Self-Referentiality

Web art's reference point has quickly if not instantaneously caught up with those of the other contemporary arts, each of which, these days, is at least as if not more concerned with making a comment on itself than on the world around it. But whereas these other arts seemed to express more convincingly the world as their exclusive reference point for substantial historical periods, sometimes stretching across centuries, Web art often seems to make at once and almost exclusively a commentary on the World Wide Web. This might be because Web artists spend a lot of time sitting in front of their computer monitors, online and in virtual time and space, time spent cut off from the real world, which differentiates them from other artists who, even though they too contemplate for hours on end creations of another world, work in real time and real space. When other artists turn their backs on their creations, it is a gradual and unconscious process, and not an absolute extinguishing of a world, like the "Quit," "Exit" and "Shutdown" commands of the world inside the computer. The work of the Web artist extends out into the Internet. Even when other artists turn off the lights and slam the door of their studios, they leave one real world for another.

One consequence of the Web artist's work in the virtual Web art world is that the greatest esthetic innovation of the 20th century, the readymade, is unavailable to it. The readymade has become as important to the livelihoods of conceptual art and installation as ready-to-wear has become to the industry of fashion. And although the readymade no longer blurs the line between art and non-art space (if it ever really did), the readymade is the artist's lifeline, his faith in the pertinence of the day to day. On the other hand, under its avant-garde cloak, Web art's immateriality is a throwback to classical drawing and painting, for one of its ongoing quests is the triumph of a three-dimensional reality that is analogous to what is now seen as merely clever French trompe-l'oeil painting of the 18th century.
Self-referentiality in art celebrated its heroic heyday with American abstract expressionism of the 1950s. But already in the 1960s, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein had counterattacked with a pop art that today, granted just a short end-of-century later, seems to have muddled through the eras of conceptual art, installation and video better than abstraction, and passed the test not so much of art-historical but of esthetic time. Today we look at abstract expressionism with sentimental eyes; but we still look at pop art with a smile. Abstract expressionism was indeed a heroic era; pop art accompanies us. Whereas today it is very difficult for an artist to create an abstract painting that says something, it is still easy for him to say something, or rather, most anything, with an almost century-old readymade and its two-dimensional pop-art avatars.

But the self-referentiality of Web art is different from that of abstract art. It might be true that when one thinks about it, abstraction is built on a solid foundation of the whole of art history; but when one stops thinking and starts looking at abstraction, one realizes that art history lessons cannot bolster the diminished emotions one feels now. Abstract art is today but a period of art history. Like the religious and historical paintings that hang on the walls of entire wings of great art institutions but are no longer being painted in artists' studios for lack of interest, abstract painting cannot emotionally sustain today's artist. But because Web art casts a critical eye not just upon itself but upon the whole of the World Wide Web, maybe its self-referentiality will survive periodicity to become its own self-sustaining essence. When one looks at Web art, one cannot help looking at it as a commentary if not an attack not on any history of art, but on the short history of the Internet.

Will the obsessive self-referentiality of Web art soon risk making it become merely tedious, like the initially amusing, then futile sight of a dog chasing its own tail? I understand the excitement surrounding Web art as a phenomenon, a thing to behold. Maybe it is its interactivity, the minimal yet still different way that we users must often click to advance into the art, that so often prevents us from losing ourselves in the medium, as we so often lose ourselves in contemplation of other art mediums. Clicking means moving along, when art cries out to us to stand still. It is also Web art's circular-type interactivity that, by refusing the linear escape mechanism of other art mediums, also refuses the outside world. Yet artistic nourishment is and will remain to be found exclusively in the outside world, with all due respect to the World Wide Web.

Interactivity and Self-Referentiality
Interactivity turns the Web artwork upon and around itself, and in doing so reinforces its reference to itself. It breaks down the linear thinking of the viewer and creates an unending, always-changing circular esthetic experience. In an immediate demonstration of this power, interactive Web art's unexpected unfolding under the clicking of the viewer directly expresses that art is eternal -- and infernal in its vicious circular philosophy of life. But although it refuses or at least puts off an ending, it doesn't preclude a happy ending. Instead, the happy ending teems at all moments from its rich combinations of interactive clicking. There is then, when the spectator is caught up in the midst of these seemingly endless combinations, a certain image here of eternal bliss, of liberation from earthly evil. Maybe Hinduism has got it right after all.

However, is Web art's interactivity so different from the esthetic experience of other art mediums? Interactivity reminds the viewer that linear thinking is a convention. It also suggests that choice is but a . . . choice. That is, there exists another attitude, which is that choices have no inherent meaning, that no choice is better than another -- at least in Web art. The clicking that constitutes choice in Web art says at the same time that choice is arbitrary. But this Web art esthetic is only the explicit albeit invisible structure of what the viewer of any art object sees in his mind. The clicking and rollovers that take the Web art viewer from one window to another, trigger sound or bring up other images onto the screen, constitute essentially the same mental process that the art viewer uses when in front of any other art work, whether it be a painting, a sculpture, an installation, or a video. In these mediums, the viewer runs his eyes over the work in the same visually interactive movement as the hand that moves and clicks the mouse. If anything, the viewer of these art mediums simplifies the interactive process. And, reciprocally, what Web art interactivity does is simply to make the viewer do something more than move the eyes. It complicates in an ironically satisfying way the interactivity that is inherent in all art, making the viewer feel that he is actually participating in the unfolding of the work. Web art contains structured, explicit, one might even say Mickey Mouse interactivity. When contemplating works in other art genres, the mind alone of the viewer offers the emotions a freer, subconscious, interactive structuring.

In this context, it is also ironic that Web art seems like a less, far less contemplative medium than other art mediums, except maybe video (for how can video escape the aura of the less than contemplative TV?). This feeling is exacerbated by the viewer's habit of using the same equipment -- computer and mouse -- for the rest of the Internet. And here, as in Web art, this equipment is indeed a tool to get on with things, whether it be the search for information or for pleasure, or for pleasurable information. The Internet is a search if not a quest, which implicates a traditional linear progression that interactivity was supposed to supplant. There is still a
psychologically finite linearity that invisibly underlines the more apparently possible endlessness of a Web site, a linearity similar to the groping search for liberation from a labyrinth. I for one am never able to rid myself of the feeling that I'm trying to get something over with when I'm on the Internet, that there is a "click through" that, like a physical or mental follow through, smacks something (a link? a pixel? a bit?) into the other court, if only to have it batted back. There is no such thing as sitting tranquilly in front of a Web art page the way one sits in front of another art object. This is indeed an essence of Web art, that the hand and mind are always moving on to the next step. This is a less contemplative essence than in other art mediums. Web art, with its inherently interactive nudging or even nagging, gets rid of the idea that art is a contemplative medium for the patient spectator. [Top]

Superbad and Interactivity

There is a first page, but no home page or introduction to Superbad's work. In a way, http://www.superbad.com is like an old-fashioned art exhibition, before art institutions felt the need to explain things in wall texts plastered or stenciled in the entryway: Spectators entered the exhibition space armed with only the artist's name. They then began to take in the paintings, for instance, one by one, free to walk around the space however they wanted to. Superbad's home page is a regularly changing first piece in such a show. From there, it's up to the spectator to click to the next image. Since there are sometimes several possible links on each page, the spectator wanders as if in an exhibition space devoid of arrows and ushers. This nonlinear technique has now come to be seen as a classical utilization of interactive new media.

This also means that it's a simple, effective technique. There is no guessing in Superbad’s use of interactivity. The unspoken rules are set down in the entryway to the exhibition space, from which point we can stroll and scroll. This simplicity also encourages deeper concentration on the art work itself. For the essence of Superbad is in the seemingly arbitrary juxtaposition of seemingly arbitrary images. Meaningful links between them are created by the spectator. Yet meaning is the least of our concerns. Instead, visual emotion takes over as we click through what is rightfully considered to be one of the richest vocabularies of graphic images in the Web art world. But if we do decide to create meaning, the grandest of thoughts are, surprisingly at first, then awesomely, in order: that seemingly random images open onto strangeness, mystery, and beauty.

But this would also suggest, erroneously, that there's nothing special to
Superbad. That the arbitrary image is merely an essence of art. On the contrary, Superbad's insidious, playful suggestion -- absolutely no didacticism here -- is that the arbitrary image is the essence of art. This is a welcome, refreshing antidote to the conceptual artist, who takes an arbitrary object or image and proceeds to give it meaning, to really give it meaning: a text. Nothing wrong here, of course, except, again, some like to skip the wall text. (Am I cutting my own throat here?)

Seoul, Coming to

Some of the Web Project 8 artists, on accepting my invitation to participate, asked if they could come to Seoul to present their work or to supplement it with real-space work in the Total Museum. A valid question. I explained to them that although in the recent history of Project 8 it had been a museum policy to bring artists to Seoul from around the world, since today's was a Web Project 8, we had decided to forego museum activity for cyber activity. Yet their polite queries also raise questions about the nature of Web art.

During a recent dinner at the Total Museum with some international curators, Amanda MacDonald Crowley, the associate director for the Adelaide Festival 2000 in Australia, said that even Web artists feel the need "to squeeze the flesh." Undoubtedly. And one can consider this need, which may or may not be universal, as either a betrayal of Web art's original and accidental attack on institutional art, or a vindication of the Internet not as a separator of people, but as an invitation to come together. But in the end the sociability of certain Web artists doesn't change the nature of their work, which is that it indeed obviates the physical art institution. The ready-made means that anything can be art. Web art means that anything on the Web can be art. The key here is that for anything on the Web to be art, it has to be on the Web. It is of course possible and, it appears, more and more desirable if not fatal that the Web be projected onto the walls of art institutions. But this is like projecting a book's pages onto a wall with an opaque projector: Why bother? Who turns the pages? Who clicks the mouse? When? Why at that point? Not to mention that both projections defeat their mediums' purposes and functions. So in the end, Web art's only possible evolution is dictated by the development of the technology: Internet connections, application and browser invention and upgrades, monitor quality and size (which I guess could, like the development of TVs, become horrendously large, even museum-wall size). None of these developments change Web art's essence as just that: art on the Web.
Jodi

Jodi is synonymous not with fake virus, but with uncooperativeness. Interactivity becomes a disobedient juvenile, or something that instead of interacting, sabotages, backfires, blows up and wreaks havoc -- but it's just a game. Still, it is havoc, and so havoc to what? To your computer. It's easy to walk away from menacing art in other contexts. But here, in front of your besieged monitor, as when you're looking at http://OSS.jodi.org, Jodi knows how to strike a certain kind of fear into you, the kind that you experience at say, a science fiction movie when the poor expendable soul realizes that the as yet unseen alien creature is now inside his house. You might know that what's happening on the screen isn't real, yet, while you watch it, you can easily pretend to yourself that it is real. Jodi plays on different kinds of computer fear, especially the one that tells you that you've made a terrible, irreparable blunder that will cost you at least a crash and at most a hard drive, and the one that tells you that you don't know enough about computers do be doing what you're doing. You too, or rather your computer is expendable.

Jodi's trademark crazily flickering screen is at first look even more ominous and depressing an accident as the fluorescent tube overhead that starts to blink on and off at night while you work late in the office, all by yourself.

But Jodi's Web art is indeed more than just a joke of the April Fools kind. It means to ask an essential question: How important is the computer and the Internet in your life? Is there still time to just turn off the damn fluorescent light and leave the office? Is it possible, when things start to go wrong, to pull the plug on the computer (don't do that!), walk away from it, then come back at a later time, boot up, and have everything on the screen come back to normal? (I've tried it, and sometimes it really does work!)

