SWITCH

Ontological Problems with Web Art

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<art>   of the   world wide web

PART II

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Jan Ekenberg on Jan 14 1997   **issue 07**

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Any attempt to categorize, analyze or find, for that matter, what we call Web Art, art of the World Wide Web or Web specific art, has proven not to be a simple task. Why is that? Is there somehow an incompatibility between art (as a western contemporary concept [1]) and the World Wide Web, or do we just have too many preconceptions about what we expect to find?

Two often heard statements point out what looks like a problem with the ontological status of web art. A polarity that perhaps simplifies but also phrases the question differently can be derived from the statements: does the slipperiness we feel when dealing with these issues lie in our notion and habits of art viewing (or making) or does it lie in the anatomy of the World Wide Web?

● The World Wide Web is such a new medium that things haven't crystallized yet. Time will give us some perspective.

● No one has been able to define what art is.

Dealing with web art, these are comments we've all heard. They sound right, but don't seem to take us closer to an understanding of the problem.

Inherent in the first assumption is the problem of verification. When is something no longer "new"? The second phrase is heard in all kinds of situations, often suggesting that one should not try to define, or narrow down, art. Even though it's a obvious rhetorical statement, it has the misfortune of being false.

Why do I chose two arbitrary statements just to immediately dismiss them? At first they don't seem to offer any answers to our problem; but in spite of this, perhaps a key to our predicament can be found within the two assertions.

First: What is really the problem?

To summarize:

● Why are the good art sites so relatively few on the World Wide Web?
● Why are the issues, concepts and strategies used within contemporary art culture not being implemented in sites and projects on the Web that claim to be art, but instead using romantic and/or modernistic ways and methods?
● Why do many tactics, "traditionally" used by contemporary artists, show up in so called "useless pages". [2]

Let's take a look again at the two common assumptions that I claimed could help us.

Let's start with the second one: "No one has been able to define what art is." Well... an a-historical, encompassing and truly successful art definition has not been produced and would probably be a monster. But the problem is **not** that we **don't** know what art is; it is the opposite. We have a very strong cultural idea what art is (of which we're not always aware of course). Although the discourse defining contemporary western art is vast and complex, two important concepts immediately come to mind. They are:

• An intentionalistic view an art. This view basically tells us that any artifact that is produced with the intention of being an art object is art.

• An institutional theory of art. For example George Dickie's: "A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact, (2) a set of aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)."

It's easy to see how the problems gather if we try to apply these ideas to web art.

First: Any unit of information (i.e. document) on the World Wide Web can not be usefully looked upon as an artifact. It can be copied innumerable times without loss; it can be dynamically changed; it can contain any number of other documents; it can move and keep its characteristics; etc. - features that artifacts just don't have.

Second: Even though the problem with intentions of the "artist" is not only a problem on the Web it seems more apparent here than anywhere [3] else. In most cases you can't know and don't have access to that information. It becomes an unverifiable assumption.

Third: It's rare to find a person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) who confer the status of candidate for appreciation on Web Art documents. And when there are, institutions on the Internet or World Wide Web seems to be self-contained. When Web-pieces contextualized by these institutions leave the bounds of the institutions, the mark of approval doesn't transfer with it. When the art piece (artist) is outside of that context it's a new ball game. It's been said before but has merit: the Web is an equalizer, where any attempt to use hierarchical force seems bound to fail.

Even though institutions cannot use their traditional authority on the Web, perhaps the World Wide Web can be said to have characteristics of an institution in itself. To take a look at that we'll go to the first statement often used in dealing with Web Art.

"The World Wide Web is such a new medium that things haven't crystallized yet. Time will give us some perspective." The interesting part in this statement is that the World Wide Web is said to be a *medium*. Initially, looking at web art, the concept of the World Wide Web being a medium is very strong. But is it? Technically no. But that's too simplistic an answer. The fact is that the HTML protocol that constitutes the Web possesses characteristics of a medium in a very general sense. But, it's definitely not *only* a medium. The complexity of the information service on the Internet called the World Wide Web is too extensive to be that narrowly defined. The spatial/cosmographic metaphors used since the creation of the World Wide Web have turned it into a construct where its technical realities are unimportant. Web sites are real sites according to the logic of the Internet- whether or not that's technically correct or even a desirable way of thinking about it. [4]

Here we can conclude that we have something that seems ontologically interesting for

the artworld and for art: a schizophrenic entity that is both an institution and a medium.

This unusual quality could explain characteristics of art on the Web. Art on the web almost always treats the World Wide Web as either a medium **or** an institution/place. Producers of art on the web are often locked into this dichotomy. You either create web galleries and "museums"- *places* for scanned or re-photographed matter, paintings and computer generated "art", or formal "experimental" web pages, trying to squeeze out as much visual flash and flickering as the formatting language allows.
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The Internet and the Web is of course a "something" that has unique and sometimes strange features. Some of these features, like the ones discussed, combined with other notions, such as a modernistic separation of form and content, leave space for a worry that the Web, when it comes to art, is not utilized for any of its potential. But, hey, what is?
The search is on, for Web Art that uses the Internet in ways that it can be used, and with an idea of what art can be.
[1]This is the idea of art that I've chosen to talk about, well aware of all the other ideas of what art is and isn't: i.e. anything that's pretty or aesthetic, anything made with skill, creativity, rebellion etc.
A painful testimony of other confused ideas of what art is can be found
here.
[2]See Benjamin Eakins' article on

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

[3]note the spatial quantifier
[4]The reasons for this psychocultural phenomena is of course worth a study in itself.
[5]A third common type of web art that I haven't talked about is the poetic multimedia experience. It assures us that poetry doesn't need the verification of any institution but can be found everywhere throughout human existence.

::CrossReference

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