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## Artists Find Startling Changes When Their Craft Hits the Web

By **ROBIN FROST**

When artist Joseph Squier is asked to define Web art, he begins by saying what it isn't.

Working on the Web isn't like painting, which is more about texture, he says. Nor is it like photography, which he says concentrates on detailed, accurate, precise images.

Instead, he says, the Web is more of a "televisual" medium. "It's rawer, it's faster, it's about multiple layers of things happening simultaneously," he says. "Things move. It's an amalgam of still images, text, sound and moving images. It's a world in flux."

It is, in other words, a whole new kind of art -- and one that artists are just beginning to understand, experiment with and embrace.

In one way, Web art is the same as more traditional art forms: They all require a good concept on the artist's part. But in most other ways, Web art is very different.

For one thing, unlike even the scanned photographs of real, physical paintings and sculptures that museums and galleries put up at their Web sites to publicize exhibitions or display a collection, Web art exists only on-line in virtual space.

"The essence of art on the Web is the Web," says Benjamin Weil, co-founder and curator of [ada 'web](#), an on-line art site.

In addition, Web art usually uses several different media -- including still images, sound, text and moving images -- in the same piece, often simultaneously. It also incorporates the particularities of the Web's structure and form -- its nonlinear architecture and networked hypermedia links.

So, a Web artwork might play with the orientation, extending out horizontally instead of vertically, making the viewer scroll out to the side to see it. Or, using frames, the artist might divide the computer screen into different segments, each containing different information in text or images, and juxtapose them in interesting ways. The images and text in the different frames might also be hyperlinks; clicking on them would allow the viewer to move through the work,

often in unexpected ways, and to see or hear different things or even jump to another Web site.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of Web art, though, for both artists and viewers, is its interactivity, the relationship it sets up between the audience and the work.

"What you're seeing in entertainment technology," says Fred Ritchin, associate professor of photography and communications at New York University's School of the Arts, "is the nature of communication is changing from a broadcasting mode -- one way -- to an interactive one where the viewer becomes a participant instead of a passive observer."

### **Lagging Expectations**

To be sure, the Web art movement is in its infancy, and artists' tools -- Web technology -- lag far behind their expectations and concepts. What's more, the Web is still slow and clunky; works may take a long time to download -- if you can download them at all -- and often have a jerky quality to them. A high-end multimedia computer, a high-speed connection and a lot of different Web software is helpful to be able to experience most Web art (many pieces use special software called Shockwave, generally available at the sites that require it).

"We're still in the finger-painting stage" of Web art, says Stewart McBride, president of United Digital Artists, an agency that educates and represents artists working in digital media.

Nevertheless, there is a payoff. The Web offers artists a unique opportunity to get their work on a visible public art space. And they can reach a global audience -- paradoxically, in a one-on-one, intimate way.

"Distribution for an artist has always been a problem," says Mr. McBride. "With the Net, anyone can create art and show it." And the cost of entry is relatively low: hardware, software, some training in the technology and a good idea.

For art enthusiasts, there is the enticing prospect of sitting at home in a ratty old bathrobe, curled up in a favorite chair in front of the computer in the middle of the night -- interacting with art.

### **Shedding Baggage**

One of the first artists who recognized the potential of the Web was Mr. Squier, whose Web site [the Place](#) exhibits a number of his Web works, and who is the curator of @art, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Web art space. He says the first thing he had to do when he started trying to work on the Web was "shed my baggage as a photographer" and approach the Web as a different medium with its own special characteristics.

"The Web is the sort of place that really encourages a different kind of formula, a kind of hybrid of image, text and sound," says Mr. Squier.

Mr. Squier's best-known work, "Urban Diary," came out of his desire to have

audiences go deeper than they typically do when surfing the Web. "As an artist, you can encourage people to do things differently," says Mr. Squier.



### **"Urban Diary" by Joseph Squier**

With "Urban Diary," he does that by allowing viewers to explore -- one at a time but not necessarily in any order -- large, clear, photographs of different pages of a personal diary. Each page resembles a collage, filled with fragments of someone's daily life: handwritten notes, scribbled shopping lists and reminders, a laundry ticket, some photographs and drawings.

Nothing is explained; the work is both voyeuristic and mysterious. If the viewer is intrigued by one of the elements and wants to take a closer look, he or she can click on it. Click on a folded shopping list, and you can see the entire list; click on a piece of a diary and you may get an image whose relation to the diary is known only to Mr. Squier.

The architecture of the piece, like that of the Web, is nonlinear; with no beginning or end, the viewer can choose to view the pages at random or in sequence, choose to move to another element on the page or go down one level deeper. "Navigation is a metaphor for memory" in "Urban Diary," Mr. Squier says.