Jodi also symbolizes a certain latent hope in us that things that go wrong on the computer screen are sometimes O.K. There is an apparent computer fear that accompanies every step that certain users make into personally uncharted cyberspace. And the fear is based on a resignation that every one of these steps is meaningful yet unknowable, that every one is either right or wrong. Jodi's playfulness with right and wrong should actually reassure us not of the cliché that we can learn from our computer mistakes, but that mistakes can take on a beautiful meaning in and of themselves. Or, to go a step further, that every pressed computer key can actually create beauty -- not meaning, but beauty, which might even be
meaningful, if you're one of those who do need some meaning.

Jodi was one of the first to demonstrate the beauty of doing things wrong on the Internet, at a time when artists were creating Web art by just pressing a few keys. Today all of that has changed quite a bit. Today, more complex and powerful Web tools enable the user to avoid more and more mistakes. Too bad, for mistakes are at the heart of art.

"F_T2K"

Or Diane Bertolo's "Frontier Town 2000" [http://www.turbulence.org/Works/FT2K](http://www.turbulence.org/Works/FT2K). Or rather, the Web as a Western, with its cowboys (techies), sheriffs (webmasters), ghost towns (Web sites), outlaws (hackers), and saloon belles (chatters). The analogy is perfect, especially because both the Western and the Web are unreal.

"FuckU-FuckMe"

Or the essential virtual metaphor. "FuckU-FuckMe" [http://www.fufme.com/](http://www.fufme.com/) is Alexei Shulgin's response to the question: Does the Internet isolate us from each other or bring us closer together? His answer is that the Internet brings us closer to... the Internet. In fact, his fabulous new product brings us into direct, intimate, sexual contact with it. The Internet is not like your lover, it is your lover. "FuckU-FuckMe" responds to Marcel Duchamp's exhortation to "Use a Rembrandt as an ironing board." It also reminds one of the scene where Charlie Chaplin eats his shoe. If there is a creative will, there is a way.

There is an architectural school of thought that posits that a museum of outer space, for example, wants to look like a spaceship. Ever since the popularization of computers, it has been a running joke that some would rather spend time with their hardware than with their mates. This phenomenon would seem to suggest that new computer shapes might do well to take on the curves and muscles of their highly sexed function. Yet in Shulgin's design of the perfect high-tech lover, he shuns all but the two most necessary references to the male and female human body. Here, form follows function indeed. "FuckU-FuckMe" demonstrates that computer hardware, gray, cold and angular, can become powerful sexual fetishes, leaving all but the essential coupling to the imagination. Buy now, while
stocks last.

Death and the Internet

Olia Lialina has already taken measures to deal with the problem of what to do with her work once she herself enters into infinite cyberspace. In her "Will 'N Testament" http://will.teleportacia.org she bequeaths her cyberstuff to an array of Web art luminaries. Yet this is also, in a real-world sense, a classical, if not reactionary step. "No drastic measures" is another, possibly more progressive attitude toward life and cyberlife, death and cyberdeath. Dust to dust. Unplugged to unplugged. Empty trash.

It does seem that as things become less tangible, modern society's attitude toward preserving these things becomes more manic. Rome has been decaying for centuries. The tides are eating away at the land. Pollution is burning a hole in the ozone layer. The sun is burning out. Yet these decaying "things" leave most of us momentarily alarmed, then generally unmoved. There is, however, something strangely moving and vaguely terrible in the click of a mouse that wipes out something if not everything. It's like the proverbial red button; one push and -- boom. Everything goes up in smoke.

I think one reason for a user's wary looks at the Trash can in the corner of the desktop is that he fears the absolute finality of clicking on "Empty Trash." For it's not at all like emptying real trash. In fact, I can remember quite a few times when, having tossed something into a dumpster or plopped something into one of the communal trash bins at the bottom of the stairway or in a dank corner of the courtyard, I have despaired enough over my decision to have gotten up out of my seat and gone out to the dumpster or down to the trash bin to fish back out what I decided was no longer trash. There is a scene in Dostoyevsky's "The Idiot," where, in front of her mesmerized audience, the femme fatale Natasya throws a hefty bundle of rubles into the burning fireplace. Shocked, everyone watches as the flames lick the package and begin to burn through the wrapping. In the end, someone pulls the burning money out of the fire: Only the top layers of bills have been singed. But while it is aflame, the audience, including the reader, experiences a delicious, perverse moment of danger, delicious because everyone knows that we have not reached the point of no return, that decisions can still be undone.

This is not the case with cybertrash. There is no point of no return. The Trash icon symbolizes the essence of computer fear: irreparable loss, the death of something that cannot come back to life. However, this fear is all
the more surprising given that what is lost forever never really existed. Yet it did, for the computer brings information, or memory, to life, then keeps it alive. When someone dies, the person's friends and loved ones try to keep the person alive in their memories. This is the power of the computer: to keep memory alive. The opposite then of memory is forgetfulness. Forgetfulness, both in reality and virtual reality, is death. The computer and the Internet are memories that are never supposed to forget.

But cyberdeath is probably the wrong expression to use for a Web art's demise. Olia Lialina is concerned about what happens to her Web work after she dies an earthly, real death. Is her concern any different from another artist's concern for his or her art created in a different medium? In a psychological sense, yes. In a technological sense, no, except that the psychological sense that the Internet is an eternal guardian of digital data is based on the technological prejudice that digital means indestructible. That in optimum conditions, digital data will endure forever. This is far from the truth though. By definition, technology will change, and not later than tomorrow. Today's cutting-edge technology is tomorrow's fodder for Redundant Technology Initiative http://www.lowtech.org/. All things digital could go the way of gesso and rabbit skin glue -- and at today's rate of technological change, they surely will not endure for as long as these oil painting materials.

Then there's another prejudice, the one against aging. Yet digital art, if unable or unwilling to take on the patina of other art mediums, will suddenly look old, like last year's car models or ad campaigns, as newer and newer technology tries and succeeds in getting closer and closer to making virtual reality resemble reality. And this is the problem. For reality itself is anything but young. So digital life will indeed age in perfect synchronization with real life.

"English" and Language on the Web

"Marina Abramovic who is famous Yugoslavian alternative strip dancer once said to a member of us. You should learn English, if you want to be an artist.... That was her kindness, but an irony for idea of Art. " - From Takuji Kogo's VOICES, in SIT.COM http://www.bekkoame.ne.jp/i/ga2750/fet/links.html

The most global aspect of the Internet is the English language. To be global is to express oneself in English on the Web. But Marina Abramovic is not entirely correct to say that an artist should learn English. An artist uses language more than he speaks or writes it. There is a difference.
Young-hae Chang reminded me of the story about André Breton and Marcel Duchamp in New York during World War II. The two French friends approached the English language from essentially different perspectives, literary and artistic. As a writer, Breton felt he would need to learn English in order to express himself. Duchamp didn't need to learn it. He could use it like so much material for a work of art. According to the story, Breton was unable or unwilling to learn English, which might have contributed to what many agree was his unhappy stay in New York. Duchamp was happy. Later he became an American.

A good example of an artistic use of language is Duchamp's "The."

"If you come into the * linen, your time is thirsty because * ink saw some wood intelligent enough to get giddiness from a sister. However, even it should be smilable to shut * hair of whose * water writes always in plural, they have avoided * frequency, meaning mother in law; * powder will take a chance; and * road could try. But after somebody brought any multiplication as soon as * stamp was out, a great many cords refused to go through. Around * wire's people, who will be able to sweeten * rug, that is to say, why must every patents look for a wife? Pushing four dangers near * listening-place, * vacation had not dug absolutely nor this likeness has eaten." (Marcel Duchamp, Hulten, Pontus, ed., London, Thames and Hudson, 1993, p. 60, and http://www.artseensoho.com/Life/readings/duchamp.html)

Web artists around the world seem to have discovered instinctively how to put to immediate use the English language, whether out of artistic necessity or just plain necessity. What makes Web artists seize English and brandish it boldly is their realization that often the language alone represents the artist and the work on the Web. As Alexei Shulgin has stated, in Web art, communication has taken the place of representation. There is no way nor need to represent the physical self, a self that in most other cases is as expressively practical as a language itself.

A good example of this boldness is Takuji Kogo's ambitious text "Voices," from which the following is an excerpt.

"But now cultural activities work for community, They use conceptual art as euro intellectuals campaign for enlightenment/ as new entertainment. Donald Judd left from NY with his delusions of grandeur. He made a paradoxical theme park at borderline of America. We can appreciate its uselessness but not use for the community. And then Donald Duck went back NY from Hollywood with his many worldwide fakes." http://www.bekkoame.ne.jp/i/ga2750/voices/index.html

In "Voices," Kogo's desire to express himself in writing knows far fewer linguistic limits here, in Web art, than if he sought to express himself
elsewhere. His less than masterly grasp of written English would disqualify him in other textual contexts. But in Web art and, in general, on the Web, there is a generosity toward all users born of the necessary imposition of English on everyone who wants to try to communicate with the world. And there is also an oftentimes joyous ignorance of correct English on the part of both parties, writer and reader. And yet there is still verbal communication, which is not a prerequisite to art and even Web art, but a mere wonder.

Another even more suggestive example of a less than masterly yet entirely masterful use of a certain English à la ASCII comes from Jodi:

"..!!!!....................,,!!! ...................."....................* : under $1 heoreti cally, i litist powersqua re,000. A business that will _____\ \ / /__ ___ /
/=================\ ____\ / \. \[
]------>
le5t anybeody put a 54 5on 5 you are worth and c5apable of. I 45invite y3ou to join t6uhe only k
 in th272e world __/___________\ \ / /__ ___ /============="

http://www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/

This secret code is waiting to be cracked, and -- eureka! -- will be cracked by most anyone who knows a few elements of English and has a minor bent for poetry, concrete or other. In the same way that it is possible and even desirable to appreciate the art, and not just the meaning of calligraphy, it is possible and desirable to appreciate the art of this new media calligraphy.

Then there's Alexei Shulgin commenting on Jodi's home page for Moscow WWWArt Centre http://sunsite.cs.msu.su/wwwart/jodi.htm:

"the creators are obviously bearers of cyberpunk ideology with rather good taste (strange combination !). they have presented a post-linguistic and post-visual research that reflects very well the state of contemporary culture and communication. it's very logical that they are using english word "fuck" as abackground - nowadays it has become a mere symbol that means nothing and everything at the same time - a synonym for all other words. rather simple and well-weighted their work is a perfect sample of (sorry, here i have to think more)"

http://www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/199608/msg00016.html

There is something brilliant in the come and go of Shulgin's writing, from a discussion of language -- English specifically and even more specifically the word "fuck" -- to an abrupt yet obviously unembarrassed admission in mid-sentence that he has come to an aborted end to his thought, even if, grammatically, the end of the thought has not yet arrived. The written expression of this writing attitude, of being at once inside and outside the language, then suddenly taking leave of it all with utter disregard for the abandoned language itself, has of necessity -- the Internet as a global,
English expression -- become a stylistic movement.

