

On the Internet: Turbulence and 1001 Nights of Networked Performance

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Networked performance is a growing area of art/tech practice on the Internet. Although it has a long history, which includes telecommunication artists and activists working with computers and satellites from the 1970s onward, it has expanded exponentially alongside the Internet's development. Consequently, performance is now a major mode of media art, enabled by the Web. New forms of performance art have burgeoned, and Turbulence has been pivotal in enabling and archiving many of the groundbreaking networked performance artworks.

Turbulence

Turbulence (<http://turbulence.org>) is one of the first sites to support and promote net art (that is, art located on the Internet, and which often explores the Internet as its medium). Two artists run the site: Helen Thorington, who launched it in 1996, and Jo-Anne Green, who joined her in 2002. In its 11 years of existence, Turbulence has commissioned and supported more than 120 works of art. We interviewed Thorington and Green about the site's concerns, directions, and technical issues, and, in particu-

lar, their work with networked performance.

To begin, we asked whether changing technology was making certain works no longer viable for a Web site such as Turbulence. Thorington explained that only three works on the site no longer function. One, from 1996, uses a 3D application that's no longer available and doesn't work with newer browsers and operating systems. Another, from 1997, requires that the user's machine be able to receive a MIDI file, a RealAudio stream, and a Flash animation at the same time. (In this case, the RealAudio player locks out other players from playing MIDI.) The third piece, from 1998, uses CosmoPlayer 2.0, which no longer exists.

Thorington expressed concern about the future of the work on the Turbulence site, saying that it would be sad if people remembered only the more successful artists, and forgot about the significance of the thousands whose contributions made the development of the field possible. According to Thorington, "To maintain this sense of the importance of the large number of creative people struggling to come to grips with the meaning of the Internet and its technologies, we must be able to see the work. And some of it is very good!"

Networked performance is a vibrant if broad area of art and technology practice on the Internet. Its parameters are still up for debate. Turbulence has a blog dedicated to discussing and defining "networked performance." The blog also provides links to artwork, conferences, and publications. As stated on the blog, it was initially designed "to chronicle current network-enabled practice, provide a wide-range of perspectives on issues and commonalities in existing work, and inform a conference" that Thorington, Green, and their colleague Michelle Riel hoped to organize.

Green explained that the blog's parameters continue to change. "The evolution of the cate-

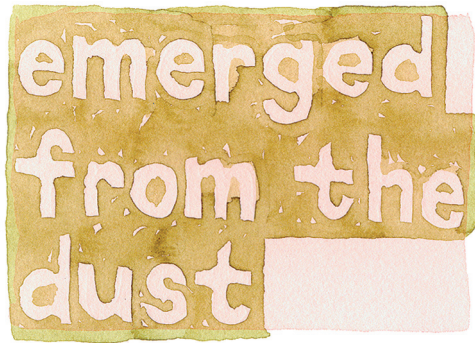
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Editor's Note

In this issue, Art Beat looks at networked performance, featuring Turbulence, a net art portal. Turbulence's Helen Thorington and Jo-Anne Green discuss their blog, Networked Performance, which provides an extensive archive of networked performances. We also profile performance artist Barbara Campbell's *1001 Nights Cast*, a durational networked performance project. Multimedia researchers interested in Web 2.0 might want to help develop a template or standard that lets performance artists share and search their work on the Web. Such work could also ensure that certain software, when it fades away, is translatable or included in new versions of software so that viewing art isn't contingent on outdated file formats.

—Maria Miranda

Figure 1. The prompt for one of the stories that Barbara Campbell performs in *1001 Nights Cast*. (Image courtesy of Barbara Campbell and Turbulence, © 2007.)



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gories (we're still adding them) and the scope of the blog over time in effect 'define' networked performance. We started a list of categories and their definitions on the "About" page, but no one has had the time to keep it up. Plus there's some uncertainty in both our minds about whether these categories have value any longer, whether tags aren't just the best way to go at this time."

Green continued, "As Helen is always saying, where do you put an American semitropical climbing Philodendron that functions as an instrument in a musical ensemble? Or a glass tumbler that lights up when a distant friend or lover drinks from it? It's almost impossible to assign this new work to traditional categories, or to invent categories that can hold them."

