact, you instinctively know how to deal with a book, but not necessarily how to deal with a record or a video. So, for books and magazines, for print in general, this question of the digital and physical is even more prominent than with other media, and this relationship emerged as a crucial one in my research. Historically, this question entails tracking back how the physical interface evolved and how the digital one emerged, then finding when they juxtaposed, crisscrossed, or merged, even partially. At the end of this, the need is to look at what is going on right now, or even better to look at what could happen more than what will happen. And rather than predict, this need is more about trying to imagine the future, to realise it and implement it. In the case of print, scattered sites and experiments made by printing content that had previously been processed have emerged in the last few years. So I started to wonder: "This could be what could happen which did not happen before. There is no historical moment in

which technology would have generated something like this before".

MG: What are the instances that you just mentioned?

AL: Historically speaking, these instances are more conceptual than practical. Take the Dada poems, for example: Tristan Tzara explained how to generate a poem by taking a copy of *The New York Times*, cutting an article and all the words and then recomposing them where you want, which in effect is a purely generative process. There are many other historical examples, like Raymond Queneau with all his experiments in literature, especially the ones with the Oulipo [*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*] movement. The *Cent mille milliards* set of poems is a book in which the poems are cut in to strips, so you can read any strip of any poem in a kind of combinatory way; potentially you have millions of different poems. Again this is generated from physical things. In these instances, there were already, embryonically, the concepts I mentioned [hybridity and processual objects] but they were not fully realised. Now, what we have are extended networks, and behind these networks there are the huge computational powers of machines — in fact, although we tend to see those machines more and more as purely communicational structures, we are forgetting that they have incredible computational powers. It is interesting that [via these networks] we can elaborate the content and not just distribute it. In the print world, the debate is always about: "We have print things which are expensive to print and to distribute, but if we go digital we don't have printing and distribution costs". That's the general main argument, but there is one point that is completely missed here, in my opinion: the network is not only an infrastructure for distribution it is also made by computers, which can calculate digital information to accomplish this distribution. These calculations, this processuality of contents, can affect the production itself. If you connect them with very obvious network references, such as the spatial locations and where the content is produced and processed, for example, you can have very interesting things: cultural and processual objects which can be produced within the print realm. There are already many artists' experiments with such concepts, even though we are at the very beginning. And the key issue here is to have content that has been processed, and not just harvested from the network and then printed. This is another dimension, equally interesting. But it is one thing to have a concept about how to elaborate content, to devise a process and apply it to some content, and another — in the case of print — to freeze it in the space and interface of a book.

MG: Perhaps I am making a distinction that does not apply to this context, but does the object you are referring to as "processual" exist in the process or in the fixed outcome? I mean, what is key here, that the object is something that changes over time through being scattered across different platforms or that it includes the process of its own making?

AL: The object should include the process. The idea is that you should use the computational possibilities to produce what you are producing, literature or whatever else, to exploit the characteristics of the network, and of course this should be done in a proper way not just for the sake of it: to show paradoxes, or even empower these processes. In the last five to eight

years a lot of platforms have been established, they are often socially irrelevant because they're usually not in the news. One of them which you cannot find in the newspapers is a peer-to-peer money lending platform: instead of asking for money to a bank to finish your studies or refurbish your kitchen, for example, you ask a person you don't know — it is the platform that reinforces the trust. Think of another example such as couch surfing platforms. These platforms are based on trust too and enable students and young people to travel without wasting a lot of money on hotels. I have just learnt about two other similar platforms in *The New York Times* today. One platform is for renting out a room in your house, which again is about trust; the other one is a new business for which you can offer, in exchange of a sum of money, a guided tour of your city. You can say: "Listen, I know this neighbourhood, this city, and I can offer you a tour and you pay me whatever money you think is reasonable". These platforms are mostly commercial attempts, but behind them there are social processes that are enabled by digital networks. And again this is not only a distribution problem. In here the computational side of things is that these platforms are calculating quite important data that affect you socially and make you decide if you want to engage with them. You can do the same with artworks and cultural objects in general. So again it is not about making the best hotel booking online, it is about dealing with the process in a completely different way.