It is just that feeling of traveling down through layers that is so satisfying in the Web experience, says Marshall Blonsky, a scholar of semiotics at the New School for Social Research and professor of telecommunications at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program. He says, "That's what makes the experience of the Web unique and different from any other certified

medium: the very pleasurable sensation of going deeper, ever more inward, that you absolutely cannot get in a gallery."

## Two-Way Street

Interactivity is a big part of the Web art equation, often blurring the line between audience and author, artist and viewer. Interactivity is what gives viewers the impression that "the page seems to be alive and it responds to you," says Mr. Squier.

Piotr Szyhalski, a professor of graphic arts at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design who has a Web art site called the [Spleen](#), says that the Web artist relies on audience participation to make the work exist. In some cases, authorship becomes a joint project between the artist and the viewer.

For instance, "[Amends](#)," part of the Spleen site, is a collection of interactive digital posters. The viewer proceeds through a piece by clicking on elements, which creates a reaction, which cues the viewer to take another action, like clicking or dragging. In "Amends," says Mr. Szyhalski, a viewer's actions "contribute to the piece ... so that the action is part of the meaning."

"Amends" presents one piece for each day of the week. In the Tuesday piece, the viewer has to click on a photograph of a left hand to get a photograph of a right hand. Click again, and drag the right hand to "draw" a line down the middle of the frame, a line that separates the two hands. Text is revealed one or two words at a time after each click-related action: "Draw ... The Line ... Between You and the Enemy." And the music shifts back and forth between a haunting violin line and a quick, loud drumming in response to click actions.

Similarly, the Sunday piece begins with ornate words arching across the top of the frame: "Hold Fast to Your Ideas ... No matter what evidence is presented to disprove them."

Each time a viewer clicks in the frame, a small flashing shape appears, progressing from right to left. When the viewer clicks on one, he hears the rat-a-tat of machine-gun fire in the distance and another flashing shape appears, indicating the viewer should click on it next. Each flashing shape, when clicked, produces the gunfire and generates the next shape. Each one also produces a word in a sentence running along the bottom of the frame: YOU ARE NEVER WRONG.

At the end of the sequence, a grainy black-and-white photographic image fills in the screen slowly from the bottom up. The image is of four blindfolded men in uniform, standing in a field with their hands in the air; each one's head is placed where one of the shapes the viewer clicked on was located. "Your actions are part of the message of the piece," says Mr. Szyhalski.

There is also the possibility -- even in preprogrammed pieces like "Amends" -- that different people will explore Web works differently, and so the resulting experience will vary. In some pieces, Web art is changed by a viewer's interaction with the piece, and the next viewer will have a different experience. Some pieces even incorporate feedback from viewers into the piece, thus adding

to it or changing it.

One early Web artwork is Jenny Holzer's "[Please Change Beliefs](#)," a 1995 piece that, like most of Ms. Holzer's work, consists primarily of moving text, but also has short video and audio components. Ms. Holzer hadn't worked in cyberspace before, but she was interested in public art, and when ada 'web approached her about doing a piece, she agreed.

"Please Change Beliefs" consists of a large number of short cliches (among them, "a little knowledge can go a long way" and "even your family can betray you") that flash on a viewer's screen. When the viewer clicks on a truism, he or she is presented with a larger chunk of text, placed on a brightly-colored, neon screen. Some of the larger chunks of text have an associated video or audio clip with them.

If you click on the phrase "Please Change Beliefs," which is near the bottom of the screen throughout the piece, you get a long list of the cliches that are used in the piece and are encouraged to add your own or modify an existing one, which will then be added to the list and to the piece.

When "Please Change Beliefs" was first put up at ada 'web, says Mr. Weil, the curator, one element of it involved "planting" truisms all over the Web at unrelated Web sites, completely out of context, with the other sites' permission. That way, a person could be browsing a site and see a little phrase somewhere and click on it, and he or she would be linked to Ms. Holzer's piece without any warning.

## Exploring Privacy

Some Web artworks don't just play off the Web structurally; they comment on or reflect on an issue that is specific to the digital environment.

Julia Scher's "[Securityland](#)," commissioned by ada 'web, addresses the issue of public vs. private on the Net, and how Web surfers are often scrutinized by computers and their operators without knowing it. With its bland, cartoony "policewoman" images, its infuriatingly calm, impersonal and patronizing female voice and its prying and extremely personal pink questionnaires that the viewer is urged to fill out and submit, Ms. Scher's work is dealing with the issues relevant to a security-savvy and security-hungry environment, says Mr. Weil. In their Web surfing experiences, he says, people don't always think about what they're giving away when they fill out questionnaires with personal information.