Olia Lialina's English:

"I don't have any projects in Russian. In my works I use English, because English words are only signs for me. This gives me a chance to feel different. I can concentrate on the language of the net; it's structure and logic. But I write articles and communicate in Russian; or rather in transliteration (Russian typed with a Latin keyboard). It's easier because you don't need to worry about encodings. This is an interesting detail. Due to the lack of co-ordination in the beginning it seemed that every platform had its own encoding for Cyrillic. This caused confusion for several years and a lot of inconvenience, supplementary software and eventually jokes. Now the problem is almost solved. But I guess this deep confusion with font encodings has become a part of Russian Internet culture. You could say the abundance of them and the varieties in which any given page is offered stresses the power of language and its special role."
http://www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/200002/msg00120.html

Lialina expresses what the Web artist knows instinctively, that English is there to be used and abused; that in the context of art, language bends to the will of the artist like any other sign or thing. But what she is also saying is that in spite of the abuse of English or any other language on the Web, there still exists the communicative aspect of language, a minimum of meaning without which we might as well be happy with broken characters. Otherwise, who in Web art would care if encodings were effective or not; who would care if characters were garbled in transit and "unreadable"? Lialina is saying that even though neither she nor others might master the intricacies of a foreign language, they are still trying to communicate meaning.

Still another example of an artistic use of language, not so much of the English language, unless the mere fact of using Romanization is enough to qualify it as such, is Young-hae Chang's "I'LL PAY CASH," which is a piece that she recently made (more than wrote) in "Bulgarian." The following is an excerpt with, in parentheses, the English translation:

"CNEIIIEH CNYYAN! (THIS IS AN EMERGENCY!) CMPN! (STOP!)IIIE MRATR B 6PON! (I'LL PAY CASH!) B 6AHRTA HRMA TOARETHA XAPTNR! (THERE IS NO TOILET PAPER IN THE BATHROOM!) MORR! (WAITER!) ORPA6NXA ME HA YRNUATA! (I'VE BEEN MUGGED!) CNHBT MN NEYE3HA! (MY SON'S MISSING!) TR HE MOKKE RA MRYBA! (SHE CAN'T SWIM!) TON CE IIABN! (HE'S DROWNING!) KORA E CRERBAIIINRT BRAKBT OT BAPHA? (WHEN IS THE NEXT TRAIN TO
According to Chang, she's writing Cyrillic. And this is enough for us, given the context, which is artistic. Chang's text works, which blink on and off the screen, underline another quality or drawback of the Web, which is that most people don't read Web text like they read hard copy. Chang exploits this psychology, for it is just a mind set, but an essential one that differs from the turning of pages in a real book or magazine. A page on a Web site cannot be turned. But even if it could be, the reader of a Web page, which is not so much in a time-based as a timed context and a psychology of impatience, would make haste to turn to the next page. Text on a Web site is at once essential information and an annoyance to be clicked away as fast as possible. It is the clicking, the interactivity, the moment and the space between the pages, that is satisfying, for it signals to the reader that he is indeed getting something out of the way. All Chang does (no small task) is to help the reader expedite the chore.

Then there is Diane Bertolo's "The Reader," [http://www.totalmuseum.org/webproject8.html](http://www.totalmuseum.org/webproject8.html), which invites the spectator to participate in the transfer of a text from a site of the spectator's choosing. For Bertolo, who is a native English speaker, the language difficulty is completely different from that of nonnative English speakers. For her, the problem is not to close in on English, but to distance herself from it so that, like her international Web colleagues, she can use it like an object and not like a language. "The Reader" appropriates text in the same way that an artist appropriates other art works; or in the same way that an artist uses ready-made objects. It takes texts out of their original contexts, and in doing so it strips them naked of their graphic adornments. Instead, it accompanies them with the same talking body, the reader, who raps out each letter of each word, making them become annoying objects.

Finally, there is the English of Superbad:

"Dear Everyone,
I'm sorry, I can't write to each of you individually, but our family counselor said it was important to get this letter out to everyone
as quickly as possible.
It's sad that we have to
send a message like this.
We realize that almost all
of you who gave money to
Little Jay gave it in good
faith, but please, DO NOT
loan Jay Junior any
more money.

Jay Junior wasn't trying to
take advantage of anyone.
He just wanted to be certain
that he was getting enough
foods from the Meat Group.
The meat that can be returned,
will be. The meat that has
already gone bad, Jay Junior
will pay for out of his own
pocket. All of your money
will be returned.

Sincerely,
Viv"  http://www.superbad.com/1/turkey
/viv.html

The deadpan text is striking for its absolute specificity. It is at first a
strange letter, made all the more so in the context of the World Wide Web.
It is the kind of letter that we more easily see being hand-written on
stationary and sent through the postal service. The "family counselor"
notwithstanding, it is a letter from another period, from another family,
from the mother next door who has finally revealed that something is
indeed wrong with either her or her son or both of them. In taking its place
on the Web, the letter redirects our gaze toward planet earth, which, as is
evidenced here, is a weird place. The letter is also poetic, in its form and
content. Benjamin has used the literary mechanism of enjambment on
many of the lines to create a poetic and strange rhythm to what would
otherwise be a less remarkable letter.

The Web artist uses English to comment at once on the language itself and
to communicate -- willy-nilly -- meaning, any meaning maybe, which is
perhaps the same as commenting on language. The French often complain
about how English is massacring the French language via the French
people's deplorably instinctive adoption of English words and phrases. The
French even have a language authority, the Académie française, to admit
or refuse new words, particularly English words, to the French language.
There is, however, no authority to regulate the use, misuse and abuse of
English on the Internet. There are bastions of "good English," although I'm not entirely sure where, perhaps on American and English campuses, although even there, where the Web has become an essential academic tool, students and teachers are submitting themselves to the greatest authority on English of all, the Internet. Or rather, the greatest lack of authority on English. For the sending of an E-mail and the uploading of a Web page is a wonderfully scary process in its finality, like the printing of a text on a printing press. Yet, whereas typos in hard copy are a proof reader's shame, on the Internet, it is the stuff of art.

McDonald's

"MMM/WWW" [http://www.bekkoame.ne.jp/i/ga2750/fet/WWW.html] is either Takuji Kogo's way of embracing or mocking globalism. "MMM/WWW" is a collection of several voices, each one repeating like a mantra with a different language's accent, the word "McDonald's." This iconic verbal motif symbolizes a very real manifestation of what, until the beginning of the last decade, was considered to be cultural and economic imperialism, the Coca-colonization of the world. But, of course, yesterday's imperialism is today's globalism.

And it does seem that since the explosion of the Internet, cultural and economic imperialism have taken on the benign aspect of a link. For a link, or the act of linking to another Web site in a culture that is not your own, is "interactive," meaning that you are not submitting to imperialism, but are clicking -- I mean seeking out maybe the best and the worst that the imperialist country has to offer. You have freely chosen your cultural oppressor. You have not witnessed the disembarkation of a foreign invader on your country's shores, but embarked yourself on a voyage to the shores of a foreign invader who is now just as content to operate from his home base. This must be what is called a postcolonialist conundrum. Unless it's neocolonialist.

Kogo's take on global culture is not so much in stark contrast with cultural diversity's doomsayers as it is a statement of fact. Art has always been more a declarative statement than anything else, and Kogo's declaration leaves us to decide if he is for or against global culture -- although I'd guess that he is little troubled by it. On the other hand, "Presence and Place" was the theme of a recent Webcast held by Multimedia Art Asia Pacific (MAAP) [http://maap.org.au/] in Brisbane, Australia, with participants in Beijing, Hong Kong, Tokyo, somewhere in India, and Seoul. "The now common idea of new media is one that destroys boundaries and melts countries -- a globalization. However, the reality is that art and ideas
are made 'somewhere' and that the local and specific environment are still at the core of how artists perceive and express their ideas. The idea of 'presence' is related to context. What is the identity/persona of the creator? Who is the work talking to? How is it perceived? Is the personalized ownership of artistic authorship once again needed to humanize new technologies?" Quite naturally, MAAP sought to present a debatable subject. But it seems that in the statement of the theme, there is an underlying bias toward cultural diversity. Or is this bias inevitable? There might even be a slight subconscious tinge, all good will notwithstanding, of racism -- just a smidgen! And the organizers are unaware! So it's O.K.! But it's interesting. So let me explain.

First, a digression. There was an exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris maybe a decade ago called "Magiciens de la terre," ("Magicians of the Earth"). At the time it could be said to have been an exhibition of alternative or third world art. It was a revelation, an important and entertaining exhibition. Here was art in spite of itself, made by "artists" in spite of themselves. If only they knew it! Or was it better that only we (Westerners) knew that what they were doing was acceptable if not avant-garde Western art? In fact, because of the show, some "artists" ended up by knowing it, by becoming artists, and some -- hallelujah? -- even ended up going to the West to start artistic careers. There was a sense, present in the title of the show, that art not only existed and thrived outside of Paris, New York and London, but that it was "real" art, art close to the people and to nature, art unsullied by Western hands, a magic, even miraculous art, like the miracle of a happy primitive people existing and thriving in the jungle at the end of the 20th century, for crying out loud. Or at least it was art that had survived colonialism, sometimes bought into it in creative ways, and was now expressing itself.

The point is that at the time, and it's still that time today, certain open-minded Westerners, maybe especially in France, needed to believe that the third world wasn't just intent on becoming so many developing countries; that what had been forsaken in the West (Rousseau for Voltaire?) could maybe be saved elsewhere; that art made from seeming ignorance possessed miracle virtues absent in the knowing, ironic, thoughtful, casual, slapped-together, conceptual stuff and fluff of Western art. Since the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the French have personified this belief in the "bon sauvage," the noble savage. Why the West needs the noble savage is too much of a digression for this text. But need him it does, if only to thwart the fear in itself that everyone, even the savages of the third world, can easily, as easily as saying the magic word "McDonald's," become Westerners.

This, to me, was the subtext of MAAP's Webcast, "Presence and Place." It wanted to believe that in Beijing, Hong Kong, Seoul, Tokyo and somewhere in India, Web artists were striving, consciously or unconsciously --
although now might be the time to bring it to the surface -- to make use of the Internet on their own Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Indian terms. This is a naive belief, similar to the belief that the "bon sauvage," once he is exposed to Western life, will head back to the forest. Indeed, the opposite is true. Just as McDonald's is the world's restaurant, the Internet is the world's information superhighway. There is no turning back, and at least Western thinkers like those at MAAP have the good sense to pose the problem delicately instead of doubling the burden on non-Western shoulders: to live at the same time by and for the Internet and by and for their native cultures.

"MMM/WWW" is a witty and mordant declaration of post-colonial colonialism as it works in the trenches -- and not analyzed from the outside, that is, from a Western country. And it is a fairly joyous declaration -- certainly not the joy of being the prey of cultural and economic imperialism, but the joy of making do, and then some (after all, one makes out from the context that this is Japan, an enjoyable enough place for the natives, I'm sure), even in the grasp of an insidious and tentacular cultural and economic monster of a burger joint.

Think Locally, Act Globally

This seems to capture the reality of the Web artist more than its opposite catch phrase, "Think globally, act locally." For it's easier to be yourself (to think locally) when you create than to be a concept (to think globally). And it's easier to put things on the World Wide Web (to act globally) than to have a gallery or a museum show (act locally). Not only is thinking locally and acting globally easier than its counterpart, but it's better. For to think globally is to indeed ask oneself and maybe come up with the wrong answer to the question of Self in today's world. Whereas to think locally is to be oneself, which, except in the most deviant acts, is desirable for self-fulfillment and most likely for the good of the locale.

Who then is asking that we think globally and act locally? It must be the purveyors of globalism. They have given us the tools to act globally, which is fine, but first they also want us to think globally. This is anathema to the artist.
"My boyfriend came back from the war. After dinner they left us alone." [http://www.teleportacia.org/war/](http://www.teleportacia.org/war/). There is in Olia Lialina's poetic work a cyber realism that isn't so much a contradiction as a commentary on what we consider to be real. "My boyfriend came back from the war," with its black background, few white images and brief dialogue in white type, reads like a scene from a black and white 1950s European movie. Or is it like a Hollywood movie? This is where the realism of the piece begins to question our assumptions about our perception of reality.

