

On the Platform's Ruins: Practicing a Poetics of Obsolescence

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Abstract:

Visual artists, writers, and other cultural producers have long leveraged networked technologies to establish platforms that circulate cultural products in participatory contexts intentionally distinct from cultural institutions. As technologies change over time—including deprecated plugins, changes to HTML, and linkrot—these platforms fall into various states of decay. In this paper, I examine an example of a platform, the Net Art Latino Database (1999-2004), an effort to document net-based artworks vulnerable to obsolescence that overall stands as a precarious monument to an earlier era of digital culture. As the platform slowly falls out of joint with current web technologies, the Database illustrates practices of cultural production that respond to the decay of the very technologies being used.

The Net Art Latino Database was initiated by the Uruguayan digital artist Brian Mackern to compile examples of net art activity by Latinx artists, working at the periphery of English-language dominant net art communities. The Database functions as an art platform in the sense offered by Olga Goriunova: a dynamic configuration of people and technologies amplifying new kinds of creative activities that push beyond the boundaries of existing categories of cultural production. As Goriunova's theorization of art platforms suggests, the lines between categories like 'net art' and 'electronic literature' are often blurry, as artists and writers deploy the same technologies and pursue similar aesthetic strategies to circulate digital cultural production online.

While the Database catalogs principally digital visual artworks, it is instructive to think about this platform in the context of electronic literature specifically. First, the Database documents works that function expressly as electronic literature, including listings for e-zines. More fundamentally, though, the Database can be read as a work of electronic literature. Coded by

hand in HTML, Mackern's work exemplifies the scribal practices that were the foundation of early Web culture. The text-based work consists entirely of descriptions of other artworks and links to other projects. These sites are frequently located under the top-level domains of Central or South American countries, though many are no longer active, and these defunct sites are rarely captured in public web archives. As such, the Database serves an ekphrastic function, evoking multimedia artworks that no longer readily circulate online—and may no longer materially exist beyond this description.

I approach this analysis from the discipline of library and information science (LIS). A deeper understanding of Mackern's artistic and curatorial practices can help to shape professional perspectives on the preservation of net art, electronic literature, and digital cultural production more generally. Unlike a traditional institutional repository, the diverse artworks included in the database are documented as part of a living, interconnected media ecology. Rather than adaptively preserving individual works through migration to new technological environments, Mackern's Database enacts a poetics of obsolescence, carefully stewarding works on a platform built with the recognition of its own fragility.

Keywords: digital preservation | net art | obsolescence | early web culture

Article:

Platforms are built crumbling

Visual artists, writers, and other cultural producers have long leveraged networked technologies to establish platforms that circulate cultural products in participatory contexts intentionally distinct from cultural institutions. In part, these platforms promise cultural producers the potential to distribute works broadly and on their own terms, beyond the reach of a museum and beyond the purview of a publisher. For instance, Carl Loeffler frames the Art Com Electronic Network, a pre-Web example of an “electronic gathering place” for artists to share digital art projects, as “an alternative to exclusivity in the arts, by inviting collaboration among individuals from all walks of life” (321). But along with the promises of working at the periphery come the risks of exclusion and obscurity. These conditions have long been the norm for cultural producers engaged with digital technologies, with work featured in specialized ‘new media’ spheres largely ignored by mainstream art worlds. Writing in 2012, Claire Bishop describes this paradoxical situation, in which digital and networked technologies have radically reshaped social and cultural life in countless ways, and yet artworks thematizing these issues remain on the outskirts (436).

This tide is perhaps finally shifting, or rather has been unavoidably and apocalyptically overcome by the tsunami of the Covid-19 pandemic that has forced all sectors of society to confront the realities of the immanently networked world. As arts institutions scramble to contrive their own online arts platforms that maintain a virtual veneer of prestige, Artie Vierkant reminds us that there is a long history of artist-driven platforms to inform a radical refashioning of the art world. Here, though, is another risk of working at the periphery: obsolescence. As hyperlinks rot and plug-ins deprecate, the history of artist-driven platforms resides in memories and screenshots. Verena Kuni notes that while arts institutions have (occasionally) paid attention to ‘new media’ art, they have largely not paid the ongoing costs needed to maintain this body of

artistic heritage over the long-term: “that many early works were not documented in time with the available art-historical tools turns out to be an existential problem, primarily for an art history that aspires to be worthy of its name” (194-5). The archives of digital culture are inherently lossy.

