

Art on the Web, the Web as Art

Organizer:

Annette Weintraub, The City College of New York

Panelists:

Remo Campopiano, ArtNetWeb

Nan Goggin, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

John F. Simon, Jr., Independent artist

Sharleen Smith, USA Network

Web-specific art work and art sites on the Web are fostering a seamless environment in which the boundary between the artwork itself and the "space" it inhabits is vanishing. The Web offers the promise of a direct and intimate connection between artist and audience, and requires a shift in aesthetics and approaches to storytelling, narrative and interaction. This panel explores this interface of art and art space and the dynamic qualities of art created for the Web.

Roundtable Overview

For many artists, the World Wide Web is no longer merely a means for viewing or distributing art, but has become an art medium in itself with its own distinct characteristics. The shift from making art work available on the Web to utilizing the Web as a dynamic artform has been dramatic, as the "gallery" metaphor is replaced by a variety of approaches that exploit the inherent characteristics of Web-based communication.

The Web has become one of the fastest-growing venues for new art, and an active laboratory for the developmental of graphics and media integration. The evolving environment of the Web provides a unique challenge to artists to explore conjunctions of text and image, narrative and storytelling, and strategies for participation and interaction in real-time – all with direct audience input. The speed of development, the constant changes in the development environment, and the interaction among fine art and commercial site developers and their audience are also important factors in this synergy.

This roundtable will examine some of the kinds of art being developed for the Web. The speakers will offer their perspectives on the components of successful Web-based artwork. Each will present the work of one or more artists making Web-based work, and will focus on sites that integrate Web art works into an aggregate art space. The roundtable will also address the impact of the growing integration of moving images, virtual reality, 3D modeling, interactivity and sound in real time on the Web. Panelists will explore aesthetics, content, interface, and interaction in current work and will examine their implications for future development of art on the Web.

This roundtable includes artists doing Web-based art, developers of art Web sites, and the designer of a commercial Web site with a strong art component. A particular focus of the roundtable is to explore the exchange of ideas and energy between commercial and fine arts sites, and the integration of works of art created for the Web within a particular Web site. The panel of will address these core issues from a variety of distinct perspectives, and will provide an overview of some of the most interesting art work and art sites on the Web. The roundtable will address the question of what differentiates Web-based artwork from other interactive art, consider the interaction of aesthetics and technology, and describe the potential evolution of this form.

Remo Campopiano will present his ideas about the Web as live organism and speak about the development of ArtNetWeb.

Before I found myself tumbling head over heels down the rabbit hole of cyberspace, I was creating installation art. More specifically, I created environments for live animals to act out metaphor for human phenomena. ArtNetWeb grew out of an art project called Virtual Real Estate. Simply put, the idea was to create a digital environment for artists to explore this new medium.

It quickly became evident that we were part of a much bigger phenomenon. "Artnets" were popping up all over the world. When you look at this phenomenon from a global/naturalist perspective, it felt like the living earth was developing a nervous system through telecommunications. Add to this revolutionary breakthroughs in Complexity Theory (Chaos), and you have a unique and provocative view of cyberspace. From this perspective, the telecommunications revolution is not just a new tool, but a living force that seeks to maximize its potential by existing on the edge of chaos...the place of pure creativity.

ArtNetWeb is made up of a group of artists, all exploring the same issues, who are trying to determine what constitutes a Web-based artform, and what the role of the artist is in the telecommunications revolution. As a member of this panel, I will introduce my own ideas on the Web as a dynamic art environment, as well as present work by the group of artists that make up ArtNetWeb.

Nan Goggin will represent the ad319 site, a collaborative art research group based at the University of Illinois. ad319's projects include a spectrum of activity related to digital tools and their impact on making, viewing, and distributing art. These concerns led to the development of one of the first "curated" WorldWideWeb electronic art galleries, the "@art gallery".

In creating the @art gallery we had several goals: 1) creating a moderated virtual gallery space on the Internet; 2) focusing on work created specifically for the medium; and 3) as an experiment to evaluate whether experiencing art on the Internet is emotionally and intellectually fulfilling. In September 1994, when the @art gallery went on-line, web-based art work was very early in gestation. Today, it is just learning to crawl. Partially, we are simply limited by bandwidth; video, sound, and even picture files can still be unwieldy. But more importantly, artists are still becoming acquainted with the medium. What are the inherent and most conceptually profound characteristics of this medium? Is it appropriate to look at models from print media for form, such as book or magazine; or does this medium require completely new forms?

One thing we have learned is that there are no absolutes. While there are forms yet to be created as the tools continue to evolve at an incredible pace, there is also value on emphasizing distribution as a key characteristic of the medium. Several of our exhibitions have acted as virtual exhibition catalogs for their physical counterparts. To address the unanticipated dilemma of so few artists equipped with the html programming skills, an extended goal is to develop a residency program for artists. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a fertile environment for web-based development, and there is frequent interdisciplinary activity between the arts and sciences.

