

Time as an artform

From January 1 to December 31, 1999, cyber artist 'Giga' created daily entries in a digital journal called 'The Millennium Diary' (<http://www.mowa.org/change/time/millenniumfr.html>). The images reproduced here are some examples of his effort to "give a very individual view of time as an artform".

Virtually beautiful

Is cyber art a direct descendent of traditional art forms or something new altogether?

BY DONNALEE DUNNE

The artist has embraced every technological advance since the beginning of time. From pigment marks on cave walls – to bronze, glass, and paper – to the latest computer technology, the artist has been at the forefront. An artistic exploration of the Internet medium, therefore, should come as no surprise.

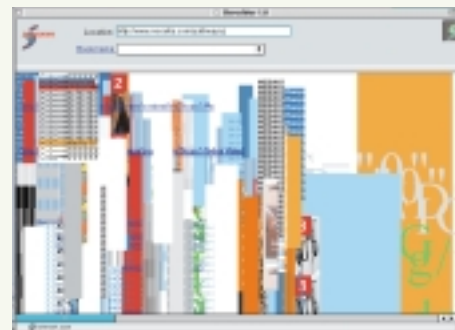
Long recognized as an indispensable tool in business and at home, the computer's use as a means of creating beauty is nothing new. As a movement, cyber art can be traced as far back as the 1960s. Just as computers were first being linked together for communication, graphics software innovations delivered 2-D painting tools and gave the virtual sculptor the illusion of 3-D environmental space. But it was the emergence of the World Wide Web in 1991 that drew communications, as well as art, into a new age allowing text and images to be viewed in a user-friendly atmosphere. More than images of traditional paintings shown on a website gallery, cyber art is produced specifically for the

virtual world. Created on the computer, it is uploaded to a website and only moves into the real world in the form of copies or downloads.

Art history's latest chapter

Amy Stone, founder of the Museum of Web Art (<http://www.mowa.org>), sees cyber art as the latest movement in the continuum of art history. "When photography and offset printing were combined, people in all walks of life were able to behold the spectacle of the Sistine Chapel without having to journey to the source," she says. "This made art accessible to all for the first time. A century and a half later we are seeing this phenomenon anew, as art is translated and reinterpreted through the digital medium to a global audience."

It was the possibilities offered by such global reach that attracted Australian sculptor and installation artist Melinda Rackham to adopt a new medium. "Working on-line means working in a public space, and I like the fact that I can access an audience anywhere on the



What is cyber art?

Cyber art, or net.art, comes in various shapes and forms. Log on to the numerous examples listed to see for yourself.

Web Art Art specifically designed for, and existing within, the Internet. The entire site can be a work of art. <http://www.potatoland.org/pl.htm> (Mark Napier) <http://www.artfuture.com/WebArt.html>

2-D Art Digital images made with computer software, displayed on the Internet. The work may be static or 2-D web experiences using animations, sound, graphics and interactivity. Some require specific software to view. <http://www.mowa.org/> http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/dasc/g9_dasc_intro.html

3-D Art and Sculpture 3-D models constructed in computer software virtually existing in 3-D settings, much like a theater set within the computer monitor. These models can be the basis for animation, or become virtual or physical sculpture. <http://gallery.bostoncyberarts.org/sculptgallery.html> (Displays several artists)

VRML – Virtual Reality Modeling The standard protocol used to describe and render 3-D objects and scenes via the Internet. Unlike 3-D art and sculpture, which maintain a fixed relationship to the viewer, VRML presents the user with a navigational panel by which the scene or object can be explored from all possible angles, thus simulating a real-life type of experience. You may need to download viewers to experience the virtual reality. <http://www.vrml-art.org/node.php3#NID150004> (Includes several VRML artists) <http://www.artfuture.com/VR.html>

Text Art made with text or hypertext. <http://www.yhchang.com/> (Winner of the Webby award for art, 2001, Young-Hae Chang)

Performance Art On-line interactive art scheduled to occur at a specific time. http://gallery.bostoncyberarts.org/perf_frameset.html <http://www.desktoptheater.org/>