Artists have learned not to rely on these institutions for the preservation of their cultural memory, lessons gleaned from working on the periphery. Annet Dekker considers how “networks of care,” formed by audiences, other artists, and small organizations, can be crucial for stewarding works over time (89). However, these cooperative efforts require resources—time, technical expertise, labor, and money—to work against the fast onset of obsolescence. Artists exploring novel creative possibilities of the latest digital technologies are often quickly forced onto the ‘upgrade path.’ Terry Harpold discusses the many challenges of accessing older works of electronic literature from a scholar’s perspective (4-7), and artists and cultural producers negotiate similar challenges as they struggle to preserve personal digital archives documenting their careers. For online art platforms, which function only through the careful coordination of technological dependencies, the infrastructure is crumbling from the start.

Preservation immanent to creation

The significance of online art platforms in the creation and curation of digital culture outside the walls of traditional institutions makes it imperative to understand how cultural producers themselves approach preservation. Given the rapid rate of technological obsolescence, preservation can become immanent to creation, an integral part of staging platforms from the first. The Netart Latino Database (2000-2005),¹ a platform created by Uruguayan artist Brian Mackern to document net-based artworks by Latinx artists, provides an illustrative example (see figs. 1 and 2). Over the course of a half-decade, Mackern amassed numerous examples of Latin American net art and e-lit and compiled them into a public-facing website. Essentially a descriptive list of these creative projects coded in straightforward Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), the Database now stands as a precarious monument to an earlier era of digital culture—many of the links to these projects have since rotted, though Mackern’s curation-as-creative practice has left a record of these defunct artworks.

In an artist’s book and accompanying collection of essays, curator Nilo Casares narrates a tour of the Database guided by Mackern. Browsing in 2009, just four years after Mackern stopped actively updating the *Database*, the pair encounter many dead-ends: 404 error messages or projects that no longer function on current browsers. For instance, *Influenza’s Skin* (2002) by Rafael Marchetti required a deprecated Quicktime plug-in and did not work in 2009; today, the server hosting the work is no longer located at the URL listed in the *Database*. This particular work has left other traces on the Web—a catalog record in the runme.org software art registry,² a blurb and blurry screenshot from an online exhibition featuring the work³—but all point back to the same aimless link. Putting these pieces together, we can arrive at an effaced ekphrasis: an experience of “*contaminación comunicativa*,” an entropic system that causes layers of noisy interference to seep across application windows, a browser virus that impedes the expected ‘user experience’ but instead prompts altered reading practices.⁴ Perhaps fitting for a work that enacts a breakdown of the browser interface as a kind of contamination, the virus has been thoroughly contained within obsolesced technologies.

The current state of *Influenza’s Skin* exemplifies that of many of the other projects included in the *Database*. Some URLs still successfully resolve, leading to functioning artworks.

In *Sanctu* (1999) by Brazilian artist Celso Reeks, a project that does continue to work on current web browsers, viewers navigate through polychromatic collages made from clip art saints in order to arrive at a disquieting error message: “Url ‘god’ not found on server.”⁵ For the more mundane broken links, Mackern’s descriptive notes provide evocative if woefully incomplete information for net-based artworks often left unmentioned in art historical studies and museum exhibitions of this crucial period of web culture.

If net-based art has circulated on the periphery of the mainstream art world, Latinx net art has been even further marginalized. Mackern describes this broad exclusion as a major impetus of the project, as a response to the “very obvious northern-centralist slant” to the academic and institutional discourse emerging around net-based in the late 90s (142). The same handful of North American and European artists feature in conversations sustained through North American and European art communities and organizations. Prompted by Mackern’s documentation of *Influenza’s Skin*, I can place this work with other “artist’s browsers,” like *The Web Stalker* by the British collective I/O/D, that have been more thoroughly discussed in major studies of digital art (Paul, 117-120). Similar to these browser artworks, *Influenza’s Skin* intervenes at the level of the interface, interrupting familiar paradigms of interaction and pushing viewers to grapple with alternative metaphors for networked information beyond the electronic page. Although the body of the artwork is no longer accessible, the *Database* holds this shadow of metaphor, an “image of potentiality” that, as Belinda Barnet argues, can inform our understanding of technology in the present and future (5).

