

## In Touch: The Internet and the Re-Materialization of Art

by John Perreault

### THE INTERNET IS BORING

Some claim we are poised at the **brink** of the Internet Age. The era of **instant** global communication available to all is upon us. All libraries now have open doors. Boundaries do not exist.

We have **however** been disappointed in the past with technological "breakthroughs."

Cable television promised interactivity and unlimited choice only to deliver--- **more of the same** old television programming.

This is an example of more resulting in less. Ninety channels all the same; most of them vampirizing old programs and films.

More **deadly** still is the **fragmentation** of audience. Millions of people no longer simultaneously watch the same program or even news broadcast.

### THE MONITOR REQUIRES HEADLINES

But the Internet is different.

The blank screen has replaced the blank piece of paper. Except it is not blank; it is full of rulers, symbol bars and, if on-line, interruptive **advertisements** and buddy-queries.

My thesis is that

(1) the internet is not the solution; it is merely another tool, like the fax. It will not improve communication only increase it.

Nevertheless, there are consequences already:

(2) We touch only keyboards and are psychically inside the monitor, strewn through cyberspace, so that after art it is we who have dematerialized.

(3) Art is already going through a period of re-materialization so that we can win back our bodies, our senses, and our souls.

There are numerous examples already: art works made of chocolate, glass, clay stuck to canvas, batting. There is a need to create new sensations and new contact with the **haptic**.

## NO TIME TO THINK

After sitting at your computer for hours of work or play you can only break the trance and re-enter your body through the physicality of art. It is not that ideas are unimportant; far from it. It is simply that we need ideas embodied in materiality; only then to the ideas connect with emotions and the spirit.

## WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU ARE WAITING FOR AN IMAGE OR A TEXT?

PRAY.

I keep a wood-fired clay jar on my desk. It is by an American—Jeff Schapiro—who studied in Japan. It keeps me sane. I touch the rough glaze and see the earth colors produced by the kiln and the fire. I also have a turned wood bowl by Ron Kent who lives in Hawaii: splits in it are stitched together with copper wire. It is from his **post-apocalypse** series. It too keeps me awake.

## A MEANS OF COMMUNICATING WITH THE UNIVERSE

The internet is **not** the means of communicating with the universe. It is a nervous system but it has no brain, no headquarters (a strength). The internet is a symbol of the **telepathic** system that has always existed. As such, in comparison the internet reality is paltry. This is proved by the **idiocy** of chat rooms and message boards. Let us not turn the computer into an altar. It is what it is: a substitute for **silence**. True silence, however, can only happen through grace.

"The prototypical altar layout is found not only in most Japanese homes but also in major Buddhist temples...It is only when there is a main office that corporate branches and agencies gain significance...The home altar is clearly 'on-line' within a system of invisibly linked nerve-wirings." Kenji Ekuan: *The Aesthetics of the Japanese Lunchbox*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998.

## BACK IN TOUCH: AN AMAZING TOOL?

The internet could be an amazing tool for the **international** communication of art data, analysis and opinion. So far it is not. A global site is needed: listing all **exhibitions** in all countries, names and addresses of museums and art galleries with hours, staff, policies. If I am **traveling** to Tokyo next month (or to Reykjavík or Cairo), I would like to know museum and gallery information in advance:



exhibition schedules, addresses with maps, admission fees, etc. Reviews of **exhibitions** should be attached.

This however constitutes service not thought. From such basic service units of measurements could branch **conversation** and actual **debate**—could, but most likely won't, for such is the nature of art criticism that it is not conversation or debate but description, positioning, or doctrine. To make matters worse, the styles of conversation dictated by the formats and **time structures** of the internet are **telegrammatic** and superficial.

### **ART IS NOT COMMUNICATION**

I see two uses of the internet vis a vis art: data and actual art works. Only the former is of any **interest**. In terms of the latter, the Nam June Paik of the internet has not yet emerged.

The internet is about communication

and art is not.

I suspect that there are **virus** artworks, some perhaps even attached to this file. The threat of a **virus** is an artwork. Computer false identities are no more interesting than real life masquerades. If, however, the identity you inadvertently **construct** for me as you read this diverges from the **one** I have constructed for myself—or a **third party**—it is the **space** of this divergence that is the artwork—not the details of the divergence, but the space of the divergence.

Nevertheless, aside from latter-day concept art, the best computer art so far takes **the form** of screen-savers.

