

**Temporal Windows and Transient Identities:
An Examination of Emerging Internet Art**

The internet is more than just code and electricity. It is a web of human relationships transcending geographic location. People can engage with other individuals and cultures from the comfort of their own home (Donati and Prado 437). Internet has a unique appeal that sets it apart from visual and audio media like magazines and movies—you can influence and interact with the internet. You can tour distant continents and act out your wildest fantasy from your easy chair (Binkley 108). Such freedom does not come without certain dangers and complications. Many internet critics warn of such dangers including the colonial nature of the internet, loss of identity and privacy, and issues of disembodiment. Internet artists are beginning to explore these issues in their work and some provide clarity and critique of the internet and the society in which we live.

Visual-interactive-real-time encounters with people and places on the other side of the globe are not possible in any media other than the internet. Real time images that people can alter and interact with create a temporal experience that alters their perception of others as well as space itself. Luisa Donati and Gilbertto Prado point out in their essay “Artistic Environments of Telepresence” point out that this transglobal movement of the mind through the internet creates the effect of movement through space while time is maintained. The authors go on to state this effect allows the individual to “coexist in virtual and real space” (Donati and Prado 437).

Real time images create a “presence” between both the sender and receiver of information. Donati and Prado describe this interaction:

The images captured in real time unfold like “temporal windows,” rendering virtual the interventions of users who can observe, interact, move and share other distinct “realities,” regardless of the physical distances or geographic location but subjected to the speed of the connections for data transmission.

(Donati and Prado 438)

The concept of “temporal windows” existing on the internet is an important one to consider when discussing the developing relationship between artist and viewer online. Artists are capable of creating intimate dialog and private experience with a global audience.

One example of such a real time experience is the JenniCam produced by twenty-one year old Jennifer Ringley in 1996. Ringley set up a camera in her college dorm room and broadcasted her life across the World Wide Web un-edited twenty-four hours a day. The website launched people into a frenzy of questions including: what could they expect to see on the JenniCam?; will it be censored?; is it pornography if she is naked in the room?; Ringley willingly answered the questions. The world would see everything uncensored and if she was nude it was up to the viewer to decide if it was pornographic or not (Burgin 77). People wanted to watch and she was willing to expose all to the world.

When asked, “Why are you giving up your privacy like this?” Ringley said, “I don’t feel I’m giving up my privacy. Just because people can see me doesn’t mean it affects me. I’m still alone in my room, no matter what.” Her answer could be considered

naïve (if not ignorant) and may be due in part to the relative newness of the internet in the mid-nineties. Later, Ringley would receive threatening e-mails demanding that she strip for the camera (Burgin 78). She could not maintain that she was completely unaffected by the presence of the camera and those who watched her. When she moved out of her college dormitory the JenniCam was only briefly offline. Ringley reinstalled the camera in her new apartment. When asked why she decided to continue to share her private life with the world she said that she “was lonely without the camera” (Burgin 80).

Ringley’s attachment to the “presence” of the camera and the sea of unknown people on the receiving end of her broadcast is a testament to claims of Donati and Prado. We look through the computer screen as if it were a window into the world of others. We can feel their presence as their image moves in real time across the screen and they can feel our eyes move with them, and when we can interact with others in real time we can temporally transport ourselves to other places.

Even the terminology of computers and the internet reinforce the idea of the screen as a window. Macintosh operating system requires you to “opening windows” and Microsoft runs on the Windows interface. Similarly, the JenniCam website gave the viewer the option to open a “remote window” which would launch a video box that would remain open while the viewer visited other sites and performed other tasks on the computer.

What we can take from the JenniCam scenario is an understanding of the affect that both viewer and viewed have on one another on the internet. Comparisons of the internet to a window to the world also become more evident through this case. How different is the average internet user from Jennifer Ringley? A computer has a certain

presence in a room and I must admit that I too feel isolated when I am without an internet connect. Once we have established that the internet does indeed have a real affect on privacy, identity, and relationships we can begin to discuss the significance of artists have begun to create a dialog on and about the internet.