In addition to creating a record of net-based artworks that have not been thoroughly documented or discussed otherwise, Mackern’s *Database* importantly places these works in a broader geopolitical and cultural context of Latin America. Mackern signals this intent to represent a distinctly Latinx web culture both in the name of the project as well as the organizational principle of grouping artworks together by country of origin. As Lila Pagola observes, Mackern’s ASCII rendition of Joaquín Torres García’s inverted map of America (1943) serves as an immediate visual indication of the driving motivation to center Latinx artists (see fig. 1) (36). Viewers begin their journey through the *Database* with a map on which country-code top-level domains name the nation-states. Clicking on the URL .AR, for example, takes the viewer to the list of artworks by Argentinian artists. The viewer sees *Influenza’s Skin*, for instance, placed among other Argentinian net-based artworks, and from Mackern’s ‘travel notes,’ the viewer learns that Marchetti was actually living in Brazil at the time of making the work. These contextual details, while scant, build out the shadow of metaphor, adding depth—in short, a history—and offering details that current viewers can pursue in their media archaeological excavation of this net-based artwork.

Still, Pagola questions what it means for net art of any kind to be ‘from’ a place. The global promise of the World Wide Web is in its name, and this goal of the Web is an aim of networked technologies more generally: to circulate information broadly rather than situate it specifically. In her study of locality in Latin American net art, Claire Taylor points out that networked technologies may challenge and transform our understandings of geography and place, but “this does not mean that place is erased altogether” (4). Taylor argues that offline places feature prominently in Latin American digital culture in particular, with Latinx net artists often taking up digital technologies to tactically counter dominant representations of contested spaces using the very tools deployed by imperial and capitalist forces (11-12). While not explicitly political in its intent, the *Database* does undertake this kind of reterritorialization, mapping the social relationships of a network of artists with shared geopolitical affinities on top

of a network of webpages and servers (Mackern and Baigorri 80). Just as many of the webpages have moved to new URLs or ceased to exist altogether, the Database is a map of these social relations at a particular time, although the contours of the networked terrain may have since changed beyond recognition.