If we begin to think of art on the net as an experience and not an object, questions about copyright and ownership can parallel other media. Just as we pay for specific cable channels on TV or subscribe to magazines, there will be similar mechanisms in place on the net in the not too distant future. (See the January 1996 issue of Popular Mechanics magazine for a review of the state of "digital dollars"). For me personally, the jury is still out on the experience of art on the net. I have seen very little that I find emotionally and intellectually compelling, but I look to the future with great anticipation.

John F. Simon Jr. will present the work of artists using the Web as a mechanism for real-time participation and speak about the design of adaweb.

Mechanisms for creating art online are continually invented, exploited, and then quickly reinvented. How can Web-based creative projects be understood in the context of art? For example, what distinguishes a Web-based gallery from a gallery stored on CD-ROM? Categorizing the underlying mechanisms of Web-based art helps to understand the work's unique presence.

Art projects can use the Web for more than delivering hyperlinked media, because the Web is structured as millions of "real-time" interconnections. The feedback loop between client and server may be exploited through mechanisms such as creating original content through submission of information, initiating and documenting ongoing dialog both on and off the Web, and creating images and new links based on navigational decisions.

Three projects in particular at adaweb (<http://adaweb.com>) have explored this kind of participatory work. The most popular section of Jenny Holzer's project, Please Change Beliefs, was based on her Truisms work from the 1980s. The "Change" section was a Web-based adaptation of a project that involved photographing truism posters on city walls as they accumulated graffiti. One such photograph is used to open the Web project. Turning to the Web as a new kind of public thoroughfare, the project allows visitors to choose and then modify or rewrite a truism. The altered version of the truism is presented in the style of the original truism poster (alphabetized, all caps) on a page with other people's modified truisms. Several thousand modified truisms were collected within the first few months of the project.

Ben Kinmont's art is based on sharing common tasks and exchanging items with individuals. He often initiates exchange with these people in the street or the space where his work is installed. We Both Belong, extends his work by considering the Web as a kind of public space. Visitors to the site are invited to write to Ben, via the Web, stating a desire to participate in his art project. Ben asks the participants to photograph themselves washing dishes and to mail him the photograph. As a record of the interaction, the letters, the photograph, and other items created in the course of making the project are shown together as an archive both inside and outside the Web. This project highlights an overlap of online and offline spaces by extending Ben's previous artwork into the Web and drawing connections made with people through the Web into Ben's space.

John F. Simon, Jr. worked with Web-based interaction as an experiment in Web viewing in his Alter Stats project. Described as a self-modifying Web self-visualization, the project uses the statistics of the visits (hits) to the project to create images for visualizing those statistics. Each visit to the project further modifies the database of hits to the page and therefore modifies the images created. No visit is identical to any other visit and each visit effects future images. This accumulation of statistics happens at every site, leaving traces of activity. Alter Stats is situated to use the activity of viewing pages as the input for creating images.

Sharleen Smith will comment on the interchange of influence and ideas among commercial and fine-arts sites from her perspective as the art director and developer of "The Dominion" on the Sci-Fi Channel.

Although purists and academicians have decried the commercialization of the Internet, this "gentrification" by corporate America has, in fact, served both to inspire mass culture and to educate artists in the pursuit of their own vision.

Current trends suggest a need for collaboration between the artist and this growing commercial presence. With source code readily accessible to the curious and brave everywhere, it is the commercial sites which push the envelope every day. Why? Because this new medium demands creative thinking and problem solving. Because our metaphors are shifting, and our interfaces must to keep up with them. Communication is evolving... and as business understands all too well, evolution is about the survival of the fittest.

For now, corporate America is in a unique leadership position. Given the rising complexity and cost associated with development of compelling Web sites, it is perhaps unsurprising that commercial sites have become the essential point of reference for the cutting-edge and vanguard of the World Wide Web.

Bracque once described his relationship with Picasso as that of two mountain climbers. One supporting the other in turn to advance to new heights and vistas. It is my belief that only through such synergy of the commercial and artistic can the Web truly evolve.

URLs

@art gallery:
<http://gertrude.art.uiuc.edu/@art/gallery.html>

Electronic Culture and the Training of the 21st Century Artist:
<http://gertrude.art.uiuc.edu/ad319/paper1.html>

adaweb:
<http://adaweb.com>

artnetweb:
<http://artnetweb.com>

The Brown Moo Bird:
<http://moobird.com>

Blast Conversional Archive:
<http://artnetweb.com/projects/blast/home.html>

The Electronic Chronicles:
<http://artnetweb.com/projects/ahneed/first.html>

G.H. Hovagimyan Home Page:
<http://artnetweb.com/gh>

Iola:
<http://artnetweb.com/iola/home.html>

Realms:
<http://artnetweb.com/projects/realms/notes.html>

Betalab:
<http://www.jodi.org/betalab>

Getty AHIP:
<http://www.ahip.getty.edu/ahip/>

Ellipsis Publishing:
<http://www.gold.net/ellipsis/>

Heath Bunting:
<http://www.irational.org/>

Pseudo Online Radio:
<http://pon.pseudo.com>

CICV - Centre de Recherche Pierre Schaeffer:
<http://www.cicv.fr>

USA Networks | Sci-Fi Channel:
<http://www.scifi.com>