

Webbed Spaces: Between Exhibition and Network

Organizers:

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Panelists:

Ken Feingold, School of Visual Arts
Stelarc, Artist, Sydney, Australia
Lorne Falk, Consultant, Los Angeles
Laura Kurgan, University of Pennsylvania

Artists, curators and theorists, each using the Internet in their own practice, will discuss works that emphasize public installation and multi-user approaches, using these works points of departure to begin a critical discussion of the Internet and its implications for artmaking, representation, and interactivity.

Panel Overview

The Internet (and in particular the World Wide Web) has seen unprecedented growth in the last several years. What started as a mode of communication linking remote sites has become a new public arena. As the Internet continues to mushroom, it is continuously accruing new technological capabilities, such as VRML, Java, graphical MOOs and MUDs, CU-SeeMe and the Mbone. As a result, a variety of cultural entities are beginning to gravitate towards it, including galleries, artists, and public institutions. Because the explosion of the Internet has been so sudden, and because its growth has been accompanied by a huge measure of real excitement as well as calculated hype, there has been little critical discussion of emerging cultural practices in this new realm.

By bringing together artists, curators and theorists, each of whom is actively engaged with the Internet, "Webbed Spaces" will focus on the ramifications of the newly-expanded Internet for artmaking practices, addressing the following issues:

- How can two very different "publics" – one physically present, the other tele-present – be brought into relation to one another? What characteristics distinguish one public from the other? What kinds of interaction become possible between them?
- Is the way the Internet serves to connect geographically distant individuals at the same time that it de-emphasizes physical contact an inevitable consequence of online communication? Does "wired intimacy" go hand in hand with "wired isolation?" What are the ramifications of being wired?
- To what extent is the Internet creating new forms and forums for artmaking, and to what extent is it altering (or merely replacing) existing ones? Should we consider the Internet a new medium? If so, what are its specific characteristics? What is the critical language that can be used to represent it?
- What are the implications of webbed and hybrid work for visual representation, experience, and interactivity?
- How can the Internet be used to extend the fixed space of galleries and other exhibition venues?
- The rhetoric of the Internet often makes the assumption that everything is instantly accessible everywhere to everyone. What are the ramifications of this assumption, especially for the incubation and dissemination of new work? And, despite this rhetoric, what things, places, and people remain excluded, and why?

Lorne Falk Brave New Audience

The audience for this presentation involves real people living in telepresent neighborhoods, live buildings, and hot rooms. Wired and unwired people in digital niches – a brave new audience. I want to map

some of the attributes of this brave new audience in a way that subjectively maps the desires of the people who comprise it.

A keyword is symbiosis. There is a new kind of symbiosis – in the broadest terms, how real and artificial organisms live attached to one another (or one as a tenant of the other) and contribute to each other's support. As an attribute of the brave new audience, symbiosis doesn't negatively contrast different kinds of presence. It recognizes the interrelations between the physical and digital as something mutually beneficial and natural to do. This is both adventurous and consequential – hence, brave.

Physical and digital audiences are, for example, able to interact with one another as a consequence of the (creative) environments they find themselves in. They also eagerly interact with these environments. They have a powerful motivation: the concept of the original, which has dominated aesthetics for most of the twentieth century, is no longer relevant. Instead, the aspiration is to create (spaces) whose identities are infinitely malleable and fully shared with the audience. The brave new audience is encouraged to construct new rules for social conduct, revise concepts of social integration, and even imagine an aesthetics of community unlike what we're used to. In other words, there is an ethical dimension to their behavior. What happens when a creative space is unable to let go of the notion of the original enough to allow the audience to reform or transform, if not the whole space, at least some significant aspect of it?

Ken Feingold Shared Virtual Environments as/and Art Spaces

This presentation will discuss the evolution of Shared Virtual Environments on the Internet as social environments, spaces for artmaking, and their intersection with actual shared environments. I will assert that it is not information which drives the social and aesthetic experience of using the 'Net, but rather communication with others, the ability to experience extended powers in the physical world, and a suspension of normal formations of "identity;" and that the underlying goal of many works created for the 'Net is not in their widespread distribution, but rather their ability to create linked spaces which are inhabited simultaneously by people in diverse physical locations, and their ability to bridge physical spaces and virtual spaces. I will discuss and develop the idea of such uses of the 'Net as liminal spaces, and discuss notions of personal agency, fantasy, and magic in these spaces, as grounding ideas upon which some recent works of art are being created.

