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### **The New New-Media Blitz**

*Digital art—in all its forms—is gaining prominence among artists, curators, and audiences*

By Carly Berwick

To view Funnel, Erik Adigard and Patricia McShane's 1996 digital artwork, type <http://www.funnel.com> into your Web browser and hit Enter. Click on the red target and an image of a funnel appears. Inside the funnel, a capsule marked with a logo that says "VI 'R' US" twitches to throbbing music. Click on the funnel and you're taken to a grainy, vertiginous world filled with the sound of clanging drums. Click instead on a second target, below the funnel, and changing images of body parts turn up amid tracts of words. One of the first Internet art pieces acquired by a major museum—the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in 1997—the work is meant to link the idea of a computer virus with the physical feeling of sickness. Visitors to SFMOMA last fall could see Funnel exhibited on a touch screen mounted on a wall.

Inez Van Lamsweerde's digitally altered photograph *Me Kissing Vinoodh (Passionately)*, 1999, appears in "BitStreams," at the Whitney Museum of American Art through June 10.

Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art

Internet art, or Net art, constitutes a subset of digital art, generally defined as art created with computer code or digitized information. Digital art—also known as new-media art, tech art, and electronic art—encompasses digital video, sound art, digitally altered photographs, sculpture first sketched on a computer, and online audience-participation pieces. And despite uncertainty surrounding what it means to own, exhibit, create, or simply view works, computer-aided art is gaining credibility from collectors and institutions, who are not only buying it but commissioning it too.

Complicating the definition of digital art is the notion that it includes art inspired by or reflecting the digital culture in which we live. This is the sentiment behind SFMOMA's most recent foray into digital art, "010101: Art in Technological Times," online and in real space, through July 8. The far-reaching exhibition features five well-known Net artists and also showcases others working in more tangible mediums, such as sculptor Sarah Sze, whose webs of pills, toothpicks, lightbulbs, and fast-food containers can refer to the Internet's linking of seemingly incongruous ideas and objects, and painter Chris Finley, whose enameled work on wood aims to mirror the outsize and grandiose adventure narratives of video games.

The Whitney Museum of American Art, which included Internet art in its biennial for the first time last year, and the San Francisco Art Institute have also organized major exhibitions of digital art this spring. As a part of the Boston Cyberarts Festival (from the 21st of this month through May 6), M.I.T.'s List Visual Arts Center has organized "Race in Digital Space," which features more than 30 artists using film, video, and the Web and runs through July 1. Also this spring, the Tate Britain will host "Art Now: Art and Money Online," through June 3. Like "010101," the Whitney's "BitStreams," through June 10, takes a sweeping look at how digital technology is affecting art. A companion exhibition, "Data Dynamics," organized by the museum's adjunct curator of new media, Christiane Paul, zooms in for a tighter focus on five Net artists whose work visually maps changing information flows, such as the movements of museum visitors. Lawrence Rinder, curator of contemporary art at the Whitney, says his interest in mounting a show on digital work stems from the recent and obvious impact of digital technology on artists like Paul Pfeiffer, who digitally splices video for his repetitive, incantatory works, and Marina Rosenfeld and Elliott Sharp, who work with sound. In addition, "digital technologies have transformed how we categorize media art itself, blurring boundaries between video, Internet, sculpture, et cetera," he says.

"It's difficult to tell what you might call some of the artists in '010101,'" says Aaron Betsky, SFMOMA's curator of architecture, design, and digital projects (who is leaving in June to become director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam). But the confusion over genre boundaries and the speed of innovation are the features that many find most exciting about digital art. Instead of being as constant as the rules of logic that underlie computer code, the high-tech tools used in digital art change continually, which can make the work seem as fleeting as a live performance. Nevertheless, Betsky points out, "technology is accelerating at the rate at which the blurring is happening. As technology seeks the easiest form of transaction or transformation, you start talking about other kinds of blurs—of identity, for example."

