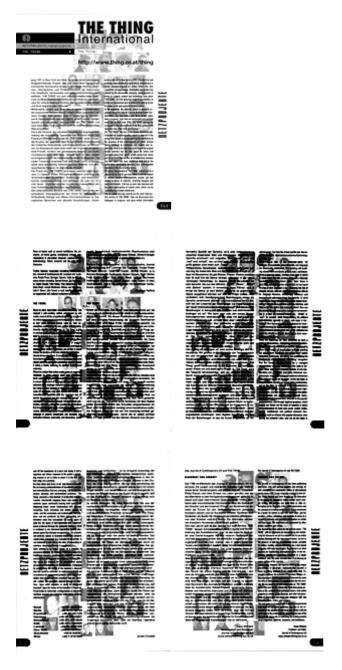# The Thing
The Thing International

http://www.thing.or.at/thing

went on the net in New York in 1991. It is the first and currently most advanced project which, originating in a rather concept-oriented art scene, enters the new spaces for communication, distribution and production offered by the information network. Developments in terms of content, context and technology have given "THE THING" an ever growing range of possibilities to reflect on the medium and to utilize it for diverse forms of artistic work and concomitant discourses.

In the meantime, the network, which is basically organized along the lines of a classic Bulletin Board System (BBS), has nine nodes, with three further nodes being prepared. Joint data are exchanged and updated every day. As from June 1995, 'THE THING" can also he

accessed on the Internet/World Wide Web, where it will have two sites (New York and Vienna).

For "THE THING", the end of the classic dichotomy artist/author vs. audience/public, which is inherent in the virtual data space, is an approach to the redefinition of the structure of the contemporary art public without taking recourse to traditional role models and institutions. What is at stake here is no longer the original artistic process, but the joint space for action and communication from which artistic production stems and to which it returns. The strict separation between text and object has been abolished, but at the same time constitutive moments and exchangeable materials in the discursive process.

Of course the practice of "THE THING" will not just be a simple mirror of this concept; rather, it will be subject to various dynamic developments, moods, ups and downs in terms of intensity, revolving thoughts and leaps and bounds. It thrives on ever-new impulses and the active participation of system users, which can be controlled to a limited extent only.

The so-called message boards are the most (inter)active section of "THE THING"; they are discussion for dialogues in progress and open-ended information flows on topics such as current exhibitions, the artmarket, art-world gossip, institutional critique, psychoanalysis or perception research, science-fiction, biotechnology, future research and its own meta-discourse.

Further features: magazines (including Camera Austria, Journal of Contemporary Art, Lacanian Ink, Lusitania, Purple Prose, Springer, Spuren, Texte zur Kunst), online shows (including Duncan Brown, Aki Fushiyoshi, Rainer Ganahl, Peter Halley, Felix Stefan Huber, Karl Heinz Klopf, Joseph Nechvatal, Helene von Oldenburg, John F. Simon, John Tower), e-mail, data base as well as cooperation with cultural institutions and projects.

THE THING

Since its early incarnation as a BOS, "The Thing" has enjoyed a self-scrutiny seldom entertained by arts media, most of all the art publication, which, in spite of its critical engagement of recent textual theory, refuses to turn such criticism inward upon its own assumptions, questioning its own nations of authorship, linearity, stability and autonomy. As "The Thing" is able to embody such critique, and continually reformulate itself in response to it, it is able to structurally engage alternate, social modes of contextual and artistic construction. Such a collaborative process of content-construction goes against the fixedness of print media, whose author-reader distinctions are written in stone: it blurs the borders of the text where the publication clearly demarcates them: it complicates the location of the artwork and opens its medium to include social and spatial elements, where the publication clearly isolates it within a frame, reducing its medium to traditional materials.

While it is evident that online media poses an important challenge to print--which must now reformulate itself, acknowledging that which it has cast out in order to secure the borders of the page, the sanctity and authority of the binding---what is seldom discussed is the rising fortress ideology in the online world, which casts off materiality with such rapidity and finality, its textualities not symbiotic with the "real" but shut off behind the interface into the realm of the "virtual". A constituted outside is necessary for any textual production, however, calling into question the distinctions that it has temporarily made visible (and which make it visible), and a recognition of the performative quality of language in general complicates and dissolves any distinction between materiality and information, action and language. Far from

the virtual and the real, the online or the offline, what we have are terms that no longer fit the "taxon".

