

LACMA Art + Tech LAB Conversations

Offline-Online Convergences

Aram Bartholl and Kathy Rae Huffman

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Dead Drops, NYC, 2010 Aram Bartholl courtesy of the artist

Conceptual artist Aram Bartholl examines the relationship between the digital and physical worlds with his installations, performances, and sculptures. In conversation with curator Kathy Rae Huffman, Bartholl discusses the convergence of the physical and virtual with respect to urban space in his work and considers how digital landmarks and customs translate to urban culture.

Aram Bartholl is currently visiting faculty at the UCLA Design Media Arts program. Kathy Rae Huffman is a curator and writer, active in the field of media art since the early 1980s in Europe and the U.S. She has held curatorial positions at Long Beach Museum of Art and ICA Boston, and has programmed for numerous electronic arts festivals.

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aware of that digital space.*

- Aram Bartholl

Peggy Weil: Welcome to the LACMA Art and Technology Lab. Tonight in our series of Conversations on Art and Technology we're talking about *Online and Offline Convergences; Convergence of the Digital and the Physical Worlds*. We're happy to have Aram Bartholl in conversation here with curator Kathy Rae Huffman. Aram is based in Berlin, here just this semester at UCLA, part of the Design Media Art faculty at UCLA. His work literally and gleefully injects the digital into the physical world. Kathy is originally from Southern California but was based for many years in Europe. She's been involved in early media and video arts, at the Long Beach Museum of Art, The ICA Boston, and is associated with several European festivals including Ars Electronica and Transmediale. We're really happy to have both of them. The format this evening will be to start with 45 minutes of conversation between Kathy and Aram about Aram's work and the intersection between cityscape and cyberspace. Afterwards we'll open it up for questions.

Kathy Rae Huffman: As the curator, I'm going to start off and I'm really happy to be here and happy to be with Aram, who I've met in Berlin. I've known his work. I wanted to start off with a little story because most of you who know me know that I

came out of the video scene, which I was absolutely dedicated to for years and years. When I moved to Europe I became even more involved with what we might call new media. But I wanted to talk about the first time that I saw art on the Internet because I think it puts in context Aram's work and describes a history of what he's doing. I was in Moscow in a bunker deep down under the ground with one of today's most prominent net arts, Alexi Shulgin. We were fundraising for technical support for an exhibition and we got into a conversation about art on the Internet and graphics on the Internet and these technical guys were going, "Huh? What are you talking about? Huh?"

And he said, "Oh, you know, there's something called Mosaic." I had never seen it. I was curious. "At the University of Chicago," and they start hacking away. And all of a sudden on this bank of monitors, up come images of Muntadas' *The File Room*. And I'd heard about this work, but I had never seen it online. And everybody's jaw dropped and there was a silence. Muntadas is a very well known conceptual artist, he's internationally shown and he also did a physical installation for this show. *The File Room* was dependent on people to submit stories of censorship. So, it was not only a virtual artwork, it was a database of incidents of censorship throughout the ages. And in the installation, he created a room - a physical room - with file cabinets because at this time - this is 1994 - people really did not know what the Internet was. They really did not know what databases were. And so he was trying to show physically what this online accumulation of information is.

It's a moment that stunned me and that I will never forget and it kept me always thinking that there has to be a connection between the physical and the virtual which is one of the reasons that I'm so interested in Aram's work is because he does exactly that. He plays with these real and virtual features that the Internet offers and he's especially attracted interventions in urban and the physical landscape. He's going to show you a lot of images of his work and these contexts. He develops a lot of projects that sit between the traditional public art situations that we would know, public art as sculpture,

as murals - as well as being a digitally-based artist. I don't want to talk so long, but I do want you to think about a couple of things and one of is how performances and the performance of the public that he brings into his work is working in his pieces, and he as the initiator, the collaborator, sometimes curator, as well as artist. So, I think we can start and then I have three really specific questions that he already knows and then we'll talk. Thanks.

Aram Bartholl: Thanks for the introduction. Thanks for having me, for having us here today. Yeah, you already mentioned it and I think I want to just connect to the same time. And in '90 - like in the mid '90s, I started studying architecture in Berlin at the art school and it was like walking over to the physicist department to write email in some computer to one friend I knew of who had an email address. And it was exactly that time where all that stuff started and happened and it always kept me busy. On one hand, there's computer games and all these worlds, and then I learn how to draw buildings with a pencil and paper still. So, that is the setting of where it all started. I'm going to go quickly through a lot of pictures, talking about how I work and then we will focus on two projects in the end.

So, this is basic question, how does that digital space effect the life today? And obviously in the past - I don't know but in the past five, six, seven years, it's become really something we're aware of. For me, all these projects are very much about how society becomes aware of that digital space. And we still have these two terms; digital and analogue or virtual and real. Obviously, all of this is real, what happens there on Facebook and all. It's really hard to make that distinction anymore. Maybe also not really useful. These are projects where I like to do workshops, I take people into art. What would it be like to pretend to be in a computer game? And this is like usually what the computer games look like.

