

The New World of Net Art

Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, Vine, and other platforms are the jumping-off point for artists who blur the line between the virtual and the real

BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA

Over the course of three months in 2011, a group of students at the University of California, Berkeley, regularly logged on to their Facebook accounts to post updates about what they were doing. Things got messy fast. They used the social media service to arrange trysts on campus and off. Pictures of out-of-control parties soon materialized—including images of new pledges being water-boarded at a campus fraternity. More online uproars ensued when it was discovered that one of the university's top athletes was connected to a violent drug cartel.

OK, not really. *Dorm Daze* was a performance piece staged on Facebook by British artist Ed Fornieles. It featured dozens of fictional characters and an array of subplots. Fornieles played the role of an aggressive frat guy dating the campus sorority queen. The other roles—math nerds, goth kids, and the basketball star/meth dealer—were inhabited by friends and acquaintances. The largely improvised storylines moved forward every time someone posted a status update. "It was like narrative on crack—it kept escalating," Fornieles recalls. "As an artist, that's what I'm interested in: that moment in which a piece just takes off and mutates in ways you could never imagine."

In many aspects, *Dorm Daze* represents the Internet art of the moment—taking a prominent media platform and subverting it. The project encompasses a variety of other

mediums. Fornieles has built sculptural frat-house sets for rowdy Happenings connected to the online narratives. Physical objects from these events then get repurposed

as sculptures, which he displays in galleries. (Fornieles is represented by Carlos/Ishikawa in London, where his pieces sell in the range of \$5,000 to \$17,000. In July, he will have a show of new works at Mihai Nicodim Gallery in Los Angeles.) "A piece of carpet might be covered with an elaborate mixture of fake blood and vomit, and it becomes this incredible wall piece," he says. "It's much more loaded than anything I could make."

When Internet art first emerged

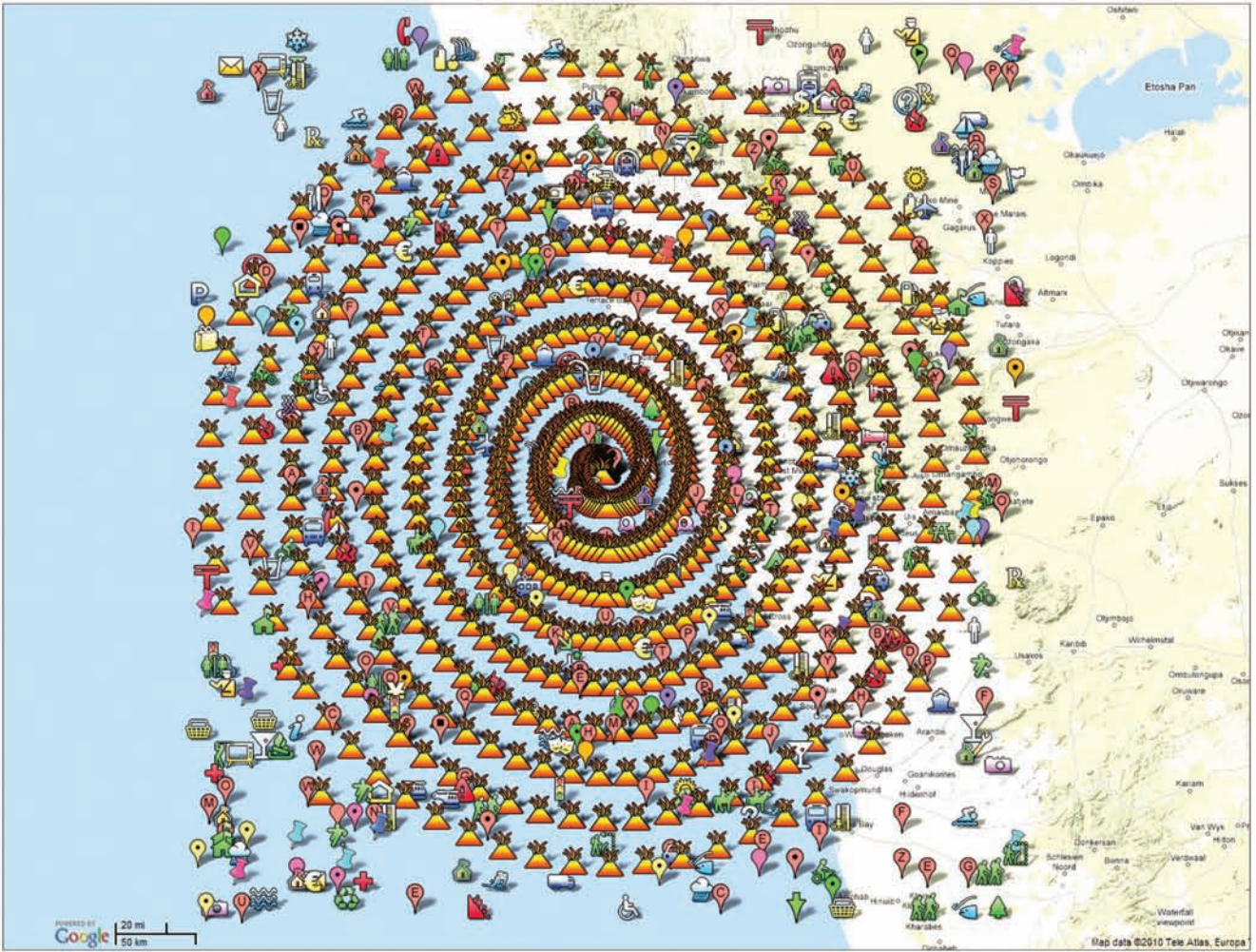
in the early 1990s, it was regarded as something that dealt almost exclusively with the architecture of the World Wide Web itself. During that period, the German-born Wolfgang Staehle constructed *The Thing*, an electronic bulletin board system that served as a forum for discussions about and dissemination of what was referred to as "net art." In 1998, British artist Heath Bunting produced a Web text titled *_readme.html*, in which every word links to a website that employs that same word as its

