The New York Times

Technology

ARTS ONLINE; Your Life Is in Your Computer, for Everyone to See

By Matthew Mirapaul
Published: April 16, 2001

⊠ SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

🖶 PRINT

The music files stored on a computer can reveal a lot about its owner. A hard disk full of Eminem songs might indicate a rebellious teenager, while several albums' worth of 'N Sync tunes might suggest a listener with a slightly more romantic outlook.

A couple who call themselves Renato Pasopiani and Tania Copechi, young Italian artists whose medium is the Internet, want you to know much more about them than what can be deduced from the musical selections on their computer. For their latest project, "Life Sharing," they are using the Internet to offer nearly total access to their computer, which they say represents their lives.

"We don't have emotions; we have a Hewlett-Packard," Mr. Pasopiani said with a laugh during a telephone interview from the one-room apartment the couple share in Bologna.

Living so publicly online is a form of performance art in the digital age. Visitors to their Web site, www.0100101110101101.org, are greeted by the message "Now you are in my computer." A one-page index appears, its functional look belying the radical experiment in online openness that "Life Sharing" is. Except for a few sensitive files, like those that might allow the project to be erased, the machine's contents -- software, e-mails, even error messages -- are available to everyone in a hodgepodge of languages.

That means copies of the computer's operating system and other programs can be downloaded. More significant, written documents can be read as works in progress, and an e-mail archive divulges the couple's correspondence, which ranges from banal exchanges to an ongoing account of their role in the upcoming Venice Biennale.

"Life Sharing" is Napster writ as big as life. The project's name is an anagram for file sharing, the process underlying Napster and other music-swapping programs. But while Napster users might retrieve an Eminem song file from a distant hard drive, they are technically prevented, in theory, anyway, from exploring the more personal material locked in the source's computer.

"Life Sharing" removes those barriers, and if the notion of a snoop in your system sends a chill down your spine, that is one of the points it makes. As privacy becomes an intense concern, it is not just raw data that is at risk of being exposed. "The more you work on a computer," Ms. Copechi said. "the more it looks like your brain."

You are what your computer processes, and since Jan. 1, the online life of Mr. Pasopiani and Ms. Copechi has been an open e-book. For example, he said, they have been approached by "people we'd never met that knew everything about us."

The couple, who are in their 20's, are undaunted by this level of intimacy. "After the first period, you get used to people reading your e-mails or looking at your projects," Mr. Pasopiani said. And there is more information to come: they are planning to add a history of their credit-card transactions and a record of their mobile-phone calls.

If this sounds exhibitionistic, it must be said that the computer-lab appearance of ''Life Sharing'' holds none of the prurient allure of Web sites that transmit images of their owners' quotidian activities. ''We are not interested in the spectacular part of the violation of privacy, putting Web cameras in our room,'' Mr. Pasopiani said. ''Our idea is more concerned with the amount of information that can be found about a person in the present society.''

Despite this cautionary note, the project is meant to illustrate a utopian alternative to living online behind a wall of digital defenses. The couple champion the open-source computing movement, which is based on freely available, communally developed software instead of commercial products.

As copyright holders struggle to preserve the integrity of their intellectual property on the Internet, the artists are offering their creative activities to all comers, with no fees involved. Because the programs on their computer are openly available across the Net, copyrights are not violated when they are downloaded.

Defenders of copyright law argue that abolishing intellectual property online would impoverish artists. Nonetheless, Mr. Pasopiani reports that despite not being paid for the content on their site, he and his partner make their living from their creative work. A review of their e-mail archive shows that the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis paid $5,000 to commission ''Life Sharing'' as well as $4,000 for technical expenses.

Steve Dietz, the director of new-media initiatives at the Walker, compared the ''Life Sharing'' project to the architect Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Conn., with its floor-to-ceiling windows and open floor plan. Mr. Dietz said: ''This is open-source living in the digital age. It's making a political statement about ownership and commercialism. It's not just about viewing. Not only can you see in, but you can use the plans yourself.''

He added: ''Net art has always been centered around the idea of appropriating the institutionalized system for the artist's own purposes, and that's clearly what they're doing.''

Still, the lives of Mr. Pasopiani and Ms. Copechi are not as open for sharing as they might seem. For one thing, the names are pseudonyms, which are changed from project to project. Mr. Pasopiani refused to confirm that any of the other names that can be found in the e-mail archive were his, opting to maintain his anonymity. He said, ''We hate the idea of artistic individuality.''

0100101110101101.org is a sequence they say was chosen randomly but which translates as ''4BAD'' in the arcane hexadecimal computer code. Mr. Pasopiani said this was an unfortunate coincidence. Their early projects often involved the unauthorized copying of digital-art sites, and they did acquire something of a roguish reputation.

Now that they are trying to live like model Internet citizens, they have become the victims of bad-boy behavior. Last month an unknown troublemaker tried to use information from their computer to capture its Web address, a form of identity theft. Mr. Pasopiani was more amused than annoyed: ''If we make just a very small mistake, we immediately have somebody who is trying to attack us. This is a work in progress.''

The idea of the work as an ongoing process appealed to Mr. Dietz, who sees ''Life Sharing'' as a digital-era descendant of such duration-art performances as that of Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh, who spent a year in the 1980's tied together. He also likened the work's autobiographical elements to the daily writings of the artist Hanne Darboven.

The ''Life Sharing'' couple have no plans to end the project. For them it is a purer use of the online medium than interactive works that resemble more traditional pieces of visual art.

''This is the beauty of a computer,'' Mr. Pasopiani said. ''It's not the colors or the flashy stuff. It's the functionality. How data goes from one point to another, how software interacts, even the bugs: this is the real Net art.''