What would it be like to have Google Maps in the street? Well, you can't get around L.A.

without these services anymore, right? At the same time - in the news recently was some woman had her house torn down because of the wrong Google Maps address. Sometimes it's very obvious that these spaces have become very real. I played a lot of computer games, worked a lot with computer games. There's this game called *Counter Strike*. I have these objects and situations rebuilt and shows outdoors and in different situations, I like to claim that these spaces are cultural heritage where a lot of people know the architecture and know how the space work. I think today whenever you take a - maybe you take an Uber here, and the driver and also we as the customer - everybody's looking at that one display and we are a victim of the algorithm, right?

We have to go along with what the machine tells us. CAPTCHA codes are kind of the same thing where they used to look like this. They're different today. But the computer is asking you the question, "Are you human or not?" And it's like that moment where you have to prove that you're not another machine. I like to look at these questions, and you have little moments before you go online - and what's the Wi-Fi password? Somebody else is writing it down for you. You have to decode that other person's writing. Sometimes it's wrong or it's almost good enough, but it's lowercase. So, it's like these examples, growing up with computers, with computer games, the Internet, you can do all these things on there. It used to be, oh, you just have some name and then you can change your name any time.

You can't change your name anymore. Like when you're in Airbnb, for example, they want to see your password, everything. So, identity online is very important. LinkedIn - they lost their whole database in 2012 and there's many services losing their accounts - the databases of the users. So, I printed all of the passwords of LinkedIn and had eight volumes and you can look up your own password, try to find your own password among 4.5 million passwords like the telephone book. I like to do that. Yeah, the whole net neutrality questions, questions how open source is being dealt with today, how all the Californian thinking about what's going on changed a lot of ways, and how the whole

digital sphere developed.

So, open Internet is still very important and privacy has been a topic I dealt with a lot over the years. There's a workshop on Saturday at the Machine Project Gallery in Echo Park where you're invited to make your own cell phone pouch to block off the signal of your phone so your phone is actually useless then. So, these kind of projects involving going in public, working, working with people, hands on workshops, making things, walking around in the city talking to people, and then at the same time, with topics about online, about what is like really going on today. Now, I'm teaching at the school. At UCLA DMA (Design Media Arts), there are a lot of students now doing projects with virtual reality, which is now really coming along with all the new glasses, the Oculus and the Vive.

It's interesting, again, there's another technical development going on. But along these developments, there are a lot of questions and yeah. I always like to address these things here. This is referring to computer games, old 3D spaces. Now, we have that new 3-space coming up. So just going through some of these slides: data itself, right? We need to destroy our hard drives to make sure the data is not going somewhere else while Google or Amazon has your data already. There are machines dedicated to do this. At that opening, visitors were invited to bring their own hard drives to get them destroyed and it's just like a bolt running through the hard drive there. Just a quick overview for you to get an impression of what I like to do - there's also a video running in the background you might have seen when you entered. Today we want to address *Dead Drops*.

Aram Bartholl: This started in 2010. I was artist in residence at Eyebeam, the media center in New York City, and it was this little idea to take a USB key and cement it into the wall. It's a place where everybody can come and leave files or you can get files there. It's not online. It's not connected to the Internet. And it really became a

very viral movement over the past five years. Over 1,600 dead drops have been made in the past five years and it's still going on. There's always press waves again and again. I think for me, that picture of a USB key in the wall is like that triggering moment also when we talk about digital and analog.

It's this moment - oh, yeah, this is really happening now. And the city also becomes, or the building becomes, a data storage. It's not in the cloud. Like this whole notion, these words like cloud are very unspecific, but in fact it's data centers. And here you have this distributed Internet going on.

Kathy Rae Huffman: But you've done this in several cities now, this project?

Aram Bartholl: Yeah. This started in 2010 in New York and then I was invited in many cities to also run workshops and I've been doing maybe - I don't know - 30, 50 *Dead Drops* myself, but there are 1,600 *Dead Drops*. So, that's our website you can go to. You, people make *Dead Drops* and upload the locations there so other people can find it.

Kathy Rae Huffman: But you also promote other people to create *Dead Drops*.

Aram Bartholl: Exactly, yeah. Yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: And to create a network among themselves creating a self-organizing aspect of the project.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah, it's very much in this idea of open source and the idea that you have a tutorial for a project. And I had this also with earlier works where then you get emails that say, "Oh, I want to build this. Would you build it? What's the tutorial or manual of how to make these things?" And here, it started from the beginning with

this idea that everybody can take part in it and also that I have still have to answer some email from a journalist from Argentina who is asking, "So, why is this art?"

And it is. A friend told me, "This is actually a big performance piece you're doing there, people, everybody is part of the performance."

Kathy Rae Huffman: Well, it is also this organizing that you do through social media and I think that's a really important aspect. This brings you into this big network of people. So, it has an online aspect, but the actual work is very physical and real even though it's data transfers.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah. There is also a very rewarding moment when you do these projects and it's meant to be participatory and then people also really pick up on it and want to do it. Sometimes you maybe have a project which is meant that way and then it never succeeds. But here are pictures for this. So, these were the first five dead drops and this is how the website looks.