MG: And this is very much about including social dynamics, right?

AL: In those examples, yes. If we take other examples such as more practical examples of print they would be completely different. But still they should use the potentials we have.

MG: Could you give me an example of any publishing projects you think incorporate this?

AL: There are quite a few. There are some projects that are close to purely generative processes. There is this artistic project called *Written Images** for which artists (selected by a jury) provided algorithms that generated artworks which were different every time. What those guys [the people behind the *Written Images* project] did was to make a single generation of each algorithm, take a picture of it, put the pictures all together and print a book, which is unique each time it is printed. They also went a bit further to reinforce the concept. They asked Bruce Sterling [science fiction author best known for several novels and the *Mirrorshades* anthology] to write the introduction, which was created in a way that can be slightly different every time you print it. Another example that takes a step further from this use of a purely generative concept deals with classic book categories, such as biographies. The French artist called Grégory Chatonsky made an artwork titled *Capture* that is about generating an entire music band. The artist harvested lyrics from the Internet and created music based on them. Besides these generated music pieces, he also staged remote music concerts in which the music generated itself. They lasted hours. He took this further too. Chatonsky generated a band biography by instructing a software programme on how to retrieve specific kind of images and texts on the net and then assemble them in an automatic way to produce it as a print on demand publication. So you have a band biography for a band

that does not exist. Again you are using the process here and not just the network. A third example is — and I could go on for a while! — the most artistic one. There is an Italian duo of artists, Les Liens Invisibles [Clemente Pestelli and Gionatan Quintini], who question the format of the artist catalogue, better still the artist monograph. They created 100 titles of artworks through finding pictures on the net and determined their year [of production] and artistic techniques to make 100 non-existent artworks plausible. In a very automatic way they generated a collection of artworks by creating a monograph in which invented artworks were described as if they were real ones. If you look closely at it there is not much difference with any other real artist's monograph.

MG: Was all the content sourced from the Internet via an algorithm then?

AL: Yes, it was sourced via an algorithm. The algorithm plays a very crucial role because it has to be very effective to give life to the work. Otherwise you'd just have a random thing. In this case you have to 'see' that, for instance, 'that' picture could represent 'that' artwork with 'that' name and technique. Then the calculation, the processual nature of this virtual object becomes plausible because it is effective, and then you can trust it. At this point it gets printed, and when it is printed we trust it even more...

MG: Yes, we trust things more when they are in print, why?

AL: Your question is empirical. We trust printed stuff more because it is not modifiable, changeable. Once something is printed, you cannot modify or change it. And the digital is based exactly on the opposite, which is that everything can be changed, reprogrammed, recalculated. It is the physicality that generates the trust, because in print you have plenty of pages, and these pages are the space, so that you can dedicate that space to a specific content forever. It is the page content. In the case of digital you have no space at all, you have just your screen, which is bidimensional, it is very limited. So there is no space you can dedicate to content forever, and you need to change everything all the time.

MG: Do you think that for the processual artworks/objects you mentioned there is a sort of removal on the part of the artist? Or this removal does not exist in because the artists are deeply involved, like in the last example, in the making of the algorithms...

AL: What do you mean exactly by removal? Taking a distance from it, hiding behind it?

MG: Yes, like taking a distance. Let's say that as an artist I make an algorithm that enables me to gather pieces of information and collect them; of course I have to kind of trust the algorithm. But there is another difference I think between this way of working, and, let's say, being an artist who collects bits and pieces from a library, or interviews people, or commissions other artists to make fake reviews of artworks and then collects them for print... I guess there is a difference between these two approaches, perhaps in terms of the type of involvement...