The piece reads like a story of growing up, or of growing apart, of hopes dashed or hope against hope. We know there are two voices, but often we are not sure whose is whose. Yet it doesn't really matter. What does matter is the hesitant tone, the softness of the queries, the sudden irritation, the darkness, the sadness. We fear for the couple. And whereas the story could take place anywhere, Lialina's ability to give convincing voices to her two young lovers makes us ask where it really does take place.

"'Where are you?/I can't see you.
'FORGET IT.'
'You don't trust me, I see.'
'But... it was only once... Last summer... And if you think...
Why I should explain?...
Don't you see?'
'NO NEVER'
'He was my neighbour.'
'Don't kill'
'Forgive.'
'him'
'forgive'
'ME'
'them'
'WHAT COULD YOU DO?'
'WHERE WAS IT?'
'Please, look at me.'
'They never saw the snow.'
'It's so old stupid story.'
'Everyone wants to come back.'
'My mother told me that you could change.'
'Haven't you seen tigers there?'
'WHAT TIME?'
'I keep your photo here.'
'what?'
'you want me?'
"CAN anybody kill you?"
"All guys change don't worry. I'll help you."
"So, last time we met when... And you promised."
"Me too. DO YOU"
"LIKE MY NEW DRESS?"
"Who asks you?"
"TOGETHER FOREVER."
"We'll start a new life."
"nobody here can love"
"May be you look at me?"
"or understand me"
"LOOK"
"SALUTE"
"In honour of you."
"LOOK, it's so beautiful"
"RED/GREEN/BLUE"
"KISS ME"
"will you marry me"
"TOMORROW"
"No, better next month after holidays and the weather must be better. Yes next month. I'm happy now."

"OLIA LIALINA, 1996"

Even in the best of times and situations, young love is tenuous and fleeting, yet the couple leave us with a fragile hope that things will work out for them. Working within the early (1996) restraints of the Web medium, shunning a strictly linear progression, preferring an interactive progression that creates dramatic tension, the artist has bestowed a tender beauty on this rite of passage.

Anonymousity of the Internet

I saw a cartoon in a recent issue of The New Yorker magazine showing a dog seated in front of a computer, its paw on the mouse, its lips moving, its face turned to us to speak. The caption reads: "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." The anonymity of the Internet is another one of its essences. Names don't reveal users, they hide them: Jodi; Superbad. Corporate names are common: the Candy Factory; YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES. Multiple identities are possible, if not encouraged. Gender becomes unimportant because unknowable. Concepts replace individuals.
Whether this anonymity is alienating us from one another is a bromide of new media analysis. Maybe just as tedious an observation is that Internet anonymity is liberating. More interesting is whether this new liberty comes at the price of personal responsibility. Yet this possible problem is counterbalanced by the new possibility for people in politically oppressed societies of expressing themselves with less fear of being caught. In democratic countries, anonymous expression in forums and chat rooms is a phenomenon that brings up the question of the quality of the information that is being shared. Does an anonymous declaration have the same value or weight as a responsible one? Does anonymity suggest irresponsibility?

But there is another kind of anonymity that the Internet breeds, which is the anonymity of being just one person not only on the World Wide Web, but in this whole wide world, one person who is now, because of the Internet, a declared existence that in its glaring smallness, is still and all maybe but one rung up from the depths of inexistence, of not being counted or of barely being worth the effort of being counted, in any case still harassed by the fleetingness of true existence, of being really counted. Never has such a contradictory feeling of being minuscule yet countable been palpably shared by so many people. It's the anonymity of still being a nobody, as we say, and a no more countable, knowable person -- a somebody -- for having a personal Web site on which you put everything about yourself that might make you become more than just a number -- or a zero -- to the world. This is what YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES' "ARTIST'S STATEMENT NO. 45,730,944: THE PERFECT ARTIST'S WEB SITE" [http://yhchang.com/perfectfinal.html] means when the artist cries out "I am, I am, I am!" to the World Wide Web. What she really means is: "Am I? Does my existence on the Web mean I exist in life? Am I now somebody, a recognizable entity, or am I still an anonymous nobody?" I think I have the answer for her.

[Top]

Information Art

The Internet is the information superhighway. But almost as soon as it became popular, the Internet became a source of commerce, selling, among other things, information. And because any site offering a commercial or noncommercial service is going to try to convince us of the usefulness of the service, we're talking about information now weighing down upon us with wanted or unwanted influence and power. And in that sense, Web art, which, in most cases, is on the Internet to indirectly or directly exert as powerful an influence as it can upon us, is at the same time just another piece of pushy information and a more often than not
commercial service or good, albeit one that rarely gets sold, maybe because it fails to inform us or push us around enough.

**Disinformation Art**

When does information become disinformation on the Internet? Since everyone, including the artist, has a pitch to make, since nothing, in a philosophical sense, is entirely or even halfway knowable, even given the best of information -- in fact, since everything, including the simplest things, is buried under a growing cybermass of information, all the textual and graphic information presented on the World Wide Web leads to interactive confusion. Link leads to hyperlink, and hyperlink leads you up, over and down a path on which you feel more and more lost, even if you can console yourself that you're only lost in a make-believe world that you can walk away from.

Here, Web art is not a response to disinformation, but just another exploitation of it. What Web art has going for it though is its absence of subterfuge. No one expects enlightenment, whether financial, intellectual or spiritual, which puts Web art at a distinct advantage to the expanding galaxy of nonprofit Web sites whose major worry is their possible irrelevance or failure to inspire interest.

**Command Not Recognized:**

Or how to rap in E-mail. What is recognizable in the following text is Jodi's grasp of art and language, which is especially impressive for the period, 1996, which is comparable to classical antiquity. (1997 can be seen as the Renaissance, 1998 as the Enlightenment, and 1999 as the 20th century.) Jodi is saying something here, which is almost a shame, given the poetic possibilities irrespective of meaning.

"To: nettime-l@desk.nl
Subject: Re: nettime: !: of(f) the w.w.web
From: jodi@jodi.org
Date: Sun, 3 Nov 1996 15:51:48 -0800 (PST)

>--
>
of the w.w.web cultural networks- network culture

Command '>of(f)' not recognized.

Non commercial /collaborative Network CD-Rom for the European Media Art

Command '>non' not recognized.

Festival 1996 (Hybrid CD-ROM PC/Mac)

Command '>festival' not recognized.

topics: Film, Video + MediaArt / Hypertext / network criticism / asocial
Command '>topics:' not recognized.

Hyperpolitics + Internetsociety / Lost in Hyperspace

Command '>hyperpolitics' not recognized.

*looser

Command '*looser' not recognized.

of the w.w.web is the result of a chaotic, collective, production process:

Command '>of' not recognized.

groups dropped out, gave up in the face of the complexity of the material,

Command '>groups' not recognized.

e etc

Command '>etc' not recognized.

*idiot

Command '*idiot' not recognized.

Our idea is, that perhaps other centres of publishing will start another re-collection, re-organisation of specific online-projects!

Command '>our' not recognized.

Command '>re-collection,' not recognized.

*asshole

Command '*asshole' not recognized.

The wishing machines aren't stuck in our heads, are not figments of the imagination,

Command '>the' not recognized.

Command '>imagination,' not recognized.

(Gilles Deleuze; Felix Guattari)

Command '>(gilles' not recognized.

*butthead

Command '*butthead' not recognized.

Find the mistakes, the quotations, the misappropriations ...

Command '>find' not recognized.

Copy the material, scan it, import it, work with it ... feedback!

Command '>copy' not recognized.

*prick

Command '*prick' not recognized.
Found Art on the Web

The "WWWART MEDAL," created by Alexei Shulgin [http://www.easylife.org/award/], brings to light the oftentimes irrelevancy of categorizing Web sites as Web or Net art. In this piece, Shulgin presents Web sites that, in spite of themselves, succeed in invading that vaguely, if not futilely, defined territory of Web art.

There's only one problem here, however, which is that the unspoken criteria that determine his finds are esthetic ones. When we click on one of the medal winners, for instance [http://www.philosophy.com], maybe we really do expect to find something philosophical. Instead we discover skin creams for sale. But surprise would be disingenuous on our part, for no, we don't expect philosophy, we expect something ironic, something to be made fun of. This is because Shulgin has already set the scene. We know that what he is presenting is, well, found Web art. Unlike Marcel Duchamp, who set down a urinal in an exhibition space of "art," Shulgin sets down
skin creams that we already assume are found art.

Still, he has directed us toward a gold mine. Moreover, he has indirectly posed the question: What is Web art? Whether one thinks this is a worthwhile question or not (the moment you ask it, you bring Web art in from the cold, into the warm embrace of art criticism -- anything wrong with that?), the question is inherent, imbedded, one might say, in every Web site, just as, offline, out of the computer and back into real life, the question "What is art?" has become inherent in every worldly object, ever since the invention of the readymade.

In fact, when surfing the Internet, you get the same simultaneous feeling of discovery and of wasting time that comes from cleaning out a closet, the attic or the garage, of coming upon clutter that takes on new, significant, unique meaning just from its existence in your hands at a new time. This feeling is not unlike studying art, whether in books or in the museum. In her work "ARTIST'S STATEMENT NO. 45,730,944: THE PERFECT ARTIST'S WEB SITE" [http://yhchang.com/perfectfinal.html], Young-hae Chang asks the question: "DOES THE INTERNET MAKE EVERYONE AN ARTIST? IS THERE ANY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN ARTIST'S WEB SITE AND 'TERRY'S TERMITE PAGE'?" This is the same question that Alexei Shulgin asks in "The WWWART MEDAL," and I think they both have the same response: no.

But there is a difference, if only in the context. Closet, attic and garage discoveries rarely turn out to be forgotten Van Goghs, but probably only because the person cleaning out these places isn't looking for a Van Gogh. The Van Gogh is there all right, it is just in the wrong place. "Terry's Termite Page" is also in the wrong place. RTMark [http://www.rtmark.com/] is in the right place, the art world, although in the end, its stated goals are no different than those of Terry's Termite Page, which is to inform us about something that's eating away at the foundation of someplace or other.

So in the end, the gold mine that the "WWWART MEDAL" postulates is everything, every site on the Web. Every site is a Web art site, just like everything in the world is a readymade. Which can be a harrowing thought, or just reality, or both, sort of like global warming, something that is there and that, sooner or later, must be dealt with -- except that you personally don't have to think about it or deal with it, because if these things are inevitable (the world and the cyberworld as art, global warming as the end of the world), then we might as well just go about our business. And this is at least the attitude that the art world has taken toward the end of art (the readymade), or the beginning of art (the readymade), and that the world has taken toward global warming: It's there, so what?

Intent is meaningless in art, because it is silent or invisible. What the artist
and the non-artist think they are each creating has nothing to do with the way others see their creations. And this is often why the art world in general seems to exist in a vacuum. It has fallen prey to its sole perspective (much like art was for centuries prey to one-point perspective), regardless of what the outside world sees or fails to see or thinks that it has seen elsewhere when it too decides to look at art. The truth is, RtMark and "Terry's Termite Page" inspire diverse reactions, many of which have nothing to do with art and termites. In art, intent is nothing, the thing is everything, and even in the virtual world, the virtual thing is everything.

