

Net Aesthetics 2.0 at New Museum Theater

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Hunkered over their laptops, Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, Tim Whidden, Tom Moody, Petra Cortright, and Damon Zucconi did some last-minute surfing. The basement auditorium at New York's New Museum was packed with scrawney bespectacled young people on Friday night. We had come for the exciting potential of the Rhizome-hosted panel discussion on internet art, "Net Aesthetics 2.0."

A thin, diffident woman clutching a microphone in both hands greeted us. Lauren Cornell, director of Rhizome, gave a brief history of the organization and acknowledged Internet Week, tactfully mentioning its organizers were in the audience.

Ms. Cornell introduced the event's moderator, Ed Halter, a Rhizome editor. This peculiar man emerged wearing an anachronistic suit and thick black-rimmed glasses, looking altogether cartoonish. Mr. Halter cued the panelists' presentations. Some were mercifully brief and showed a careful selection of work to establish a sense of their style for the uninitiated – presumably the minority in this audience. Others seized the opportunity and large screen projection time to present their entire portfolios, perhaps aware that the uninitiated minority in this audience was constituted of Internet Week organizers, potential buyers, donors, and the like. The latter, notably the older members of the panel with years' experience in the business of art, depicted various examples of tangible works, works for sale, and works sold and commissioned. The younger speakers seemed to have little regard for these issues, having presented purely digital two-dimensional work intended for free display within the web browser.

The work of group blogs, or "surfing clubs," was brought up. Nasty Nets, Double Happiness, and Spirit Surfers were mentioned. It would have been great to hear about the role these net art collectives play in the development of our panelists' work, but Tim did his best to bitterly dismiss the entire topic.

The moderator's questions hardly scratched the surface of what's actually going on in the broad, exciting territory of what's commonly referred to as net art. Talk stagnated over the net art of old. Panelists fell into the largely self-indulgent time wasting trap of referencing their own work. While the history is certainly important, no attention was paid the present or potential future of things.

Perhaps there wasn't time to accommodate a fair debate, but Mr. Halter's compounded laziness, apathy, and spectatorial tone did nothing to instigate the dialogue we came to hear. He seemed almost as enamored of Tim's essentially meaningless "Simple Net Art Diagram" as Tim did. Halter's interview offered no follow-up, and he permitted panelists to ramble aimlessly. Clarity was nowhere in sight.

There was a depressing shortage of attention paid the topic of presentation, although it was touched on. This problem extends beyond inevitable technical issues affecting public terminals like browsers locking up and systems crashing. These setbacks can be addressed at minimal cost, with minimal creative thinking. The important questions were not even asked. *Does work designed for display within the frame of a web browser have any place in a gallery setting? Do we pay museum attendance to surf the web? Can't the New Museum do better than a kiosk?* Panel members seemed to agree that

responsibility is placed on the artist – not the curator or institution – for matters of presentation. If this is the case, we must consider the many possibilities for adapting interactive web-based work for physical gallery space.

The New Museum is a remarkable place. It offers its vast white walls as an enormous canvas for any artist invited – and a forum wherein work may eventually break the frame of a web browser.

Like any gallery or performance venue, the room is intended for the artists' transformation. It would be wonderful to set foot in a truly interactive space dedicated to innovative interactive work. There is no shortage of open source technology available to make this a reality on a technical level. But even if we aren't programmers or scientists – even if we have no desire to employ the latest multimedia techniques in adapting web-based work for the gallery – aren't artists supposed to be creative? Let's work a little harder. It's time to think beyond the kiosk.

Another topic lost on the panel came from a profound comment of Damon's. He defined the internet as a medium that works across media. Even more exciting than the potential for innovation in the traditional gallery setting is the internet's effect on all other forms. Does the internet necessarily impart its exponentially reproductive expansion within other media, or does it contaminate?

Completely absent from the discussion was the fundamental concept of the personal computer as viewing device. The majority of the work discussed at Net Aesthetics 2.0 is designed for presentation within a web browser, and is often viewed in the ultimate comfort of one's home, at extremely close range, producing effects which would be impossible in a formal setting.

We invite these things into our homes via the internet. The connections we develop with this type of work become deeply personal. We are allowed, even encouraged, to share profound intimacy with it. What could be more intimate than experiencing – even interacting with – a work of art while in bed? The success of internet art relies on our direct personal connection with it. Net art is tightening our emotional bond with the computer, driving our codependence toward the inevitable.