As the Internet and mobile technologies began to infiltrate daily life in the mid-1990s, artists began to appropriate these tools, and the strange, playfully conceptual works that emerged helped spur consideration of digital art as a legitimate genre. An early piece demonstrating the collaborative possibilities of Net art is Heath Bunting's 1994 King's Cross Phone-In, where a text-only Web site listed numbers of pay phones around London's King's Cross Station and specified a time to call, orchestrating a community ring-a-long. The interactive nature of Net art—among artist, audience, and archivist—is what many of its proponents say is its most distinct and compelling feature.

Mark Napier, a programmer and artist commissioned by SFMOMA to make a digital work for "010101," created a Web site in 1995, not long after the first browser, Mosaic, arrived in 1993 to give cyberspace a visual dimension. The former painter says, "The lightbulb was when I put up

images of my paintings online. I was adjusting the colors to see what would look right, and I realized there was no right color. To a viewer, any one could be right, since the original is gone. I thought, 'This has nothing to do with original objects. This is a flexible, animated medium,' and I just stopped painting." Mark Tribe, the founder and director of Rhizome.org, an early Net-art e-mail "list serve," or electronic mailing list, that has evolved into a hub and an archive for Net artists, had a similar epiphany while he was in graduate school. "When I first saw Mosaic, it was like Columbus seeing land," he says. "Suddenly, it was like this was an art space, a canvas." By 1995, 8 percent of all Web sites had been created by artists, according to Robert Atkins, editor of TalkBack, one of the first journals about online art.

Napier's Web site, Potatoland.org, gets about 2,000 unique visitors a day, more than many actual bricks-and-mortar art centers. His art, archived on his site, challenges conventional ways of Web browsing by returning keyword searches as scrambled HTML code. For Napier, one benefit of working online was that his work would be easily accessible to the public. "I want a part of my artwork to be available to everybody," he says. "When I got into Internet art, I felt strongly that it was the next big movement in art—and in the world." This revolutionary fervor is another characteristic of many Net artists, whose work requires a minimal investment in materials—computer, software, time—and has no clear source of revenue. In the early 1990s, artists began to meet through online bulletin boards and list serves like The Thing, Nettime, and Rhizome.org. "Many of the artists who engaged in the Internet early on claim they did so as a reaction against the greed- and profit-driven art market of the 1980s," observes Jon Ippolito, assistant curator at the Guggenheim Museum and an Internet artist himself. "Part of it is also the gift economy," he says, referring to the pervasive online ethic that software, information, and ideas should be free.

Natalie Bookchin, California Institute of the Arts professor, artist, and former member of the Net-art collective RTmark (pronounced ART-mark), developed a seminal piece through a coincidental collaboration with students and colleagues online. Homework (1997) was her course's required final exam, posted online. Bookchin's assignment required her students to do three things: "Build a site which uses outside links as an integral part," "construct a faux documentary or appropriate an official interface," and "build a site which is new media specific," such as one that would "give the illusion of choice." Then, she says, "Heath Bunting found and posted my assignment to an online list," which happened to include some of the most influential early Net artists—jodi.org, Alexei Shulgin, Vuk Cosic. "These artists saw it not as an assignment but a definition of Net art at the time. So they asked if they could do it, and if I could grade them." That experience solidified her perception that "the work in the end is about what action is created."

In another "classroom" piece, students put up for auction on eBay a university gallery space, where the buyer could hold a temporary

exhibition. The students composed a press release in which they "tried to imagine what the most extreme thing that could happen would be," explains Bookchin. The release fabricated the claim that the North Koreans were bidding on the space and that, since that would constitute an instance of prohibited free trade with that country, the auctioners were discussing with then secretary of state Madeleine Albright the possibility of her sanctioning the sale. News services picked up the story, treating the release as if it were true. In the end a group called Fluxus Midwest tendered the winning bid of \$565.55 and staged a real show in December 1999, featuring Shulgin as a special guest. For Bookchin, RTmark, and other conceptual artists working online, art is literally action-making things happen, one way or the other.