Kathy Rae Huffman: So, people have to actually bring their computer and put it up against the wall, right?

Aram Bartholl: Exactly, it's very open. There's always that question. And I'm sure many of you are probably wondering that already, "Isn't that generous?" Yes, there could be a virus on that USB key. And I think that's the moment where we have a very different perception of, "Oh, I can hand you an USB drive and you plug it in and there could be a virus on there, too, or maybe the email I got this morning could be a virus in there too. But we're dealing with these fancy devices and we don't think about it."

But the moment you go in public space and it's dangerous out there at night and it's public space, so it has to be like some – I constantly get these remarks about that

question about the virus. And especially I think it's astonishing that still after the Snowden revelations and all this knowledge of we know now about how mass surveillance is going on and how we don't, well you don't feel it, you don't see what's going on in computer. And a lot of people have the attitude, "Yeah, I have nothing to hide." But here, the moment it's out there in the city, we have a very different understanding.

There are a few examples of dead drops being made in L.A. in the past years. A lot of them are probably gone. Also they don't really last forever.

Kathy Rae Huffman: Then it becomes a game of sorts for people to locate them? They might be there, they might not and -

Kathy Rae Huffman: But also for me, it was quite an interesting to consider the origin of the term *Dead Drops*, which -

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: I didn't talk about. That it comes from spy culture, the dropping, of having a place -

Aram Bartholl: Exactly, yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: where you would -

Aram Bartholl: There's two connections here. On one hand, *Dead Drops* is that place in Cold War, spy times. And, there's still spying going on and you there's different Dead Drops. So, they, I guess they use the Internet. But it's a place where you leave information and later on in the day or any other day, the others, like the French

spy comes to pick up the information. So, it's in opposition to the live drop. The live drop is when you sit on the bench in front of the Capitol and then you slide over the newspaper. This is the live drop.

And then there are movements like geocaching, which started way earlier in the 2000s, where you have spots in the city with a treasure to find, but it's more about being yourself on the digital map with a GPS device which was big then.

Kathy Rae Huffman: Right.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah. There was a *Dead Drop* at the *Talk To Me* show in the MoMA in 2011 or 2012. And I made this little tutorial, *How To Get Your Art in the MoMA*, a call for artists to bring their digital art files to leave them on the USB key and then you could claim you have art piece in the MoMA which is a pretty good thing.

Kathy Rae Huffman: It worked, huh?

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: How many artists enrolled?

Aram Bartholl: There's a bunch of really interesting files in those USB keys. There were some press waves last year in Germany. There was a newspaper, a yellow press newspaper, that claimed that they found a bomb-making plan on one of these keys, which is also addressing the other question of censorship. This is something we have consider, "Well, this is the bomb-making plan..."

Kathy Rae Huffman: But these are also readily available in *The Anarchists Cookbook*.

Aram Bartholl: That's the point and this is also one of the questions I think we have to ask ourselves today where, well, books used to be a dangerous medium some 100 years ago, right, because you can distribute information? You can send anonymously a letter by mail.

Kathy Rae Huffman : Right.

Aram Bartholl: We cannot forget that, too. And for a lot of countries, it's very crucial, important that you're able to encrypt, that you're able to get in touch without being spied on because otherwise you might end up in a prison. And of course, we have to ask ourselves, "why are there bomb-making plans or what is the basis of terrorism? And still, here in this case, I'm pretty sure that the press was interested in that picture of the police taking out that USB key.

But it is addressing the censorship, and also the openness, and why, how now we can imagine very well how data and big data is collecting so much information about us where in a couple years, your car will give you a ticket, right, when you run a red light. Well, this is what they're doing right now. You're not even able anymore to run a red light. We're getting there. It's not that far away. So, this project goes on forever. And there are a bunch of spinoffs. But we can go on to other projects.

Kathy Rae Huffman: Is this *Speed Show*?

Aram Bartholl: *Speed Show* is a format I came up with also in 2010. So, I was part of this artist group, *F.A.T. Lab*, and we were doing -

Kathy Rae Huffman: What does F.A.T. Lab stand for?

Aram Bartholl: *F.A.T. Lab* is the *Free Art and Technology Lab*.

Kathy Rae Huffman: I see.

Aram Bartholl: Very similar to our lab. And it was founded by Evan Roth and James Powderly in 2007 and was mostly meeting online in a blog and creating off- and online works, browser add-ons, questions about copyright, pop culture, and privacy. And I had this idea or this vision, let's have a show, and what would it be? What would be the best way to show net art and in fact art which is only in the browser? And I wanted to make the picture. I go to Internet Café, which is still existing in Europe quite a lot, and you have all these pieces from *F.A.T. Lab* on the screens, and then I could say I have, we have, a show.

