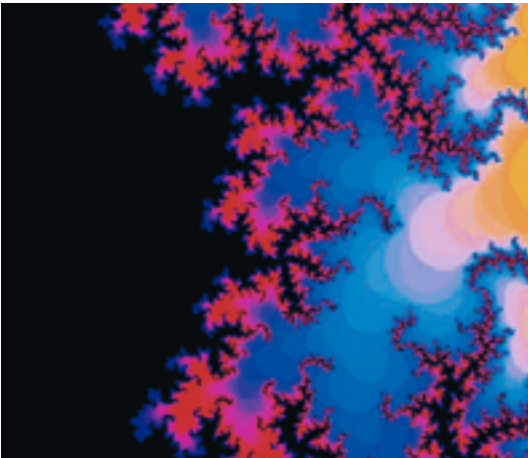


Looking for Art in All the Wrong Places



The Mandelbrot Set (detail)

A scientist lets a population of interbreeding computer viruses loose on a network of hard drives, and they evolve into a complex ecosystem. A hacker bent on demonstrating the futility of copyrighting computer programs buries a forbidden code in an image and posts it on the U.S. Copyright Office Web site. Online activists channel money through the Internet to a group that switches Barbie's voicebox with G.I. Joe's, so that unsuspecting girls buy a Barbie that barks "Commence firing" instead of cooing "Let's go shopping."

Why has the art world played such a miniscule part in the tremendous burst of Internet-enabled creativity of the last decade?

Michael Kimmelman writes in the *New York*

Times that there is no interesting art happening online; students who want to make Web sites join Design instead of Art departments; and you can count on the fingers of one hand the museum curators who've heard of Tierra, DeCSS art, or ®™ mark. What has kept the art world out of the loop?

There are many factors, but the most fundamental is laziness. Not the physical kind—there are plenty of curators who jet back and forth from Kwangju to Kassel, studiously trolling for biennale wunderkinder and art school stars-in-training. No, what's holding the art world back is a *philosophical* laziness: a disinterest in, or worse, a refusal to rethink definitions of the "art" that many spend so much of their time trying to scare up.

Refusing to define art is not just easier than the alternative—it also has an intellectual pedigree. Marcel Duchamp let the art world off the hook when he transformed a store-bought item into art simply by plonking it on a pedestal next to bronze sculptures and oil paintings. To be sure, Duchamp may have meant to poke fun at the arbitrary line that divides art from non-art, but since his death those museumified bicycle wheels and bottle racks have slyly transformed from a critique of the art world's solipsism into a justification for it. If art is merely what fits under an art gallery shingle or museum lintel, then curators and critics can afford to be lazy. In theory this contextual definition of art may sound open-minded and pluralistic, but in practice it has excluded a remarkable variety of creative activities whose distributed nature has kept them outside the art world's sacred circle. Most of them don't look like art. Many are not made by people who call themselves artists. And even if curators tried to squeeze them into a white cube, the act of uprooting these works from their *own* context—the Internet—would drain them of the links, literal and figurative, that made them interesting in the first place.

If curators want to find the sparks of emerging creativity, they'll have to step outside their

habitual gallery openings and studio visits, launch their browsers or e-mail clients, and engage in a kind of viewing and interaction destined to change their very notions of what constitutes art. But viewing with an open mind does not mean abandoning rigor. What follows is a first charting of some of the emerging stars of this new kind of art practice, an attempt not only to discern new genres, but also to articulate a set of symptoms by which we might begin to recognize new spaces opened up by art on the Internet.