AL: I don't see a difference, except in the tool you are using. Of course there are social relationships in the first type of artworks that you cannot reproduce in an algorithm. In the way you approach the making of the work, which in your case is to generate a collection of objects, your role as an artist would be that of making decisions about where to look, what to collect, who to interview and commission fake reviews to, and so on. To a certain extent this is similar to crafting the algorithm and using it in a way in which 'possibility' is absolutely crucial here too. Another example that is even more processual than the other two is that of the artists Mimi Cabell and Jason Huff who made an intervention on *American Psycho*, the novel by Bret Easton Ellis. What they did was to exchange the entirety of the book, one page at a time, through Gmail. Each of the artists would send a page to the other and when one received the page some Google advertisements related to the image content, which in this case was the novel page, were displayed on the web page, in the browser. So what the artists did was to collect all texts of the ads and transform them into footnotes because it was very clear to what part of the text an ad was related. Then they deleted the whole text of the book, leaving only the numbers representing the footnotes and the advertisements as notes. The novel is gone when is printed. But what remains is the process of these exchanges in the form of a classic book with footnotes and titles, and also a reflection on a non-replicable set of ads — because Google changes them all the time — as footnotes. This is something that, in relation to what we were taking about at the beginning, could also be achieved with an analogue process; for example you could search the ads that are related to what you are reading in a magazine wherever you want and use the same process without the network and computers. But, of course, this would be different because the decisions you make with processes involving Gmail have already been made by Google. So this is a different variant.

MG: Nowadays, the Web is a mass media rather than an instrument/tool for specialists and an unexplored platform for communication. Big corporations in the entertainment industry, from print publishing to record labels have appropriated the Web, giving life to the myth of convergence, of the seamless translatability of contents from one platform, or device, to another. What do you think site-specificity means in the context of contemporary artistic production in the light of the above and in relation to your work/research in publishing?

AL: There is a lot to discuss here. Just to start, this convergence has been debated only slightly within academia because it seems to be something that had already been discussed. The concept of media convergence points attention to the media, and to how different media can relate to each other, connect to each other, whatever content they are delivering. This aspect is not that interesting to me; it is more an industrial perspective. This perspective is more about how I can make the most efficient and effective portfolio of media, using the most persuasive combinations of media to accomplish my task. And I am not sure this is that interesting. Instead, convergence is more interesting when you see it from the user's point of view: how I see the same content replicated on different media and what it means to me and how it affects me, my attention, my perception of that content,

how I relate to it. While the 'industrial' convergence seems not to say anything new, except the fact that something can have different embodiments. What it means is that when I have a physical book and the digital edition of it — the PDF — they have different views, they can accomplish different tasks, but the content is actually the same. And I am not very impressed by the fact that I can see the same content on two different platforms and if I see a PDF and the HTML version the view is the same. So, I am much more fond of site-specificity be it digital or not. There's one issue I was discussing with Fei Jun, a Chinese colleague at ISEA — he is a real entrepreneur and really engaging with digital editions of commercial magazines — and I was telling him: "What is happening now is that I have a digital edition of, let's say, *TIME Magazine* and the difference is that I can see a video in the digital edition, I can click on the picture and see the video, or galleries of pictures for example. This is the main difference from before. But what about my experience [as a user]? When I am holding a book in my hands I am not supposed to see a video in the book, I am supposed to see a video somewhere else. What happens to me when I am reading something that has to do with reading in print, but I can then switch to a video and then switch to print again? This is something I am not ready for yet. I mean, I am already doing this [switching] as part of a lot of other things that I do online and I have never had time to really adapt. But the reading experience is quite challenging because I am switching from a magazine to TV and then to a magazine again. So my reading experience is quite heavily affected, and site-specificity in this case is quite crucial". During our discussion, we came to the conclusion that the virtual place in which I am consuming some content should be carefully constructed to preserve my user experience, and, in the case of text, my reading experience. It is much more than just delivering the content. The focus should be more on this [rather than media convergence].

MG: Is there any possibility we can talk about site-specificity in-between online and offline from your point of view, without making a distinction between these two modes of display and of working?