However, the user of the Internet overcomes intent with words. He spells out his intention. Words, information, not images, are the bread and butter of the Internet. Web art and all Web sites are bathed in words to such an extent that, in the same way that context creates the readymade in the art world, words and information create the context for art work on the Internet. And whereas it is given that anyone can see the world and the virtual world as closets, attics or garages of readymade art, in the end no one does, and no one sees the point in going beyond the declaration of this given. It's at this point that for some odd reason we turn to the specialists, people like Marcel Duchamp for the real world, and Alexei Shulgin for the virtual world, and entrust them to find art for us. They are among the few hardy souls who discover pure gold everywhere around themselves, and free for the taking, instead of, like most us, only seeing gold in the paper money we work so hard to get.

Alternative Web Sites Versus Web Art Sites

When it came to choosing possible Web artists or Web art sites for Web Project 8, either an essential or a futile initial question presented itself: What is Web art? That one must ask the question itself is an indication of the special place that Web art has already made for itself in art. Rarely if ever does such a question concern other art genres. It's easy to decide if something is a painting, a sculpture, a movie or a happening. The question "What is art?" is in a different category, and at this stage in the history of art is an easy question to answer. This is the question that all artists ask themselves as they set out to create. Today, the response to the question is the art work itself. But "What is Web art?" is a surprising question, given that it's so easy to respond that "Web art is art on the Web only." Of course. Yet why does one hesitate in front of Web art sites such as the Institute for Applied Autonomy http://www.appliedautonomy.com/, the Redundant Technology Initiative http://www.lowtech.org/, RTMark http://www.rtmark.com, etc.?
There is no doubt that these Web sites are Web art. But when it came down to deciding to invite or not to invite any of them to create a Web piece for Web Project 8, it became clear that their own definitions of what they do indeed create disqualified them from further consideration, not because I believed their definitions, but because they clarified what I already felt. The Institute for Applied Autonomy: "the IAA has identified the already emerging market of cultural insurrection as the most stable market in the years to come. IAA research has examined the primary behavior patterns of this market and is developing technologies that best serve the needs of the burgeoning market." These technologies include a robot that sprays graffiti -- not in real time, but in real life. The robot may be a joke, but it really does exist. The Redundant Technology Initiative: "What is Redundant Technology Initiative? RTI is an arts group based in Sheffield, England." This arts group creates, among other things, computer installations. And RTMark: "What is RTMark? RTMark is a brokerage that benefits from 'limited liability' just like any other corporation. Using this principle, RTMark supports the sabotage of corporate products, with no risk to the public investor." RTMark is not talking here about sabotage in the sense of an I-love-you type virus, but of turning off your computer, standing up from your chair and getting out of the house to get the sabotage done.

Still, RTMark comes closest to creating Web art in the sense that its "sabotage of corporate products" seems to be essentially limited to its project proposals on its own Web site. Even though RTMark advocates real-world action, the Web site itself doesn't seem or need to catalyze specific off-site results, except maybe a continuing personal awareness, which is close enough to the affect that Web art and all other art has on us. However, the project goals it proposes carry the mind away from the Web and into the street, which is quite different from the way that the Web art works in Web Project 8 function.

Again, this is not to say that RTMark and other alternative sites are not Web art. An intriguing facet of these sites is that their political engagement, which would invariably be fatal to other art mediums, is what makes them so fascinating and oftentimes esthetically pleasing. Yet, is there an artistic difference between the calls for political activism from RTMark and, for instance, those of the American Civil Liberties Union http://www.aclu.org/ or Amnesty International http://www.amnesty.org/? Each in its own way seeks to create first political awareness, then political action. If there is a difference, it's in their rhetoric and field of action. The first Web site is out to criticize and satirize lesser if not wholly imagined social ills; the second two are dead serious about what are often life and death issues. The ACLU: "Act now! To help stop the execution of the innocent, we need you to do three things right away: 1. Take action to support a national moratorium on executions;
2. Help spread the word by telling your friends and family about this campaign; and 3. If you agree with us, join the ACLU and help make a moratorium on executions a reality before another innocent person dies" http://www.aclu.org/death-penalty/. RTMark: "Plant enticing pornographic videotapes in porn stores everywhere, with models such as (a super-well-hung) Ronald MacDonald, (a dementedly horny) Barbie, etc. -- in other words, any trademark character which depends on its assumed virtue" http://www.rtmark.com/fundintel.html.

It seems that it's the most superficial aspect of RTMark, IAA and RTI that makes us accept that they are Web art: their declared connections to the art world. This is strange at first, since an art work need not be, and indeed most often is not a consciously direct commentary on itself -- except in Web art, where there is often an almost surreal consciousness of being Web art. So this is enough, for it is also the most profound aspect of art today to say -- first to oneself -- that "This is art." Art has always been more a question of emotion -- that is, belief -- than of reason. And there is no doubt that in the art world, it is what you say it is.

I suppose that in the end my Web Project 8 choices boiled down to a simple consideration: Is this Web art site an end in itself or a tool, even a partial one, toward other ends, artistic or other? It is true that it is more and more difficult to make a clear distinction between Web art sites and another kind of alternative site, the so-called "personal Web site," if only because both promote the people who create them, even if the people are staunch defenders of their anonymity. But this is just another case of the people who create deciding or not deciding how they see themselves, then acting accordingly.

A
nxiety, Virtual

Many people say, when in front of art, that they don't understand it. This is at once a normal statement to make and a misunderstanding -- I mean a lack of appreciation for what art is all about. There's nothing to really understand in art, it's all a question of likes and dislikes. It's all a question of feeling. Many artists, consciously or unconsciously, laughingly (in spite of their apparent seriousness) create works that play on this worry that we're not getting the point. Their works are not supposed to be worrisome, but funny. Many critics compound our worries by writing texts that are hard to understand. But there is a difference between not getting the point of an art work and not getting the point of the text that purports to analyze it. It's O.K. not to understand a work of art. It's someone's fault, though, when we don't understand the text about it.
I think that the more you enjoy art, the less anxious you are about understanding it. It ceases to be a problem. The birth of conceptual, or "difficult," art renewed anxiety, until someone made the simple observation that concepts are by definition made to be understood. Problem solved. In the case of Web art, however, we're confronted with a completely different problem, which is not so much a conceptual as a technological one. I can't remember if anyone ever got anxious about which technology went into the workings of the TV set, but if anyone did, his anxiety surely never measured up to his pure visual pleasure of watching it. I mention this, because the Web is like a TV set and, they claim, soon TV and Web will be one and the same. Maybe then virtual anxiety will evaporate. For now, it is as strong as ever, with cultural institutions rushing to get a grip on it for fear of being cultural dunces.

Web art anxiety is a subcategory of computer and Internet fear, both of which prey on either our inability to fully understand or our lassitude with trying to understand the depths of the workings of continuously changing hardware and software. And it is indeed a question of going or refusing to go below the surfaces of both of them, into the nuts and bolts and motherboards, the bits and bytes, the codes and scripts, to discover -- what, exactly? That there is nothing down there? That, like the atom, it's a thing you could splice and slice into nothingness? The problem (if there is one) with computer technology is that, unlike nuclear technology (to take another example of a mind-boggling invention), it isn't a danger to be simply rid of. In fact, the only worrisome thing about computer technology is that children and young adults -- irresponsible as they are -- understand it better than many adults.

Or at least they don't worry about it. And this is what breeds virtual anxiety in the more responsible among us. I was told about an article in a Seoul newspaper that reported that male Korean office workers over the age of 35 have recently been experiencing chronic indigestion. The cause: younger colleagues -- who are usually also underlings -- who not only use computer technology and especially the Internet with alarming and casual facility, but who flaunt their superiority in a humiliating fashion in the eyes of the over-35s. I myself noticed that in the subway, Seoulites devour in general but four kinds of texts: the Bible, English manuals and computer and Internet books. The last three texts are complementary. But now that I think about it, a reading of a computer book demands some of the same Biblical faith in what to a lot of us is the ultimately unknowable. It goes without saying that because Web art anxiety is the icing on the cake of digital fears, there is growing sales of antacids to relieve cultural indigestion.
Sale, Virtual Reality For or Not For

In spite of the hacker's unspoken credo of freedom from real world status quo (yet all the while faithfully obeying the laws of HTML code), especially the strictures governing payment for goods and services rendered, that has indeed played an important role in the mentalities of the Web art milieu, it's hard not to see this resistance as an attempt to momentarily halt the inevitable, which is the selling of Web art like any other Internet service. And, hackers aside, the inevitable would also be quite a coup, on a par with and maybe bettering Duchamp's "Air de Paris" http://members.aol.com/mindwebart3/marcelpg1.htm, which is a glass vial of air that he once sold as an art work -- for after all, the glass vile is something. Duchamp, the inventor of "infra-thin," who himself daydreamed of creating merely by breathing, would undoubtedly take his hat off to artists selling Web art. As scrambling art dealers, among other smooth talkers, know well, there's nothing more satisfying than getting money for nothing.

Duchamp's successful sale of air is not just a prank, but a confirmation of the salable beauty of minimal art. And at the time -- 1919 -- he probably thought that selling air, or nothing, was the extreme limit of minimalism. He made the invisible and the inexistent become visible and real -- and beautiful, which is no mean feat. In that sense, Web art's minimalism is more conventional than the minimalism of "Air de Paris." Neither air nor Web art actually exist for the taking, yet, whereas air is invisible, Web art is at least visible. What's more, like the glass vial containing a dose of Parisian air, you can actually buy and have the artist hand you a Web art "piece" on a floppy disk, CD-ROM or other digital support, and guarantee in one way or another that you alone or among a happy few possess the sole or a numbered copy of the work. This would be similar to the types of transactions that occur with works in quite a few artistic mediums, such as film, video and photography.

And this suggests that it is not at all the virtual existence of Web art versus other art mediums' physical existence that is at the source of art market anxiety, but the profusion of something that, when it comes down to salability, really does exist. Like luxury goods, the art market thrives on a relative paucity of high quality objects. The real problem that Web art presents to the art market is not that it finds itself in an indefinable somewhere between, below or above goods and services, but that it is both a richly abundant good and a much too readily available service. In fact, if that is indeed an accurate description of Web art, maybe it should be, as Duchamp suggests with his "Air de Paris," bottled and sold like mineral water. Or regulated by the state like any utility.
So Web art is art for the people. We don't need art like we need air, water and electricity, but if we do in some way and at some time ever need a dose of art (some seem to think so, whether they be capitalists, communists or social realists), the need is already more easily fulfilled by Web art than by any another. And many Web artists would like to keep it this way. Alexei Shulgin is one of them. In his statement "Art, Power and Communication," [http://www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/199610/msg00036.html](http://www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/199610/msg00036.html), he says that

"With the coming of Net something new, shyly calling itself net.art is emerging, now trying to define itself and experiencing its difference from other forms of creative activity. The problems of current period of net.art as I see them are deeply rooted in a social determination of the notions 'art' and 'artist.' Will we be able to overcome our egos and give up obsolete ideas of representation and manipulation? Will we jump headlong into realm of pure communication? Will we call ourselves "artists" anymore? Net.art means communication means present."

I don't know exactly what he means here, but I sense the excitement in his tone.