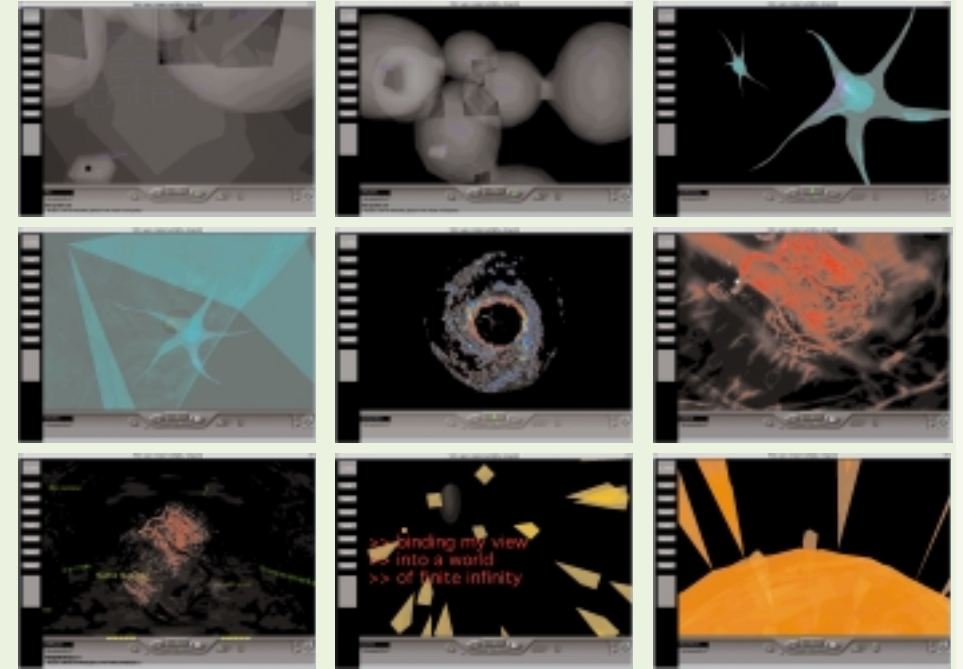
The **pathways website** (www.novartis.com/pathways) looks rather different viewed through Mark Napier's Shredder. (<http://www.potatoland.org/shredder>)

planet immediately,” she says. “I work in the same way on-line as I did in the real world, first thinking hard about content, then collecting images, sounds and text snippets and constructing from there.”

The main difference, of course, is that rather than assembling physical objects, she now uses software programs and text editors. Her new work *empyrean* (see page 45) is created using a programming language known as VRML (see box, above) that allows the artist to create 3-D objects and scenes through which the viewer can navigate. “In more hypertext-based Internet art you click on text or an image to get to another space, often jerkily,” she says. “In VRML you navigate smoothly and pick your own pathways. I think the future of the web will follow this 3-D direction.”

Mark Napier, one of the cyber artists

With her work *empyrean* (<http://www.subtle.net/empyrean/>), Melinda Rackham wanted to explore notions of “on-line spirituality – that cyberspace is seen by some as a new spiritual realm for connection. I wanted to offer those who visit both an opportunity for a meditative and internal space, and an explorative and external place which allows you to interact with other people.” The viewer travels through a number of zones such as ‘truth’, ‘chaos’, ‘void’ and ‘charm’, encountering images and random texts about connections between people – both on- and off-line.



Working on-line means working in a public space, and I like the fact that I can access an audience anywhere on the planet immediately

Melinda Rackham, Australian sculptor turned cyber artist

recently commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to work on their 010101: Art in Technological Times project (see box, page 47), works extensively with the programming language known as Java. “I spend a lot of time experimenting, finding the hidden tricks and limits of the language, how the Internet works and how people interact with it,” he says.