Green also explained problems with spam: "We really wanted the blog to be a forum for discussion, but after a few months, we had to close the comments section because of spam. Our limited financial resources and time have meant that we haven't been able to upgrade to a format that is more secure. Although this will change within the next few months—because the blog will be ported into Word Press (which is open source)—visitors have become accustomed to merely reading it rather than interacting with it."

Meanwhile, the blog has become a valuable resource for people all over the world, receiving almost 3,000 visits a day. In addition, "many of its posts get reblogged on other popular sites." Green also noted, "Whereas I had to browse or search for most of the content initially, users now send me projects and announcements. When 'Googled,' [the projects] are often found on Networked Performance before their own Web sites. The blog has increased traffic to the Turbulence archive as well." Green pointed out that an increasing number of artists now describe their work as networked performance, which "wasn't a term as widely used prior to the blog."

The Networked Performance blog's success encouraged Thorington and Green to take on another blog, their recently launched Networked Music Review (NMR; see http://turbulence.org/networked_music_review).

In addition to the blog, networked performance has become a crucial part of Turbulence's activities. Turbulence's commissioning and archiving work has contributed to this form's growth. Its expansion attests to a growing interest in "liveness" in technology-enabled art forms. Here ephemerality, always an issue and an interest for performance, is doubly inflected. Says Green, "We've moved toward commissioning more performative works recently; works that are ephemeral not because of failing technologies but because they are durational, live for specified periods of time."

Examples of such projects include

- "IN Network" (see <http://turbulence.org/Works/innetwork>) by Michael Mandiberg and Julia Steinmetz, which was performed for one month;
- "Ten-Sided" by Francis Hwang and his colleagues (see <http://turbulence.org/Works/ten-sided>), which ran for three months; and
- "Nothing Happens: A Performance in Three Acts" by Nurit Bar-Shai, Zachary Lieberman, and Rich Miller (see <http://turbulence.org/works/nothingHappens>), which was live for three weeks. All that remains is an archive of what happened.

According to Green, "Somehow, the thought of losing these pieces isn't as disturbing to me as some of the others, which are still very much alive and meant to be."

1001 Nights Cast

In a faraway land a gentle man dies. His bride is bereft. She travels across continents looking for a reason to keep living. Every night at sunset she is greeted by a stranger who gives her a story to heal her heart and continue with her journey. She does so for 1001 nights.

So opens performance artist Barbara Campbell's *1001 Nights Cast* (see <http://1001.net.au>), a networked performance project featured on Turbulence's networked performance blog and one of the most visited sites. The title plays with the original *Tales from 1001 Nights (The Arabian Nights)* and with the fact that the performance's net cast involves 1001 storytellers, who submit

their stories online for Barbara to perform each night (see Figure 1). This “durational performance” began on 21 June 2005 and will continue until 18 March 2008.

Each morning Campbell looks through newspaper reports about events in the Middle East to find several word prompts, which she paints and posts online, inviting people to write their own story (no more than 1001 words). They have all day to write the story and post it on the site a few hours before sunset local time, wherever Campbell is. Campbell chooses one of the stories (which she has access to once they’ve been submitted) and reworks it for a 5-minute performance, which she does live for the webcam. Only her mouth is visible, giving prominence to the voicing that storytelling involves. The webcast opens with a view of Campbell’s tongue, pierced and wounded like her heart. Her tongue stud signals the number of the day and performance.

With the death of a loved one as its point of departure, *1001 Nights Cast* makes a deliberate play with ephemerality. The performances can only be viewed once, live, as they’re happening. For the bride, who remained alive, time and tim-

ing are critical, markers of that liveness. So the webcast always occurs at a specific time. Campbell travels the globe so that this live storytelling at sunset can involve writers (and viewers) in different time zones. Having spent the southern summer in Australia, Campbell is currently spending the northern summer in the US and Europe.

Although the performance is ephemeral, the written stories remain archived on the site, which was designed and enabled by the House of Laudanum.

1001 Nights, like many other networked performance artworks on Turbulence, exemplifies how performance and performance artists are moving into networked environments. *1001 Nights Cast* and other works featured on the Turbulence blog and portal highlight the specific collaborative possibilities of networked art and show how the social software of Web 2.0 has allowed artists to explore the possibilities of performance and connection. **MM**

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