There will be Web artists who will make money doing Web art, if only because this seems to be the way that societies reward most good work (and even more bad work) in any domain. But, according to Shulgin, Web art might also be the art that finally turns everyone into artists. If this is so, it will only be because people finally realize that they have always been artists. "Personal Web sites" abound already, and one can only laud or blame those who have one for not calling them "Web art sites." Personal Web sites are essentially no different than any Web art site. It's a simple question of belief or delusion in oneself or goals one sets for oneself. Personal Web sites are no doubt extensions of one's personal space, especially one's home, whether it be a cardboard box and its belongings in the street (I've recently seen some very cleverly-designed, touching and fascinating ones in Tokyo) or a penthouse and its "luxurious appointments." Looked at from the inside out, these homes are not so much architecture as art. I remember an exhibition in Paris of the reconstructed living rooms of people who owned expensive art and art objects. I found the exhibition merely curious, because every human creates consciously or unconsciously a living space with art, an art that is just as worthy if not worthier than the expensive art and art objects that a small minority collects. The artistic process of decorating a penthouse and a cardboard-box home is the same for both the rich and the poor, the cultivated and the uncultivated, the artist and the non-artist. The artistic results are similar, too. So too with the personal Web site and the Web art site. That the creator of the latter might be able to sell his Web art is just the end result of a mental process that the creator of the former either
refused or never came upon. Yet the artistic results are the same.

In "Frontier Town 2000" [http://turbulence.org/Works/FT2K/html(marker01Text.html], Diane Bertolo says that "Cyberspace, like the old West, is a lawless domain of limitless possibilities." We may not know the limits yet, but there are laws in Web art, many of which might be unspoken for the moment, that resemble the laws in other art mediums and other non-art mediums. This is because the creators of the Personal Web site and the Web art site are just extending themselves, their homes, their personal belongings, onto the Internet, for show or for sale.

T
ime Travel

In Olia Lialina's "Agatha Appears," [http://www.c3.hu/collection/agatha], a brilliant moment of interactivity occurs when, as you just click the mouse, the heroine of the story travels from different Web site to different Web site scattered around the world. It's a simple, strangely satisfying and wondrous voyage that Agatha takes herself and us on. Simply by clicking, one goes around the world in far less time than when one flies on an SST.

W
estern

I like the similarities between Olia Lialina's "My boyfriend came back from the war" [http://www.teleportacia.org/war/] and Diane Bertolo's "Frontier Town 2000" [http://turbulence.org/Works/FT2K/]. Each story carries specific cultural markings, Russian in one, American in the other. Both express a restrained sexual atmosphere. Both contain violence. Both refer to movie genres as much as to real life. But "My boyfriend" contains an element of realism that "FT2K" makes no effort to attain, if only because a "Western" is already a mythological genre, and "FT2K" is not even a frontier town, but a Disneyesque reconstruction of one. No, I take that back. Bertolo's work is a virtual symbolization of a Disneyesque reconstruction of a frontier town. As such it suits Bertolo's intentions ideally, for behind the already stage-proplike facades of the frontier towns of yore there was . . . nothing, nothing but the emptiness beyond them, or what she and others before her called the frontier, which is just like what exists behind the facade of art and especially Web art: nothing but you, face to face with the nothingness of the beyond. Go West.
Communication and Art

Alexei Shulgin's "Art, Power and Communication" [http://www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/199610/msg00036.html](http://www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/199610/msg00036.html) declares that art, as evidenced by Web art, is moving from representation to communication. I think this simply means from image to text. And I think this is true. But he also states that language is just another tool for the artist. This is also true. The problem then is that if the artist uses language as just another material in his creations, does its uniquely communicative quality remain in his art work? Shulgin posits that art has heretofore been more an affair of representation. This doesn't seem to make art preclude communication so much as it makes it communicate non-verbally.

Art and language do seem to oppose each other in a communicative sense. On the one hand, art is all suggestion and emotion. Any conclusion (communication) you come to in front of an art work is your own. It is not an incontrovertible conclusion, it is not even a clear message, and it certainly does not communicate the same message to another person: it is not written. Art is not written, nor is it spoken, even if it contains written and spoken elements in it. Simply, written and spoken elements of an art work become integral parts of the artistic. . . representation. Art does not, then, contain an explicit message. This is its nature. On the other hand, language seeks and, at its best, achieves clarity (communication), and by definition, this is a shared clarity. Clarity in language, be it written or spoken, takes at least two people. Language communicates. It is the basis and the fiber of a functioning society. It is what makes people and things work. And when people and things don't work, it is often because language has failed to fulfill its function. Moreover, what language communicates is not only a message or something useful, but even the useless -- art, for instance, in the form of literature and poetry. And now, more than ever, language communicates, according to Shulgin and others, art and, specifically, Web art.

Many Web art works are indeed just text. Yet if we're going to call them art works, communication becomes the least of our worries. In fact, an art that really communicates is an art that communicates something. I can think of only one thing that art really communicates, and that is that it is art. That it is art, which means that it is beautiful, which means that it affects our hearts and souls as much as or more than our minds. However, this message, if it is one, is so basic to art that it goes unsaid. What Shulgin and many artists and critics before him are driving at, I feel, is that art, and in this case Web art, if indeed it is moving from representation to communication, has the capacity to be important, maybe
more now than ever. Or rather, it might be time for Web art to be in the avant-garde of an art movement that does more in the world than just shut up and be beautiful.

Is it the textual element in Web art that makes this so? How can it be if Web art is just another form of art, an art that doesn't communicate coherently, even if it is laden with text? "Art, Power and Communication" reads somewhat like a political manifesto, albeit a friendly and modest one. Yet there is also an enthusiastic, urgent, even slightly foreboding tone to Shulgin's English-speaking voice. And in life, is there anything less urgent and foreboding than art?

"I intentionally wrote this paper directly in English which I am not good in and I know that what I am going to say may sound rather declarative, generalised and clumsy. But the only alternative to this I see is to say nothing."

"How one can dare to use words trying to explain something? Isn't it obvious now as never before that words fail to describe anything? Let's be honest - words now are nothing but just another medium for an artist."

In the two initial sentences, Shulgin seems to contradict himself. First, he must speak his mind. But second, what's the use? Far from criticizing him, I suggest rather that here is an essential contradiction, not just of Web art, but of all art. This is the artist at work: he has something urgent (for himself) to say, yet in the end he fails to communicate it. But not through any fault of his own (and I hope Shulgin understands this), but because art doesn't communicate, at least not like language. And yet, the artist must persevere.

The enthusiasm in Shulgin's text is for a new media art that he feels is confounding more than ever the frontier between representation and communication. Yet, if he makes one misstep in his exhortation, it is to assume that art should communicate more than it should represent. If Web art is indeed moving toward communication and leaving behind representation, this is a problem. Art that communicates something other than beauty is really something other than art. And it's important to remember this, otherwise the artist is made to bear a burden that is not his. No one expects much from an artist in terms of clarity. In fact, "wrong" thinking is a hallmark of good art. Or just not thinking at all. It's a good idea not to confuse art with intellect, otherwise we really start to pay attention to the text or its lack in an art work.

But we do pay attention to the text. And as the visitor to Web Project 8 can see, every artist in the exhibition except Jeong-hwa Choi uses to some extent language in his or her works. Shulgin is right in a way. Web art uses a lot of text. The question is: Does this abundance of text make Web art
essentially different from other art mediums? I think not, for the very reason that he himself states, that "words now are nothing but just another medium for an artist." I think a Web artist like Young-hae Chang would agree. She has a certain literary mastery of text in her works, yet she refuses to be considered a writer. She explained to me that this would be a fatal error for her, because then her works would be judged not on artistic but on literary criteria. About the difference between her work and a literary work, she said to me "Listen, since when do you read a good book while listening to music? And on the other hand, when someone ignores that she needs the Flash plug-in to hear my pieces, and goes ahead and just reads the moving text, she's missing a lot."

So what do her well-written texts communicate in her mind? "Don't ask me that question," she says. "It doesn't matter what I think." But do her texts communicate, or represent? "To me that's an unimportant question. There is communication, and maybe it's of a kind that functions differently than images. But the sometimes outlandish interpretations that an artistic text encourages seem to outdistance the multiplicity of serious interpretations that literature encourages, if only because the artist isn't a writer, even if she is writing. I think the writer wants to be understood. I myself don't worry too much about that part of my work. There are of course radically different interpretations of certain literary works. But my texts encourage a reader/spectator to let go of the burden of interpretation, all the time. I mean, I doubt, at least for the moment, that my Web works will inspire the depth of analysis that literary texts demand. After all, these are texts that purposely don't allow the 'reader' to study them. The words appear and disappear on the monitor too fast for that."

Chang's texts seem to underline two essentially different mind sets, that of the Internaut and that of the reader of hard copy. The Internaut is like an astronaut: everything about him is speed and goal orientation. The reader of hard copy is slower, more intent on contemplation, more patient. The Internaut seems to be always working under some self-imposed time constraint, almost as if he had to get back to the spaceship or planet earth before his oxygen tank runs out. The reader is a dreamer as much as a thinker, someone who goes out into space and gets lost out there, but with no worries about getting back safely, or in time, or else. In these two very different contexts, communication takes on different meanings. On the Internet, communication is at least for now a relatively haphazard, hit or miss search for practical information. Reading a book or a hard copy text is a traditional way to do a relatively systematic search for knowledge. [Top]

Struggle, as in http://www.yhchang.com/THE_STRUGGLE.html
Somewhere near the start of Young-hae Chang's piece is the declaration "ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE," which is emblematic of a certain empowering attitude of the Web toward anyone who wants to use it. And even though Chang's work becomes an exposition of a more playful kind of struggle, and a style which is emblematic of other art mediums' prudence when it comes to taking politics head on, it also exemplifies one of the most original and unabashed themes of Web art, which is out and out politics and joyous propaganda. When I talked to her about this side of her work and of Web art, she wisely declined to recognize it. "I think that since Web artists work with information technologies, there's no avoiding creating art that seems to have a more intentional, coherent message than in other art mediums. I also think that language itself, written language especially, is meant to express important things. There's no use saying meaningless things -- except in art, however, including Web art. And this is the contradiction. Art treats language like any other object. My Web art uses texts. The text is in the service of the art work. So even if my Web art texts express what seem to be political ideas, they don't -- or at least no more so than any other work of art. Whether one sees art as important or as unimportant (as I do), any art work has the capacity to express the same range of political ideas, whether it be a painted still-life or a piece like THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES."

However, she points out an essential aspect of Web art, which is that it occurs in the context of information technologies. It is completely normal to appreciate Web art that is dominated by textual information. Whereas art in an exhibition space often gets off to a poor start by demanding that the spectator stop in the entryway to read a text without which the artist or the organizers fear that the art itself will be misunderstood -- as if this were possible. An exhibition that tells the spectator what to do or think is probably on its way to alienating the spectator. But Web art that tells the spectator what to do (click here, roll over there) or think (text), is just doing what every other Web site does, which is to communicate information.

For an artist to create successful political art in Western, capitalistic society, the trick is to communicate political ideas without seeming to be pushy, without pushing to the point of seeming to create propaganda. This is not only difficult, but maybe impossible. What is ironic, witty, biting and suggestive art to one spectator is mere didacticism to another, the parameters of which are often easy to define according to political party lines. The reasons for this dilemma -- the difficulty for the artist of consciously giving a political bent to his work without being accused of putting art in the service of politics -- are probably complex, not the least of which is the worn out ideal -- or hypocrisy, again, according to party lines -- of art for art's sake. That some artists, including Chang, are able to walk this tightrope without falling into the net of propaganda is not so
much a tribute to their artistic ability, but to their political prudence.