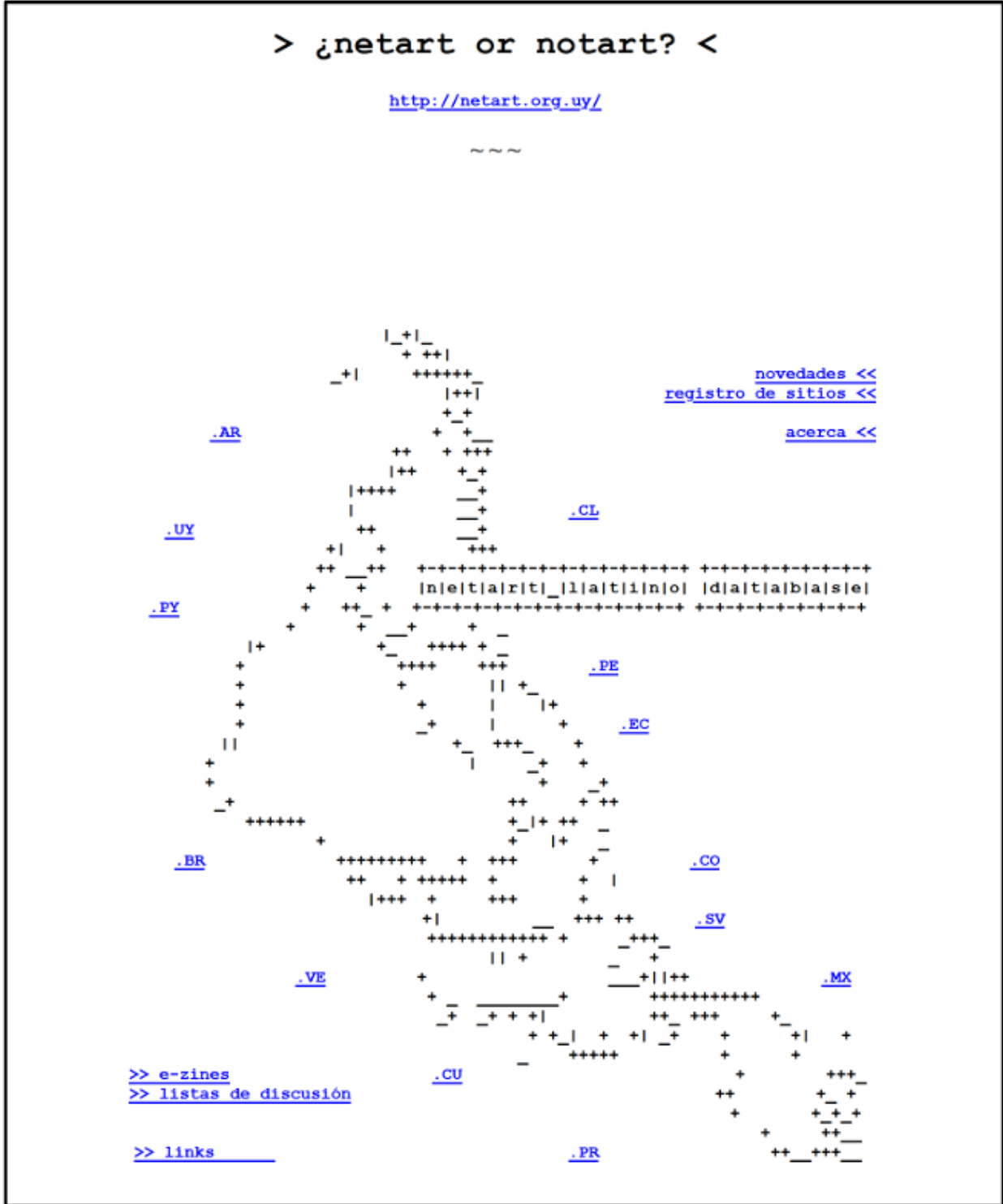


Figure 1 Brian Mackern. netart latino database, 2000-2005. Website. Available from: <http://netart.org.uy/latino/index.html> (accessed April 21, 2021). Used with permission of the artist.