Autobotography

Writers since Augustine have used events in their own lives as inspiration for new forms of narrative, but never before has a technology like telecommunications automatically rendered such autobiographic details in a form that can be witnessed instantaneously across the globe. From Jennicam to Weliveinpublic.com, privacy has become a commodity to be traded for artistic capital. But is the simple act of setting up a videocamera to record your most quotidian acts an act of art? If not, how much secondary elaboration—such as the elaborate diaristic text-and-image interface of Tanya Bezreh's NewCenturySchoolbook.com—is necessary for the viewer's experience of this "autobotography" to transcend mere voyeurism? And what happens to constructions of subjectivity that are based on interaction? What kind of "persona" is elaborated by a series of viewer-initiated "clicks" through a web project? Finally, what kinds of data constitute the narrative of a life? Clearly, the Jason Pettus diaries constitute an autobiographical statement, but what about his excerpts from other peoples' novels? Videos of poetry slams? Mission statements for a conference he plans to direct? Reviews about his work from *Artbyte* magazine? What happens to the genre when the data that once served as primary resources become fit for the work of autobiography itself? Clearly, these autobotographies challenge our pre-Internet concepts of subjectivity, authorship and audience. Their merit as art, then, might be linked to just how uncomfortable they make us about our sense of self, and to how many new ways of "being" in the world—virtual or material—they offer.

Encoded Muse

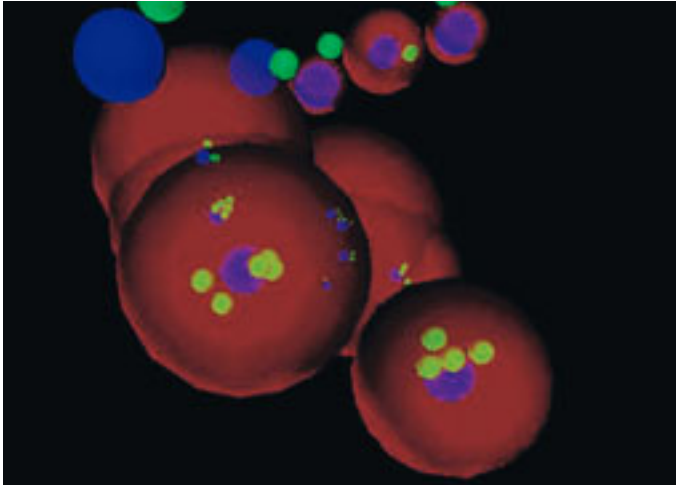
Some of the most renowned online artists seem to have taken to heart Cornelia Solfrank's dictum, "Why make art when you can have a machine do it for you?" John Simon's *Every Icon* systematically generates every possible 32x32 pixel image. Mary Flanagan's *Phage* plumbs the computer's unconscious by calling forth random texts, sounds, and images stored in nooks and crannies of the user's hard drive. And jodi.org, has made the code the subject as well as medium of their art.

Many of these experiments in software-as-art embody the "procedural" aesthetic Judson Rosebush espoused in 1989. In his view, the goal of computer art is to create the greatest richness and meaning from the fewest lines of programming code. But if this is the yardstick for aesthetic success, how do we judge the merit of these works against such remarkable achievements of the scientific community as the Mandelbrot set, whose single-line formula generates an astounding wealth of complex iterable shapes. If intent defines art, then what do we make of the invention of a geometer bent on modelling nature?

When code is the medium of creativity, we also have to consider where to look for the craft. Do we look at the products—Simon's icons, or Flanagan's visual display—or do we consider the code itself—the programming instructions that jodi.org make visible. The medium may be the message, but if neither restricts itself to transparent communication, perhaps this is a moment to pause an invitation to reflection.

Finally, we are used to attributing merit to labor—looking for the artist's brushstroke on the canvas. If the machine can make the art, then who/where is the artist—the machine

Image courtesy of Tom Ray
www.isd.atr.co.jp/~ray/tierra



VRML Visualization of Network Tierra.

whose labor generates the work, or the programmer who generates instructions for the machine? The viewer who makes the art by launching the code with a click of the mouse, or the architect of the latest OS? Whose labor makes the art? As we can see, the muse for encoded artwork is as promiscuous as it is inspiring, playing the field with many interacting players.

Visual Poetics

The originality of the artist has been a vexing issue for as long as creative practice has been centered in the individual. Can Shakespeare be considered original if the plots of his history plays derive from Plutarch? Was Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel original if the story of the creation had already seen enough versions in text and paint as to be clichéd? The welding of familiar themes into the service of new technologies has been one way to test the capabilities of the new while maintaining ties with tradition. One example of this marriage of old and new is John Cayley's *Noth's* which splices bits of floating Proustian text into an audio-visual e-poem, breaking up the words and rearranging them while the computer "reads" aloud the bits and bytes.