Wittgenstein's idea of the language-game, for example, demonstrates how materiality and language are inextricably intertwined. "A is building with building-stones — there are blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words 'block', 'pillar', 'slab', 'beam'. A calls them out. B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such and such a call." Following this line of thought we ask: how are actions and relations altered as language becomes increasingly nonlinear and transactional — advancing from the linearity of print media to the hypertextuality of new information technology? How do these relations span the interface, and what is the role of this last in shaping them? How can the emerging regulatory norms that parcel out, according to logic of commodification (eg. "virtual" or "real"), be resisted, while highlighting the political and economic agendas to which such logic is harnessed? How can an economy of resistance be structured? Avoiding the delirious and fevered rush toward the technotopia (which paves the golden infobahn but casts the streets as abject), these issues have occupied us on "The Thing".

Since the beginning, we have embarked on such a strategy of resistance, intervening within and spatializing the elements of textual production and engaging more social modes of construction, actively resisting the authoritative structures that others have readily embraced. Continually disrupting and questioning the elements of artistic practice, "The Thing" recognizes that the current situation — fueled by a resurgent conservatism — severely undermines the need to engage more social and inclusive models of art-construction and a broader and more historical consciousness, especially among an audience who knows little about art and is all too eager, on the one hand " to succumb to the opinions of conservative reactionaries, and on the other, to succumb to the technofetishist's reduction of artwork to endlessly recombinant digitized images. At a time when artwork, for the public, is increasingly just another image-through reproductions, which displace their referents in the popular consciousness and through digitized graphics, which reduce and flatten out the webs of relations in which art is embedded, its hard-won social, spatial, bodily, textual, institutional and political elements desperately need an infusion into popular discourse, even among the artworld's elite, who are all too ready to seal off the boundaries of a work and stamp it with a signature and whose response to the public's dwindling interest in art is often to shoot it in the foot and then whip out a painting.

At a time when new forms of art, hybridized in line with the increasing problematization of boundaries and potent interstitialities that are emerging, call for new inclusive, unstable and decentralized practices, "The Thing" presents a vital medium of production and discussion, structurally engaging these new modes, its systemic space continually looping back upon itself, displacing linear, vector relationships with alternate circuits. Such circuits link bodies. Bodies of codes and the economies and technologies that produce and are produced by them, generating performative webs that incorporate the social space of daily life, the space of representation, and "extended" space produced through the computer interface. What is instituted is not divisional space but hybrid, situational space that disrupts encapsulation. The artwork is not centered, bound or locatable but is rather a dynamic construction enmeshed in a complex of circuits and is not stabilized on one side or the other of a boundary or interface, whose positioning it complicates.

Such artwork is no longer based on a dialectic of presence/absence. As Michael Fried has suggested, traditional artworks (paintings) are made to be beheld and therefore presuppose the

existence of a beholder: this led to the demand for the actualization of the presence of the beholder. At the same time, it was only by establishing the fiction of the beholder's absence that this could be achieved. As work now is based not in presence but in accessed pattern, what kind of beholder does it demand and actualize? Not one "present" — rather, one somehow aligned through an interface. Upon what negation is such an alignment founded? Upon the fiction of the beholder's dispersal? From fiction to conviction: configurations of elements, nowhere present but somehow everywhere at once, interfaceable.

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The Journal of Contemporary Art and THE THING

PRESENT AND FUTURE

The Journal of Contemporary Art has been publishing interviews with and special projects and writings by both emerging and established artists of international repute since 1988. Two artists, Philip Pocock and John Zinsser, originally created it as an alternative to the glossy art magazines which contain much critical writing and images. but gave none or little information on the thoughts of the artists themselves and the process of creating works of art it was envisioned as a forum for artists to talk with each other, and for curators, critics, collectors, and students to serve as a source of intimate and personal information an artists and their work. Other artists, curators and critics conduct the interviews.

The Journal has been online for the last two years. "THE THING", with its emphasis on encouraging and revitalizing the discourse on art, is a natural site for an online edition. Starting with the most recent issues, we are in the process of making all published issues available for online reading and downloading as a text-based magazine with only few images. The Journal is an ideal medium for distributing information online. In the beginning, making the interviews available to a larger audience was the main consideration in producing an online edition of the Journal.

Increasingly, however, the need for utilizing the unique possibilities of electronic communication became a force in getting involved in the world-wide-web. Its graphic interface, the inclusion of hypertext, images, video, and sound and its openness and interactivity make the web an ideal platform for a publication like the Journal. We are planning to open a web-site on "THE THING" in the very near future, which will, aside from giving access to the contents of all published issues, host online projects by artists, image libraries, and offer the possibility of interactive interviews and dialogues with and between artists, critics, and curators.

The web gives us an opportunity to publish inexpensively and reach an unlimited audience, one that is not restricted to the small world of visual arts. While it will not (yet) replace the

printed edition, the online version of the Journal will play a role in redefining the existing models of art magazines, galleries, museums, and exhibitions.

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