AL: This is not an easy question. The thing is, we are assuming we are using digital means all the time so that we are talking about post-digital as a definition of reality, which is not split into virtual and real but is just one continuum so to speak. But at the same time there is a kind of anthropological question of how I am affected, how I physically and perceptually react in front of a screen. And how I perceptually and physically react in front of anything that is retro illuminated, for example. There is this thought from [Marshall] McLuhan that I really love and I included in my book book [*Post-digital Print*, 2012]. He says that we are totally fascinated by screens because they are retro illuminated, like the glassworks in a church that were made to be retro illuminated because we react differently to this. They seem to glow with light, they have their own enlightenment, and we are just contemplating them. What McLuhan was hinting at is that we are mesmerised by televisions for similar reasons, and I would say that now we definitely are by the multiple screens we deal with all the time. So this something in-between is actually tricky because it should be either a kind of new space where I am not technically in front of a screen or it should be something I just perceive.

MG: As...related to the screen, but not on the screen?

AL: Right. They call this the network of objects. That is something in-between because the computer is hidden, like those objects which are the lovely playthings of trendy designers. These coloured objects which change their colour if something happens remotely, and you see the colour and you can understand it intuitively without opening and closing [browser windows] and typing anything, just by using your colour code. They are just data visualisations in the end, but because of their form it is a data visualisation that we understand easily. They are kind of in-between, we know there is a networked concept but at the same time we also know it is an object. Augmented reality is also something that can be in-between but I still feel the physicality, I still feel that the physicality is too heavy to get rid of at some point.

MG: Yes, I have recently seen some artworks in a gallery, which were in the guise of customised QR codes [Quick Response Code] and you would walk around the gallery with a phone to access them. But I feel it was a 'heavy' physical experience that of trying to match the QR code, waiting to upload the artwork and then seeing it. And this way of experiencing got in the way of reading the artwork because there was too much effort involved in accessing it. It was a strange experience that I feel perhaps did not give me any additional content than what the work might have been without the QR code process. I don't even know if it was site-specific to the concept of the show, site-specific to my mobile device, site-specific to the space it was shown in...

AL: Yes, if you think about this it would be different if you, for example, went close to an artwork and then you would get a message on your mobile phone, from a person you don't know, saying something that only much later you would realise was connected to the artwork you saw in the gallery. It should not be about flamboyance, showing off the technology as something that enriches the artwork, it should be about the process that you are able to trigger. In this case they are quite trivial social processes, but if properly done they become much more engaging than just being engaged with whatever technology you can use.

MG: My next question was supposed to be about publishing in relation to the hybridity we discussed, but in a way we have already touched upon it so I will move onto the next question: how would you define the role of the contemporary publisher?

AL: This is a very vast question. I am not sure I can easily answer it! I mean the only thing I think is necessary for a contemporary publisher is to metabolise this network concept. So he should not only have a strategy and a concept for what he is publishing but he should think in networked terms. For example, who is reading and where he is reading? What I am publishing? There is not a big difference with the past except for the available channels, the platforms and the scale probably. I still think that more than the publisher the key role is that of the editor. The editor is the filter; he is filtering information and is the mediator of the whole concept he is trying to put together. So whatever specific mediums the publisher is

using — Web, print, writing on matchboxes or writing on bank notes — the editor is crucial. And again, ISEA2013 was great for the meetings I had there. I met Judith Doyle from Toronto and she told me that there is no school for editors, there is no official school you can attend to become an editor, it is something that you just do, that you feel how to do or not.

MG: Well, I assume a curator is also an editor, and as an editor she/he learns on the job, via using different platforms...

AL: ... and practices...

MG: ... and practices as well, yes.

AL: But still I think curating and editing are quite different practices.