URL—an abstract way of getting at ownership of ideas online. And the Dutch-Belgian duo known as JODI (Joan

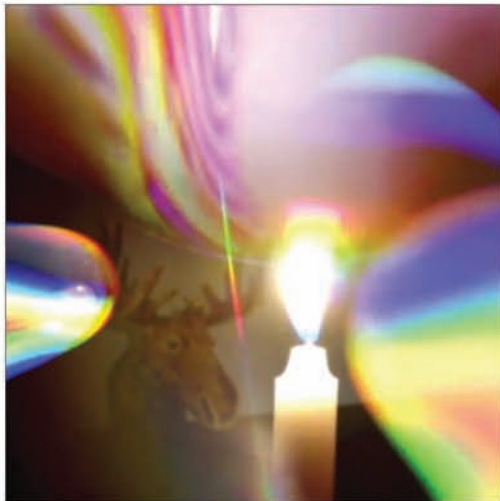


Stephan Backes's *1st Come, 1st Served* (Limited Edition), 2012, a signed and numbered digital painting that collectors can download from the Light & Wire Gallery website.

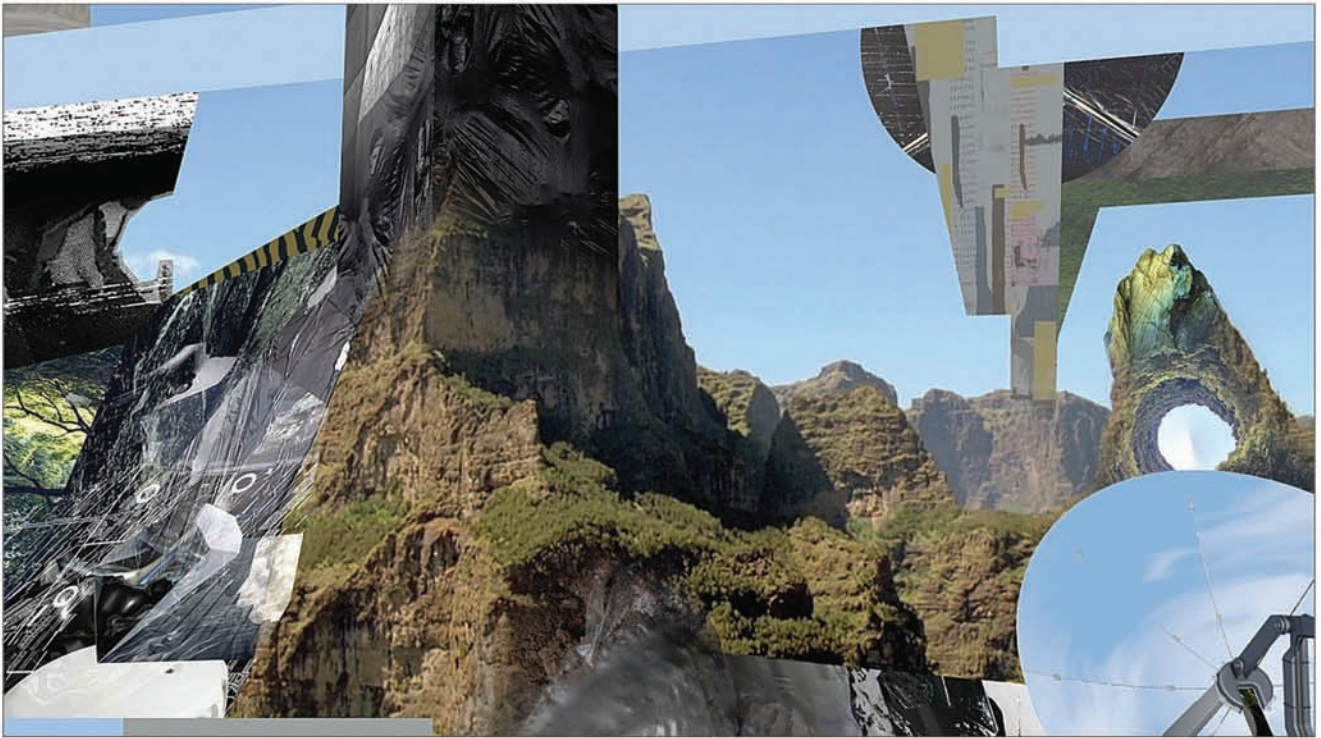