Web artists like Chang and the others in Web Project 8 who consciously express relatively coherent political thinking in their work have less of a stylistic burden to shoulder than artists in other mediums, for the strong text element in all Web sites and the textual essence of the Internet itself pave the way for declarative Web art. But what the textual essence of the Internet does even more for Web art is to bring out one essence of all art, which is political. In all other art mediums, this essence remains in its suggestive state for fear of betraying the mediums themselves. But since the essence of the Internet is language, finally this political essence declares itself -- in plain language.

**Move, Art on the**

Interactivity means movement that the user triggers on the computer monitor, whether it be the changing of one page to another, or the transformation or movement of something on a page. In art, movement has always played a key role in the emotional satisfaction that a work inspires in the spectator. Yet throughout the history of art, this movement has for the most part only taken place in the mind of the spectator. Only since Alexander Calder's mobiles of the early 1930s has art begun to actually move. Of course, movies (short for "moving pictures") preceded moving art. Compared to today's moving images and objects, the moving elements in Web art and in anything else on the online monitor seem tame. Movement in Web art is simple if not simplistic, nothing compared to animation, video and computer animation, on the small or the big screen.

Yet, because of interactivity, because the user directs or thinks he directs the movement, or maybe because of the novelty of clicking on the Internet, the simple movement from Web page to Web page, from form to transformation, and from one place to another on the page or across cyberspace -- because of this, there is a simple pleasure to it all, like that of a hands-on museum or a penny arcade, or like being an assistant to a magician: you know something unexpected, strange or delightful will occur by waving a magic wand (a rollover) over the handkerchief (Web page).

[http://www.superbad.com](http://www.superbad.com) is especially strange and delightful in this sense. Combining Web page changes, formal changes and moving shapes, Ben Benjamin creates a kaleidoscopic journey that is, ironically, easily imitated in its interactive arbitrariness, yet not at all so easily imitated in its graphic and artistic brilliance. It is the movement from one absolutely unexpected and unrelated graphic image to the next one and from start to
finish on superbad.com, all of which result from a click or a rollover, that places Benjamin's work head and shoulders above all other graphically oriented Web work.

One of the easiest ways to create movement in Web art and on any Web site is with the multimedia application Flash. Flash has become so prevalent on the Web that there are entire Web sites devoted to the phenomenon. A recent article in Rhizome, the new media resource, was just a list of URLs using or dealing with the program http://rhizome.org/object.rhiz?1872. Among certain Web art critics and graphic design critics, there is even a growing backlash against what they consider to be overly flashy Flash-designed Web art and Web sites. I asked one of the most brilliant Web art users of Flash -- albeit a brilliance born of simplicity -- Young-hae Chang, what she thought of Flash and its critics. "I suppose the people who criticize Web artists using Flash might be intent on maintaining the illusion of a certain artistic integrity in Web art. Maybe they think that Web artists should only use raw HTML code and ASCII. I think this is a little silly. After all, since when do critics care whether painters grind their own pigments with linseed oil or just buy oil paints off the shelf? And are there critics who say that found art is too easy? Is there something wrong with readymades? Art doesn't have to be difficult to be good. As for the abuse of Flash, well, to each her own style. It's the same in any art medium. Over-the-top plays a big role in art. Just because fluorescent colors aren't to your taste doesn't mean that they are a problem."

The people who criticize the use of Flash to create what they consider to be too-flashy movement on the Web are probably making subconscious comparisons with video, TV commercials and computer animation for the small or the big screen, in all comparisons of which Flash movement either comes up short or perpetuates a sorry resemblance to what makes these other mediums become so tedious. So their response is: What's the use? Why bother trying to compete? But another comparison could be with pre-Flash Web sites -- that is, with Web sites and Web art that don't move, or at least not very much. Here, movement is a commentary on the lack of movement, or the staid quality of some Web art. But in all of these comparisons, there is the prejudice that art is different from entertainment, or if it is entertaining, it needn't be the same kind of fast-moving entertainment as on TV and in the movies. There is the prejudice that even in moving pictures, for instance, the less movement there is, the more artistic is the movie. This is not just a presumption, but a general truth. Art often invites more patience than mere entertainment. Slowness, immobility mean: Take a good look. "Serious" movies are most often movies with longer takes and richer dialogue than lighter fare, both of which usually imply less movement. But, ironically, what seems to often annoy critics of too-flashy Flash is the extra download time necessary to begin watching the Flash piece, which is often a splash page. Many people
don't have the patience to wait for the Flash movie to begin. Hence the
"Skip" button. Here, Flash is seen as fluff. But this is wrong, for all art is
fluff, unnecessary filler on our path to getting on with things in life.

Movement slow and fast is life itself. How slow or how fast the life is the
stuff of philosophy -- and of art. How easy the life, too. Neither life nor art
have to be hard. After all, the goal of computerization is to make things
easier. No use turning around and then saying that Flash, or any other
computer program that facilitates artistic creation, makes things too easy.

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"Reader, The," by Diane Bertolo

Diane Bertolo's "The Reader" puts a virtual talking-body interlocutor on
the screen that slows down the transfer of information on the Internet by
seemingly rapping out with body language each letter and symbol of an
HTML text whose URL the visitor has chosen to link to. "The Reader" is an
equalizer that takes the disinformation out of "plain" textual information.
It only reprints text, white on black, letter by letter, blacking out all other
visual information: banners, photos, illustrations, other type faces and
sizes. The result is a sobering demonstration of the otherwise dull essence
of the Internet. Example. I typed into the URL slot http://www.sex.com
/index.html. Here is what the Reader brought up:

"Sex.com... The Place To Find Sex On The Net.
FREE XXX IN YOUR EMAIL!
Enter Your E-Mail Below Check your email after
you click submit!
ENTER HERE 4 FREE
- SEX KEY... FREE 1 YR AVS
OR JuSt HaRdCoRe - Just FREE!
OR NUDE CELEBRITY PICS!!!
GAY SEX BOYS
Sex.Com Online-Chat, Match, & Dating
Sex in the News
Pics Of The Day
Story Of The Day
Cartoon Of The Day
Sex.Com PIC Gallery" [. . .]

I invite you to do the same, with the same or a different URL, then to
compare "The Reader"'s transformed page with the target Web page itself
(if you're over 18 years of age). In my example, "The Reader"'s
no-nonsense, textual rendering of a colorful, flashy, interactive-banner-
filled, seedy, explicit, no-holds barred, adults-only Web page succeeds in making pornography read almost like a poem. "The Reader" reigns in the Web's unstated ambition to forsake its information-superhighway origins and to become a new-age TV set.

But Bertolo also places her virtual talking-body in the driver's seat. Instead of just text appearing on the screen, a woman's upper body and head mimic a Teletypelike clanky carriage sound and the plodding appearance of each letter and symbol that your chosen URL brings up. This virtually human touch might be her "reader," but to me it is her writer, her messenger, from her to me, at first a disquieting virtually human presence, then a comic one, and finally an annoyance: let's forget the Bertolo deadpan then slapstick human touch and get back to 100% beautiful virtual beings doing what we like to think are human things.

Another example. Here's "The Reader"'s response to my query http://www.love.org/index.html:

"Could Not Connect
Could Not Connect
Description: Could not connect to the server "love.org".
on before
the transaction was completed."

How true. "The Reader" brings cyberspace down to earth. It reminds us that in spite of the Web's promise of radical rediscovery of the self (your personal Web site) and the other (their personal Web sites), some things may still remain difficult to discover in our lifetime.

"Web Art" Versus "Net Art"

I think the difference between the two expressions is simple. "Web art" happens on a Web site. "Net art" happens on the Internet. This means that the second expression encompasses the first one. It also means that Net art happens not just on Web sites, but anywhere else on the Internet, for instance in E-mail. I've chosen to use the expression "Web art" simply because all the artists' works I studied for Web Project 8 were on Web sites. In any case, whether the art work is on a Web site or in an E-mail, the terms "Web art" and "Net art" seem interchangeable. It's noteworthy that Net art seems to be the accepted term in Europe, and Web art in America, although as one moves from the West Coast to the East Coast, "Web art" gives ground to "Net art." It's worth noting, from what my Korean collaborators tell me, that in Korea, in spite of the explosion of the
Internet and the Web, the translation into Korean of either "Web art" or "Net art" creates for the moment a strange expression and impression on the Korean person who comes upon it.

"Love I" by Jeong-hwa Choi

Jeong-hwa Choi is new to Web art. I decided that instead of looking for another Korean Web artist for Web Project 8 (at this writing, there were no other notable ones), that it would be interesting to invite one of the most well-known Korean artists to try his hand at Web art. After all, there is no reason why an artist need know anything about Web art to make it. Although art schools still exist and thrive, is there really any good reason to continue to make all art students learn to draw from a model when they can just hire someone who knows how to do it? How many students still study Greek and Latin? How many Web artists will learn HTML in the near future? Knowing how to use an artistic medium, getting one's hands dirty -- this attitude was rejected overtly by Marcel Duchamp when he decided one day to stop painting. But you could see his attitude coming just from looking at the history of art. The monumental paintings in the Louvre, for example, needed an entire team of painters with, at its helm, a master, to meet the escalating demands of royal and aristocratic clients. I consider Choi to be a sort of master in this same spirit. He himself is the first to admit that he prefers to tell others how to create his own works than to do it himself. And only the naive would question the mastery of his installations and sculptures.

The work he presents in Web Project 8, "Love I," is striking for its visual beauty and absence of interactivity. This second trait could be seen as a beginner's misunderstanding of one of the essences of the Web. However, talk of misunderstanding in art is already nonsense, for there's nothing to understand, at least not in the sense of right and wrong. Moreover, interactivity on the Internet, not just in Web art, is already, after just a short history, a necessary cliché, no longer so different from the"interactivity" involved in changing channels on a TV.

All of Choi's works exploit brilliant, joyous color, whether it be a golden pagoda in the center of Seoul, an inflatable golden goddess whose wings flap to the rhythms of an air compressor, cheap red, light green and yellow plastic baskets stacked up in pagodalike towers, or rows upon rows of polyester resin imitations of mounds of candy offered during traditional Korean ceremonies. In "Love I," more striking than the dental photographs of sets of crooked teeth is the overall red coloring of the screen, a color that Choi has decided is, like the teeth themselves, an essence of love. Set
in the middle of a black page, blood-red love begins to take on a hellish tint.

Choi has an all-consuming faith in the visual as opposed to the conceptual. His visual staples are, to proceed from the relatively specific to the general, contemporary Seoul, Korea, Asia, the West. This is not as futile an observation as it may sound when one compares his approach to art to that of other Korean artists. South Korea, like other industrialized Asian countries, has embraced Western ways wholeheartedly. Many South Korean artists have wholeheartedly embraced contemporary Western art. Others have sought to fuse Korean culture with contemporary Western art. Of these two approaches, it is the second one that has until now been the most self-conscious. Nowhere in contemporary Korean art has an artist undertaken so joyously and humorously this self-conscious approach as has Choi. The elements of Korean culture that he exposes in his works are both traditional and contemporary, yet in the end he makes it all seem vital. He revitalizes dusty traditional culture and superficial contemporary culture. He rejuvenates the pagoda by making it out of synthetic materials painted gold. He turns the colorful, cheap plastic baskets that are omnipresent in Korean daily street life into classical vessels.

In "Love I," Choi slathers a sound track of syrupy Korean lounge music reminiscent of another era (the '70s?) over shaky stills showing sets of problem teeth. He brings us up front and close to the slick salivating reality of imperfect physical loving. "A Kiss is Just a Kiss," comes to mind, although a deep, French-style kiss with each one of the possessors of the depicted restructured teeth would definitely send a more loving message, don't you think?