MG: What does make them different? I find this interesting because I come from a curatorial perspective. My PhD is within the curatorial field, and we have these historical tropes, especially within the new media field; these definitions like 'the curator as editor', 'the curator as filter feeder', 'the curator as aggregator'... and we are using publishing terms, right? So I wonder from your perspective who are we then? [Laughter]

AL: That I cannot answer! I already have enough problems with defining what publishing professionals are doing at the moment... I don't want to go into how curators, and new media curators can be defined. Too much work! [Laughter] The whole field is borrowing terms from publishing because publishing is a very established field and if you say editor everyone knows what you are talking about. So using these terms can be very effective. But they [curators and editors] are similar and different at the same time. They are similar in that they filter information very heavily; one really has to reduce the amount of interesting information around a single concept to achieve a very strict selection that one thinks is worthy. They are similar also because this selection rather than being omnicomprehensive has to be very representative; it has to tell a lot about their concept. And finally, they are similar because if one is passionate about this work one really cares about each element, and even the details about each single element. As a curator one would take care of a corner of the pedestal that has been a little bit scraped and would ask people to clean it. And as an editor, one would put a parenthesis where it is missed. The difference is that with curating one deals with artworks and as an editor one deals with text mainly; one also deals, in the instance of a graphic editor, with pictures but they are always meant, traditionally, to complement a text. These days I am reading a book about the paperback revolution in the sixties. For example, think about *The Medium is the Message* by McLuhan. It gave all this space to pictures; they were preponderant in that they were not meant to be illustrations, they were totally part of the text, on the same level and with the same importance. We are back now, even with experimental magazines except for very few examples, to having the text as the crucial thing and pictures as less preponderant elements. Artworks are a whole

different world compared to text, or I could say that to deal with them is quite different. Another difference is space. I mean, I have never thought as a curator, I have only spoken with a few curators, but I have been completely entranced and hypnotised by some curators in my life. And one of the few things I think I have understood is how a curator manages the space, that is, the experience of the person who is involved, engaged, immersed in the space is absolutely essential. So as a curator one deals with the space he has, whatever that space might be; it can be completely virtual, or heavily physical, or it can be small or huge, but a curator deals with that. It is crucial. As an editor — strictly speaking — one is not thinking about space, unless there are constraints such as that the text has to be 10,000 words. That is all the space constraints an editor has, and then it is the job of the graphic designer to make it looking beautiful or attractive. But the task of the editor does not involve the space. That said; another similarity between the two is that one deals with an artist about his concept and the other with a writer about his concept. So a curator triggers an artist's by saying: "Have you though about that?" or "This part has a lot of potentials, maybe you can think about developing it a bit more". The same happens with a writer for things like: "Yes, this part of the text is so powerful so you have to move these few lines at the beginning" or "You should engage the reader and take him by hand through the text". These approaches are again similar for both the roles.

MG: So are you saying that an editor does not deal with forms of presentations, but with content mostly? I am going off topic a bit perhaps: I have pretty much been organising exhibitions online lately so I deal with space in a very different way, sometimes I think I am an editor because I feel that I work with a page, which, although to me it is an extension of what a magazine page could be, entails a very different interaction but at the same time is limited...

AL: ... it's confined.

MG: Yes, it's often all about the screen and what happens in relation to it. I envisage how people might be in front of a screen and sometimes I feel this is quite similar to dealing with a page of a book, although it is different too.

AL: There is one crucial difference in my opinion. If you want this to happen within a physically defined screen, yes, it is quite similar. But if you think about the properties of the screen, the page is infinite and then you have a whole different world so... again... it depends on how you define the space. But you can make an exhibition in a magazine as well, and you can edit artworks that are only made of text, literature. And you can also be a skilled editor and be called a curator for a specific task.

MG: Yes.

AL: But still it is how you approach it. I understand this whole online thing, because the space online is hard to define. But again what I would do when it comes to online exhibitions,

if I was really free to engage with it, is to think of not only the Web page itself but also all the incredible space that can emerge from a Web page.

MG: You mean in terms of social interaction?