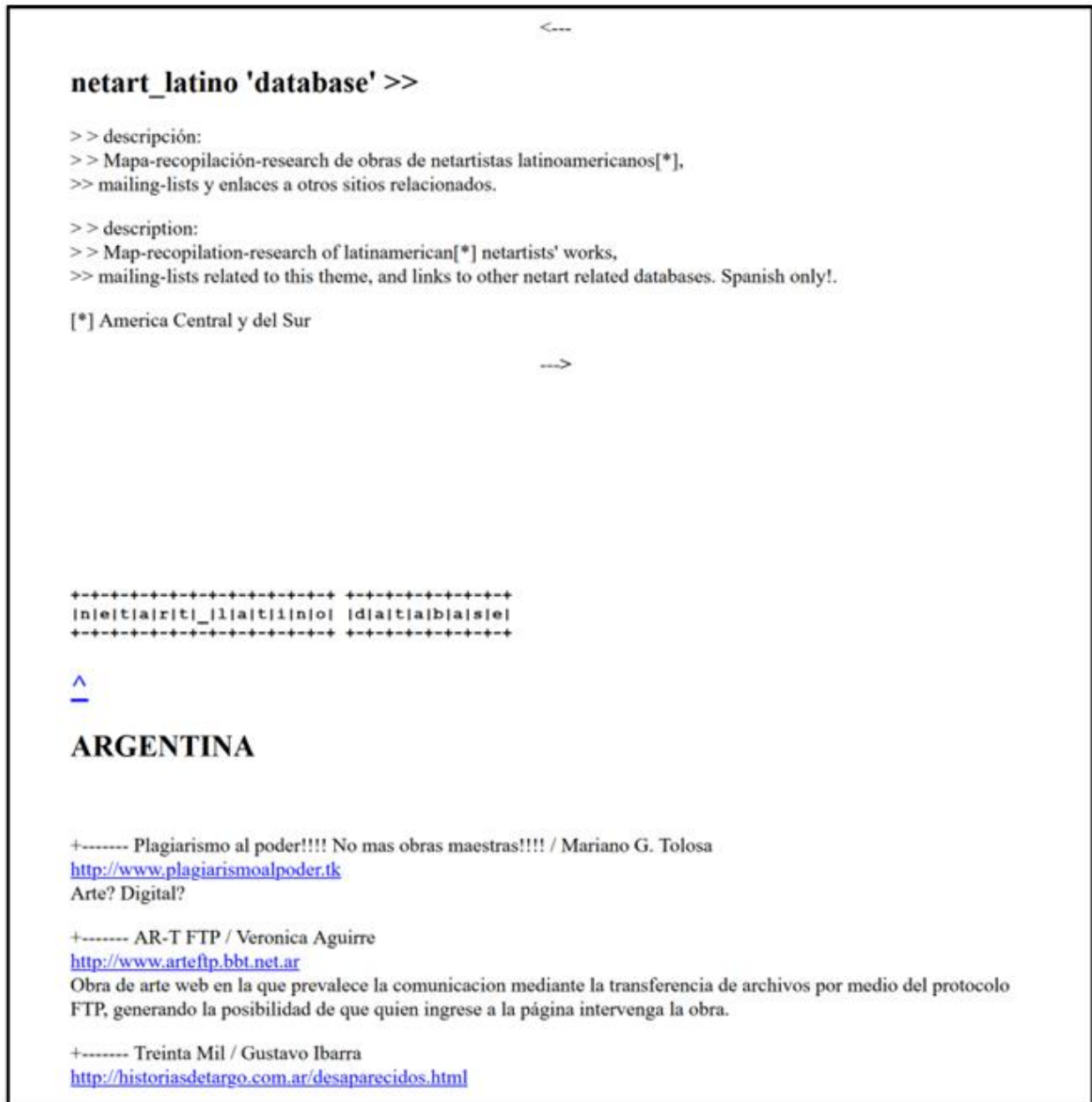


Figure 2 Brian Mackern. netart latino database, 2000-2005. Website. Available from: <http://netart.org.uy/latino/index.html> (accessed April 21, 2021). Used with permission of the artist.

Platform of scribal practices

As well as a map, we can also think about Mackern's *Database* as a platform. In the popular lexicon, this term brings to mind social media services like Twitter and Instagram:

online spaces that provide users with tools for creating and sharing content. Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort, leading scholars in platform studies, adopt a broader view of computational platforms as systems that provide bases for creativity and cultural production. The *Database* does not fit especially well with either of these definitions, as it is an effort of a single creator and was not built for a particular piece of hardware or software; but I would argue that we can understand this artwork as a platform in that it brings together diverse strains of cultural production into a shared space, generating new resonances across the works the process. In a word, Mackern's curation constitutes this as a platform.

This emphasis on curation is also found in Olga Goriunova's description of online art platforms as "experiments in the aesthetics of organization" (9). For Goriunova, art platforms are not necessarily defined by any specific piece of hardware or software (though they can take these forms), but rather by an organizational aesthetics that emerges from living, fluctuating assemblages of human and machine elements, all working together to amplify creative efforts to point of "brilliance" (20). More than a definition, Goriunova provides a theoretical framework for understanding platforms as participating in processes of cultural production. As with the *Database*, examples that Goriunova uses to illustrate her theory, like the runme.org software repository,⁶ cull together and classify digital cultural products that skirt traditional fine arts genres and occupy the margins (if recognized at all) of mainstream art worlds. Devising such an organizational scheme is itself creative, and this scheme, in turn, helps to shape the aesthetic experience of the constituent works. Describing the *Database* as an art platform serves to highlight the curatorial effort driving the project, which is to legitimize Latinx digital culture by preserving it from precarity.

The *Database* reflects an attention to the fragility of digital technology that is apparent across Mackern's body of work. For instance, in a contemporaneous work *La Máquina Podrida* (*The Rotten Machine*) (1999-2004), Mackern preserves his aging laptop containing a vast archives of his own digital output interleaved with numerous files from projects by artistic friends and collaborators.⁷ The *Database* is outward-facing corollary to *La Máquina*, curating a public rather than private directory of digital artworks, though both foreground the extensive labor required to maintain creative work in digital formats against technological obsolescence. A visitor to the *Database* need pause for only a moment to recognize the scope of this work as they browse entry after entry in a long-scrolling list of Latinx net art projects that Mackern has personally encountered on the Web and then documented, with details of each artwork encoded with care in HTML.