[Top]

Graphics, Superbad and

The Web site is an ideal context for graphics. With its unavoidably flat surface that both psychologically and physically refuses any thickness that even the thinnest layer of ink, graphite and paint can lay claim to in the mind of the spectator, and with the mechanical, indirect way with which the artist creates lines, dots, planes and colors, the Web site has irreversibly blurred the line between the graphic artist and the artist. Superbad [http://www.superbad.com] is a master graphic artist in the tradition of Paul Klee. Like Klee, no color, line or shape is unworthy of playing a role in his work. Unlike Klee, Superbad has given his visual vocabulary free access to found graphics, photos and illustrations, although this observation is an afterthought for even the attentive spectator. More powerful is Superbad's ability, like Klee's, to juxtapose
page after page of virtuoso visual difference.

Often the spectator perceives, and not without reason, the originality of an artist's work as a simple, even formulaic style, especially when the spectator can formulate it to himself. This is the superficial case of Superbad's Web art. Yet taken in the context of the Web, Superbad's style is a revelation. The challenge of the Web for the artist is to exploit its features without seeming to. The World Wide Web is an absolutely orderly place compared to the real world. To obey and to break the rules of the Web at the same time is the Web artist's job. Superbad does it by obeying the HTML rules he needs in order to break visual rules -- which really have more to do with esthetics that with the Web -- to such an extent that the spectator forgets how many rules the artist is obeying in order to create original (disobedient) Web art.

Artistic beauty is often found in strangeness. Superbad contrasts the unusually staid atmosphere of what has in a short period become a very conventional Web world with his relatively, yet not absolutely strange Web art. One of Superbad's originalities is to have seized this atmosphere, which is informed by the original goals of the Internet as an information superhighway, as an ideal context for disinformation, or rather, art. Another of his originalities is to have seized this atmosphere in his own way, which is to create his vibrant, wacky, funny, weird and wonderful graphics.

[Top]

Introduction to Web Project 8

Every year for the last five years the Total Museum of Contemporary Art has organized a show around eight important contemporary artists, four Korean and four international, all from one country. Since this year's theme is Web art, I decided that instead of sticking to the previous formula, it would be appropriate to choose artists from around the world (wide web). However, in doing so, I wasn't and still am not one hundred percent sure where some of them are from, nor where they reside. Nor will I present their biographies here (I didn't ask them for one), or introduce them in any other way except to discuss their works, for this also seems in keeping with the spirit of their work and of Web art in general. I haven't noticed or cared to notice if any of them present themselves and their work on their respective Web sites in any fashion other than in the works themselves. Really, their works speak for themselves. And although none of the artists go so far as to remain as anonymous as some Web art groups, one gets the feeling that they would not be against my tack of leaving them alone.
The relative originality of Web Project 8 is that the Total Museum commissioned original pieces from all the artists. From December 1, 2000, to February 1, 2001, these pieces will remain solely on http://www.totalmuseum.org. Afterwards, the artists will be free to show them elsewhere. The pieces will remain throughout the show and afterwards the property of the artists.

Cultural institutions are only beginning to invent ways of working with Web artists. For these institutions, it's an essential problem: should one put virtual space into real space? The temptation is almost irresistible, given the existing physical plant and the desire to, well, put on a show. The Total Museum resisted this temptation and decided to organize a virtual exhibition only.

The virtual museum presents a certain menace to the real museum's domination of contemporary art. The real museum's response until now has been to add a virtual space in the form of a museum Web site, and monitors in the museum that present it, and, of course, to bring all the weight of its often prestigious name to bear on Web artists' decisions to link or not to link themselves and their Web sites to the museum site. But maybe even more so in Web art than in other art mediums, there is no esthetic difference between a piece viewed on a museum Web site and on a non-museum Web site. If only psychologically, there has never been a greater art equalizer than the Internet.

In this context, the Total Museum decided that by commissioning eight artists to create eight new Web art works, it's goal would merely be to show support and respect for this new and innovative medium, and to reward some of the most outstanding Web artists.

I would like to thank the Seoul Metropolitan Government and the Korean Culture and Arts Foundation for their generous sponsorship.

I would like to thank Hyungmin Moon, the Total Museum Web developer and a talented graphic artist, on and off the Web, who had patient answers to every esthetic and technical question I had about Web Project 8, who taught me a lot, and with whom I had a great time; and Joon-eui Noh, the director of the Total Museum, who jumped at my idea to organize a Web Project 8 -- which, I have almost forgotten to mention, is the first Web art exhibition in Korea -- who encouraged me from start to finish, and who considered no obstacle too high to hurdle in her energetic, decisive style.

Marc Voge, guest curator
marc@totalmuseum.org
"Think the Same," by the Candy Factory (Takuji Kogo)

"And I should little bit explain about this work. Because I didn't explain work's concept on the pages so much. I just want people to feel some weird while playing pages. So If you are preparing some introduction, hope this explaination could be help .

The work I titled

"Think the same "

It featured one girl, Gaku, she's an artist. so she's also one collaborator for this work. But I pretend some typical website for date or marriage with her, also some individual "home" page.

Which means I tried some format about these things, And I want to collect some love letters, harassment mails for her. that's should be the dcr file I want to add after. and also we, candy factory invite people into this marriage web work. we can make her or his website with this format to make another collaborative work with her or his images and favorite love songs. That's the concept for this work.

Also we add some sounds and texts for our own decorative elements from some candy factory projects and these things I'm working on with some collaborators. Some sounds are from Steve Jobbs lecture at Mac Expo, some texts from a stupid book about how to get a japanese girlfriend in English, italian situational utopian Architect, Tanizaki Junichiro Japanese novelist, R D Laing etc...

We just tried dubbing our new illusions because people believe or maybe now late capitalism just needs to believe which ideology that will be realised on internet etc sometimes. I don't believe artist can make change these EXPO utopian thought but sometime we could make these thought into paradox to show and be realised as some conflicts,
can be make sure little bit what is our unconscious religion. So this is not just an irony to me, because sometime I think all we are in these thought. And this work on the net."

"RAIN ON THE SEA," by YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES

To the literarily inclined Web art viewer, "RAIN ON THE SEA" can be seen as a new development in the work of YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES. The technique is the same as in its former pieces, a Flash text set to a jazz soundtrack. Yet the text itself has evolved. Yes, the humor and mordant wit are still there -- if you can catch it as it goes by in the blink of an eye. But YHCHI has also decided to tell a new tale of sorts, at least for it, the story of -- are you ready? -- a poor guy who drops dead of a heart attack in his own bathroom. And that's just the beginning. To add insult to deathly injury, God reincarnates him as a stick. The story goes on to recount the misadventures of the stick as its handlers misuse and abuse it until, broken down into stub, it finally -- well, I won't give away the ending, if there is such a thing in reincarnation. And YHCHI does take the story to a logical conclusion, or beginning, or rather renewal, all of which is driven on and on by a mambo beat.

There is something wildly divergent here in the medium and the content. YHCHI creates a new media piece that eschews an easier and more expected new media subject matter for a traditional fairy-talelike flavor more appropriate to a contemplative reading, and certainly not to the speed reading necessary to take in a tale that might otherwise resonate more effectively after the piece ends. But in this case, maybe the speed reading necessary to follow the story is a strategy that makes the reader fall into a deep concentration or even something bordering on a trancelike state (I know I did) almost like that of a performer who must burst onto the scene and accomplish a feat that, if he took the time to think about it, he would almost certainly fail at. The piece goes by very fast, and the reading of it becomes a rhythmic participation during which reflection has but a split second in which to squeeze itself.

"Hamster Dream," by Superbad
Ben Benjamin has finally offered us a key to the structure behind the content of and links between his seemingly illogical Web pages: It is the dream sequencing of a burrowing rodent who has dropped off after having been slipped some Tabasco sauce in its feed. "Hamster Dream" is also an indirect response to the essential question posed by a classical Chinese poet (whose name I have forgotten). The poet, sitting alone in a boat adrift on a moonlit pond, contemplates the lotus blossoms floating on the water and asks himself: "Do lotus flowers dream? And if so, of what?"

One novelty of Superbad's new work is sound. Click on the work and hear it.

Another interesting development is the relative lack of interactivity compared to that on superbad.com. Still, this is Superbad all the way: rich, colorful graphics that are weirdly juxtaposed and superposed, moving and transmogrifying. Oh yes, the Tabasco bottle lifts off.

[W] by Olia Lialina

is self-explanatory.

[Muzzle] by Alexei Shulgin

"Muzzle" took me by surprise. I'm not sure what to make of it. I hope Alexei Shulgin takes my puzzlement as a compliment. I hope that one day he will even explain to me how he sees it. Formally, the work complements the rich diversity and low-tech simplicity of the artist's other works, for I think it is the first time he has used family-photo type images in at once an alarming and disarming manner. (But is he using a high-tech digital camera?) It is a strange coincidence that like Takuji Kogo, Shulgin has chosen to present up front and close a female collaborator. And like Kogo, he distorts the features of the young woman. The difference between Kogo's technique and Shulgin's is in the level of technology. Kogo creates digital movement in the eyes and mouth of Gaku Tsutaya, his "straight woman"; Shulgin extends his hand into the field of the camera lens and squeezes or "muzzles" the mouth of his straight woman, Olga Goryunova. The contrast in styles is telling about each creator's use of new media. For Shulgin, why bother with digital manipulations when you can just as easily
"Muzzle" also finds itself midway between the uncannily similar themes of Takuji Kogo and Jeong-hwa Choi. Kogo delights us with the full face close-up of a cute Japanese woman. Shulgin deforms the mouth of the equally cute face of a Russian woman. Choi dissects the cuteness of the mouth. All three works are striking evidence of the desire of Web art to bring us face to face on the monitor with our Self and the Other, in all of our and their imperfections.

"CO.KR," by Jodi

By the way, are you, yes or no, interested in being a part of Project

Yes, we are positiv about it' /

+++jodi

When will you finish your work for Web Project 8? It's important for you to E-mail it to within a few hours

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will be ---very easy

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    OR: a DownloAd in one.html page//..

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Subject: browser %Download CO.KR Browser
Date: Tue, 28 Nov 2000 01:45:21 +0100
From: JODI
To: marc@totalmuseum.org

>WE NEED YOUR PIECE FOR PROJECT 8 NOW! I MEAN NOW! PLEASE!

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CO.KR Browser for Mac and Pc

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Subject: (mac)done
Date: Fri, 1 Dec 2000 01:20:07 -0800
From: JODI
To: marc@totalmuseum.org
CC: hyungmin@earthlink.net
you can %Download the sit.file

www.jodi.org/browser/kr.sit

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> NO-no;
Subject: Re: open
Date: Fri, 1 Dec 2000 12:13:14 +0100
From: JODI
To: marc@totalmuseum.org

> have your piece. Please do everything possible to get it to him withineally%Hope we made it

thanks Marc
tanks Hyungmin for your improvisation

have a good fiesta/dine
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Friday December 1, 2000 at 8:05.28 PM
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Standard time zone:
UTC/GMT +9 hours
No daylight saving time active

Daylight Saving Time:
No known DST-adjustments for year 2000
Sun
Sunrise: 7:27 AM
Sunset: 5:13 PM
Books
See available travel books for Seoul
Additional time-related services for Seoul:
Subject: Re: ps/pc
Date: Sat, 2 Dec 2000 01:33:18 +0100
From: JODI
To: marc@totalmuseum.org
CC: hyungmin@earthlink.net
References: 1

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Additional time-related services for Seoul:
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