AL: No, I mean really in terms of space, in terms of what kind of space can be represented, illustrated, projected, expanded in a Web page, and not only what you can put on it. How you can really break the conventions of having the computer window as something similar to a page you are used to.
I have an interesting experience of mine to tell. I teach the Interface Aesthetics module within the Software Art course at the Art Academy of Carrara in Italy. Each year I spend four hours, sometime even more, presenting to the students the original Xerox prototype of the first graphic interface — the one that Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak 'stole' as the main idea for their [Apple] products. I am still amazed at how the visions of [Douglas] Engelbard were embodied by the first GUI team at Xerox in conceiving the window as a content that is limited only by the machine's resources: you can have a window that is almost literally infinite if you have a machine that has an infinite memory. For me this is quite fascinating: how the window — the window's borders — is technically completely undefined. But we don't think about this because we are used to the Web, and the Web is a mass media so it has been reduced to certain standards and conventions. What is interesting about this experience is that when I start talking about this with my students, about having an infinite space, I can see them starting again to think about [and see] the window and how potentially fascinating it is as a structure even though they have used it for years as a standard [limited space].

MG: I know... I think we have already started to talk about the question I planned to ask next... The use of technology allows more flexibility in terms of production and distribution, as a curator of the exhibition *Erreur d'impression* for the *Espace Virtuel* of Jeu de Paume gallery, what are the possibilities that a display platform online offers in your view? What are the downsides? How have you appropriated the space that the gallery offered you? I am also interested in knowing how you have approached the communication with your audience; when we met at ISEA2013 you told me about a section you curated for the gallery bookshop, which seems to function as a physical point of access to the content of the online exhibition.

AL: I have to say that I was a bit surprised — and very pleased too — that Jeu de Paume asked me to do something so specific like curating an exhibition. This is why I proposed to deal with a concept I was very familiar with. Also since I am not a curator, I asked that the person who had invited me to organise the show would discuss with me every aspect of the exhibition, every artwork, everything that would be put in there. The collaborative dimension was essential for me to do something I considered worthwhile. This is the same for the artworks I make; for me, the collaborative dimension is essential to appreciate them. I have never thought about making an artwork myself, on my own: I mean, I have ideas that fascinate me, but I don't think it is fun to execute them on my own. It's kind of selfish... it is

too much. While editing, for instance, is totally the opposite; it is not democratic, the production is absolutely not democratic. It is really about the person who knows how to do it, the person who should do it.

MG: So you were working collaboratively with the curator at Jeu de Paume, were you more like the editor and…

AL: No, it is even more interesting than this, because she [my collaborator] is not the curator of Jeu de Paume, but responsible for the artists' production, both of us were not formally curators. There is my name on the show, but there is not the name of my collaborator because she works at the gallery so she is not allowed to share her name for the exhibition. For me what was interesting was what came out from our discussion, from confronting two different experiences. For example, if I was proposing something I was curious about her reaction… and I was interested in seeing where our different points of view would meet, in finding our common cultural space. This is for me the most interesting part of this experience, and of course what the outcomes became. The experience with the team there was great. Indeed, as a museum structure it can really support valuable outcomes and especially the team was very supportive and surprisingly open to inclusions and different solutions.

MG: Most of the artworks shown are not site-specific for that online platform; they were either already existing or hosted on other websites. To me then the exhibition functions more as an archive that could expand into something else…

AL: Yes, absolutely. The space is a kind of display of the different works because Jeu de Paume does not host the artworks; they are just linked to that space. This is a space that is conceived as the virtual space of Jeu de Paume with all that which it implies, and within that space there is one selection and new commissions. The commissions were the best part for me because it meant to bring some artworks alive and to have them realised, have them happening. But as a virtual space, you are right; it is more a kind of archive.

MG: Did you have artworks that were commissioned to exist outside the online platform too?

AL: No. The commissions were for the online space. And this brings in another thing, a kind of historical problem of the whole so-called new media art and contemporary art relationship. For example, one of the things I was asked was: "Should we think about [commissioning] a contemporary artist and should we engage her/him with this space?" When discussing this with Florian Cramer, he was noticing that this happens all the time and it is never the other way around: it is never that [the organisers of] a physical exhibition would ask a net artist, an electronic artist, a digital artist, to make something physical, it is always the other way round. It is always: "Let's ask whoever famous or acknowledged artist to make something with digital". This is a very bad thing, because it tells a lot about how much digital art — so to say —, new media art in general, is poorly considered or is always kept aside, as a niche.