And I had this idea, this quick idea about it - a turnout. So then I really made a show and not just a picture. So, it also turned into a website and tutorial of how to make your own art show. The idea is very simple. You go to this Internet Café, and then - in Europe there's a kiosk. They sell all these drinks and food and in the back there's 20 computers and you can rent a computer for one hour for one dollar and go online. This was a much older idea from the '90s and even earlier. And so each computer has one art piece on it and we have an opening for one night. So, it's an art show going on which is only happening on that night and you invite the artists and their friends, and -

Kathy Rae Huffman: It's like a pop-up. It's -

Aram Bartholl: Yeah. It's a true pop-up show, but it's at the same time a business which is still going on. You, customers would come in and also rent a computer maybe, but we were hanging out there having drinks and then looking at art. This also became a viral phenomenon, not as big as the *Dead Drops* movement, but a lot of people made *Speed Shows* over the years. This was the first one in Berlin. I like to

make these like a typical art gallery sheet, where you can see the works. So, each computer has really one piece in the browser.

And the tutorial says, "Rent all the computers, bring the links for the artworks." You're not allowed to bring software. It's all online. It's all on the Internet. And the shop owners were having a great night because they sold a lot of stuff. And there were shows in Vienna. There was one in New York City in Chinatown, I think. Yeah, all over the place. And over the years, I think it's been 40, 50+ *Speed Shows* being done by other people other than just me. And it's again, this tutorial the open format. And for me as an artist, also at that stage, I can say there's this empowerment-like feeling where I don't have to wait for a gallery asking me for a show. Like, "Let's just make a show." Or actually with this concept, I was like, "Yeah, somebody has to somebody has to curate the show. Yeah, I'm just gonna curate it." It's connecting very much for me this idea of how you work online. The empowerment of the Internet. The fact that everybody can publish, that the old ideas of the avant-garde, where now we're at a stage where we all can be artists.

Kathy Rae Huffman: Well, I think you touched on this idea of curating, but I also see you more personally as creating a performance work with the people you invite. The basis of the show is the monitors there with the work on them and everybody's coming together, but it's a community performance -

Aram Bartholl: Right.

Kathy Rae Huffman:- And without your starting the ball rolling, it wouldn't happen.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: But there's a term overlooking at all your work involving

people, involving this open source idea, involving all of these very open platforms. There's a big connection between what is called common based art and urban spaces in the works you've just shown. And there's a philosopher, Antoni Negri who has pointed out that our public spaces have a cultural commons, and there's a natural commons, and there should also be a digital commons. And so as you create these self-managed events and activities, how do you see your works fitting into this philosophy of commons-based art?

Aram Bartholl: We just had this discussion with the students and now they're discussing whether if Facebook is public space or not and it's obviously private space, right? It's like the public space of a mall. You go there and it feels like it's your space, but it's all run by a company.

Kathy Rae Huffman: yes

Aram Bartholl: Although, I think the digital commons in that sense, this is how the Internet started from the scientific way from the scientific thinking and from the open thinking. If there are tele-codes, the telecom players would have come up with the Internet, like every email would cost money, right? So, there is a very strong basis on that in this direction of thinking from how the Internet came together and started and also what it influenced. Yeah, how people make software, how people make the sharing culture I've been talking about. And for me, it naturally always bound together.

I grew up with my parents from the '68 generation, let's say. While my father was doing all these – well, not demonstrations – there were demonstrations in the street, too, but these street fest activities like going into public space and reclaiming public space for all sorts of interactions and interventions and it felt empowering. And even in architectural school, we had assignments like, “Oh, we're going do one week with a scaffolding in front of the main station in Berlin and we're going do different actions on it there.”

So, this is something I learned which has been very natural to me and this is how my career as an artist started. I just studied architecture and then worked in computer stuff, not really designing houses, and I started making works and published them online. And then, people get in touch and put you in a magazine and I got invited to festivals. So, for me it all worked through the Internet and always had that connection. And it feels very much like that common space where today we there are firewalls. Like the Internet is not the same. If I go to a German website from here, I find, "Oh, yeah, you're in a different country. You can't access that video stream." The divide is pretty strong already, although we think it's like the one Internet but it's not anymore.

Kathy Rae Huffman: I have another question before we open it up and this has to do with you and your involvement with your audiences. Today the term audience engagement has become really important for institutions, especially when that audience engagement is with young audiences. Your work is participatory, open source, non-hierarchical, how has it been for you to work in a gallery or a museum in those white cubes so to speak, in controlled conditions that is rarified, rather than in open spaces? And do you consider or worry about the potential of the institutionalization of your work?

Aram Bartholl: Yeah. That's a very good one, especially because we're at a museum here right now. Also as I'm teaching now, and with the grad students, I'm organizing the grad show. Not really curating, but organizing with them the second year grad show. It's the 12th of May and you're very much invited to come. But also considering the university as an institution - and you can already tell that I didn't study art in that way and also the universities are very much different here from what I used to teach in Germany - it has a very institutional feel.