The internet is only a medium and in this case the medium is **not** the message, unless you think that electronically linked typewriters is extremely exciting. Multi-media internet capabilities have yet to be proved. Most likely, when memory is adequate, **corporate** entertainment programming will dominate the internet. You read it here first.

### **FORGET ART**

Art criticism, rather than art, has a **place** on the internet.

Since art criticism is never commercially viable as an in-print commodity, the fact that the internet allows **cost-effective**,

virtually free self-publication means that every art critic can be his or her own publisher, **editor** and distributor.

No profits will accrue, but they never do anyway.

As a self-published art critic one is not beholden to galleries, publishers, collectors, artists. The art criticism is free to anyone with a computer and internet access,

but there is no guarantee that anyone will find your golden words or when found they will be read. **THE INTERNET**

**REQUIRES**

**HEADLINES**

#### **THE ANSWER TO THE INTERNET PROBLEM**

As a critic and an artist, I am currently most engaged by art that takes specific material form, subscribing to the phrase by the American **poet** William Carlos Williams: No ideas but in **things**. It is not a questions of either ideas or form. The secret of post-appropriation art is that there must be a new unity of ideas and matter. Matter without ideas is **dead matter**. Ideas without material manifestation are daydreams. The internet cannot transmit matter; it can only transmit words and images. **The internet is a dream state.**

The answer to the internet problem is the answer to this question: why bother having an AICA conference in a specific place involving huge expense, travel, and all sorts of inconveniences when the papers could be presented—and responded to—over the internet?

#### **The Internet Is Not Far Out Enough**

Remember holography? It has not actually gone away, but only headaches rather than art works have been produced.

*Internet Art is the new holography.*

Of more importance is that the internet is *the new telephone* (and soon the new tv) but it is not the new canvas or the new bronze.

The internet makes art even more important than in the past. After being on-line, one hungers for something real. Only touch allows us to be touched. Will the internet destroy art as we know it? I hope so. As the internet becomes more of a



mass media, innocents may stumble upon art. **Cultural isolates** will have some hope. Another sign of hope: cd-rom tours of museums have failed. No one wants them. **Photos of art, even if digitalized, are not art.**

The virtual museum does not replace the actual museum.

### ESCAPING THE NET

A net, as short for network, is a system of **connectors**. But a net, as in fishing net, is a collector. Do we **connect** or collect? Do we **harvest** or are we harvested? Everyone is connected to everyone else---through the gene pool, through history, through LANGUAGE---but now electronic evidence seems to be required.

Only instant contact, no matter how superficial will satisfy the deep loneliness of disconnected lives.

The on-off, yes-no structures of electronic media create digital sanitation. No amount of fuzzy logic will correct dualism. **The address or rather the index is a way of life.**

On the other hand, what are those who wield the net fishing for?

Customers.

The internet is the latest version of the mail-order catalogue.

The internet is searching for desire, capturing desire, exploiting desire.

The internet obeys the laws of economics. Play is marginal. The  
electronic wilderness will be a farm rather than a garden.

**Hunting and gathering has been replaced by shopping. Searching has been replaced by being searched, by surveillance.**

We are niches. Instead of information seekers, **we are the information sought.**

What are the functions of the internet? Library, mail-order catalogue, postal service, newspaper, entertainment provider, baby-sitter, time-waster.

### THE INTERNET EATS TIME

The internet is for people who prefer **pen pals** to friends.

The internet consists of **second-hand** experience. Information is not knowledge.

The internet means you can talk to **strangers**, do your banking, buy stocks, consult a travel agent---in your underwear or even less.

The internet means you never have to bathe, shave, get a haircut, shake hands.

I know of an early computer programmer in Southern California who never left his apartment and never wore clothes. Is this the new ideal? The electronic hermit vs meat.

Meat is a phrase used by electronic hermits for the body.

When poet Walt Whitman sang " the body electric, " he did not mean the internet.

#### **THE INTERNET EATS ITSELF**

And other paradoxes:

- 1) You only know who you are when you have an e-mail address or a web page;
- 2) you are the identities you make up;
- 3) the you who invents your identities is both the problem and the solution;
- 4) art is something that occurs somewhere else, off the grid;
- 5) art critics can conquer the internet by stealth.
- 6) You only know *where* you are when you have an e-mail address or a web page.

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