The question that this kind of work poses is whether the technologies permit a strong enough misreading of the original to suggest new insight, to suggest a new kind of "originality." This is a particular concern for works of hypertext, which borrow from the tradition of print, but often fragment the text into many diverging trajectories leading to different versions with each reading.

Hypertext explores the advantages of screen over codex by using visual and auditory elements for storytelling purposes. Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* relies on a visual mapping of the fragmented body of Frankenstein's female creature, as well as a visual metaphor of quilting, to knit her broken story and subject together. More sophisticated textual/visual hybrids can depend on a hidden level of structuring—whether JavaScript (Loss Glazier's e-poetry) or Flash (Judd Morrissey's *The Jew's Daughter*)—which requires authors to become not only visual artists, but also programmers.

Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer expanded the edge of art by taking text as their visual medium as well as by challenging concepts of originality with poster-print art. Now, hypertext authors—both the original scripters and the readers who generate the various version—are redefining narrative by splicing text and image, sound and interactivity in a way that blurs the line between textual practice and visual art.

Reweaving Community

Some of the most venerable sites for online creativity have been outside of the Web itself. Since the early 1990s, artists and theoreticians have been posting text-based criticism and projects to electronic bulletin boards and e-mail listservers and participating in multi-user text environments such as MUDs and MOOs. The participants in these improvisational communities have invented playful and unpredictable ways to blend subjectivities, from spoofing each other's e-mail accounts to swapping identities on a virtual stage to selling their avatars on eBay. With the legacy of creativity so transitory and the personal identity of the participants in so much flux, however, what can these spontaneous online performances legitimately contribute to art as an accountable history of artists and movements? Like much Internet art, these works suggest that it may be possible to have art without an author. To account for these forms of creativity requires an alternative to the traditional view of art history as a progression from movement to movement with a stable sense of whose work is being built upon and whose work is being transgressed. When Solfrank's *Net Art Generator* and jodi.org's code are producing the art, and when artists in virtual communities are spoofing and swapping and selling identities, the unquestioned link between author and creation, between artist and work becomes tenuous. And when entire online communities are involved in the production of works, from collaborative architectures like Marek Walczak and Martin Wattenberg's *Apartment* to multi-user games like *Ultima Online*, then the notion of individual authorship may be stressed to the breaking point. Plato suggested that knowledge was a social act, that thinking itself was a kind of dialogue. We may be entering an era in which we require—at least of some of our art—that it engages a kind of social interaction or contribution. That without the input of many people, and also many entities that are not people, we will never be able to adequately describe or reflect on the worlds we now inhabit.



Burch/Cheswick map of the Internet showing the major ISPs (data collected 28 June 1999).

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The Barbie Liberation Organization in action.

Designing Politics

When software designers and political activists meet, the results are difficult to categorize. ®™mark, an online clearinghouse that channels money and resources to people with subversive ideas, has sponsored hacks of gender-biased computer games, posted bogus Web sites that pretend to represent American presidential candidates, and sent ersatz repre-

sentatives of the World Trade Organization to spout imperialist ideas at international conferences. Subterfuges like ®™mark's are more carefully targeted than pranks but less solemn than political campaigns or underground movements. Yet they are not exactly political art in the tradition of Gericault or Picasso either, since rather than representing issues in an art context ®™mark actually intervenes in the real world, garnering attention from CNN and the WTO.

Ultimately what defines "hacktivism" is less a particular political stance or mode of representation so much as the use of the global telecommunications infrastructure to subvert the very governmental and corporate interests that created the infrastructure to begin with. But because ®™mark straddles so many categories, it may be difficult to judge its aesthetic merit or long-term relevance. Should its success or failure be measured by the degree to which it actually debilitates global capital? By the share of media attention it achieves? By the artists' ability to wrest their talent away from corporate use to corporate critique?

Clearly, these hacktivist practices give us room to think about uses and abuses of power in our culture, but they also give us the means of acting on that reflection. If art can be judged by its ability to make us rethink our position in the world, what can we say about work that not only makes us think, but enables and encourages us to act?