And the gallery, the white Gallery is this really big space. So, already the education is it's very institutionalized. Because when they're asking me, "How should I hang the

screen?" I'm like, "Oh, yeah, you should go and take that screen and put it in the street maybe." Yeah, I wanna see that screen in Venice somewhere in the street and have the video on there. (laughs) Exactly.

So, this is, of course, a topic. Well, often it is, and there are some examples you've seen here, like workshops. Back then with the names floating above the head in Laguna Museum, there's a show and there's documentation in the show, but the actual piece for me is like having this event one day and there are 20 participants coming and we go out and we have this experience for one day.

Documentation is one thing. This is always also with performance the typical question, what is the actual piece? What is the piece, or what's leftover from the piece, or is there documentation or not? Some of my work is print or is 2D to hang on the wall. I feel more at home in public space, I have to say. I admire certain people, curators I work with, who are very good at hanging a show in a white cube and it really works when it's two more inches to that direction. I have high respect for that, but being in the public space is more my home turf town, and making sculptures, working with people, yeah.

But took me a long time as a kid, you're taken to art shows and it's like this, "Oh, it's like this guy with the stones on the floor," which later you realize, "Oh, yeah, it's Joseph Beuys," you learn later when you're older. And then at some point you realize, "Yeah, they have these stones in the gallery, but it's actually from the whole tree-planting idea. And it's not about these stones in the white cube. It's really - it's all about - right?"
There's like many examples for artworks where -

Kathy Rae Huffman: So, we give -

Aram Bartholl: - there needs to be a way, they need to find a way to represent it also in an institution which is important. But the actual work happened back

then.

Kathy Rae Huffman: Right. So, in 20 years, maybe your work will be in a retrospective and it'll be institutionalized. (laughs) You have to fight that every day.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah. I think it's good. And also even there are very different institutions, and then there's festivals, and museums, and -

Kathy Rae Huffman: Right.

Aram Bartholl: - commercial and non-commercial. Sometimes I'm invited to talk at a design conference or have something to do with architects. And then at the same time I'll be at this Chaos Computer Club with the German Hacker Conference. I've been going there for years and invited there to speak. So, this is the interesting part where you're bridging different fields and topics. I very much enjoy that.

Kathy Rae Huffman: How big of a role does this social media in your work? How do you much depend on it?

Aram Bartholl: Well, it was called Web 2.0, right? And then they called it social media. I like to do this workshop, for example, at a table and everybody's sewing their own phone pouch to block the signal, it's like the most social situation you can have. To actually sit at a table, and do this by hand, and then people are like, "Oh, yeah. When was the last time I used scissors?" All these computer people who know everything about the wavelength of the radio signal, but the sewing machine is difficult suddenly.

I used to use it much more. I'm not on Facebook, but I'm using Twitter and Instagram. I feel there's also a backlash going from when I see my kids. They're like, "Facebook is

for old people," right? They're not even using Instagram - they're more into games - and then it's just the WhatsApp and these chat services. So, there's different channels. It is still probably also very important as an artist to promote yourself online. And some people do this very explicitly from the studio documenting. Instagram has been talked about a lot in the past years as this driving motor for arts sales and whoever posts a certain picture suddenly gets in a big category.

So I've been there very much from the beginning and looking at these services coming up. It's important to have. I'm not following up anymore. So, I don't use Snapchat, for example.

Kathy Rae Huffman: Okay.

Aram Bartholl: And when I asked the undergrad students, "What's hot right now? Like what are you (laughs) what is the latest service?" But even there, they have some - yeah - reservation about it.

Kathy Rae Huffman: Okay. People have to find out about it somehow.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah, yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: It's usually some traditional means. Posters and stuff like that -

Aram Bartholl: But I feel this is also when I talk with them about privacy and I think we all have, you also know this moment where you type something into Facebook or some other public channel - and it's, "hm? Maybe I'd better not post this because this person, or parents, or whoever is gonna," or, "This is gonna stay online." And we have already own censorship of what we post. There's some development.

There used to be these huge parties, yeah, I'm sure this was here the same as in Germany, where some kids posted a birthday party and then it was a public event on Facebook and 10,000 people show up because it went viral online. This has changed.

Kathy Rae Huffman: But I think also your work is a lot of fun and so people want to be in a fun situation, you know?

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: The world's tough right now. So, when you're having a lot of fun, people hear about it, they talk to their friends, and they see photos online, and they come and join the party. And -

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: - and there's serious stuff going on, but it's not to say you can't have a good time while you're making -

Aram Bartholl: Of course, yeah –

Kathy Rae Huffman: - making your secure phone.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah. The humor you may have noticed in the works is also an important access point. Depending on how long you look at the work, I would say that you also discover there are more and deeper questions to it. And then some of the works work very visually well online where they were distributed widely. Like these Google Map marker pieces also went through all the different stages of publications and blog posts. But sure. it's also about working with people, having a good time, being with people who wanted a good time.