His work *The Shredder* (<http://www.potatoland.org/shredder>) is an example of a more conceptual take on cyber art. It invites site visitors to enter a web address into a special browser window, which then displays the specified web page as a chaotic and irrational collage incorporating elements of its intended appearance amidst tangles of the previously hidden mass of supporting code. The original website is not actually corrupted in any

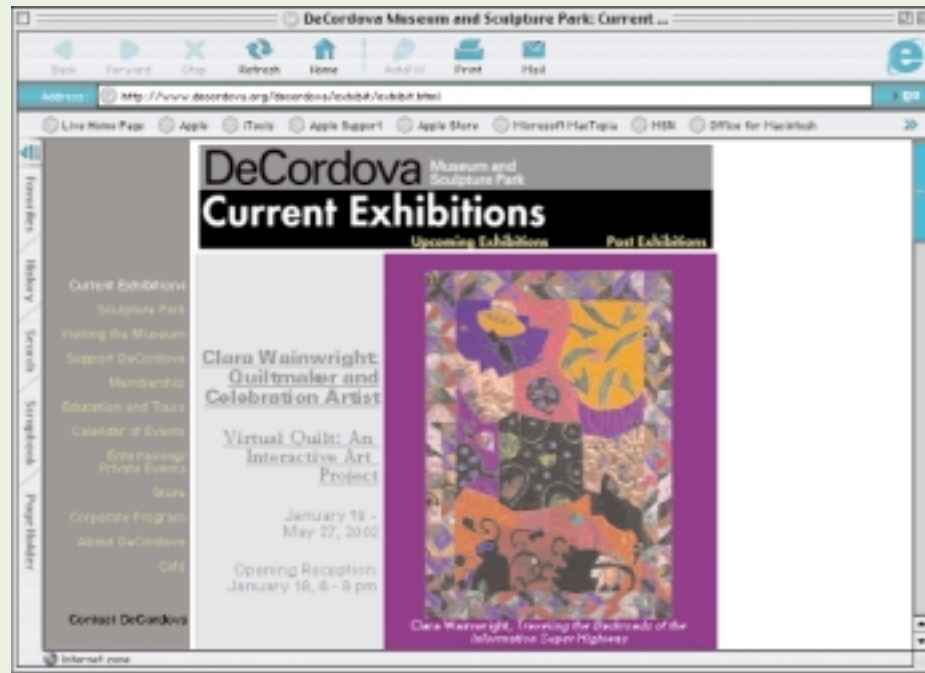
way (see how the pathways website appears through the Shredder on page 44).

Napier is examining his medium. “We want to get our hands on this virtual medium and find something solid and concrete about it, but there is no such thing,” he explains. “Although viewed as an extension of print media, the web has no static physical form. It is made of software rules, code and data.” By turning those codes and rules inside-out, the Shredder attempts to bring this elusive quality of cyberspace to the surface.

Threat of obsolescence

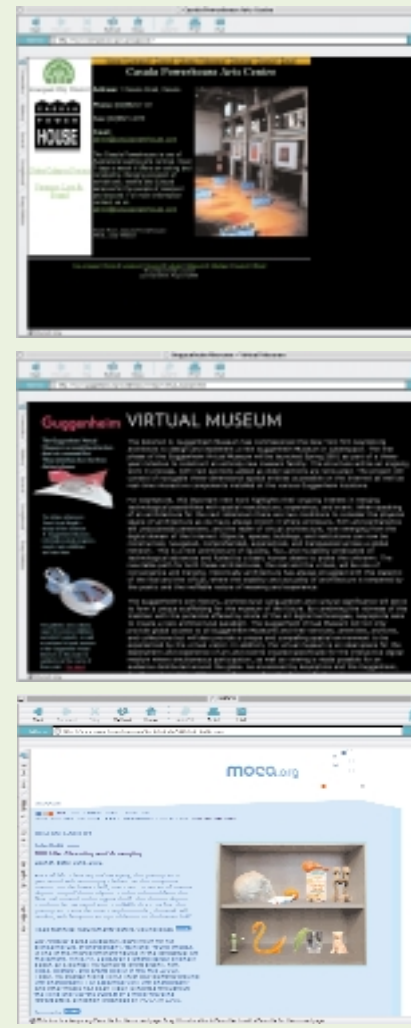
The constant development and ‘upgrading’ of technology utilized in the creation of cyber art is a major issue when it comes to its longevity. It is not uncommon for a creative work to cease being ‘functional’ as the technology that supports it becomes obsolete. A number

Virtual Quilt
An Interactive Art Project, currently at DeCordova Museum (http://www.decordova.org/decordova/exhibit/exhibit.html), is a collaboration of virtual art constructed from software such as FrontPage, Photoshop and Flash, then reflected in the construction of a continually evolving physical quilt. The project drew the largest crowd of visitors in the museum's history, and averages over 60 virtual squares a week from every continent. Visit the Decordova website to contribute your own square (see right).



