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### **BREAKING THE CODE: ART THAT DOES NOT STAND ON ITS OWN**

Traditional wisdom has it that the successful art object should stand on its own, without the need for further explanation. Generations of art students have been taught if a work cannot be easily understood as a discrete object, it is poorly constructed. But the historical resistance to appended explanatory information is built on the assumption that the audience will have been initiated into the cultural codes of the artist, or more commonly, that they will operate with the same codes.

In today's multi-cultural world, this concept seems strangely naive. For years, artists have been taking their ideas from sources both personal and outside of mainstream culture, using references that could not be known to the average viewer. Furthermore, when the viewing audience is extended to those who may not have the same education or cultural experience as the traditional art viewing public, it is even more difficult to maintain that an art object should stand on its own.

Fortunately, we now have the World Wide Web. The introduction of the Web into the art world brings with it the potential to change the very way in which art is presented. The actual format of the Web is in opposition to the concept of the stand alone object, as it invites links from image to related textual information, to another image, to more information and so on. In fact, in viewing the WWW, the viewer's reaction to a non-linked image is frequently that no matter how interesting the image, if it is not linked to something else it is BORING. No one likes a dead end on the Web.

And of course the "World Wide" nature of the Web makes it imperative that artists go beyond the usual assumptions of a shared visual language, as the potential viewing audience is now everyone, everywhere. Even within the same country, the viewing audience on the Web may include those who never seriously looked at art before, as well as those who may not have felt comfortable in museums and galleries, but who find that the privacy of viewing on the Web makes the art world more accessible.

One of the important distinctions of the WWW as an environment for viewing art is that it allows the artist/performer/curator to place the work in a context. This provides the perfect opportunity to accustom viewers to the challenge of seeing art in the context in which it was created. The exchange on the Web can be opened in both directions: artists can be liberated from the cultural conventions that may have been imposed on their work in order to make it more acceptable to the established art world, and the viewing audience can be expanded to those who never had access to the cultural conventions in the first place

Thus the Web is becoming the alternative exhibition space of the 1990's. Just as American artists in the 1970's and 1980's became frustrated with the exclusive nature of the gallery scene and organized alternative exhibition spaces under their own control, the Web is becoming the arena where art that

might not otherwise be shown is readily available. While many artists are simply using the Web as just one more avenue for showing their work, many are realizing that at last they have a space where they potentially have complete control over the presentation of that work, apart from the obvious and (perhaps temporary) limitations of the scale of the screen

As Annette Weintraub noted in her presentation at SIGGRAPH 1996, art on the Web exists without boundaries. Museums and galleries post information on the wall, performers distribute program guides, and books include introductions, but seldom are these read with the same intensity as parallel information on the Web. This is because the information is presented in the same medium, in a sense in the same space, even in a presentation in which the viewer moves from image to text to a new site and back again. Presentation on the Web is uniquely fluid.

Many artists have made use of the Web for the development of "site-specific work", that is, Web pieces which could not exist outside of the Web. These are pieces in which very nature of the Web, including the linking possibilities and the advantages of presenting text and sound with the images are the basis of the piece.

But what about artists, as well as curators, who have turned to the Web as a way to show images that may have existed originally in other media? One would think that the lead in this area would come from those museums who have long provided supplementary information to their viewing audience. Unfortunately, many museums continue to use the Web as just another way to present the same information. In the February, 1995 edition of "Le Journal des Arts", a front page story summarizes the responses of curators from major museums to the emergence of new technology, including CD rom and Web presentation. Philippe de Montebello of the Metropolitan Museum says "we are a museum, we are not in the business of being on the cutting-edge of technology." He goes on to say "like many curators, I must admit that I am not attracted to multi-media, but without a doubt we must follow the trend, because if we do not control the content, then other will do it in our place".

If we cannot depend on museum curators, whose task it is to interpret art and place it in context, then where will we find innovative use of the Web as a vehicle for presenting art? Mr. de Montebello recognizes the fact that art presented within multi-media and Web contexts has the potential to speak of a different content, and yet he is not confident that this is the way to go. In fact, a quick look at the Web site for the Metropolitan Museum (<http://www.metmuseum.org/>) confirms this. We are given images of the front door of the museum, floor plans, and the organization of the collection. Only after passing through several layers of information that is relevant only to the traditional museum do we come to the images of the art itself, finally presented with information that adds to our understanding of works that were created in a different age, and thus are frequently in need of context. While the Louvre site (<http://mistrall.culture.fr/louvre/louvre.htm>) is somewhat more interesting because it brings us to the images more quickly, it still does not show us something on the Web that is beyond what we would see in the Museum. The images are organized in the same collection mode as in the actual space.

If the curators cannot do it, what can artists who are not afraid of innovation do on the Web? And especially those artists who already work in electronic media, who certainly have already made the essential leap to understand that images are more than objects, and that paint and ink and other materials are just means to creating imagery. For, while the computer may never simulate paint, in the end, it is the communication

of the imagery itself which carries much of the essential meaning.

The Web is still mixed in this regard. A quick search of artists' sites most commonly brings up scores of galleries that show prices for art, but do not place the art in context. Even seeing a large group of images created by the same artist gives the viewer an understanding of the hidden meanings, but this is as difficult to find as the images which include source materials and text. The Web first reflects the commercial sense of the current art world, and artists are sadly behind in recognizing that at last the power to present art as they would like is totally in their hands. To be sure, some artists have more access to Web sites than others, but even considering the large numbers of artists who do have access, the results are disappointing.

There are, however, some interesting sites which use the Web as an extension of the traditional exhibition space without duplicating it. Philip Coman, a photographer, uses the juxtapositioning of image and text in his site (<http://www.interlog.com/~filphoto/page33.html>) to move us past just images and explanatory information, into a space where the visual artist is able to communicate more of his own internal visions, simply by his organization of the site. Eric Morris, an artist in Sweden, uses his site (<http://www.galleries.se/room3.html>) to give the viewer an overview of his work, which at first glance does not seem extraordinary. The global overview of his body of work however, with some explanatory information, gives us an appreciation of how serious this artist is, even if his particular painting style is more traditional.

Some sites have been created only to show the work of artists, and do so in a context that gives more than price information alone. One of these, Dotcomgallery (<http://www.dotcomgallery.com/art/artists/index.html>) shows works by a wide variety of computer artists, presenting more contextual information than one would normally find in an exhibition, and including a page layout that makes connections easy. The site that ArtNetWeb created for the CODE show last year at Ricco/Maresca in New York, (<http://artnetweb.com/artnetweb/gallery/code/home.html>) goes beyond attempting to simply replicate the exhibition itself. In the case of several of the CODE artists, the background information available on the Web was not as readily available at the exhibition itself. My own site ([http://www.uvm.edu/~crubin/rubin\\_images.html](http://www.uvm.edu/~crubin/rubin_images.html)) includes samples of the sources images which were the foundation of the images.

In brief, the time has come for artists to go beyond the idea of stand alone object. The Web has the potential to become the vehicle for habituating the viewing public to the idea that the stand alone precious art object must become a thing of the past. The ultimate alternative exhibition space has been given to us, and it is time to begin to utilize it to create a new open culture of viewing.