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INTERNET LIFE



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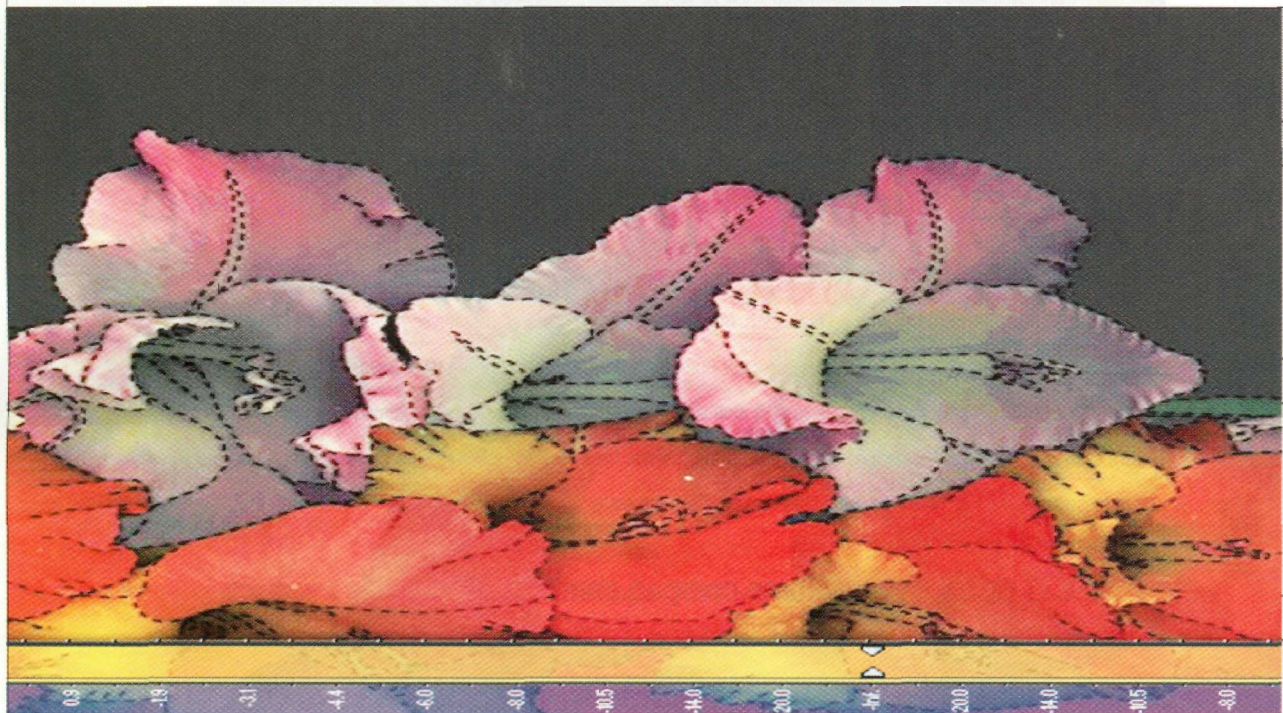
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Roll Over



Code and culture collide in the new wave of online art

HOW LONG AGO WAS IT THAT the Internet was the playground of a few scientists? Though it seems like an eternity, only a few years have passed since we went from ASCII to e-commerce. Now the keys to the Net are back in the hands of a marauding band of code warriors: cyberartists who decorate the Web with their visions. And the **WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART**, one of the country's most renowned repositories of contemporary work, has chosen to recognize this emerging subculture in its 2000 Biennial Exhibition by including online art for the first time.

This *is* contemporary art—the voice of the next “new” generation, which has adopted previously nonexistent tools and exploited them in unexpected ways. Breaking form, evolving styles, and messing with assumed uses of software code and interactivity, these artists take advantage of inexpensive self-publishing platforms and are being rewarded for their efforts: They win access to an immediate global audience.