In part, the 'low-tech' aesthetic of a hand-coded HTML page reflects disparities in technological access between the Global North and South, which Mackern himself describes as encouraging a "craftsman-like way of handling things to find the best possible solution with the resources at hand" (Mackern and Baigorri 76). A simple HTML page of text and links would have loaded quickly and cheaply in Latin American Internet Cafes or on low bandwidth home connections. But this "manual personalization" of "prehistoric resource spaces" evident in the *Database* evokes an earlier era of web culture more broadly (Mackern 159), recalling the late 90s homepages and other experiments in HTML that net artist Olia Lialina describes as a "vernacular web." Like a scribe constructing a manuscript page, these early web users crafted their sites from a hard-won, intimate knowledge of technologies of production. Both in its own making and in the projects documented, the *Database* is a platform of scribal practices.

Perhaps adopted out of necessity, as the best use of the tools at hand, this 'low-tech' approach to curating the *Database* has also helped the platform to withstand 20 years of

technological obsolescence. As discussed above, many of the featured artworks projects have succumbed to this erosive force even as the overall platform persists in essentially the same form on current browsers as it would have appeared on Netscape Navigator. For instance, a version of the *Database* rendered in a Netscape Navigator 4 emulator betrays no significant differences in structure, user interaction, or content (see fig. 3).⁸ As the platform is fundamentally a descriptive list, its contents can be readily un-digitized as well, translated into a more stable paper format. Mackern collaborated with the Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo in Badajoz, Spain to produce such an artist's book documenting the project.

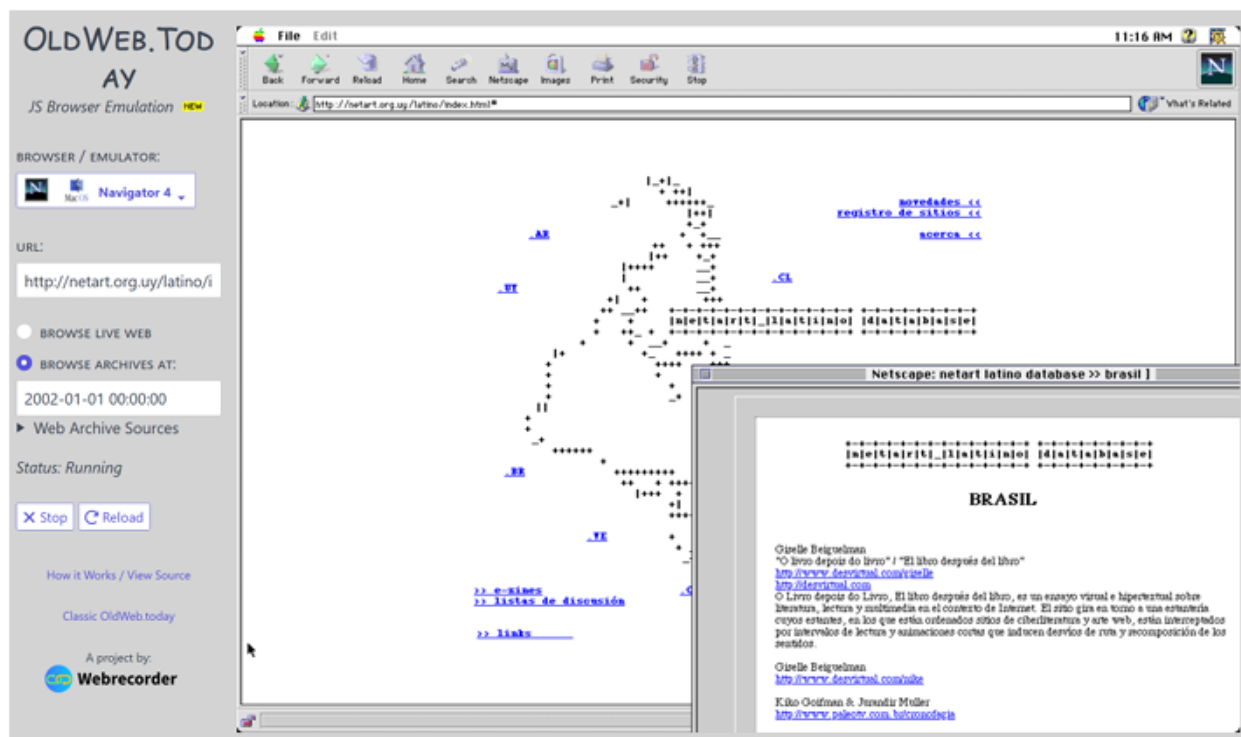


Figure 3 Screenshot of the Database on a Netscape Navigator 4 emulator.