As early as 1993 ARTnews had a cover story announcing that, “computers are transforming the way images are made, objects are studied, and visitors view pictures” (Dery 1993). In some ways it was easier then than it is now to talk about the computers impact on life and art. Today we are like fish swimming in the international waters of the internet and we no longer aware of the water surrounding us. We have become so immersed in the norms of internet culture that it is difficult to see it clearly and objectively. Internet artists seek to bring forth the realities of the online world. At this juncture it might be useful to explore what exactly is and is not internet art and how internet art came into being before we can fully appreciate their commentary on the internet and society.

Artists had the unique opportunity to shape the Internet as a medium during its inception. In 1995 eight-percent of all websites were created by artists who recognized the creative potential for the medium (Ippilito 485). As time has progressed it seems like some artist have continued making art which glorifies the potential of the internet. Others have chosen to use the internet as a forum to discuss cultural concerns.

Typing “internet art” or “visual art” into an internet search engine will not necessarily take you to the internet art discussed in this paper. Instead, your search may return a myriad of online art outlets, traditional artists’ personal WebPages, or museum listings. The absence of the internet art that we are discussing may be due to Internet art’s

tendency to reside outside the traditional art world's domain (Ippilito 485). Since Internet art works outside the framework of traditional art institutions—galleries, print magazines, and museums—it is not bound to their conventions or audience. An advantage of this is that Internet art is capable of drawing a more diverse audience and is able to innovate more freely than institutionalized art (Ippilito 486).

It is important to consider that internet art is not merely a means by which traditional art forms may be proliferated and reproduced. The most effective Internet art exploits the inherent nature of the internet itself. It should not try to be something it is not (Ippilito 485). Film, for example, benefits most from being seen in high quality and in its intended setting. Paintings similarly benefit from being seen not online but in person. Thus internet art is also best read when experienced online in its original context.

In many ways the internet is an exclusive club for those with the means to access it and obtain a computer. However, Internet art is in some ways more affordable and accessible than traditional art forms. For example an artist can much more easily afford an iMac than a large canvas stretcher and oil paints. Additionally, artists are much more likely to have their art seen by the public online than in gallery. Not only is the internet not as exclusive as a gallery but also it reaches a much larger global audience (Ippilito 486).

The seriality and transient nature of internet art also sets it apart from its print and filmic counterparts. A video clip, image, or text file can be reproduced and copied throughout the internet to an infinite number of websites and formats. There is no guarantee that a video will not be fragmented into image stills, an image will not be altered by another internet artist, or that text will not also be altered (Ippilito 486). This is very

unlike conventional art practices. It would be simply blasphemous to physically alter a Jackson Pollock painting or to cut portions out of a copy of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*.

Although some internet art requires extensive knowledge of computer programming, a large portion of internet art is accessible to those with only moderate knowledge of internet technology. One example of highly involved internet programming is Stelarc's Cyborg bodies. Stelarc, an Australian online performance artist, endeavors to extend the possibilities of the human body with technology. He creates complex mechanical artificial limbs whose movements are transmitted and in some cases remotely controlled over the internet (Atrzori and Woolford 1998). By contrast, Keith Townsend Obadike's eBay piece, which I will discuss in greater length later in the paper, by contrast only required a rudimentary knowledge of how eBay works (Ippilito 486).

Additionally, skilled design is not enough to qualify as Internet art. There are many highly experienced website designers who can produce visually appealing slick and flashy websites. Internet artists do more than design; they use design conventions to achieve alternate goals. Jon Ippolito comments on this in his essay "Ten Myths of Internet Art":

Design creates a matrix of expectations into which the artist throws wrenches. Just as a painter plays off pictorial design, a Net artist may play off software design. Design is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for art (Ippilito 486). However, I do not believe that design is always a necessary part of Net art as witnessed by much of the performancesque and guerilla like Net art which uses and manipulates preexisting designs and interfaces. This brings me to a very important divide in the kind

of internet art that exists. There is the internet art in which artists develop their own interfaces and designs and then there is the internet art which works within the realm of preexisting internet platforms.