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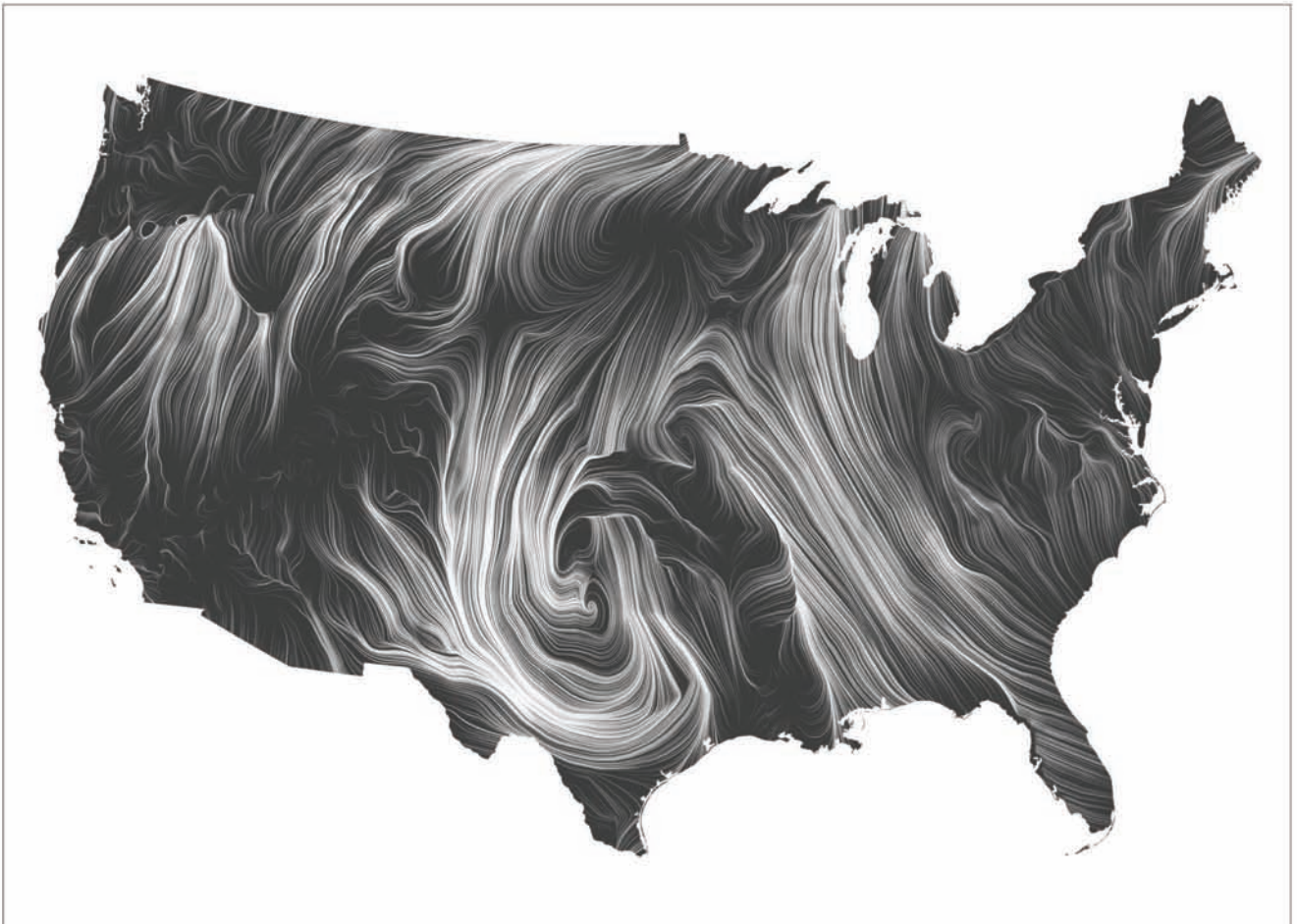
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP JODI's 2008 Web work *GEOGOO* riffs on Google Maps. A still of Yoshi Sodeoka's *A Candle and A Moose Head* from "The Shortest Video Art Ever Sold," 2013. John Baldessari's app *In Still Life* 2001–2010 lets users manipulate a 350-year-old Dutch painting.



TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT: COURTESY THE ARTIST (2)



A video still of Joe Hamilton's *Hyper Geography*, 2011 (above). Fernanda Viégas and Martin Wattenberg's *Wind Map*, 2012 (below).



TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST; BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND POINT B, STUDIO, PORT ORFORD, OREGON

Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans) created such iconic works as www.jodi.org, a website made in 1995 that appears to be nothing but garbled alphanumeric symbols—until the viewer clicks through to the programming code, which is written in the shape of an atomic bomb. (The site is still up.)

But as the Web has evolved, so too has the notion of what might be considered Internet art. “I think it’s much harder to define than it was in the mid-1990s,” says Christiane Paul, adjunct curator of new-media arts at the Whitney Museum and a follower of the form since its earliest days. “We are looking at something that is becoming more hybrid. Pieces often have different manifestations: an application, a net-based piece, an installation.” For Fornieles, who divides his time between London and Los Angeles, going from the virtual to the physical is simply representative of the way he thinks. “I studied sculpture, but I like moving from one medium to another. Why shouldn’t the work I make reflect a bit of that ADD mentality?”

Even artists who aren’t known for working on the Internet have put a toe in the arena. Three years ago, L.A. Conceptualist John Baldessari collaborated with the organization ForYourArt to produce *In Still Life 2001–2010*, an app that allows users to create their own renditions of Abraham van Beyeren’s 1667 painting *Banquet Still Life*. “What I like about these types of commissions,” says Baldessari, “is that they give you the ability to do something that you don’t normally do.” In this case, that’s digitally rearranging the fruits and shellfish in a historic Dutch work of art.

