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The Internet as Art

In the digital age, the medium is the new message.

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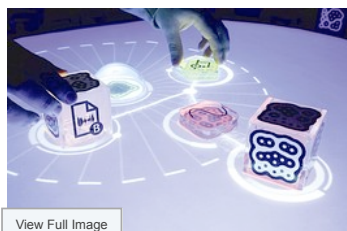


Text +

By GORAN MIJUK

Next time an error message pops up on your computer screen or if your machine succumbs to a software virus, it may be more than just an annoying glitch. It may be a work of art.

Just as video and computer technology attracted pioneering artists in the 1960s and 1970s, the Internet today is inspiring artists to tinker with the possibilities and boundaries of the World Wide Web. What started as a playful and often tongue-in-cheek experimental venture by a few code-savvy artists in the early 1990s has grown into a global art movement that is attracting attention from museums and private collectors. Karlsruhe-based media museum Zentrum fuer Kunst und Medientechnologie, or ZKM, has been running a series of net.art exhibitions. Berlin's Digital Art Museum recently showed the video performance "Hammering the Void," by Gazira Babeli, the pseudonym for an artist who exists only in Second Life, an online virtual reality game.



View Full Image

Xavier Sivecas

'Reactable' (2005), an interactive installation by Sergi Jordà, Martin Kaltenbrunner, Günter Geiger and Marcos Alonso

Among the artists who first saw the potential for creative uses of the information superhighway were Belgrade-born Vuk Cosic and Amsterdam-based artist duo Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans, who perform under the pseudonym jodi on the Web. Their early digital works, much like the art being made today by Italian duo Eva and Franco Mattes—who call themselves 0100101110101101.ORG—often imitated or at least paid ironic homage to the clandestine machinations of computer hackers.

Jodi's Web site, 404.jodi.org, for example, shows a blank screen, which through individual clicks switches from yellow, red to blue, with the figure 404 that is standardly reserved to denote an Internet error message, meaning that a Web site has failed to upload. The duo Mattes even created a software virus in 2001, called biennale.py, that spread around the world and had to be eliminated by U.S. antivirus software maker Symantec. Besides reproducing itself endlessly on computers, the virus was intended to multiply itself by "using the human mind and the media hysteria as its reproductive machinery," Mattes said. Their aim: to show that a computer virus isn't just a destructive program but that its existence and its circulation depends on humans.

Mr. Cosic's "history of art for airports, volume I," which can be seen at www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/history and which will be exhibited at the Treshold Artspace in Perth, Scotland, from Aug. 1 to Nov. 1, shows a series of iconic artworks and cultural references rendered as alienated airport pictograms. One such icon, called King Kong, depicts a white hand holding a small woman in its palm, a reference to the Hollywood classic in which a giant gorilla caresses the heroine.



But Internet art, which is often called net.art, is more than just a dadist-inspired attempt to create online mischief or challenge the popular understanding of the World Wide Web as a useful and low-cost medium for business transactions or information-gathering or time-wasting.



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'T-Visionarium' (2003-08), by Neil Brown, Dennis Del Favero, Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel

disempowering the middleman," he says. "Our first generation aggressively played with shortcuts to the end user, thus avoiding curators, critics, theorists and all other art bureaucracy."

One of these more serious works, "tv screen, night one," shows how the Internet has changed over the past decade (ljudmila.org/%7Ewoelle/lajka/war). It shows a series of TV pictures taken from various European channels on the night in 1999 that Yugoslavia was bombed by NATO forces. In addition to pictures of U.S. President Bill Clinton and Yugoslav strongman Slobodan Milosevic, the TV stills show fighter jets taking off and missile blasts seen through a night vision camera—as well as other images being broadcast, such as soft porn movies and old war films.

"It was a piece about the relation between TV and the Web," Mr. Cosic says. "At the time I was insisting on the fact that when it comes to global coverage, TV was still in advantage in terms of reach and credibility over the Internet."

But obviously this has all changed with the ubiquity of the Internet. The technology is advancing quickly, creating new network forms that challenge and change traditional media—forcing, for example, TV stations, newspapers and magazines to use the Internet as a major distribution channel to attract readers. People trust the Internet more and the old-fashioned, "mainstream media" less.

But net.art artists aren't stopping here to question and challenge, criticize and eventually redefine the Internet. They are embracing the Internet's ability to connect people to share ideas and become active both in the digital and the real world. They're also exhibiting their works in unusual public spaces, generating more attention than they would in a museum.



View Full Image
'tv screen, night one' (1999) by Vuk Cosic; facing page 'pieta' (left) and 'cezanne' from Mr. Cosic's 2009 work, 'history of art for airports, volume I.'

For artists like Mr. Cosic, the Internet's attraction is its promise of artistic independence. "The so-called disruptive potential of net.art was identified in

South African artist Nathaniel Stern, together with American artist Scott Kildall, for example, have created a mock-Wikipedia art page, wikipediaart.org, where other artists and art lovers can create and edit their own art and discuss aspects of art such as censorship and copyright. The work was originally intended to be part of the actual Wikipedia site, but the online encyclopedia blocked the artists' initial attempt because the editing process on the their Web site did not conform to Wikipedia's standards.

