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Manuscript 1061

Useless Web Pages: Conceptual Folk Art or Post Modern Web Dada?

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<art>

of the world wide web

PART I

Useless Web Pages

Conceptual Folk Art or Post Modern Web Dada?

Benjamin Eakins on Mar 15 1997

issue 06

Examines a host of personal and other sites looking for art.

by Ben Eakins

Even the casual web-surfer will probably be familiar with "**useless**" world wide web pages. These "**useless**" world wide web pages are representative of an internet phenomenon that is not necessarily confined to the world wide web, but these pages are simply the most visible manifestations of that phenomenon.

The useless web pages vary greatly, varying from personal confessions to collections of highly specialized, meaningless bits of **information**. They are all, however, considered "useless." That is to say, they possess one of several traits. One, the page is presented as the inverse of a (supposedly) informative web page, by providing either **irrelevant** information or a lack of **information**. The site may contain **information** that is of such a specialized, often personal nature that it has little or no relevance to people, such as a list of a certain type of **possession** of the page-creator, or **personal** details of an extremely **specific** type. Such **information** could have relevance viewed within a different context or a larger sampling, but due to lack of context or the small scale, personal nature of the sites, the **information** can only be seen as simple, **meaningless data**. The **information** could also be presented as a complex, perhaps even scientific elaboration on totally nonsensical, imaginary data and theories, that is, as a **parody of the kind of scientific inquiry** that instigated the creation of the web. Another approach is a lack of **information** sites merely as empty place holders, having just enough substance as web pages to emphasize their emptiness or the total nonexistence of **information** on them, or sites that offer the fantastic and grandiose and instead contain an extremely simple and banal content. These sites present themselves as meaningless either in relief to, or in addition to the rest of the web. That is to say, they either attempt to show how meaningful or useful the web is by providing an **alternative** in the form of a meaningless or useless page, or attempt to show how meaningless and uninformative much of the web is by providing an **exaggerated** version of it. In the former case, the site often works the way the latter case does, by being indistinguishable from any number of supposedly "useful" web sites, they point out how meaningless much of the **information** is on the web, and how little actual information can be found on most web sites.

Two, the web sites offer entertainment of an absurd and sometimes confrontational nature. These web sites offer one or several of the following: extremely personal revelations; **games without goals, substantial reward or seriousness**; randomness (**links to other, random pages**, or random information presented in the form of an "**oracle**" or some conversational context); fan clubs for banal objects or

anti-fan clubs. Such sites, in addition to the other ways in which they function, frequently have a social purpose as well. The sites that have a playful and/or personal approach most often encourage feedback and participation- apparently receiving both, and in fact, the sites are sometimes reliant upon the contributions of others. These web pages work as **instigators of social interaction and play**. Working within this scientific/military/business infrastructure, altering it to function not for productive purposes, but instead for reasons of "useless" play and community, can be seen as constituting a "resistance" to the socio-economic situation in which they are situated. In their role as parody, the question can be raised, does it act as ridicule, that is, as an attack upon the system which they inhabit or something less than ridicule, some form of parody which simply relieves pressures caused by the system and allows for the maintenance of the system, rather than an attempt to resist the system in which it exists? That is to say, does it function as temporary release or as (hit and run) resistance?

Also included in the "useless" web pages are those that **fetishize (particular) information**. Decontextualized from its economic/scientific context, the information is removed from its role in **(information) industry** and becomes analogous to the Dadaist fascination with machinery. Just as **Dada** fetishized mechanical apparatus divorced from their industrial contexts at a time of increasingly sophisticated mechanized factory lines, separating out the mechanical element and holding it up for adoration, so do these web pages hold up useless information (removed from any possibility of commercial use) for adoration in and of itself. The information in the one case and the mechanical object in the other function relatively the same in both cases, and in both cases function in some way as a critique of productivist logic. By denying what society sees as the most important role or aspect of the thing (the industrial role as capital/product), it becomes liberated from this role, functioning outside of productivist logic.

The refusal of "use" relates directly to movements such as **Fluxus** and the writings of **Walter de Maria**, who, as a response to art of the time asserts (somewhat tongue in cheek) that "Meaningless work is obviously the most important and significant art form today... Meaningless work is potentially the most abstract, concrete, individual, foolish, indeterminate, exactly determined, varied, important art-action-experience one can undertake today. This concept is not a joke." He goes on to define "meaningless" work as "...work that does not make you money or accomplish a conventional purpose." only the documentation of the work done is comodifiable (and in the case of web-pages, not even that), it allows one to step beyond productivist logic, to "make you feel and think about yourself, the outside world, morality, reality, unconsciousness, nature, history, time, philosophy, nothing at all, politics, without the limitations of the old art forms." It seems that the "uselessness" of the web pages can be directly corresponded with the meaningless (making no money and achieving no conventional purpose). Some of these useless web pages, fulfilling the characteristics, fit into this accepted art paradigm. The meaninglessness is not only of the work done but also of the information produced. In a culture of simulations, **Baudrillard** asserts, the only form of resistance is to deny meaning. Within the context of the "useless" web-page as critique of the web, the meaningless web page becomes a refusal of meaning for the web as a whole.

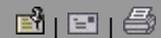
There are a number of similarities of the "useless" web pages to **Dada** besides the connections mentioned. Although **Dada** originated in large part as a reaction to the first world war, inherent was a critique of middle class values and society, as embodied by art. Within the context of art, the creation of anti-art or meaningless art became a clear critique. The anti-information of the useless web page could be seen to function in the same way. A fascination with the laws of chance in Dada have a mirror in the use of randomizing features in many useless web pages. **Random links** to unpredictable web pages explore liberation from the (basically linear) predictability of the web structure. Random content in a conversational form explores the creative possibilities of the mechanical (non) randomness of the computer.

The question arises: while these web pages fit somewhere within existing art paradigms, they are viewed as art neither by the creators, those self appointed classifiers of the web known as "search engines", or possibly by many who view them and are "entertained" by them.

Since this work exists within rules for art-making, and has no other clear function

besides the entertainment of the creator and the aforementioned social function, it seems to place itself in the "art" category, having no other existing paradigm to fit into. However, based on what the search engines classify as art, it could be assumed that the art paradigm that most of the web operates upon is nearly a century old. The "artistic presence" on the web is most often a design sense, with painting (in the late 19th century sense) dominating the majority of "art" sites. It is perhaps possible that art and art history, being fields of increasing specialization and complexity just as any other fields of knowledge in the information age, have become so specialized that the majority of people lack the awareness of the last century (give or take a few decades) of art history and theory. Without knowledge of this theory, they are unable to recognize "art" that is not explicitly contextualized as such (and perhaps not even then). Existing within an out-dated art paradigm, people create and view information artifacts that exist within art paradigms, but unable to contextualize them as such label them simply "useless." The work is then usually not aware of itself as art, lacking both context and theory, so that while the work may function as art, it may not do so very successfully. An art which most often functions outside of theory or context is folk art: might then these useless web pages be considered conceptual folk art? Sites are occasionally **jokingly presented as art** (art also being equated by the presenter with "important"), with retractions of such statements immediately following (reaffirming it as "unimportant").

Perhaps existing within art paradigms isn't enough. The useless web pages may function just differently enough to be, (or because of lack of context and awareness are), another thing entirely. The internet, with its new structures and possibilities, allows for entirely new categories of creations, and may in fact, change the nature of what art is sufficiently that even when operating within art paradigms on the internet, what is created no longer could be termed art.



::CrossReference

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