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John Snavelly's "WhoWhatWhenAir" is an alluring, breathing tangle of tubular valves that can be manipulated by the viewer -- in the gallery or online. (The Boston Globe)

GALLERIES

## Rapt in a fine Web of interactive art

The Boston Globe

### Internet-based exhibition is a virtual stunner

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | December 28, 2006

Looking at art on the Internet can't compare to seeing it in person, but what if the art is Internet-based? The Boston group Turbulence has been promoting Internet art for a decade; it sponsors New England Initiative, a competition that awards a commission and an exhibition in real space, as well as on the Web.

"New England Initiative II" can be seen live at Art Interactive, and that's still the best way to view it. You can also check it out virtually at [turbulence.org/ne2/awards.html](http://turbulence.org/ne2/awards.html).

The three works are bigger and more engrossing in the gallery than they are on a personal computer. This is particularly true of John Snavelly's "WhoWhatWhenAir," a giant tangle of pneumatic valves that looks like a squid with 16 left feet; it can't move without tripping over itself. Each of those long, black tubular valves, ordinarily used in industrial settings, can pull up to a ton. The viewer -- either in the gallery or remotely from home -- can control the way in which the valves expand and contract, and choreograph the

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sculpture's movements.

Most alluring, the piece breathes as it moves. Unfortunately, Snavely has chosen not to hide any of the trappings of his piece. He suspends the sculpture across ladders; computer cables litter the floor behind it. I wish he'd masked all the workings of "WhoWhatWhenAir." It would have conjured a daunting mechanical beast.

Brooke A. Knight's "Cell Tagging" deploys wireless technology to poignantly explore the psychology of landscape. Using your cellphone, you can program in a zip code, and an aerial map appears on screen. You can draw over the map by pushing your phone's keys, virtually "tagging" it like a graffiti artist, and leave an audio message. I dialed up the zip code of my childhood home. There's an archive of the tags -- Etch A Sketch -style markings over aerial views, with audio -- showing that most people circle or point to places that have personal meaning.

The Mobius Artists Group offers up "Variations VII: Fishnet," which takes off from a John Cage composition for which he utilized sounds available at the time of performance, such as open phone lines, radios, and household appliances. Mobius members Margaret Bellafiore , Lewis Gesner , Lawrence Johnson, David P. Miller, and Tom Plsek created a computer program that culls audio and visual material from the Web to create a constantly shifting collage on screen. You can also input text from home.

The visual collage is lush, images and words shifting over what looks like a grid or map. I found the audio at the gallery -- snippets of cellphone calls and radio broadcasts -- more interesting than online, where I just got a deafening buzz. This piece, though, is more about the process than the product. "Fishnet" is a natural progression from Cage's work, an effective homage, and like a lot of what Cage did, it's clever but off-putting.

#### Unexpected turns

Second Gallery usually specializes in installation art and new media, so "Wilderland," its drawing show, is unexpected. Most of the artists are young; some aren't even out of college. This venue seems to be turning into the place you go to see what will happen next, and there's a lot of nervy, thoughtful work -- and some flat-out fumbles -- in "Wilderland."

Standouts include Anna Trzaska , who makes a wonderful variety of marks in her brooding, dreamy industrial landscapes, and Brian Willmont , whose drawings, packed with colorful, ramshackle shelters, take on history and the American West. Zoe Wright's intricately constructed but spare works blend abstraction, everyday objects, and collage into odd emotional hothouses.

Many of the artists here share a self-consciously awkward, outsider-art aesthetic that is scruffy, obsessive, and fantastical. They're all like the kid in the back of the classroom, scribbling on his notebook, oblivious to what's going on around him. Much of what they're making feels inchoate (indeed, the best of it is; the stuff that isn't has a wise-cracking quality) but also focused and fertile. We just have to watch and see what grows.

#### Black-and-white world

Thoughtful, prolific silhouette artist Randal Thurston has completed his first public art project, the Yerxa Road Underpass in North Cambridge, and you have to wonder why he hasn't been doing it all along. Thurston specializes in ornate networks of images, mythic and organic, weaving over vast wall spaces. He usually works in paper; here he's working in steel, although you can see paper versions, mockups, and other pieces at the Cambridge Arts Council Gallery.

What used to be a dark, forbidding, and damp tunnel now beckons. It's filled with light. Thurston has mounted black steel silhouettes of birds wheeling into

the tunnel; passersby may feel as if they have startled a flock of ravens to flight.

Thurston frames the entrances with the dark outlines of winter tree branches. Inside, black-and-white tiles with silhouettes of winged insects swarm toward the center. The piece is called "The Night Garden." It sweetly evokes creatures of the dark, the beating heart of winter, and the quiet vibrations of downtime.■

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