

Michael Bell-Smith,
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Net results

Closing the gap between art and life online **By Lauren Cornell**

In the past 24 hours, the odds are good you've sent an e-mail, Googled somebody or downloaded music. Our lives are wired and so, increasingly, is our art. Last week, the Chelsea nonprofit Electronic Arts Intermix hosted "Net Aesthetics 2.0," a panel about the 10-year-old medium of online art, organized by Lauren Cornell, executive director of the new-media art organization Rhizome. **TONY** invited Cornell to moderate a similar discussion (conducted online) with six panelists: Bay Area artist Marisa Olson; New York artists Cory Arcangel, Michael Bell-Smith and Wolfgang Staehle; British Film Institute curator Michael Connor and Caitlin Jones, a researcher at the Guggenheim Museum.

Lauren Cornell: When artists started working online, the Internet wasn't nearly as assimilated into everyday life as it is now. Popular culture is clearly influenced by e-mail, blogs, eBay and social software like Myspace. Do you use these platforms in your work?

Marisa Olson: In between my jobs, art and personal life, I'm online nearly 24/7. I think my recent work and that of many of my peers puts this consumption on display. I frequently work in blog format. In

American Idol Audition Training Blog, I documented my attempt to become a contestant on the TV show. I was simultaneously indulging in and critiquing media culture.

Cory Arcangel: I just did a performance at P.S. 1 where I committed Friendster suicide (when you delete your account). Five years ago

"Chances are that some 14-year-old kid from Brazil has beat you to your next project."

it would have been impossible; the concept of a compelling online identity didn't exist. But today everyone in the audience knew what I was doing and got superstressed when I hit the DELETE button.

Wolfgang Staehle: I follow these developments from the sidelines. What I am aiming for in my work is an escape from all the entertainment and distraction that the media promotes.

LC: With so many people online, memos or individual actions (like the guy who quit his job

to go to every Starbucks in the world) stand in for conceptual art or performance. How do you distinguish between what is art and what isn't these days?

Michael Bell-Smith: I think memes and other kinds of "Internet folk art" are some of the most interesting stuff happening online. The challenge, I find, is to take things I find amazing and recast them so others understand what I see in them. There's a curatorial aspect to the approach but, ultimately, I am trying to make something of my own while respecting the original, whether it's art, nonart or something in between.

CA: As a conceptual artist, it's tough because chances are that some 14-year-old kid from Brazil has already beat you to your new project.

Michael Connor: British cult writer Stewart Home says that art is bureaucracy, that the line between what is and is not art is often just a decision made by a curator or gallerist. I think a lot of the best art of our time is out there waiting to be labeled as such by forward-thinking art bureaucrats.

LC: Does Internet art need to take place online?

MO: No. What I make is less art "on" the Internet than it is art "after" the Internet. It's the yield of my com-

pulsive surfing and downloading. I create performances, songs, photos, texts, or installations directly derived from materials on the Internet or my activity there.

Caitlin Jones: A lot of the structures and aesthetics of the web are moving offline. A group like Paper Rad has a tremendous website and also takes content from the web to use in their gallery installations.

CA: Internet art can be anything. The Internet is a research tool and a place for new cultures to emerge. Lots of artists are making Internet art, although outwardly their work may have nothing to do with computers.

WS: The Internet is a means in my work. It simply moves data from A to B. I use it the same way I use my Olympus camera and that doesn't make me an Olympus artist.

LC: What are the challenges in exhibiting Internet-related art?

MO: Getting people to take it seriously and to see that it is a diverse practice that produces diverse objects, many of which are not strictly computer-based.

MC: In a gallery context, the primary problem is that it's difficult to recreate the psychological space of the personal computer in a public space. Surfing the web in a public gallery can make you feel like you're a performer; the computer itself can feel like a sculpture. These aren't insurmountable problems, but they make things tricky.

LC: How will current legal battles about copyrights and file-sharing affect artistic practice?

CJ: Nam June Paik wrote an essay circa 1970 about how television stations and corporations were hoarding information and inhibiting visual communication. The similarity between his argument and the current debate about copyright is astounding. Maybe I'm naive but I think creative people will always find a way around uncreative measures and restrictive structures.

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