The contemporary art [world] wants to enter it with its own means, with its own forces without understanding it, interpreting it, including it, absorbing it in the process of contemporary art, but considering it as a sort of contemporary VIP club.

MG: I see what you mean.

AL: We should join forces to accomplish the opposite.

MG: We should, yes, definitely.
Going back to mass media communication, I'd like to talk a bit about your work in collaboration with Paolo Cirio. Your artworks bring to light the hidden structures of contemporary means of communication, their relationship with corporations and their logics, and very often they make use (and abuse) of the channels of communication offered by the Web and their characteristics — for example the radial diffusion of news with no geographical boundaries. From my perspective, your projects often operate in this in-between online and offline, I am thinking of *Face to Facebook* and *Amazon Noir* projects [part of the *Hacking Monopolism Trilogy* along with *Google Will Eat Itself*], and they have a close relationship with publishing activities. Could you unravel this relationship a bit, assuming that it exists?

AL: *Amazon Noir* was really connected to publishing, fully. *Face to Facebook* had a kind of side effect: it went completely viral in the news and the media art world. Actually, I was really looking to find some opportunities to really analyse it further, because there is a lot of material. I would have loved to just have the time and funding to dig into how the different media reported about the artwork: how news was constructed out of an artwork was something quite interesting for me, from the CNN [coverage] to the personal blog. So I have saved a PDF with all 1,100 pages of news [coverage] we have had on the Internet.
Talking about mass media, well, I can talk only about what happened with *Face to Facebook* even if it was not really planned. Of course we did our best for two years to make the best artworks we could, but we were not expecting such a media reaction and some of its mechanisms are quite interesting. For example, who was the first to report about the work and how it became viral is an interesting element. The very first coverage was published on a blog for managers of Internet communication strategies, and from that there was an article on the *Wired.com* a couple of hours later. This article was nodal for the whole media performance because it generated other endless articles, opinions, and so on. It was quite amazing to see how that specific article generated the first wave of articles, and then viral processes generated other waves which went on social networks and so on. I am saying this because if that article had been different, this would have not happened. That article was the best we could have ever hoped for because the journalist totally got the content, and was effectively explaining it in an understandable way to the reader. The journalist mentioned important references and was supporting us from the beginning. It was incredible. But if we had had an article in a conservative newspaper, let's say in the UK, criticising the artwork as a bad work by artists who only wanted to destroy personal relationships, the whole media performance would have been completely different.

MG: I am intrigued by this concept of media performance because it is something that is totally related to how information spreads through using web tools, right? Or to how things are received within the Web..

AL: There is quite a long tradition of net artworks aimed at generating global and networked media reactions because net art was born at the same time as the Web. But the thing is that in the early 90s, and even in early 2000, you had to plan something, you had to engage with the old journalism and devise some sort of media strategy. Instead, what happened to us was kind of self-generated. I mean we had sent the PR to all the people we knew and of course journalists were amongst them, perhaps not even all of them, but that was it.

MG: You did not use a media press office, right?

AL: Exactly, there wasn't a special strategy. It was just about how it was received and this tells a lot about the role of mass media nowadays: anything can be exaggerated. If it is interesting for the editor and cool enough for any sort of reason it can generate various waves of replication everywhere and almost in real time. Our [project] lasted online almost for two weeks and it was insane, then [the wave] went on for another month or two. This is completely different from how it used to be before. My personal feeling is that now anything can be exposed if it has the characteristics of attracting a lot of attention because it becomes symbolic or triggers some social mechanisms.

MG: Have you ever shown the process, how the artwork spread, in a gallery?

