

WEB ART IN PHYSICAL SPACES

A talk given at the Tribes Gallery, New York City, 2001

In his 12/28 predictions for 2001, William Safire (whom I will never quote again) predicted that the continued southward trend of the economy would be called, not Bush's recession or Clinton's, but "the long soft landing."

The long soft landing is a perfect title for what I am about to say.

In 1995/96 a young architect, Laurel Wilson, made a proposal to the Turbulence web site. She wanted to break out of Netscape's flat format, which she described as a "shopping catalogue," and create a three dimensional "gallery space"-- a public space where anyone could put their work, and where the works could exist as they do in real space.

Wilson imagined a kind of 3-D Netscape, a counterpoint to the page.

1995, as we now all know, was a period in the life of the web comparable to classical antiquity, and Wilson, like many others, discovered that implementing her idea at this time was like trying to cook with the ingredients missing. And so instead of taking a very big step, she took a small one and embedded 3-D structures in her pages so that the user could be in two spaces at once--in Netscape's flatlands and in the VRML world.

I find Laurel's proposal interesting on several counts, two of which I'll mention:

First and most obviously: produced in the once upon a time of web art, it dreamed an electronic space for artwork.

And second: the space it dreamed comprised a three-dimensional way of showing work, something which, as she said, is easy to do in the real world and very difficult to do in the mathematical world.

Today, of course, there are online works created by artists, where users can draw, paint, work together or separately (Andy Deck); and there are ways of uploading works to sites, where the intent is to aggregate and exhibit (Rhizome).

Nothing yet, to my knowledge, fully realizes Wilson's idea. We seem primarily mired in the flatlands still.

In the interim, of course -- between the time of Wilson's work and today -- other directions have been mapped; the long soft landing of work created for the Web medium

on the almost totally unprepared runways of traditional institutional spaces is one of them.

One can think of this mapping, which may or may not be universal, as a betrayal of Web art's original and accidental attack on institutional art.

Or, as Marc Voge recently suggested in his writing on Web Project 8, you can consider it "a vindication of the Internet...an invitation" for artists to get together.

It doesn't really matter. In the end, the affability of artists and their desire to be represented in the real world and in a physical place does not change the nature of the work. Or the fact that the work renders the physical art institution unnecessary. Web art does not need the physical institution. Web artists do. And arts institutions, eager to be a part of the latest and (for the time) sexiest movement about, want it too. In 2000, the needs of the artists and the anxiety of the art institutions coincided.

Giving us exhibits of web art in physical spaces.

Is this one?

For me the Tribes exhibit is for the most part an exhibit of artifacts of web or net art. And I would distinguish it from the shows like the ones recently curated at the Moving Image Gallery, where the original work remains more or less intact while staged or framed in a way for the physical space. And where the physical space itself is modified, if only by closing out the light, to provide a better landing place for virtual descendents.

I was invited to curate one of these shows, and in the process entered into a prolonged discussion with the artists on what they thought about introducing their Web work into a physical space. (And here I would like to say that I think the artists who show in physical spaces need to be involved in this discussion.)

The two artists I'm going to talk about are Diane Bertolo, and Angie Eng. Annette Weintraub was also a part of the show.

For those who don't know the work, "channelUntitled" purports to tune in to the specters that haunt technology and to provide a channel to air their messages. In the computer section -- there are three sections: radio, computer and telephone -- in the computer section you can engage with a machine-like figure who immediately announces that he has a message for you, thus engaging you in a conversation with 'spirits'.

Both in content and in form channelUntitled reflects the loss of body in the telecommunications environment. It is in Diane's words a work about "absence and loss."

Diane felt strongly that the work should not be presented as an installation in a physical space. In fact had it not been for an accidental misunderstanding between us, she probably would not have participated in the show at all. "channelUntitled," she said, "is already a site specific work" and its site is the Internet. It was never intended to be part of the physical world.

Fortunately her objections were not to showing it in a gallery space, but to translating it into an installation.

And so she showed it "as is," using a laptop with an Internet connection. To this she added what she called "physical evidence," computer printouts of the disembodied voices of users, i.e. the logged texts users had typed into the site since the work went online. These hung from the ceiling behind the computer.

It was a simple and effective presentation. It worked. True to its participatory nature, it invited and was successful in attracting individual interaction in a public space. And because of this it inspired the same closeness or sense of intimacy it has online.

Angie Eng took a very different tack. Empty Velocity is about being "displaced." In her words, "it's about being in two places at the same time or feeling that you're really somewhere else, when you're actually physically in this place...it's about ubiquity, having the feeling that you ARE in many places at the same time."

Like Diane's work, Empty Velocity was not intended for a public setting. And so Angie, who is a video artist and has done a number of video installations, placed the emphasis -- not on the conceptual part of her work, not on the work you would see online (although of course that was there -- but on shaping the way the audience would experience it: Her installation was more of a stage set for the work: there were chairs for users to sit on to view the work; there were pedestals with earphones attached that users could put on to listen to the sound. There was a location for the navigator. There were pictures on the wall and arrows on the floor if you chose to walk around. In discussion, Angie advanced her idea that Internet art becomes performative when displayed in a public or community context. Her interest became in watching how people experienced the work, and in observing how the user/navigator became a performer with an audience.

Or, in other words, her installation defined another kind of "participation," to which she was the audience.

The current exhibit, here at the Tribes gallery, is yet another thing. Looking at it I found that what interested me most was the physicality of the works.

Take Tina LaPorta's work, which I happen to like a great deal: big thick-paneled reproductions of two images from her work distance. And by their side, a silver CD player attached to the wall with aluminum straps!

The opposite of its original? I see it as part of a continuum or progression, one that moves from: a) a stream of simultaneous online video and chat; to b) organized documentation--the web work, distance, which is comprised of digital photographs of the real-time interaction, still in virtual space and made visible by the users click; to c) two photographic images each printed on its own thick mount and fixed to a real wall at 285 3rd Street, Manhattan. The Netscape frame, the hiss and crackle of the sound are reminiscent of an earlier streamed interaction, but what we have now is manageable physicality: objectness.

Or Yael Kanarek's prints: images -- originally made visible on the computer screen by the click of a mouse -- here crystallized back into a familiar mold: a saleable gallery print.

What's interesting here is that with each new stage in the work's descent, the fluidity of the initial interaction diminishes; the process becomes more fixed, its scope more limited. It solidifies into something familiar, and looking or listening, our interaction is mental, only minimally physical.

Ok that's pretty much it from me. We do what we do, which is as it should be. My own preference is for real-time interaction -- the fluidity of process, the way things transpose or transmute between different states to become something other.

To paraphrase Annette Weintraub, the computer has the capacity to kind of suck in all kinds of media and transform them and spit them out again as something else, so that the web becomes this kind of omni-media where elements of film, of sound, of animation exist. And where work need not be any one of these things but all of them.

Process can open up aesthetically rewarding possibilities, suggest new horizons and make possible fusions that, in my opinion, more nearly mirror our contemporary world than any work of the past.