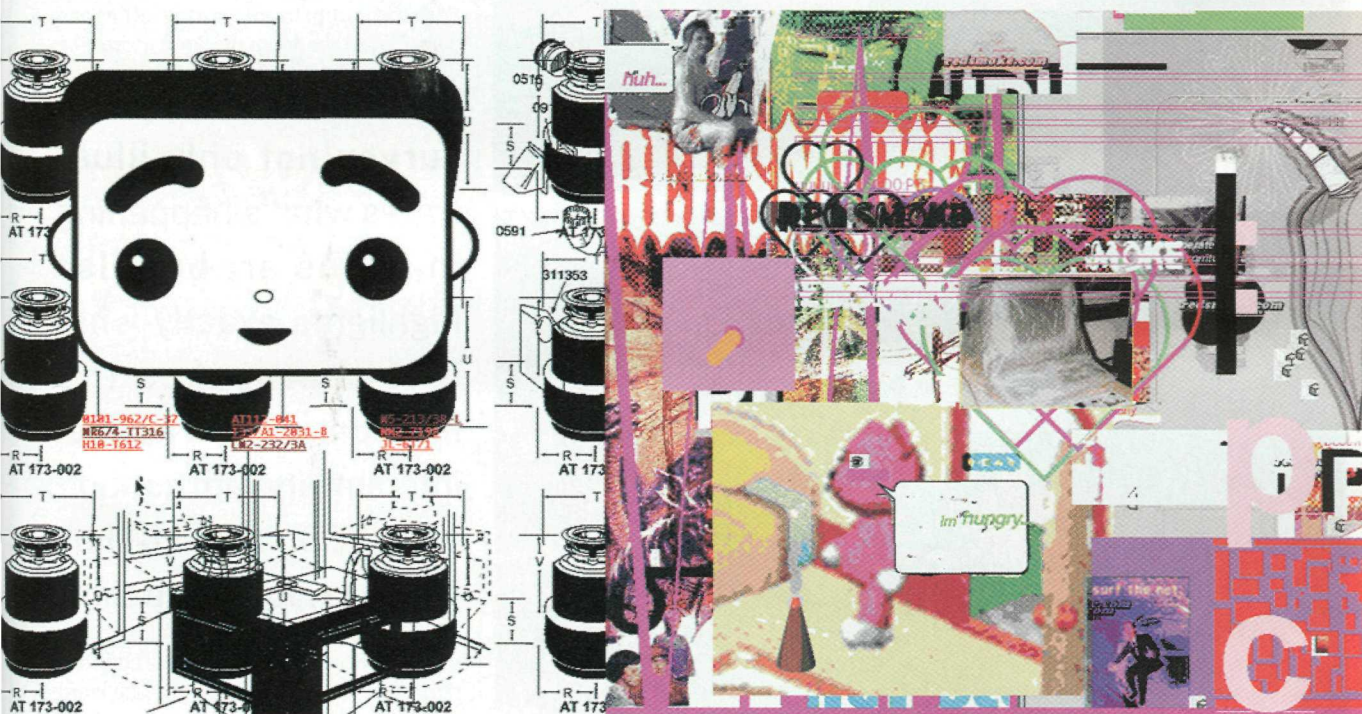
For the most part, of course, that audience has had to sift through millions of Web pages to find the hidden gems. But the Whitney has now made it easy. It has

sent curators to surf madly and bring back the goods. The Whitney survey not only illustrates what's happening in online art but also highlights exactly what it is that makes the medium so attractive: interactivity with its audience. “Don't touch” has given way to “Please click.”

Sites such as **SUPERBAD** and **REDSMOKE.COM** have long (in Internet time) been admired by Web designers for their innovative use of the latest technology and for the images that result. Superbad, for example, layers wickedly poignant stories of suburban millennial angst over pop culture icons such as

BY REBECCA PAOLETTI

Picasso



FREEZE FRAME: At Web art sites, each click of the mouse changes the imagery. Left to right: Once Upon a Forest, Superbad, and Redsmoke.

Beanie Babies and UFOs. The site, with its Pop Art feel and Warholian color play, relies on the viewer's cursor movements to create each art segment. Nothing really happens until you click. Similarly, the pulsing geometric shapes and myriad rainbows of Redsmoke aren't visible until the viewer rolls over just the right spot.

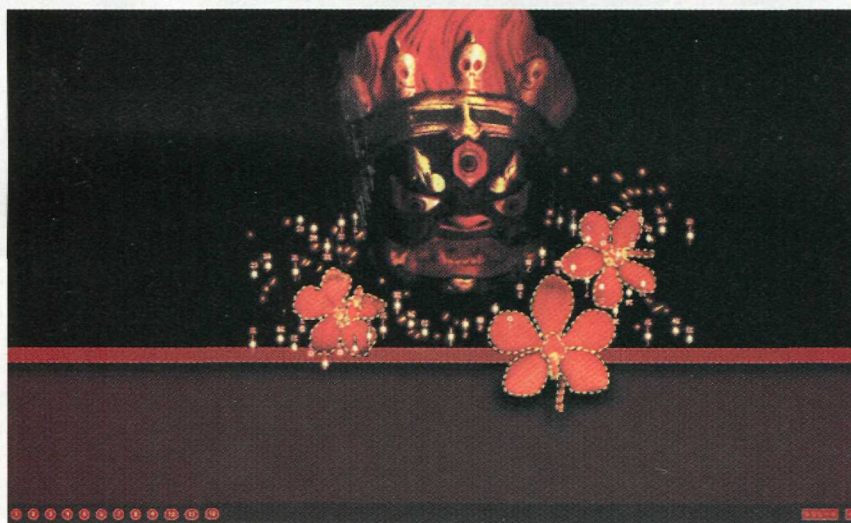
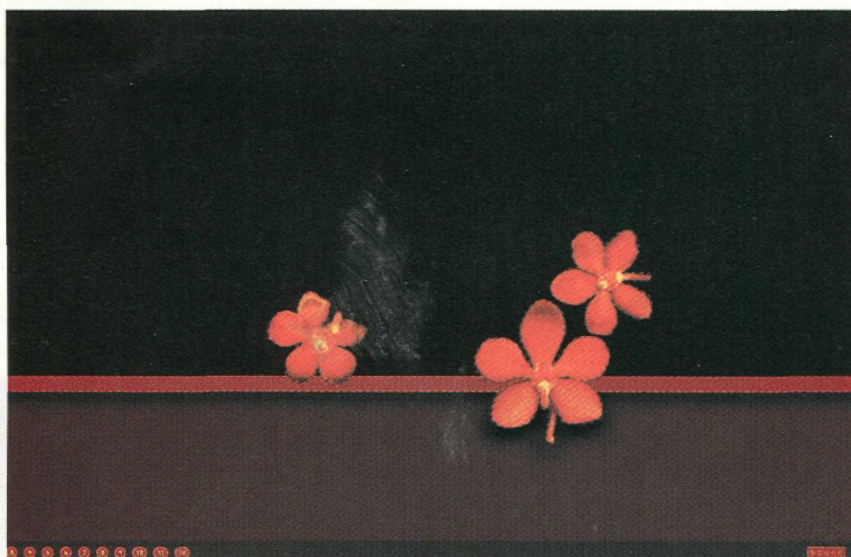
Some sites offer even greater interaction and—as in computer games—the possibility of choosing your own path. **GRAMMATRON** has 1,100 “text spaces,” 2,000 links, and more than 40 minutes of original sound track, plus “unique hyper-link structures by way of specially coded

