

[Nettime-bold] Jane Prophet 96

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Lachlan Brown on Fri, 7 Dec 2001 04:11:02 +0100 (CET)

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[Nettime-bold] Jane Prophet 96

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- *Subject:* [Nettime-bold] Jane Prophet 96
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Women artists and cyber chicks

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Each day more on-line galleries with low resolution scans of photographs and paintings, appear on the World Wide Web. However, few artworks accessed via the Internet actually engage with the specificity of the medium, in particular its support of two way communication. The potential to transfer text almost immediately between remote locations has been used for many years by academics involved in scientific research, enabling them to exchange information and collaborate internationally. Over the last two or three years Internet technology has become more accessible, and browsing software developed to a point which allows us to roam around the World Wide Web and to transfer image and sound fairly quickly. As the medium has become more image-friendly artists have been quick to explore and appropriate it. Over the next few weeks, two new on-line art works will begin, both of which that are based on the potential for the Net surfer to exchange ideas and information with the artist, using the WWW as an interface. It is the quality of exchange, the possibility of adding data to an art work, which qualitatively separates the WWW from other interactive media such as CDROM and CDi.

In 1773 the Englishman Samuel Johnson

persuaded his Scottish friend, James Boswell to accompany him on a tour of Scotland. Throughout this journey, which was to mark the beginnings of tourism in Scotland, they were both to keep journals. The famous lexicographer, Johnson, focussed on the journey, while Boswell studied Johnson himself. For two years following their voyage the Journal was rewritten and footnotes and additions made before its eventual publication.

This tour, and the subsequent Journal, have become the starting point for artists Nina Pope and Karen Guthrie who are currently working on "A Hypertext Journal", which will be housed on the WWW. During March and April, the Englishwoman Pope and the Scottish Guthrie, will retrace the route followed by Boswell and Johnson, and both will keep journals. But here the similarities between the travellers and their journey to the Western Isles ends. "A Hypertext Journal" emphasises the differences that technology and tourism has brought to the experience of today's travelling artist, separated from Boswell and Johnson by over two hundred years.

Unlike Boswell and Johnson, Pope and Guthrie will not have sight of each others diaries on a day to day basis but thousands of other people will, because their travelogues will be kept in a digital notebook and loaded onto the Internet each day. This on-line journey will also capitalise on the Internet's characteristic ability to erode the distinction between reader and writer as visitors to the Web site can email the artists directly either before or during their journey, and influence their tour. Emails will be collected daily and readers can recommend brief diversions (visits to particular places or people) in response to the project. Wherever appropriate Pope and Guthrie will respond by following the suggestion and documenting the process.

As well as the text-based diaries, Pope and Guthrie will make use of their portable laptop computers to collect further documentation of the journey using video, image scanners, sound recorders and electronic mail. This material will form part of more complex image sound and text pieces which they will produce intermittently throughout the voyage and upload to the Web site every week or so. One underlying theme for exploration has been borrowed from the original trip by Boswell and Johnson: people that they encounter along the way (In Real Life and via email) will be asked to recount experiences and thoughts about second sight, which is, according to the Oxford Dictionary, especially prevalent in

Highlanders.

Second sight, or seeing prophetic visions, is often associated with scrying (gazing into reflected light and images as they play upon water), and therefore the use of the Internet seems especially appropriate. The computer image is a play of light from the screen, and the World Wide Web allows images and texts to flow one into the other, 'transporting' user between Web sites in a way analogous to the way witches used scrying to visualise events happening simultaneously many miles away.

"A Hypertext Journal" offers us contact with the artist, and the possibility of influence the development of an on-line art work. By contrast "The Egg of the Internet" gives an egg 'virtual presence', and makes the actions of virtual visitors effect its chances for life. This project by Netband (Franz F. Feigl, Erik Hobijn, Dick Verdult, Debra Solomon) will transport Net surfers to a hen-house and enable users to care for a fertile chicken egg. A remote camera focussed on the egg will send images of the incubating egg to the Web site, and hopefully after 21 days users can watch the chick hatch. I say 'hopefully' because people logging on to "Egg of the Internet" influence the light, warmth and the turning of the egg, and it it remains to be seen if they will engage with the project and "... get used to the responsibility of looking after a living being through the digital medium" in the way that the artists believe.

If it hatches, users can watch the chick grow, and they can begin to interact with it, indirectly, via the Web site. By selecting different functions on the Web pages visitors will be able to command tele-robotic devices to feed the growing chick, control the lighting to simulate day and night, and clean out the hen-house. It has even been suggested that users talk to the chicken and send images and sounds to stimulate it. There is much rhetoric about the Internet as a medium for a new 'digital' agora, and not much compelling evidence that it is actually being used in this way. It will be interesting to see whether the users of "Egg of the Internet" debate the social and artistic merits of distance-farming, and whether they will vote to liberate the chicken from its mechanically augmented existence.

Regular users of the Internet expect Web sites to change over time, and therefore most sites contain information on the first page which indicates when the site was last updated. If the most recent update was over six months ago it brings the 'kiss of death' to a URL, as visitors jump straight off, and without visitors a Web site ceases to have a function. The developmental nature of many Web sites is akin to notions of duration in time base discussed here. The Net surfers obsession with

updates will be taken to a visually stimulating extreme on the pages of "A Hypertext Journal". The artists will add new bi elements. The pages will take on the qualities of a live work, becoming an integral part of a four week performance. Viewing the Web site will be like seeing a reverse time lapse of an archeological dig: as pages load we will see the first strata of images and texts appearing on the screen and then other, later ad will obscure them. Duration is used to different effect in "Egg of the Internet", which has a in-built sense of anticipation entire life of the chicken.

These projects could also be defined as site-specific, not in terms of the location of their URLs in cyberspace, but in the way that the artists are using digital networks to mediate specific geographical locations, whether that is the shifting location of Boswell and Johnson's route to the Western Isles, or the few feet of a German chicken coop that we see through a remote camera.

We are familiar with interpretations of the Internet which use metaphors of the journey, of travelling and visiting, pioneering and colonising cyberspace. "A Hypertext Journal" problematises this by basing the Website on a real physical voyage, and by retaining a keen awareness of the Johnson-the-Tourist, Pope and Guthrie may draw out some of the ironies and anomalies that surround the fantasy of the 'virtual tourist'.

Similarly, Netband are emphatic about the importance of the 'meat' in their chicken. The fact that the egg is alive, rather than being an artificial life form, is integral to the piece. By asking them to care for it, they are hoping that their users will develop a relationship with the egg, and subsequent chicken, that is more emotionally involved than life form in TechnoSphere.

References

Egg of the Internet
A Hypertext Journal

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