I have consulted a re-digitized PDF copy of this book, and I have cited the accompanying essays frequently throughout the present paper, though this has been an imperfect experience of the analog object. Josephine Bosma notes from her interactions with a physical copy how a dot-matrix print-out of the *Database* spills out as a manifest scroll from the cardboard binding of the book (121). An interested viewer could perform their own printing at home: the entirety of the *Database* fills 42 8½x11-inch pages. These paper versions convey distinct and valuable experiences of the artwork, but they do put the *Database* at an even further remove from the network of artists the platform serves to document. Attempting to tap a link on a print-out will not even get as far as a 404 error, I must sadly report. These retrograde preservation approaches are illustrations of the platform's resilience, though not (as of yet) necessary to maintain immediate access to the project, which can still be visited at its original URL by essentially any Internet-connected device anywhere in the world.

To study disrepair

The scribal practices fundamental to the platform's construction make possible this versatile translation across print and digital media. Though Mackern's *Database* has often been discussed in terms of the visual arts, the writerly activities driving the platform—ekphrastic description, history, elegy—suggest connections between net art and e-lit of the early Web era that have not been thoroughly explored. The *Database* can itself be read now as a work of hypertext, a parable of the Garden of Dead-Ends. A critical concern shared by both net art and web-based e-lit is that it all faces serious threats to preservation, dependent as it is on a dynamic Internet infrastructure that becomes increasingly alien to the networked ecosystem of this earlier era with each passing year. For much of this era of web culture, we confront what Stuart Moulthrop and Dene Grigar call the “Sappho Syndrome,” grasping toward more holistic experiences of past works through fragments and secondary references (230).

This “Sappho Syndrome” is not just a future threat—nor is it even an especially novel condition afflicting web culture—as we can see Mackern himself was battling against this loss of Latinx net art even while he was constructing the *Database* some twenty years ago. That the platform persists today even as many of the featured works have decayed speaks to the immense effort Mackern exerted in its curation and construction. In fact, the amount of (volunteered and unremunerated) labor required to update and maintain the *Database* became untenable and contributed to Mackern's decision to abandon the project (Mackern and Baigorrri 80). Scholars and professional memory workers concerned with digital culture are well served to study disrepair, first understanding how artists often undertake difficult preservation labor to maintain artworks in varying states of dilapidation as part of the creative process.

The *Database* embodies such a poetics of obsolescence as Mackern weaves alreadydeteriorating technologies into the foundation of the platform. Though the work falls apart, it was built crumbling. Despite its digital nature, the *Database* does not adhere to the particular binary logic of inactive/active. Instead, it crumbles to pieces over time, without any single technological shift precipitating utter collapse. Though I am not advocating that, in all cases, we should simply step back and appreciate the ruins, this poetics of obsolescence can inform preservation approaches more generally. Given that online art platforms like the *Database* exist in networked ecologies that cut across or totally outside traditional cultural heritage institutions, professional memory workers will need to adapt conservation strategies that resemble the constructive curation practices employed by artists like Mackern. The *Netart Latino Database* is a handbook for just this purpose.

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Notes

1 <http://netart.org.uy/latino/index.html>

2 <http://runme.org/project/+influenzaskin/>

3 <http://netescopio.meiac.es/muestras/intrusiones-e/04.htm>

4 This description is stitched together from the cited sources, and the quoted "contaminación comunicativa," or communicative contamination, is taken directly from Mackern's entry for the work on the Database.

5 <https://distopia.com/sanctu/index.html>

6 <http://runme.org/>

7 <http://podrida.netart.org.uy/>. This laptop has been collected by the Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo in Badajoz, Spain, which also maintains a mirror of the Database.

8 I used oldweb.today for this emulation. OldWeb.Today is part of a suite of free and open-source web archiving tools made available by Webrecorder. OldWeb.Today emulates a range of classic web browsers directly inside a current browser environment.