Re-mapping the Internet

The challenge of picturing cyberspace has attracted people with various ambitions. Some, like researcher Bill Cheswick of the industry think-tank Bell Labs, aim for the scientific goal of understanding how the Internet re-organizes itself to route around damage. Others, like artist collaborative I/O/D, aim for the more artistic goal of providing their viewers with a glimpse of the pageless Web outside of the page-based metaphor defined by commercial Internet browsers. Yet the maps produced by both projects are stunningly beautiful and seem to yield up secrets of the Internet's structure just by being looked at. I/O/D's palette is more restrained and the work is regularly cited in online exhibitions and art-based listservers while Cheswick's design appeals more to popular taste and is little-known outside of a narrow community of telecommunications researchers. As end products, is there any reason to consider one art and not the other? Like all good art, both kinds of maps do not merely reflect the world as it exists, but rather create the worlds—geographical, religious, political—we inhabit. What kinds of worlds are these virtual mappings creating? And how are we to inhabit them?

Spawning Artificial Life

No one would mis-shelve Mary Wolstoncraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* under Science rather than Literature, yet present-day research into synthetic organisms by Tom Ray and Karl Sims more often appears in science publications than art magazines or museums. Given

that imitating nature has always been a goal of art, from Aristotle to Photorealism, how do we account for this confusion? One explanation is that the work of these evolutionary biologists straddles the natural and artificial worlds. The algorithmic creatures in Ray's virtual bestiary *Tierra* reproduce, compete for resources, and evolve according to natural selection—in short, do almost everything that organic creatures do. And yet they are virtual beings. Perhaps Ray has crossed the line from art to science by actually trying to achieve life, rather than merely representing it. But is virtual life art or nature? Works that can straddle such a contested boundary remind us that the boundary between art and nature was never as rigid as we hoped it might be. But you won't find this kind of work in a museum or gallery—it “lives” online, where its creatures proliferate, compete, reproduce and remind us of the many mysteries common to both creation and life.

Implosion, Dispersal, or Redefinition

Will the edge of art expand to encompass these rival endeavors—or will it collapse under their weight, reducing the scope of art's influence to an esoteric trade in fetishized artifacts? Some argue that the art world is right to reject the rival forms of creativity birthed by new technologies, and hence to retreat to the traditional mediums and mechanisms of validation, from oil paint to auction houses. In relying on an outmoded model of creativity, however, artists and art professionals risk being left in the dust of stellar achievements in other fields. Others insist that the fires of artistic creativity are spent and that we should abandon the category of art altogether, a future that Bruce Sterling envisions in his novel *Holy Fire*. An unfortunate consequence of this reaction is the loss of opportunities for deep listening or contemplation—a practice that in an age of information overload is critical to free thinking.

But neither theories of implosion nor dispersal account for the radical transformations ushered in by digital technologies. What we are witnessing is not implosion or dispersal of art, but rather a seismic instability along the edge between art and non-art. To come to terms with this volatility, our definition of art must accommodate examples of artlike creativity spawned in disciplines with no direct relationship to art history or the art market. As implied by the genres surveyed above, such a definition might downplay such traditional faculties as condensing meaning, establishing an author, and touching an audience in favor of new capacities like connecting resources, distributing authorship, and creating a community.

For this redefinition to be rigorous, however, we must cast an unprejudiced eye not only on creativity outside of the museum's white walls, but also on creativity within them. For every scientist whose research fits a revised definition of art, there may be an oil painter whose work no longer qualifies. Rejecting a contextual definition in favor of a functional one also means jettisoning décor, commodity speculation, and self-promotion masquerading as art—whether they sit comfortably within a Duchampian frame or not.

Recent generations of art critics, curators, and philosophers have lost the ability to decide whether something is art by looking at it—and forgotten the insights and rigor that come from such case-by-case evaluation. Instead they've been rubber-stamping the self-serving validation mechanisms of galleries and auction houses, with the unfortunate consequence that, for the first time in centuries, more creativity is happening outside the art world than within it. It is time for the art world to reject Duchamp's sidestepping of the question of what art can and should be—and to look outside of its own backyard to find the answer.