Other types of digital art, particularly the offline kind, can look more like traditional genres of sculpture, painting, or film. Jeremy Blake, whose work is in "BitStreams" and "010101," declines to label himself as either a painter or a new-media artist. "At this point, an artist is an artist," he says. Liquid Villa (2000) is a looping, seven-and-a-half-minute-long digitally animated "painting" that runs on a DVD and is displayed on a 50-inch plasma screen hanging on the wall. Static and whispery music accompany slowly changing colored striations, which morph into panels that open onto an abstractly rendered villa. Blake also makes large C-prints of images he creates on the computer. "It was fairly obvious that a lot of painting processes were going to become digital," says Blake, who earned an MFA from CalArts in 1995. "When I was a painter, I was going for a flat Ruscha-Richter surface anyway, so I wasn't really losing a lot going to a painting printed as a photo." For Blake, digital animation introduced an exciting, filmic element of time into his work as a painter. And unlike the Net artists' works, his pieces sell enough to support him. Blake sees himself as having more in common with an artist like Pfeiffer, who uses looping as well, than with Net artists using the computer to make on-screen art. "If you're going to group something together to define our work, I'd say the use of the loop, which presents nonexistential repetition, more than technology."

Computing and networked systems have been of particular interest to artists since the 1960s; for example, as part of Robert Rauschenberg's Experiments in Art and Technology, which paired artists with scientists and engineers at places like IBM and Bell Labs to develop TV shows, laser displays, and even a "Utopian News Service." In 1970 New York's Jewish Museum hosted a breakthrough exhibition called "Software," which proposed that computer software, as a set of procedures, supplied an effective metaphor for conceptual art. Projects included Hans Haacke's Visitors' Profile, in which a teletype terminal allowed visitors to answer questions posed on a picture scope, and Les Levine's A.I.R., in which television sets showed tapes of the artist in his studio (in essence, a primitive online questionnaire and Web cam, respectively). In the same year, "Information," held at the Museum of Modern Art, featured nearly 100 artists, among them Vito Acconci, Haacke, and Joseph Kosuth—all three of whom were also in "Software." David Ross, director of SFMOMA, cites this more broadly conceived exhibition as the predecessor to "010101."

Steve Dietz, director of New Media Initiatives at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and an early champion of digital art, cites "Software" as an important precursor to "Telematic Connections," which he is curating for the San Francisco Art Institute. (It travels to the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena next month.) The show offers a look at projects like Randall Packer's Telematic Manifesto, which he calls a "hypertextual, collectively generated Net document." Dietz has his own idea about what qualifies as new-media art. He distinguishes art merely done on a computer from art that relies on what he considers the two critical elements of the genre: networks and computability. Dietz defines computability as the use of the computer as "a language machine that can act on its own instruction set, allowing it to be dynamic rather than fixed"—almost like a person. As for networks, it's not just about "making connections, or the rhetoric of a global embrace," says Dietz. "There's also this element of things speeding up and not having the time to make these connections."

The fact that digital art is, for the most part, electrons stored as intangible information on discs and hard drives has dramatically influenced the way curators approach its presentation and preservation. Until recently, collecting an Internet piece meant getting a CD-ROM or DVD containing the programs that made the site run and the legal rights to exhibit it (despite the fact that it would still be accessible online). But as computers, software, and methods of archiving digital information rapidly evolve, curators are facing the prospect of CD-ROMs and DVDs going the way of eight-track cassettes and 5 1/4-inch floppy discs. According to Betsky, collecting digital work "has changed radically" in the past few years. He and other curators realized that with hardware and software being continually updated and with new versions having different capabilities, museums would have to confront questions about which aspects of a work were most important to preserve. Now, says Matthew Drutt, a Guggenheim curator and head of its online Virtual Museum, "the conceptual parameters of the work are ultimately more important than physical manifestations." As with photography and video before, the medium itself is changing the way people consider art in general.

Guggenheim curator Ippolito developed the museum's Variable Media Initiative to help curators and artists set those parameters. Launched last month, the initiative asks artists and curators, via online questionnaires, to describe how to exhibit and preserve works. Another Ippolito-led project, called Apertures, will allow the public to express opinions about and classify examples of Internet art. He has informally dubbed the initiative, anticipated to be ready this summer, "Napster for art." When purchasing works for the museum's collection, Ippolito says, "ultimately, you take responsibility for preserving them"—rather than simply archiving them. Under the aegis of both the Variable Media Initiative and another effort called Conceptual and Intermedia Arts Online, the Guggenheim; Dietz at the Walker; Tribe of Rhizome.org, which hosts the archive ArtBase; and others are working with artists to systematically categorize digital works before their components fade into obsolescence. According to Ippolito, there are