I will discuss the development from text-based MOOs and MUDs and early artists' experiments in their uses as public performance spaces, to my recent experiments using the Mbone to create hybrid actual/virtual spaces in which remote participants meet as telerobotically controlled puppets. I will discuss the social and expressive limits of "uninhabited spaces," such as "publishing" on the 'Web, CGI-driven "interaction," and VRML 1.x, contrasting these with emerging forms such as VRML 2.0 and "The Palace," in which virtual environments are inhabited simultaneously by communicating participants. Further, I will explore the possibility that art is fundamentally related to the human body and physical space, and discuss the relevance of this notion to the topic.

Laura Kurgan
You Are Here: The World Wide Web

As it exists now, the Web gives us a lot to think about in the way of architecture's relation to interface, networks, and data flows. As an environment, the Web incorporates many and diverse spaces within its own very specific limitations. It can be used to illustrate examples of utopian spaces where people can exchange identities, morph their bodies, or form communities; or it can be used by local transportation authorities to upload information from traffic surveillance camera sites on freeways to visualize traffic flows, so that a commuter can see where the traffic jams are located. The interfaces are as diverse as the spaces implied by them.

Whatever the scenario, the Web has become obsessed with mapping itself – from corporate sponsors trying to get profiles and numbers of their users (and a site can capture quite a lot about the user instantly), in order to decide whether this is truly a profitable environment, to speculative mappers of self-organizing systems trying to visualize the constantly changing environments of the links in their home pages, to sites which try to locate the geographical position of their users on a map, to events which are designed to construct a map of those providing input to the site.

What's interesting (precisely because it's so unsatisfying) about most of these representations is their imposition of conventional architectures, and the conventional language of maps, to orient and draw familiar pictures of such an unfamiliar space. Why does it make a difference at what longitude and latitude the server is located? Although they often produce interesting superimpositions of different representational grids, these projects – like so many of Web maps – seem strangely unconscious of their own condition: the map of the Web is on the Web. Their limit is, simply, the inability to find an outside in Web space. In the end, no matter how totalizing the representation of the site wants to be, it's just another address on the Web. No one site dominates another... not just because the Web is decentralized, but because of the paradoxical spatial structure implied: inside and outside are no longer separated by anything like a solid boundary, or a wall.

Stelarc
Fractal Flesh

Consider a body of FRACTAL FLESH, a body whose agency can be electronically extruded on the Net – from one body to another body elsewhere. Not a kind of Cyber-Voodoo. Not of remote control, but of DISPLACING MOTIONS from one physical body to another physical body Net-connected. Such a body's awareness would neither be "all-here" nor "all-there." Awareness and action would slide and shift between bodies. Agency could be shared in the one body or in a multiplicity of bodies in an ELECTRONIC SPACE OF DISTRIBUTED INTELLIGENCE...

Imagine a body directly wired into the Net – a body that moves not because of its internal stimulation, a body that moves not because of being remotely guided by another (or a cluster of remote agents), BUT A BODY THAT QUIVERS AND OSCILLATES TO THE EBB AND FLOW OF NET ACTIVITY. A body that manifests the statistical and collective data flow. A body whose proprioception responds not to its internal nervous system, but to the external stimulation of globally connected computer networks.

THE INTERNET IS AWASH WITH OUTMODED METAPHYSICAL YEARNINGS AND FAR-FETCHED FANTASIES OF DISEMBODIMENT. THE NET IS NOT "MIND TO MIND"-RATHER, IT IS AT PRESENT MERELY A MODE OF TEXTUAL COMMUNICATION, A REDUCTIVE VISUALITY DEPRIVED OF THE COMPLEXITY OF PHYSICAL ACTION & KINESTHETIC POSITION AND ORIENTATION. BODIES ELECTRONICALLY CONNECTED AND ACTUATED TRANSFORM THE NET FROM A MEANS OF INFORMATION TRANSMISSION TO A MODE OF TRANSDUCTION – OF EFFECTING ACTION IN OTHER BODIES AND BITS OF BODIES IN OTHER PLACES.