They're using these all of these channels. This is a good example maybe. Petra Cartwright had a Twitter account in 2008 while working at Office Depot and it's a pretty fun lineup, of how after 20 days, it's getting more and more crazy until she quits on the 22nd day or something. Yeah. Those are the net pieces from the show which took place here in February in Koreatown I curated for one night in an Internet café. And the Internet café here is more like a gaming place. So, it's mostly kids - boys -sitting there playing League of Legends, and World of Warcraft, and some classic games. We had a bunch of local artists and also international artists visiting and sharing - sharing the same space with the playing crowd on the other side there.

Kathy Rae Huffman: I wanted to ask about your-upcoming projects, especially the sculpture exhibition in Munster, which takes place every ten years.

Aram Bartholl: Yes.

Kathy Rae Huffman: It's a big deal. And you've been commissioned to make new work and I think it's really an exciting idea that you're heading towards.

Aram Bartholl: While you think about your question and we get you more involved, I've prepared another slide. This is a piece I launched in October of last year. It's a public art piece well, more like a land art piece in West Germany, at the Neuenkirchen Springhornhof.

Kathy Rae Huffman: It's called Keepalive.

Aram Bartholl: Keepalive. So, you find this rock in the woods and you can make a fire - or you're supposed to make a fire next to this heat sink. And the fire turns the heat into – no - there's a device in the rock which turns the heat into electricity to

power up a router and the router gives you access to a collection of survival guides. So, you get there and you have to light a fire, which was the very first technology humanity at some point mastered, right? It's this big moment. And then we get access to these collections of survival guides which are a reflection of today's survivalism.

So, this is it. It might be a bit small. But it has survival guides, very classic ones, from how to build a fallout shelter, but also how to survive when your iPhone is broken or how to survive, "Help, My Kids Are Using Snapchat." I think when you Google for survival guides, you find a lot of modern, Internet-era survival guides, which, yeah, we can't - survive anymore without this, right? It's like when you forget it at home, "Oh, no, I can't do this," or "I can't do..." or "I don't know the number. When is the appointment?" There are so many things which are externalized in these devices. We're really depending on them.

This piece has been going on since last year and for the Munster show, there's also more projects in the direction of making a fire, having a fire to charge your phone, for example. Like you charge your phone, this is still a work in progress, but as with a marshmallow on a stick, you charge your phone. So, it goes in that direction and also that combination of these basic elements and then talking about high tech at the same time.

Kathy Rae Huffman: This should be a hard work to have in Southern California with the dryness.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah, even in Germany it was, "Oh, the visitors are supposed to make a fire." And they're like, "Oh, yeah, no. We can't do that." And then, "Well, this is on a private property and they have a special regulation there." So, it worked out. But still, it's on the edge, yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: OK. Do they get the matches when they go into the trail to -
(laughs)

Aram Bartholl: Yeah, yeah. I'm sure.

Kathy Rae Huffman: But there's nobody smoking, so you have to have matches.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah. They have to -

Kathy Rae Huffman: They have to do the -

Aram Bartholl: - they also to have to bring - work -

Kathy Rae Huffman: - Boy Scout trick, huh? Okay. Somebody must have a
question for Aram.

Audience Member: Hi. So, is there any choice with the data that's used for the
dead drops? Putting them onto the USB, what kind of data did you put there? Was there
images, texts –

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Audience Member: – songs, whatever? And how did you get to know what other
people took there, took away -

Aram Bartholl: Right, yeah.

Audience Member: - or something like this?

Aram Bartholl: So, first, there's many facets about dead drops and instructions how to make them. And they come empty, that's the idea. You submit a USB key and then it's just a readme.txt file with the instructions and a description of the project, and then it's up to the person who's doing the *Dead Drop* to decide what do you want to leave in there. So, there's no regulations about that. - I usually put art on them and things I just have in my current folder about pictures.

The second thing is that there's over 1,600 *Dead Drops* being made and we don't know. I don't know what's on there. So, you actually have to go and to look at them. And this is one of the parts where it's getting interesting – that there's no control about it. They're not connected to the Internet. And from experience, that's the fun part when you go to one of these and you find a collection of files which are mixed, it might be music or a computer game, but also a folder of sunset pictures from a vacation. People leave personal pictures or notes. Sometimes people create notes like, "I was here," writing writing up a little story.

And then the combination, I got to watch the Fitzcarrald, not the "Fitzcarraldo" from Werner Herzog, but the documentation about that movie which is much better than the actual movie. Yeah. And I got to see that documentation because it was one of these *Dead Drops*. And maybe that was next to a Darth Vader picture or something where you know some kids were here and left those other files. So, a lot of what you find you also maybe find on the Internet. But just the way it's combined tells this own story and it becomes very lively; connecting.