The first categorization is comprised of artists who create in much the same way a traditional painter or sculptor might create. They begin with materials, an interface, and knowledge of programming and from there they develop a dialog with design and create an engaging visual and/or audio experience. These works have an air of “genius” about them as the artists have manipulated from ephemeral code into a work of art. This kind of internet art is most likely what Ippolito had in mind when he described the difference between design and internet art. A good example of what he may have been referring to might be his own online artwork. In Fair e-Tales he collaborates with Joline Blais and Keith Frank, on the website www.three.org, to create an interactive literary experience. Internet design is used to draw the viewer into the world of the text and design through conventions of clicking on text in the hope that it will take you to the next level within the world of the webpage. They do not disappoint.

By contrast there are internet artists who do not create original framework, but instead choose to use and manipulate preexisting designs and interfaces. These artists could be characterized as the performance artists of the internet and the graffiti artists of the internet. Their methods are in some ways guerilla like in nature because they do not operate within the artists norm of even the internet and their art can appear unexpectedly anywhere on the web.

Grafik Dynamo created by Kate Armstrong and Michael Tippett’s collects data from across the internet and compiles it into a strange comic strip. Armstrong then adds

text that may or may not relate to the images. The viewer must then decide which images and text are meaningful and which are not. Internet users are accustomed to being required to sort out the visual content from digital trash (Andrews 2006). Pop-ups, advertisements, and misinformation litter the internet and complicate the online experience. *Grafik Dynamo* both recycles data from the internet and comments on the clutter of the internet but inviting the viewer to participate in an activity which they are familiar with. This is a great example of internet artists manipulating preexisting texts and images to create a dialog about the internet.

The former type of internet artists have a tendency to venerate the possibilities of the internet while the latter type of artists often function as cultural critics insofar as they use their art to comment on the forum in which they have chosen to appear as well as on society at large. Internet artists are able to create strong and engaging work in part because the internet user is invested in the online experience in a very real way. Their identities are present as they access the internet art and the artists are similarly present.

“I am not the set of limbs called the human body,” is an idea stated by René Descartes that is instrumental in discussing the ideas of identity and disembodied in cyberspace. Although one is not their body the body is an important referent for their identity and often the binary parts of ones self can overlap and even trade places. Cameron Bailey argues in his essay *Virtual Skin: Articulation Race in Cyberspace* that even though the physical self is not represented online the body still plays an important part in the “cyberidentity” (Bailey 1996).

It might be easy to believe that the disembodiment that occurs online might be liberating and beneficial to the individual, but this is not necessarily the case. The very

nature of the internet is exclusive and can be potentially damaging to the self. First, the majority of those who have the internet and set up its “netiquette” (as Bailey calls) it are white, middle class, young, and male. Many individuals from minority groups do not even have internet connections much less the means by which to own a computer. Additionally the format of the internet sets up a tension between self and others which is like any other communication system (Bailey 1996).

Art is a realm in which people can experience a type of out of body experience and we can mentally escape the confines of the body. Video games and cyberspace also offers this kind of escape, but one key difference between cyberspace and other escapist media is that the internet is fluid and ephemeral. Unlike traditional literary media the internet is constantly in flux and therefore the identity of the self can become lost; not just disembodied but dismantled.

An interesting dichotomy exists between the cyberenthusiast’s desire to be both embodied and disembodied at the same time. They want to create a new self while departing from their own identity. It is only logical that those who are defined by their body in negative ways would also like to do this. Women, gays and lesbians, as well as racial groups can pretend to be anyone on the internet. They can choose whether or not to share their identity and therefore may have more control than they might in a face-to-face communication. However, this is not entirely so. One can not completely depart from their body because it is an ever present referent behind the identity they construct for themselves online (Whittaker 1994).