There is also now a surfeit of digitally minded venues—both virtual and physical. Light & Wire Gallery, based in L.A., and the Super Art Modern Museum, in France, host curated projects solely online. In March, a gallery called Transfer opened a brick-and-mortar space in Brooklyn, focusing on artists who keep one foot firmly planted in the digital world. And this past spring the Moving Image art fair in New York featured a project called “The Shortest Video Art Ever Sold,” curated by Marina Galperina and Kyle Chayka. It consisted of 22 different six-second works by various artists, all created on the Twitter-owned app Vine, where users share bite-size videos. One of the pieces, *Tits on Tits on Ikea* (2013), by Angela Washko, sold to a Dutch curator for \$200. The

earnings may have been small, but the video generated a flurry of press coverage for being the first Vine-made work to sell on the commercial art market.

Moreover, there has been significant movement at the institutional level. The Whitney has been commissioning net art for its website for more than a decade. This spring, in fact, JODI created a 30-second animation that pops up on the site every day at sunrise and sunset. In addition, nonprofit organizations, such as Eyebeam

Art+Technology Center and Rhizome (an affiliate of the New Museum), serve as important art-tech incubators.

Rhizome’s annual “Seven on Seven” conference pairs seven prominent artists and seven technologists for creative brainstorming sessions that can result in unusual works of art. At last year’s conference, photographer Taryn Simon and the late Internet activist Aaron Swartz created *Image Atlas*, a tool that sorts online image searches by country. “It’s so elegant,” says Heather Corcoran, executive director of Rhizome. “It allows you to compare how a word like ‘freedom’ might be visually represented in the United States versus China or Brazil.”

Our cultural landscape is now rife with references to digital visualizations, such as pixelization or the plastic colors and stiff lines of digital rendering. And the boundary between the “virtual” and the “real” is often blurred. Last year at South by Southwest, artist, writer, and technologist James Bridle dubbed the phenomenon the New Aesthetic, a term that has since gone viral.

In art, this way of seeing has manifested itself in innumerable ways. Melbourne artist Joe Hamilton collages digital graphics and video footage—as seen in his popular Web piece *Hyper Geography*, from 2011—to create filmic landscapes that feel both synthetic and disconcertingly real. Montreal-based Jon Rafman has a photographic series based on images he appropriates from the Street View feature on Google Maps. He combs the service in search of unusual slices of street life—arrests, brawls, a butterfly in flight—and then displays these on his Tumblr blog. Rafman also generates prints that he shows in galleries. (He is represented by Zach Feuer in New York, where his works sell for up to \$20,000.) “He’s exploring the real as a virtual space,” says Rhizome curator and editor Michael Connor. “It’s very much a product of modern technology.”



Taryn Simon and Aaron Swartz's *Image Atlas*, 2012, sorts online image searches by country. Shown are various results for the keyword "love."

The culture that has grown up around the Web is also regularly de- and reconstructed. In the Internet-art version of institutional critique, many artists strive to sabotage the corporate platforms that are now active parts of our daily life. Bridle has used the photo-sharing service Instagram to post images of drone-strike zones in the Middle East. On Twitter, Lithuanian artist Laimonas Zakas (better known by the pseudonym Glitchr) uses gaps in the social network's code to create texts that bleed digital gibberish all over the screen. Facebook demands that users register with their real identities, a rule that Fornieles and his crew violated when they staged their collegiate soap opera.

The Web, in fact, has lent itself to parodic intervention from its earliest days. Eva and Franco Mattes are New York-based Italian artists who have worked together since 1994 and sometimes use the alias 0100101110101101.org. The duo once invented a reclusive Yugoslavian artist named Darko Maver, a figure who received all kinds of media coverage and inclusion in the Italian Pavilion at the 48th Venice Biennale, in 1999, before he was revealed to be fictional.