It happened I think one or twice. In Berlin, I had for a long time a *Dead Drop* in front of, at the main street, of my studio. And to bump into someone who is actually using it right now - that's happened twice. So, not really often, but yeah. It -

Kathy Rae Huffman: And I was reading in one article about *Dead Drops* that there

was one in front of a travel agency and that backpackers would leave tips on travels – you know, outside of the travel agent information, so I liked that.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah, yeah. That's very handy, too. Yeah. Yeah, it has a very local effect, in the beginning there were journalists from Brazil who said, "Yeah, this is a great idea. But you don't really, you can't do this here," or "You can't pull out your laptop in Sao Paolo like in public to connect to it." There are very different conditions for this work, and how long these *Dead Drops* last, but that's also interesting. I had to experience this last year going to Bogota twice for a project and you can't take your camera in the street. It's another -

Kathy Rae Huffman: It just will be stolen.

Aram Bartholl: Well, yeah. The probability that you will get robbed is much higher when you walk around with a Sony.

Kathy Rae Huffman: Another question? Yes? Okay. Somebody else have a question?

Peggy Weil: I'll step up. Earlier tonight, you spoke about your sons when they first came to Los Angeles and you said - very much in the spirit of your own work -

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Peggy Weil: - that while they already knew Los Angeles from Grand Theft Auto, they said, "Oh, over here by the pier are the something, and if we go over this way, we find this." And so you might have been more aware of the implications of that –

Aram Bartholl: Right. Yeah.

Peggy Weil: – given your work and what you're doing, but I wonder how you relate that to old movies. People knew L.A. before Grand Theft Auto. They knew it from all sorts of Hollywood movies and all sorts of back lots. There's a lot of work about that. So -

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Female Voice 4: Is the digital just another step from TV, from movies, from novels in how we get to know the landscape?

Aram Bartholl: Yeah, the example of L.A., there's of course this great film, "L.A. Plays Itself."

Peggy Weil: Exactly. One of my favorite films.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah. And I wish he would continue it. I would love to have his take on the computer game.

Peggy Weil: I think that's your job.

Aram Bartholl: (laughs) Well, yeah, it's my job. That's a very good example. When doing these workshops about these worlds, a lot of people, and kids, and today, also grown ups are spending time in these 3D spaces which become part of your reality. But also, when you watch TV all day, this is your reality, or if you do Facebook. I in touch with so many people at the same time today, which was not the case or not possible twenty years ago which changes the whole situation. We communicate, we

have relationships. We're aware of it because we're doing it. You know, we're talking, before we email, maybe we had a voice conversation on the phone, and there's all these different channels we're using on a very normal basis. But they have very specific qualities - how we also talk there.

What you say online and what you wouldn't say in a real life or in a face-to-face conversation. I like to take pictures or have these series of movies - this was also in one of the slides where I film when I'm on a plane or in a train that people are fiddling on the phones, playing a game on their phone next to me, and I film them while they're playing the game and they don't even notice that I'm filming them. And then I make a video series of this where we're still able to see what's going on. So, it's this private space, but it's also semi- and public space. I can tell by the colors, "Oh, yeah, this is Facebook," or "This is WhatsApp," going on your phone.

I think it's not only the game spaces, which are very 3D and it's this 3D experience now very, very much. They talk about these new glasses. And it is a different experience there. It'll take some more years to get in the market, et cetera. But we don't call it cyber space anymore, right? It's only when it's dangerous. It's cyber war and cyber warfare, blah, blah, blah. But we live already a very digitized like life in that sense. The GTA game is one example. I know from skateboarders - they told me - I don't know if that's true. Maybe you can teach me better. But you could do certain tricks in a skateboard game, people like skaters would then also do in real because they were in the game.

There are also a lot of movies now which have this first person perspective, with the hands in the screen, even the foot. What's the new one with the brother? There's one spy movie going on. It has a trailer. It looks like a computer game. So, that influence is huge there. And what I'm interested in is how the daily on the corner is still the same, maybe not in Venice where I live now because the daily is not there anymore. But we still have a roof and a house or there are still the basic needs we need to cover -

Kathy Rae Huffman: Right.

Aram Bartholl: - and that's where I try to be in that space, but have a discussion about these other questions, I think. When you talk about dating and all that direction, there's so much going on where I -

Kathy Rae Huffman: But don't you think in the last say twenty years, say, since '94 when Internet started, and it took a while before it really became part of everyday culture. But it's also affected our language and there are words now that mean something completely different because of the Internet and everybody commonly understands them as we go along. Nobody had ever heard the word net art in 1990. It didn't exist. Or New Media.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: New media meant something else. Or streaming. Streaming meant something else.

Aram Bartholl: Multimedia.

Kathy Rae Huffman: Multimedia, yeah. Hacktivism. Nobody had heard that. Hacker culture, crowdsourcing.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah, yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: There's all kinds of trending -

Aram Bartholl: Today it's even in the main usage. Like this ball player had made this tweet or –

Kathy Rae Huffman: Yeah. (laughs)

Aram Bartholl: - it's always like they told -

Kathy Rae Huffman: Tweeting.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah, yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: You can keep going, keep going.

