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### **If Picasso Were A Programmer**

Susan Delson, Best of The Web

*Forget paintbrushes and chisels. Today's hottest new art tools are XML and Java.*

Type a Web site URL—any URL—into "FEED", an online artwork by Mark Napier (<http://www.potatoland.org/>). Immediately the screen's nine windows jump into action. Text zooms by at unreadable speed. Colors careen through a grid of tiny squares. A horizontal graph whips up three-color spikes like a demonic EKG. Abruptly, the action ceases for a moment; the screen radiates an almost meditative calm. And then it all starts again, until the entire Web site has been processed. Stripping away what Napier calls the "distracting veneer of content," "Feed" turns Web data into a dizzying display of graphical activity—part mathematical algorithm, part Jackson Pollock.

This is not your mother's over-the-couch art. Napier's "antibrowser" is just one example of a new type of visual expression: digital, dynamic and made specifically for the Internet. Some works, like "Feed," reshape live data from the Web. Others use telerebotics, Flash animation and Web browsers the way Leonardo daVinci used paint and charcoal. As varied as the technologies that produce it, online art is flourishing. This year it hit the museum scene, big-time, and now galleries are trying to figure out how to sell it.

This spring saw the rollout of major Net art exhibitions on both coasts, from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's 010101: Art in Technological Times to the Whitney Museum of American Art's recent Data Dynamics. New York's Museum of Modern Art, London's Tate Britain and even the staid Smithsonian are getting into the act. Meanwhile, long-running digital culture sites like Rhizome.org and Turbulence.org act as incubators for this high-tech art. (For a list of sites, see *Is It Art Yet?*)

So, online art's out there. But...is it art? For the people who make it, the answer is indisputably yes. "My criteria for art is that it's beautiful and that it changes the way you see the world," says Martin Wattenberg, whose works are featured on several museum sites. "To my mind, this art is both."

But those of us who don't program software might not be so sure. Net art is less than a decade old, and even its most ardent champions wouldn't describe it as a mature medium. Photography took more than half a century to be taken seriously as a fine art form. Video spent years on the countercultural fringes before reaching the museum gallery. By comparison, online art is still in its formative stages. Observes Wattenberg, who has worked visualizing financial data for SmartMoney.com since 1996, "If Net art were a company, right now would be a couple of months before the IPO."

For the artists that's part of the appeal. But it also means that the idea behind a work can sometimes be more compelling than what actually appears on the screen. And for viewers without a thorough grounding in technology—or advanced math—the most innovative visual programs can seem like little more than high-end screensavers.

But Web art is much more than that. Its most striking difference from traditional art is the more active role of the viewer—or should we say, user—whose input is often essential to completing the work. Take "Apartment," a work by Wattenberg and Marek Walczak. As users type their thoughts into the computer, the program translates their words into blueprints for individual apartments—the more talk about dreams and sex, for instance, the bigger the bedroom. The basic set-up couldn't be simpler: no user, no art.

You might get used to interacting with your art. But will you want to collect this stuff? Art dealers call Net art a tough sell. "People love objects," explains gallery owner Sandra Gering, who first worked with online art back in the mid-1990s. This art is only accessible to those with a computer and a Web connection.

For the time being at least, works that embed Net art in physical installations fare considerably better in the marketplace. While computer code is the core of John F. Simon's art, Gering sells his work as sculptural objects—software, computer and screen in a complete package. And in a concept borrowed from printmaking (and video art), she issues them in limited editions of a dozen or less—all of which have sold out, at prices ranging from \$20,000 to \$50,000. If the software crashes, the collector simply ships the piece back to the gallery for a quick fix by Simon.

One collector, New Jersey physician John Burger, who's bought all five editions to date, never even owned a personal computer. For him, Simon's works are abstract art—"so intelligent, so creative, so unlike anything I'd ever seen"—and the digital aspect is almost beside the point.

Other dealers bear out Gering's assessment: you need an object—a tangible thing—to sell. Julia Friedman's recently opened Chicago gallery handles sculptural pieces with Web elements, like Eduardo Kac's "Genesis," a work that incorporates live, eerily beautiful Webcam images of mutating bacteria.

But other sales models are emerging. Simon sells an unlimited edition of "Every Icon"—a work featured in last year's Whitney Biennial—on the Web for \$20, in a do-it-yourself download. So far, he's moved about 90 of them, and sales have picked up since operations moved to an Amazon.com ZShop.

Netomat, an online application offering an "alternative browsing experience," has been available for free download at Netomat.net since June 1999. So far there have been 750,000 downloads. Now its developer, Maciej Wisniewski, has quit his post as an XML developer at IBM.com to convert his art project into an interactive e-mail client.

Michele Thursz, director of New York's Moving Image Gallery, is working with artists to sell shares in limited-access collecting communities. The collectors will share in the ongoing creative work of artist-designed Web sites, and in the sale of any digital prints or other objects that result. **Etoy**, a Net art group represented by New York's Postmasters Gallery, has already issued 640,000 shares in its digital collective, 15% of which are owned by collectors. Buyers even get signed collectible stock certificates emblazoned with the artwork. Even if **Etoy** art never appreciates, the certificates on your living room wall may still brighten your day.

Surprisingly, corporations and government agencies are buying into this untested art form. John Klima's Net-based work, "ecosystem," was commissioned by Zurich Capital Markets for the employees' lounge of its New York office. Converting individual world currencies into competing flocks of birds, "ecosystem" tracks currency fluctuations—which directly affect the well-being of each flock—and global weather, both in real time. Cost: \$14,000 and counting. And that doesn't include the extra \$14,000 that Zurich spent for a 50-inch gas-plasma monitor to display it all on.

Another Klima work, "Earth," has been leased for \$1,000 a year by the National Library of Medicine for its Bethesda, Md. building. "You license it like Windows 98," the artist notes. "At the end of 18 months, they'll still own the software, but there are no more updates or tech support."

Artist Wattenberg is also looking to design custom-interface art for corporate Web sites. "I can see a corporation commissioning me to design a beautiful front end," he says, "like the big, impressive sculpture in the front lobby." With Rhizome.org as the producer, Wattenberg is currently developing an interface for NASA's art collection on the Web, expected to launch by early 2002.

It's not surprising that Web-based art dealers, like Eyestorm.com, are getting into this market. The U.K.-based company, which began selling digital photography online in December 1999, now has a dozen digital art projects in the pipeline, half of which should launch this fall. Like other dealers, Eyestorm is looking at a wide range of sales strategies, from corporate commissions to limited-edition CD-ROMs and DVDs to micropayments on a pay-per-view basis.

Lest you think the medium is pausing to catch its breath, rest assured—the envelope is still being pushed. Currently in the works: at least one show of art created for pagers, cell phones and PDAs. Which begs the question, how do you prevent illegal copying when art is being beamed from cell phone to cell phone?