In 2010, the Matteses staged a fake online suicide and recorded the reactions to it on Chatroulette, a service that allows random users to connect via webcam. Some viewers giggled at the sight of the hanging man; evidently, only one called the police. "Every time a new medium is born we tend to perceive it as being more real than its predecessor," the couple states over e-mail. "For example, we

take for granted that people on TV reality shows are acting, or at least self-aware, while we assume that a kid making online videos is authentic. In our works we exploit a bit of this deep-rooted trust."

The vastness of the online world is such that some artists have taken to building new tools for viewing it, as is the case with Simon and Swartz's image-search engine. Projects of this nature have included Mark Napier's *Shredder 1.0*—a piece that reconfigures, or "shreds," the text on any given website—and *dump.fm*, a fast-moving image chat room designed by art-technologist Ryder Ripps. For his 2010 work *riverthe.net*, video artist Ryan Trecartin, along with several collaborators, created a site that endlessly streams ten-second videos uploaded by users. It's a frenetic peek into the Web's oddest corners, a way of decontextualizing and reframing Internet imagery.

As with a lot of business done on the Web, net art is not without its commercial challenges. How do you convince a collector to pay for a piece that has been electronically "shared" several thousand times? "It's a minuscule market," says Magdalena Sawon of Postmasters, a gallery that has supported tech-driven projects since its founding in the mid-1980s. Sawon has had great success selling prints, installations, and videos, but she has never sold a piece that resides purely online. (Postmasters represents the Matteses, as well as Wolfgang Staehle—both of whose works run in the \$10,000 to \$50,000 range.) "When we

Jon Rafman's *17 Skweyiya Street, East London, South Africa, 2010*, an archival print of an image that the artist extracted from the Street View feature of Google Maps.





An installation view of Rafaël Rozendaal's *Into Time with Mirrors* at the São Paulo Museum of Image and Sound, part of last year's Nova Festival.

did some of the early shows that featured net artists in the '90s, I thought it would take a year or two and everyone would be on board with the idea of Internet art," Sawon says. "Well, here we are 17 years later."

Acquisitions at the institutional level also remain slow. The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis maintains numerous online works as part of a commissions project called "ada 'web," which includes pieces by the likes of Jenny Holzer, but none of these works are part of the museum's permanent collection. The Whitney has only a single net-art piece (*The World's First Collaborative Sentence* from 1994, by Douglas Davis), as does the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Fernanda B. Viégas and Martin Wattenberg's *Wind Map*, on view in the exhibition "Applied Design" through January). "What is important to me is the art history we are writing," says Whitney curator Paul. "This is work that is in dialogue with other things in the art world. We are writing a very strange art history if we don't consider it, if we don't bring it to the museum space."

The lack of marketability, however, doesn't mean that artists are staying away from the Internet. They are simply finding ways to innovate. Rafaël Rozendaal is a New York artist who does installation work as well as pop-inflected net-art pieces like *mechanicalwater.com*. His tactic has been to create a brand-new website for each work, which he then sells to collectors for \$4,900. These pieces—i.e. *colorflip.com* or *intotime.org*—remain publicly viewable online but the ownership and maintenance of the site are

transferred to the buyer. Rozendaal says he has sold more than two dozen of these works, likening the process to owning a piece of public art. "Here, the experience is both private and public," he says. (For his physical installations, Rozendaal is represented by Steve Turner Contemporary in Los Angeles, where his works sell for up to \$14,000.)

Rozendaal isn't the only one cultivating his own collector base. Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge are the multimedia artists behind Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, based in Korea. They produce stripped-down text animations of poetry set to musical scores. These are often fast-paced and funny, in a simple oversize font (Monaco), with stream-of-consciousness language that is right off the Web. Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries does not have gallery representation, but the duo does sell works to collectors in a variety of digital formats. "We're in a brave new world here," they write in an e-mail from Seoul. "Artists have always been inventors, and today's digital lifestyle invites us to be just as inventive in determining not only what constitutes an artwork, but what constitutes its delivery system."

Even as their profile grows—their pieces have been transformed into elaborate video installations in institutions like the Pompidou Center in Paris—Voge and Chang have no intention of giving up the Web. They keep the majority of their work online, in several languages, viewable to anyone with a working modem. "We began our career by making Internet art," they note. "We love our website." ■