Aram Bartholl: They pull the information from –

Kathy Rae Huffman: But our vocabulary and the way we use our language really starts in deeply after a while to –

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: – change the way we start to think? Our languages and our thinking are mutually dependent. So, there is something that's going to happen in social interaction and in -

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Kathy Rae Huffman: – in community affairs with the Internet and all of the activities that go on. And I'm just glad people can have fun in some places because it's not so often.

Aram Bartholl: Right. Right.

Female Voice 3: And even though it's serious, it's still fun, so.

Female Voice 1: Any other questions? Good. Stream and cloud have come back -

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Female Voice 1: - and what they mean.

Kathy Rae Huffman: - hypertext, tagging...

Female Voice 5: Your work is a lot about engaging the audience. It's about - it's basically performance art where the user is the performer. What do you think happens to work where the audience does not engage? Is it alive? Does it succeed?

Aram Bartholl: Yeah.

Female Voice 5: And are there techniques in which you can engage the audience more?

Aram Bartholl: With the *Dead Drops* example, I came to New York and I stepped out of the plane and felt sick for a week and I had only a limited time to do stuff. And then I do this little project I know that I wanted to do. I already knew, but I had much bigger ideas. And then that this little project turns out to be that hit, or went viral pretty quickly. And so you never know. On one hand, you never know. And so as an artist, "How's this idea going to evolve or take place?" You can't really predict. Sometimes you

have been working very long on this great thing and then it never really takes off or it doesn't work in the way you expected it to.

For example, the USB as a technical port, this computer still has some, but the latest Apple devices don't have USB anymore, right? So, Wi-Fi is maybe is gone in five or ten years? So, obviously there's a date like 'consume best before.' This art needs to be consumed best before 2015. But for me, it's the Google Map marker. Like this was 2006. So, ten years ago Google bought the company in 2005 and it was still this mapping service, very new. Not a lot of people knew about it and today it's in our everyday life; totally integrated. So, these works, even *Speed Show* is like that - that was going on a lot in 2010, '11, '12, and then it fell silent. Recently there was one in Hong Kong and in Sweden.

So, sometimes it picks up. You never know. And for me, the work is still a valid work. And then we come back to the question of the documentation. Even with *Dead Drops*, it's the case is that most people know that project through an article or through pictures, but have never been actually using it. There's more communication about it than actually taking part literally in that piece. So this is maybe the moment where I'm in a paradox of work. I do all these interventions just in the city and it's about computers and Internet and then I put them back on the Internet - (laughs) on my website, et cetera, and then they circulate there again.

So, well, yeah. It's just how it goes and also today I was discussing with the grad students now how they make art. And I made that tweet a few days ago, this could be a title for an essay. "The influence of Google image search on today's art production," right? , they go to Google image search, and you put in an artist's name, and then boom, you have the past ten shows, "Oh, yeah. How did she do this, this?" and then it's really fast how these influence and movements go. And then, now you have to lean your screen on the wall, and it needs to be vertical, right? Maybe this has always been the

case with the influence on each other and movements and generations, but it's particularly now, it's really fast and very much how we see all the art online, it's very strong.

Kathy Rae Huffman: You know, in the early days of video, artists had a feeling that what they were doing was going to change the world. It was gonna make it a better place. It was gonna be more. And then Internet artists had similar feelings in the '90s. Does that still exist? Is there still a community of people who are working in this direction?

Aram Bartholl: Well, there's all these different generations and off springs from what this is based on; we can also name the post-Internet generation, and this generation, and the one before, and now what's after. And they relate in other ways to these questions. And the foundation is very much the same, I would think. There is activist art, and now we have a 100 years of data. And I just saw that report on YouTube the other night about the cybernetics movement in the '50s and '60s, and then what's still like today such as the Yes Men and other groups who do more activist approaches. I'm sure there are people out there making art addressing these issues with the idea of changing things.

Kathy Rae Huffman: For the better. (laughs)

Aram Bartholl: (laughs) That's what artists always like to believe, yeah.

Female Voice 5: So, what is the difference between art and social commentary?

Aram Bartholl: I attended a panel discussion in Berlin where there was this artist's group, Political Beauty, in Germany who were doing a activist interventions and

then people responded, "Oh, this is not art, this is activism." I think it is always a good sign when people say this is not art. Then you know (laughs) you hit it on the right spot. Also on the Internet when people comment on YouTube like, "Oh, this is all crap," then you know you (laughs) –

Kathy Rae Huffman: You're going somewhere.

Aram Bartholl: Yeah. Somebody took their time to write this comment because they got so angry because something seemed wrong. I think it's in this world today, it's probably good to have all kinds of wakeup calls from different directions - what's going on and if it's commentary or activism. Personally, I know there's artists who have a very particular way of creating the drama but also the spectacle or make it in a way you get in the news for sure. Ai Weiwei laying down at the beach, right? You all saw that? That's like, "Oh. Like why? You really need to do this?" So it has moments where it's, "Yeah, this is too much." But I would think it's besides the other questions of dimension, material, "What's the edition? Can I buy it?" I think it's important to have other issues to address.

Kathy Rae Huffman: Thanks, everybody.

End of recording.