"Julia says, 'Let me tell you what you're giving away,' " says Mr. Weil. " 'Let me make you aware.' "

At one point in the "Securityland" experience, the viewer is presented with a screen filled with information about the viewer and the viewer's computer and connection, including host machine identification, Internet protocol address and details about the browser and operating system that are installed. After a moment, the intrusive screen is replaced with one that simply asks, "How do you feel?"



## Just for Techies?

Mr. Weil says he doesn't believe an artist needs to be trained in Web technology to be able to create a good Web piece. If he commissions a piece from an artist who doesn't know how to execute it, a web acts as a "digital foundry," by providing technologically savvy assistants who work closely with the artist to realize the piece.

"What you're seeing on the Internet is the evolution of collaboration," says Bruce Wands, chairman of the Bachelor of Fine Arts computer art department at the School of Visual Arts in New York. "If you're not a programmer, then you're a collaborator."

Many artists disagree with this approach, saying that a knowledge of the tools used to create Web art is crucial to the process, in terms of knowing the possibilities and the limitations the technology imposes on the work. Christine Baczewska, a musician and composer who made a graphical and voice piece -- her first work for the Web -- in 1996, was distressed by the limits, and was unhappy with the way her piece, "Vocabulary," turned out.



### "Vocabulary" by Christine Baczewska

For instance, Ms. Baczewska originally wanted the piece to take up the entire screen. But in the end, she had to settle for about one-fourth of the screen because downloading any more would have been impractical.

"I kept resenting the fact that this medium made me edit down my expectations," says Ms. Baczewska, who nevertheless intends to try again. "Describe me as disillusioned, not bitter."

Knowing about Web technology can also help with specifics. It might help an artist determine, for example, which of the different available audio formats is more appropriate in a given piece.

"The decisions of what technology to use are based on the needs of the work," says Helen Thorington, a Web artist who works with sound and images and is curator of the [Turbulence](#) Web art site. One choice might be better than another,

for instance, in a case where the artist wanted the same soundtrack to play continuously throughout the piece, rather than having many different sounds that only play when an associated image is clicked on.

With technology changing so fast and more and more people jumping onto the Web, what kind of future does Web art face? If Web art is experiential and indigenous to the Web and loses part of its meaning if it is removed from that medium, will it endure? And how can a digital work that is easily and endlessly reproducible in its medium be bought or sold?

Some artists suggest that Web art has to be regarded as the equivalent of a performance, for which the viewer pays an entrance fee, like going to the movies.

But others reject that notion. "The whole resource of the Web is hypermedia-linked," says Mr. Weil, "so if you close a door there, you defeat the nature of the Web."

Sandra Gering, owner of the [Sandra Gering Gallery](#) in New York, exhibits Web art at her "virtual space," an on-line gallery site that complements her physical gallery. Ms. Gering also has the works for sale for \$500 for a disk and a certificate. Each work is sold in an edition of five, so a buyer knows he or she has bought one of only five official copies in the world.

"These things are going to be artifacts of our generation," says Ms. Gering.

But if they are up on the Web and they use the Web medium as part of the work, why would anyone want to buy them on disk when they could just download it? "It becomes an object," says Ms. Gering. "You don't have anything in your hand if it's up at the site."

But perhaps having Web art in your hand isn't the point. Site-specific installation art loses its meaning when it is no longer in the site it was created for. Web art would not only lose its meaning out of the context of the Web, but it would lose its form and existence.

"It counteracts the issue of what the medium is supposed to be about," says Mr. Weil. "I don't think art's collectible quality is so interesting for Web art."

## **How to Get There ...**

### **ADA 'WEB**

<http://www.adaweb.com/home.shtml>

### **SECURITYLAND**

<http://www.adaweb.com/project/secure/corridor/sec1.html>

### **PLEASE CHANGE BELIEFS**

<http://www.adaweb.com/project/holzer/cgi/pcb.cgi>

## **JOSEPH SQUIER'S THE PLACE**

<http://gertrude.art.uiuc.edu/ludgate/the/place/place2.html>

## **URBAN DIARY**

[http://gertrude.art.uiuc.edu/ludgate/the/place/urban\\_diary/intro.html](http://gertrude.art.uiuc.edu/ludgate/the/place/urban_diary/intro.html)

## **THE SPLEEN**

<http://www.mcad.edu/home/faculty/szyhalski/Piotr>

## **AMENDS**

<http://www.mcad.edu/home/faculty/szyhalski/spl.amends/amends22.html>

## **TURBULENCE**

<http://www.somewhere.org/Turb/turbsite/turb-nc.htm>

## **VOCABULARY**

<http://www.somewhere.org/Turb/OnlineWorks/Xtine/index.html>

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