four principal preservation options: traditional "storage," which is least effective for new media because of the need to upgrade hardware and software; "emulation," which is re-creating the work on new software or equipment to retain its original appearance (a facsimile of Atari's computer game Pong, for instance, can be run on Windows '95); and "migration," or continual upgrading from one medium to another—for example, from video disc to DVD—as technology progresses. With migration, "there are losses along the way," Ippolito says. "The look will change, so you have to accept those changes." The last method is "reinterpretation," which is akin to restaging a performance piece. An example of a work best preserved this way might be Bunting's phone-in, where placing calls could be replaced with instant messaging, for example. Similar to the Variable Media Initiative, Rhizome.org asks its artist-contributors to list qualities they would most like to see preserved over time.

While European art centers like ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, and Ars Electronica Center in Linz, Austria, were among the first institutions to commission digital work, American museums have lately been catching up. In addition to commissions and awards sponsored by the Guggenheim, the Whitney, SFMOMA, the Dia Center for the Arts, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Walker—as well as the Smithsonian's American Art Museum, which awarded its New Media/New Century grants last December—individual collectors are paying more attention to digital art. Robert J. Shiffler, a Dayton businessman who runs a private art foundation, was an early collector, buying an edition of John F. Simon, Jr.'s 1997 digital piece Color Balance, in 1998. "We acquired a signed disc and the right to put it in our collection," says Barry Rosenberg, the foundation's art adviser. The foundation has also bought "shares" from the Internet collective **etoy** — which are signed certificates and the only items the collective sells.

Buying shares in an art corporation like **etoy** is a funding model that several artists and curators, including Dietz, say may present a viable alternative to traditional fine-art collecting. Simon's Every Icon (1997) presents another funding alternative. Posted on the artist's Web site, it has sold 84 downloadable editions at \$20 each, although his gallerist in New York, Sandra Gering, also offers limited-edition screens customized by Simon. For around \$2,000, buyers can display Every Icon at home. Potatoland.org's Napier, for one, realizes that Net art is "difficult to price because there's not a single item to buy," but he also wouldn't want to make users pay to access his work online—a pay-for-view model that some, like Net-art collective hell.com, have tried in the past.

Galleries and museums may in the end prove not to be the best exhibition venues for digital art. The 2000 Whitney Biennial was a case in point: Net art was projected on a wall in a dark room with just one computer, providing limited opportunity for individual interaction. Since summer 1998, the Walker has hosted the online Gallery 9, which includes the entire archive of äda'web, a pioneering effort by curator Benjamin Weil (now at SFMOMA), to showcase Net artists on the Web. Similarly, the Guggenheim is betting that its Virtual Museum, a Web

space being designed by New York's Asymptote Architecture, will be an appropriate home for digital projects, while the Whitney launched a Net-art site last month, [artport.whitney.org](http://artport.whitney.org). This idea of the future—where Net-art exhibitions are hosted on personal computers and not museum walls—presents a particular challenge for new digital-art-focused centers sprouting physical roots. Among these are the Media Z Lounge at Manhattan's New Museum of Contemporary Art and Basel's Plug In, as well as the planned Eyebeam-sponsored museum of art and technology in Manhattan and Chicago's Julia Friedman Gallery, which opens next month and will specialize in new-media art.

Despite uncertainty about how and where digital art should best be displayed, experienced, and preserved, the public's appetite and appreciation for it is growing. Last summer, Magdalena Sawon, codirector of Manhattan's Postmasters gallery, sold two editions, for \$15,000 each, of *Text Rain* (2000), a digital work by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv. "After all these years of hard work—except for the selling of CD-ROMs—this was the first time a substantial interactive computer installation was bought, by people who were also buying this for the first time," says Sawon. While for museums the largest cost associated with digital art usually involves high-tech labor, for gallerists and buyers, it's the gadgetry that can become expensive. "There's \$5,000 worth of equipment on top of the cost of the piece," says Sawon. "But people who seriously collect realize this is a medium of creative expression. Technophobia can't last forever because this medium is not going away."

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