Museums are being very supportive, but can only finance a limited number of projects

Mark Napier, cyber artist



From on-line to on-display

Numerous galleries around the world have embraced cyber art and afforded exhibition space.

New York Museum of Modern Art Websites created in conjunction with concurrent gallery exhibitions, 1995–2001. <http://www.moma.org/docs/onlineprojects/index.htm>

Liverpool Regional Museum Liverpool, NSW, Australia. Cyber Cultures 1997. <http://www.liverpool.nsw.gov.au/caspower/>

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art 010101: Art in Technological Times. Traditional gallery space and cyberspace united in this pivotal commission of five cutting-edge web artists. <http://010101.sfmoma.org/start.html>

The Walker Art Center Excellent examples of recent and current exhibitions. A good chronicle of cyber art's ongoing evolution. <http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/>

Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney, Australia. Full Moon web exhibition, 2001. <http://www.mca.com.au/#>

Guggenheim Museum Virtual Museum's first phase, combining real and virtual space – designed by Asymptote Architects of New York. <http://www.guggenheim.org/internetart/welcome.html>

Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art Numerous 2001 exhibitions. http://www.moca-la.org/museum/digital_gallery.php

Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art, Amsterdam <http://www.stedelijk.nl/eng/index.html>

Total Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul Korea <http://www.totalmuseum.org/webproject8.html>

Irish Museum of Modern Art <http://www.irishmuseumofmodernart.com/netart.htm>

of works Rackham has created in recent years are already unavailable due to upgrades in browsers.

Cyber art preservation is something that concerns Amy Stone. “Is Cyberart destined to be fleeting?” she asks. “Is it created with obsolescence in mind? Cyber-based art must be maintained in tandem with its technology, but a stable and consistent foundation has yet to be achieved or implemented. Imagine if the Mona Lisa had perished the second we invented a more durable blend of oil paint? How silly that seems, yet consider how many recordings from yesterday never made the transition from LP to CD.”

Archiving the software with the art as limited editions could be one solution, but Matthew Mirapaul, columnist of Arts@Large from the *New York Times*, suggests that ephemeral art is just as valid as more permanent works.

“There’s nothing temporary about net.art,” he says. “If anything it’s less ephemeral than a dance or play, and no less permanent than a television broadcast or film. We need to stop thinking about net.art as an ‘object’ and start thinking about it as a performance.”

Reaching mainstream galleries

Ten years ago a few galleries were able to offer computer art exhibitions in the form of prints. Today the emergence of large, flat monitor screens – hung on walls or supported on elegant pedestals – has brought cyber art into mainstream gallery presentation with many museums exhibiting virtual art in physical gallery space (see box, page 47).

Napier notes that the largest hurdle now is the collecting of the art, and its sale by galleries. “Museums are being very supportive, but can only finance a

limited number of projects,” he says. Amy Stone believes two issues are preventing the emergence of a clear market for cyber art. “Firstly, collectors don’t yet know who the Andy Warhol and David Hockney of cyber art are,” she explains. “And secondly, what is actually being sold? A hard drive, monitor and browser software? A CD? Display is critical to the selling of art.”

Mirapaul adds that “institutions are still grappling with how to exhibit, collect and preserve digital work; critics and curators struggling to define and access it; and artists and galleries are trying to figure out how to sell the stuff. When this happens, people will stop thinking of it as cyber art and view it simply as art.”

That may be a positive step, but artists are also determined to acknowledge that the technology they use defines their work as much as its

driving artistic inspiration. “The artwork is about people and about the tech structures that people create,” says Napier. “Cyber art has to embody that combination. Certainly, if I get too excited about the medium the art will only be relevant a short time and will rapidly become obsolete. But if I ignore the medium I’ll probably make art that could be better made in another medium.”

Donnalee Dunne is a cyber artist and freelance writer based in California.