AL: It has been displayed in many physical exhibitions. It actually debuted as a physical exhibition. We conceived the physical exhibition and discussed how to present it as an installation. We made an explanatory video, which we had commissioned to filmmakers because producing the project in an understandable way was a complex process. People already knew what we did with Google [*Google Will Eat Itself*] and Amazon [*Amazon Noir*], but this time we wanted to make transparent what and how we did it. So while the video explained what we did, there were elements coming from the other two previous projects of the trilogy [*Hacking Monopolism Trilogy*]: a projection of the diagram of how the software worked, its hidden mechanism and three 1.5mt^2 panels [complete] with pictures. The pictures were organised in a scientific way and consisted of just under 2,000 [Facebook] images each measuring 2x2 cm. Each panel was divided into four columns, the columns of the artworks: on the left panel there was the 'funny woman', then the 'mild woman', the 'mild man' and the 'funny man'. You wouldn't know this; you just see the smiles and strange faces that are more exaggerated at the extremes than in the centre — they are more smiling. The profile pictures were cropped to the face and printed on a special photo paper called 'silk paper' which has small bumps. If you look at the pictures of your grandmother's ID, especially her passport, they were printed on this kind of paper because it was less likely to be counterfeited. The profile pictures in fact represented the passport for the whole

project, to Facebook, potentially to the whole Internet. There are some later variations of this installation. For instance the last one included a display of the whole dialogue between the Facebook lawyers and our lawyers, but these are just details.

MG: What is *Neural* in the field of contemporary artistic production and research? In some ways it gives me the idea of an innovative art centre, not located in any specific place, that moves from research to production and encourages discursive moments and sharing information. I think this comes to my mind because I connect it to your polyhedral nature.

AL: This is a very nice compliment. This is what it was always meant to be. It is difficult to disconnect it from myself, I know. For me it has been not only a magazine of course, but a platform for many processes, also experimenting with physical publications in many ways. It has been a kind of centre of activities that either stemmed from *Neural* or ended in *Neural*. I think this is the destiny of many independent magazines: you are not just making the magazine for the sake of it; the magazine reflects what you are passionate about and you do, and also from doing it you get inspiration for other collateral projects. In November [2013] we celebrate 20 years, which is very important for us. And the reply to the usual question of "why on earth we decided to do this magazine 20 years ago, when there were plenty of magazines talking about media culture (although many of them stopped at [the] same point)" is that we wanted to embody the networked concept in the magazine structure and process. I never wanted *Neural* to be the best magazine in digital culture, the number one in the world. I wanted *Neural* to be a good one amongst others; to be a node, an important node. This was my goal and was reflected in the fact that in 2002, myself and other editors founded a network of magazines of new media art that is formally still active. We adopted a slogan which for me is very important, "Collaboration is better than competition", because even if we were a niche with overlapping interests and knowledge we decided to share and collaborate in any possible way since this would have empowered, or better still, it would have benefited us and the whole scene much more that fighting for a few more subscribers. Another important thing for me was to make a magazine of ideas — this might sound pretentious! — and this is especially reflected in the space dedicated to the interviews. They are not interviews about what one has done, is doing, or will do in future, but more along this line: "Why [did] you make this?" or "I can relate the statement you made to something else, what do you think?" So these interviews are not just about talking, discussing the technology, the career or the main strategy adopted by an artist, but about the kind of idea an artist has developed and nurtured, about what inspired him or something he might have not been able to do yet. In this respect I consider *Neural* a magazine of ideas.

MG: We are done. This was our last question, mission accomplished!

Alessandro Ludovico is an artist, media critic and chief editor of Neural magazine since 1993. He received his Ph.D. degree in English and Media from Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge (UK). He has published and edited several books, and has lectured worldwide. He's one of the founders of Mag.Net (Electronic Cultural Publishers organisation). He also served as an advisor for the Documenta 12's Magazine Project. He's Adjunct Professor at OCAD University in Toronto, and he teaches at the Academy of Art in Carrara and NABA in Milan. He is one of the authors of the Hacking Monopolism trilogy of artworks (Google WIll Eat Itself, Amazon Noir, Face to Facebook).
http://neural.it

Marialaura Ghidini is a curator, researcher and founder director of or-bits.com.
http://marialaura-ghidini.hotglue.me/