Swiss artists Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud have created a Web network called www.picidae.net, which allows surfers in China, Iran, Africa and other regions to upload Web pages that are otherwise blocked by official censorship. To shortcut potential watchdogs, Messrs. Wachter and Jud are "taking pictures" of HTML encoded Web pages, making it impossible for officials to censor them because they have been structured with the help of pixels rather than machine-readable codes. Besides helping to get information past censorship, the work challenges the traditional assumption that the artist is the sole creator of art and that an art lover is simply consuming art. "The only thing that counts is one's personal view, irrespective of whether one creates art or if one observes it," the artists say. "We have been able to establish ties with our projects to people around the world. For picidae, for example, people painted posters, recorded audio files and painted pictures (to raise awareness of the site). That's all in the best sense of art that creates new views, new experiences and new courses of action."

Other artists such as Spain's Antoni Abad have also tapped into the network idea. His Web site www.zexe.net is a project to help, for example, handicapped people in Geneva and Barcelona inform each other how to best travel through these cities. Equipped with cameras, the handicapped people involved in the project have taken pictures of road obstacles and have loaded these on the Internet, creating a virtual city map to allow people in wheelchairs an unencumbered journey through the rugged asphalt jungle. Although the site may look like a self-help group at a first glance, Mr. Abad's work is similar to the efforts of 19th-century French novelist Victor Hugo, who with his epic "Les Miserables" brought to light the misery and plight of Paris's poor and shunned underclass, thereby raising the public's awareness and prompting social action.

Ken Goldberg, a U.S. artist who started out as a sculptor, is increasingly focused on Internet and digital art. His work includes short films and software programs. He argues that one of the Internet's key attractions is its permanent accessibility. "This concept stands in contrast to the cult value of a piece of art, which derives its strength and aura from the fact that the work of art is singular," says Mr. Goldberg, who also works as a professor of robotics at the University of California at Berkeley. "While art is usually restricted to museum, galleries and private collectors, Internet art can be looked at all the time by anyone."

But the easy accessibility of Internet Art has also proved problematic for its market value. "In the 1990s, when Internet Art started to evolve, interest from the public was solid," says Wolf Lieser,

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founder of the Digital Art Museum and gallery in Berlin. "But from a financial perspective, this art form was a failure." Mr. Lieser owned a digital art gallery in London in the late 1990s but had to close it because most of the works were not sold.

This has changed in recent years as private collectors and established art institutes are growing an appetite to collect and buy works, many of which are still comparatively cheap and may range from around \$2,000 to \$50,000.

"Today things are changing because collectors are more acquainted with the subject matter," Mr. Lieser said. "Rather than acquiring an artifact, they are growing aware that they are buying into the conceptual and cultural aspect of art when they are buying Internet art."

Still, Mr. Lieser says many collectors want some form of unique item, even if the artifact, a memory disk or a CD-ROM, is only of symbolic value.

Private collector Theo Armour has recently started buying net.art, he says, because he senses the chance to participate in a new artistic development, similar to invention of important art forms such as cubist art.

"I always loved art and wanted to collect it," says Mr. Armour, a 62-year-old architect-turned-computer design consultant, who until recently was also a member of the advisory board of the Peggy Guggenheim foundation in Venice. "As a technology geek, I decided that it has to be Internet art."

The first piece in his growing Internet art collection is a work by Mr. Goldberg called "memento mori," Latin for "remember you shall die," at mementomori-0.net. It shows a live, digital, constantly changing representation of the seismic movements of the Hayward Fault, a tectonic crevice that runs along the east side of San Francisco Bay. "I wanted the entire transaction to be effected digitally," says Mr. Armour, who declines to reveal the price he paid for the work. "But the artist and gallerist Catherine Clark, who brought us together, decided to go for a physical specimen too." While Mr. Goldberg's work can be viewed by anyone on the Internet, Mr. Armour has his own, original work of art stored on a silver-encased flash drive.

Museums, meanwhile, are also active in the fledgling genre. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, or SFMOMA, which commissioned Web-based works at the end of the 1990s, has recently bought two works from Hollywood, Calif.-born artist Julia Scher and Lynn Herschman Leeson from Cleveland, Ohio. Ms. Scher's work, "Predictive Engineering #2" from 1998, is a video installation that makes use of early Internet-based programming codes. Ms. Herschman Leeson's work, "Agent Ruby," which is dated 1999-2002, is a playful, interactive Internet program through which users can talk to the artificial person "Agent Ruby." Viewers of the program can ask questions, which Ruby will answer. Depending on the question and answer, Ruby will change her facial complexion.

"We feel that it is high time to make the next logical step and show our continued leadership among the museums by studying the needs of a museum to take charge of technologically demanding work," says Rudolf Frieling, SFOMA's curator of media arts.

Karlsruhe, Germany-based Zentrum fuer Kunst und Medientechnologie, or ZKM, is also focusing on net.art. One recent exhibition, "banquet_notes and networks," focused on net culture in Spain. Its current show, "YOU_ser 2.0: Celebration of the Consumer" which runs until Aug. 30, includes such net.art works as mikrogalleri.es, created by Korea-born artist Mehi Yang and Axel Roch of Germany. Visitors can upload their own pictures on a computer. The pictures are then published at the ZKM in Karlsruhe or in other galleries that can be opened by anyone who has a projector and Internet access. For Messrs. Yang and Roch, mikrogalleri.es takes the Internet one step ahead of community websites such as Facebook or Flickr. Microgalleri.es is an open platform that should entice public institutions, private studios or cafés to get in touch with others, they say, suggesting that this new Internet generation could become "The Internet of Things" as the digital world becomes "concrete" in other spaces.

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