An interesting idea brought up in Bailey’s essay is what I will call “cyberpassing”. African Americans have the ability to “pass” in such a convincing way

that bigots openly share in discourse with them. They can infiltrate the dominant group, but this seems to come at a price. Do they feel ashamed if they hide their identity, or is it simply refreshing to not be openly recognized by their physicality. The power of the internet would ideally be used to spread democracy and equality but main critics of the internet would argue that it has only reinforced racial and socio-economic dividing lines (Beckles 311).

Studies show that many minorities do not access the internet with the same frequency of white Americans. Just 29% of Latino adults have internet connections compared to 49% of white adults who have internet connections at home. The breakdown of internet use along racial lines is as follows 75% of English speaking Asian-Americans use the internet, 71% of Whites use the internet, 60% of Blacks use the internet, and 56% of Latinos use the internet. It seems like education level has an even greater impact on the likelihood of whether or not an individual uses the internet. Those with college degree were more likely use the internet regardless of race compared to those with only a high school degree (Fox and Livingston 2007).

It seems as though the idea of the internet being a nonracialized place only exists in the minds of those who are not themselves racial minorities. Just as in many facets of life from sex to politics the norm never recognizes that there is a norm and that there is an Other. The idea of Other is one constructed by Imperialist nations and social majority groups to cast a minority or conquered group as different and therefore inferior. When a group is Other they are not granted the same respect or rights of the majority group.

Keith Townsend Obadike's online art piece, in which he offers his

“blackness” up for sale, is one instance in which we may see the racial troubles posed by the internet and society at large; it also raises many questions about both the colonization of the internet by white culture and the commoditization of race. He points out that the vocabulary of the internet itself is colonial. Browsers like Navigator and Explorer validate this point. Obadike references several websites on which one can get a feel for what “blackness” is and one may even purchase tangible representations of blackness in the form of music, clothing, and accessories. It seems as though this phenomena of buying blackness is shared between black and white cultures.

His work consists of an ebay auction similar to many others on the server. He describes what the lucky winner of the auction will receive should they purchase his blackness. He describes both the benefits and the warnings that would be gained by obtaining his blackness. The opening paragraph of the auction reads as follows:

This heirloom has been in the possession of the seller for twenty-eight years. Mr. Obadike’s Blackness has been used primarily in the Unites States and its functionality outside of the U.S. cannot be guaranteed. Buyer will receive a certificate of authenticity. (Obadike 2001)

One of Obadike’s main annoyances in regard to the reception of his work was eBay’s censorship of his auction on the grounds of inappropriateness. The sense of injustice he feels is heightened by eBay’s acceptance of auctions selling Nazi paraphernalia, black face ceramics, and a variety of truly offensive items. He did have time to get feedback before the auction was pulled after four days. People ranging from black entrepreneurs to others interested in the gender of the blackness commented on his sale.

In an interview Obadike was ask about the strong similarities between his selling blackness and the slave-trade and whether or not it made a difference that now black people make money from selling their blackness. Obadike was quick to point out that at least a few black people have always profited from the sale of blackness. Once it was black people selling their black enemies to slave-traders whereas it is now black entrepreneurs (in addition to white ones) who profit from the sale of the black image (Fusco 2007).

If David Freedberg is correct, in his assertion in The Power of Images, that, “representation is subsumed by presence”, it is possible to make the absent present through representation on the internet—especially when experienced in real time video. We can visually consume other cultures, individuals and arts simply by viewing them online. Internet artists are manipulating and creating “temporal windows” on the internet to put our assumptions about identity and mass culture into question.

Jennie Ziverk Carr, B.A. (ArtHist.)
Missouri State University

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