

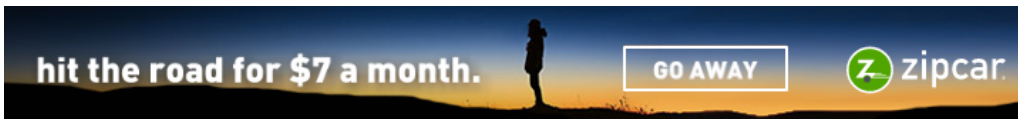
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ARTS ONLINE

## Cross-Cultural Ventures With Digital Artworks

By MATTHEW MIRAPPAUL

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The best work in "Translocations," an online exhibition of nine new Internet-based artworks presented by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, succeeds aesthetically because it is destined to fail electronically. "Translation Map," one of the works, allows viewers to write and send e-mail to any of 250 countries. There is just one small problem: the Internet is considered a global village that inspires free-flowing conversations, but few of these messages will ever be received.

"Translation Map," by Warren Sack and Sawad Brooks, argues against the Internet's utopian promise. The work's achievement is to show just how disconnected parts of the online world still are. Before universal communication can occur, Mr. Sack said, "there are various fractures that have to be bridged."

Despite the shimmering image of the earth that introduces it, "Translation Map" is primarily a conceptual artwork designed to reveal those fractures. Here's how it works: Before each message can be delivered, its text must be translated into the language of its recipient. There are 6,000 choices, from Algonquin to Zulu. Once the message has been converted, it will also be published on the work's Web site.

Don't expect the "Translation Map" site to fill up soon with messages in different languages. The work does not use a computer program to translate a message from one language into another. Instead it finds online forums in which both might be spoken, then ships the message there with a request for human help. Whether through incomprehension or apathy, the likelihood seems that most messages will be ignored, as has been the case so far.

Given that all of the newly commissioned works in the Walker exhibition involve some form of cross-cultural collaboration in cyberspace, "Translation Map" provides a backhanded reminder that such virtual ventures are more easily imagined than realized. As Mr. Sack, who teaches media theory at the University of California at Santa Cruz, said, "The borders are still there."

Most works in "Translocations," which went online on Feb. 8 at [translocations.walkerart.org](http://translocations.walkerart.org), try to break through those borders rather than explicitly expose their presence.

For instance, Fran Ilich, a new-media artist in Mexico, asked artists from eight countries to contribute daily comments to a bilingual Web log, an online journal known in geek-speak as a blog. The Raqs Media Collective from New Delhi created an online space where anyone could post a story, photograph or music file, which other international visitors could alter at will.

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Boundary crossing has suddenly emerged as a hot topic in new-media circles. Earlier this month the Transmediale festival in Berlin was built around a Play Global theme. And Paris Connection, a site with commentary in four languages about French online artworks, opens today at vispo.com/thefrenchartists. For Steve Dietz, the Walker's new-media curator and the organizer of "Translocations," it is a timely notion. With governments closely monitoring who is traversing their geographical boundaries, he said, "it seems valuable to look at the Internet for its ability to cross those borders and get alternate points of view."

"Translocations" is running concurrently with "How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age," an exhibition in the Walker's regular galleries. Like "Latitudes," the virtual exhibition asks how art has been affected in a world where there is a Starbucks on every sand dune and the country-pop singer Shania Twain slaps sitars and tablas on her songs to boost their overseas appeal.

So, as the world gets even smaller via the Internet, will Western art traditions vanquish all others or will they become more open to other perspectives? The question gets even more interesting in the digital domain. On the Internet one can skip quickly from digital art in one city to art in another. As artists rapidly assimilate one another's work, this could lead, at least in theory, to a drab homogeneity. Is it possible that cyberspace will lose its sense of place?

As the work by Mr. Sack and Mr. Brooks suggests, there are still too many impediments for this to be an urgent concern. Yet the other works in "Translocations," with their riot of foreign sounds and images, indicate that the question is worth asking. If anything, the exhibition resembles the international-arrivals area at an American airport. The site teems with people and their artistic baggage. Art, texts and video clips collide chaotically, and more pour in continually. But while the site looks like a big, fat multicultural wedding of artistic sensibilities, everyone's final destination seems to be disappointingly domestic.

For instance, "Translocal Mixer," by the Brazil-based arts group Re:combo, is an interactive audio-control panel that allows listeners to combine sounds gathered in Recife, Bucharest and other cities. But except for the exotic sonic content, the project is no different from countless online music-mixing toys.

The upshot is that, at least for the moment, voices from other latitudes are not creating new forms for online art. But if the Internet truly becomes a global medium, will local characteristics survive in online work?

Jim Andrews, a co-producer of the Paris Connection site, thinks so. He developed the site because of its strong French accent. "The French art has an élan and sensorial richness, an experiential focus that would seem to have something to do with French culture," he said. "I don't see this sort of art coming much" from English-speaking countries.

New works are to be added to "Translocations," and online viewers from around the world can augment some works with their contributions. But if the exhibition is intended to demonstrate that the Internet can be a global medium while retaining its local color, that message is lost in the translation.

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