JavaScripts.” Users may be startled by one of the first messages to appear: “Please wait while the machine reads you.” Control, never altogether in the hands of the viewer, is soon exerted by the code. Text comes at you in a series of screens full of allusion and metaphor as you follow a tale “about cyberspace, Cabala mysticism, digicash paracurrencies, and the evolution of virtual sex in a society afraid to go outside and get in touch with its own nature.”

Suddenly, a sales pitch materializes along the bottom of your browser: “How about sending me a few digicash credits,

and I'll blow your mind away.” Even “Hypertextual Consciousness 1.0”—a lengthy treatise that purports to explain the story behind the site's creation—may not put your mind back together again.

All the interaction may be intriguing, but it also begs the question: Who's controlling whom? The power of the computer, the code behind it, and the masters behind the code are integral to sites like **OUIJA 2000** and **FAKESHOP.COM**. Ouija at first behaves exactly as you would expect, and then not at all as you'd expect. The onscreen planchette floats as if possessed. You've lost control, which



A WORK IN PROGRESS: At *Once Upon a Forest*, what begins with a few simple flowers (top) gradually transforms itself into dark, fantastical imagery.

is either art—or completely bewildering. FakeShop blows up your browser window and offers jigsaw puzzle pieces, each with a mind and behavior all its own. Forget that you have no idea how it was built; sense that you are beginning to understand the complexities of artificial intelligence; decide that you should step away slowly.

Evidently, the Whitney curators decided that the Biennial wouldn't be a truly contemporary exhibit without some kind of performance art, and in that arena **©™ARK** (pronounced *art mark*) resets the standard. Mocking online investment communities, the staunchly anticorporate site typically serves up "projects" monitored with flow charts, all in green, and "identifiers" that resemble stock-ticker symbols. You might want to buy into DISN, for example, described as "any group of 20 people who hop

the fence at Disneyland at different points around the perimeter and simultaneously make a run for the security office/holding cell to turn themselves in. Maps of area available to interested parties." An interlinked global community could create an immediate art experience.

Really immediate—because even the most complex code is easy to change. And unexpected change that might jostle the establishment is what sets new artists apart. So on the eve of the Biennial's opening, **©™ark** became its own exhibit: When visitors would link to the site through the Whitney, any number of other sites, accepted by **©™ark** and randomly displayed on its home page, might appear in its stead. Such as the sneakily subversive **THISMODERNWORLD.COM**.

In a sense, this "ha—made you look" ap-

proach is precisely what it's all about. The medium is fluid. It never stops changing. And the change, instigated by the viewer or by the artist, is defining a new art space.

So what does it mean? Perhaps we are now getting a sense of our own transiency, and just as built-to-last companies have been replaced by built-to-flip dot-coms looking for a quick IPO, art has shifted away from providing icons for the ages. As graffiti crews paint over the masterpieces of their neighborhood competitors, or as weather and demolition take down the latest writing on

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the wall, so too a single snippet of code or a purposeful HTML tag will erase the latest cybercreation. It's not about taking yourself seriously; it's about constant evolution.

Although connoisseurs of online art won't be surprised at the choices in the Biennial, they may react to a few omissions. Conspicuous in its absence is **THE REMEDI PROJECT**, a collaboration of Web artists widely accepted as having set the bar for online design and experimentation. Also missing is the award-winning **ONCE UPON A FOREST**, a cross between a Net hallucination and an interactive calendar.

As more curators come to appreciate the workings of the pixel palette, this coterie of artists will spring from the subculture into our computers, not only decorating our desktops but also redefining the limits of the technological horizon. Ultimately, they may challenge our own ability to reinvent ourselves. **Y**

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