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| Home | Site Index | Site Search | Forums | Archives | Marketplace |

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July 6, 2000

@arts large

By **MATTHEW MIRAPAUL** BIO

New York's Chaos Inspires Web Art

New York, New York, it's a digital town.
The Web site's up, but the server is down.
(with apologies to Comden and Green, lyricists for
"On the Town")

Manhattan has been a muse for countless authors, artists, musicians and filmmakers. Now, as several recent projects demonstrate, New York is also inspiring digital artists, who are using the Web's multimedia capabilities to combine text, graphics, audio and video into interactive cityscapes.

For "Crossroads," launched Wednesday on the Turbulence.org digital-art site, the artist Annette Weintraub has created an impressionistic version of Times Square. Scrolling text, animated collages and short films simulate the kinetic energy and shifting moods of the urban locale once known as the "crossroads of the world."

Turbulence.org

"Crossroads" by Annette Weintraub presents the real version and the Hollywood version of Times Square.

To assemble the site, Weintraub scoured libraries for vintage postcards and pictures, which she supplemented with her own digital photographs. She also used footage from "Squared Times," a 1967 effort by the late filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt. But the site's

primary material is its audio. In 15 areas, with titles like "Just Off the Bus" and "Smith's Bar," actors narrate short tales from the naked city.

The result is an evocative homage to a Times Square that no longer exists, having been replaced over the past decade by a sanitized theme park. In a phone interview, Weintraub said, "Something new is emerging, and at some point it may be interesting, but what people remember is really gone."

And what people remember, Weintraub asserted, has been heavily influenced by what they have seen in films such as "Breakfast at Tiffany's," "On the Town" and "Sweet Smell of Success," in which Manhattan becomes one of the film's characters.

Even though "Crossroads" focuses on Times Square, Weintraub said, "It's actually a piece about how film has affected our perception of reality. My memory of the way the city has appeared in films is very different than what it really was." To make her point, the site's 15 areas also include audio clips of the filmmaker Lee Ellickson discussing how movies like "Midnight Cowboy" have affected our vision of the city.

"Crossroads" is Weintraub's first work since 1999's "Sampling Broadway," which was selected for the Internet area of the 2000 Whitney Biennial exhibition. As in her earlier works, "Pedestrian" (1998) and "Realms" (1995), Weintraub uses New York as an entry point for larger aesthetic issues.

Weintraub, a Brooklyn native who teaches electronic design at the City College of New York, said that urban locations hold a natural appeal for new-media artists. "The two major metaphors for the Web are the page and the space," she said, "and one logical extension of the space is some sort of organization that's like a city."

Weintraub said a city's complex architecture and population density make it inherently photogenic and theatrical, which is why so many films have been shot in New York. As those images have taken hold in the popular imagination -- in part due to the influence of film -- they have started to resonate in new and interesting ways. That adaptability, Weintraub said, makes the city "an almost ideal media environment," whether the medium is film, television or the Internet.

Marketa Bankova, an artist in Prague, said she created "New York City Map" on the Web because she found that films did not

adequately convey the experience of being in Manhattan.

In an e-mail exchange, Bankova related how she had missed New York after visiting it five years ago. "I had begun to work with the Internet, and I was looking for information to remind me of the city. I had seen maps, weather reports, restaurant menus, news reports, but none of it had brought me the feeling of standing on Broadway and listening to a black man playing jazz, the sounds of the sirens -- the energy."

She continued: "Only a few films reminded me of the city. Then, I saw two documentary films about Manhattan and I was disappointed. It looks like the most important thing in New York is the Statue of Liberty or some other tourist attraction. I found some other things to be more beautiful."

With a grant from the Czech Foundation for Contemporary Art, Bankova was able to return to New York last August. For three months, she explored the streets, armed with a digital camera and a digital audio recorder. "I had problems with people when I was taking pictures of them," she said. "I was surprised no one in New York wanted to be photographed. If someone agreed, then they wanted money or stood in an unnatural position with a wild smile."

Bankova persisted, learning tricks to outwit her subjects. Her interactive map now contains more than 200 pages, each with a still photo and an ambient audio clip, but without any geographic signposts. The site can be travelled from East Side to West Side, from downtown up or by following the erratic route of a bad taxi driver.

The Internet's interactivity is ideal for building a virtual city, Bankova said. "All those streets reminds me of a labyrinth of Web pages," she said. "And it is living -- I can react to people who visit it and send me e-mail, so it is like a city with its citizens."

The author Thomas Beller also uses a virtual map of New York as a navigation device, but his is firmly rooted in reality. "Mr. Beller's Neighborhood" is based on satellite photographs of Manhattan. The city has been divided into nine sections, and each neighborhood has red dots marking specific locations that are linked to stories by Beller and a few others about events connected to each spot.

In an e-mail message, Beller said he has not yet launched the site, but that its basic structure had been up for about three weeks. He added: "Launched is not the right word, at any rate. It suggests

up and out, a rocket ship going into space. My direction is the opposite. I'm burrowing, digging, dusting off. 'Mr. Beller's Neighborhood' is an archeological site as well as a Web site. It's a narrative that sprawls in many directions, and it is a work in progress."

Beller is soliciting contributions for the site, which he is updating every other day. "Work is coming in from the famous and the obscure, the living and the dead," he said. "Of course, the dead are of a bit more interest than the living, in purely literary terms, but then that's usually the case."

In a note on the site, Beller, the author of the novel "The Sleep-Over Artist," writes that the city, as seen from above, is densely packed and "tighter than it ought to be, self-regarding, almost haughty."

"But there are also spaces and valleys and all sorts of incredible looking crevices that immediately evoke Manhattan of days gone by," he writes.

The artist Gary Simmons also uses up-to-the-minute technology to summon memories of old Manhattan. In "Wake," a project commissioned by the Dia Center for the Arts, Simmons photographed nine empty ballroom-dancing spaces in New York, then selected a song to accompany each shot.

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But it is impossible to view each photo in its entirety; moving the cursor on the white screen reveals only a few parts of each image at a time. Like the era they depict, the photos fade away and cannot be recaptured.

Other Web-based works related to New York include Wolfgang Staehle's "Empire," a regularly updated Webcam image of the Empire State Building that pays homage to Andy Warhol's landmark experimental film of the same name, and Maciej Wisniewski's "Turnstile 2," which collects data from the Internet as if it were passing through a subway gate.

In "On the Town," Chip sings of hearing that New York could be seen "in all its spreading strength and power" from atop the Woolworth Tower. Before you go there, though, check out the view from atop the Internet.

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- Turbulence.org
- Sampling Broadway
- Pedestrian
- Realms
- New York City Map
- Mr. Beller's Neighborhood
- Wake
- Dia Center for the Arts
- Empire (requires Netscape Navigator)
- Turnstile 2

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