bbc.co.uk

Home   TV   Radio   Talk   Where I Live   A-Z Index   Search

arts ▦

■ **homepage** ■ **art** ■ **books** ■ **get involved** ■ **TV & radio listings**

Network artists - Matt Fuller interviews Mark Tribe

Audio interview transcript (2000)

Mark Tribe founded Rhizome.org, a non-profit online community for the digital art world, and StockObjects, a marketplace for digital objects. His most recent art project, a net artwork called StarryNight, can be found at **http://rhizome.org/starrynight**. Prior to Rhizome and StockObjects, Mark worked as an artist in Berlin, and developed commercial websites at Pixelpark GmbH, a leading German new media agency. He has spoken widely on new media art. His speaking engagements have included Museums and the Web, Ars Electronica, SIGGRAPH, ISEA, the Dutch Electronic Arts Festival, the European Media Arts Festival, Harvard University, the Pratt Institute and Brown University. Mark received a Masters of Fine Arts in Visual Art from the University of California, San Diego (1994) and a BA in Visual Art from Brown University (1990).

Fuller: First of all, perhaps you could explain what Rhizome is, what the history of the website is, and what the mailing list is.
Tribe: Rhizome is a non-profit organisation that is focused on presenting new media art to the public. That means contemporary art that uses new technologies like the Web. Also, fostering critical dialogue about new media art, and preserving new media art for the future. I founded Rhizome in 1996 in Berlin. I was living there making art and working as a Web designer, and I saw the need for a place for a very young but global community of artists and curators and others who were interested in how artists could use the internet as a space to do new kinds of work and reach new kinds of audiences. What is the function of your mailing list?

Fuller: One of the key ways you do this is using a mailing list. Could you explain what function the mailing list has?
Tribe: A mailing list is quite simple really. The way it works is, you send an email to a certain email address: in our case it's list@rhizome.org. The message gets instantly forwarded to all the other subscribers on the list. So it's a really good way to build a grass-roots community and get a lot of people around the world talking to each other and exchanging information. The great thing about an email list compared to a website is that, especially if you're a really busy person, you may not have time to go back to a website every day or every week to stay involved in a community. But email comes to you. It comes into your mailbox and reaches out to you and keeps you involved. Mailing lists have long been used in the art community as a way to keep people in touch across distances. One of the first and most important email lists of it's time was Nettime, which started in Berlin and Amsterdam in '94 or '95, just a few months before I started Rhizome. Nettime served as a model for what we do.

Fuller: You work specifically in a New York context. You've got predecessors such as The Thing in there, but I also wondered if you had a particular flavour that the New York locality added to the mailing list or to the activities of Rhizome.
Tribe: I started Rhizome in Berlin, then moved to New York, largely because that's where I felt that I had the best access to resources: money and talent and space. And I just felt there was less resistance to doing something new there, compared to Germany. But we've tried not to let Rhizome become a kind of New York-centric community, to try and keep it as international as possible, and were trying to avoid giving it a New York flavour. We have subscribers in seventy-five countries; only about thirty per cent are in the United States. Most of them are elsewhere. So much of the art world collapses into a myopic New York-focused vision, and were really trying to avoid that and stay international in scope.

Fuller: One thing that's interesting is the people who write to the list. You get artists, you get critics, you get technical experts. You get a different variety of people talking in a lot of different ways about the work or about issues that affect new media art. There doesn't seem to be that division between artists and critics that you get in the mainstream art world. How can you maintain that, or stop people rigidifying into roles as new media art becomes more accepted?
Tribe: I think from the very start net art has been a kind of do-it-yourself movement, and these artists are their own marketers and publicists, they are their own gallerists and their own dealer. And also often their own critic. And you're right, there is a real blurring of the boundaries between artist - the one that makes the art - and critic - the one that talks about it. With the emergence of the Internet, artists have felt free to review other peoples work, to interview each other and to write critical texts. But that's integral to the structure of the way our community works. It really is a grass-roots network in that all of the content comes from the community. It turns the model of a traditional magazine on it's head, in that you have a few editors and a small circle of writers that produce content for a large, large audience. With Rhizome it's many to many: everyone talks to everybody.

Fuller: In the last few years you've seen the emergence of artist groups such as De Geuzen, Strike in London, and Backspace - also in London, producing infrastructures for other people to show or to make artwork, as artwork itself. I wondered if you saw Rhizome as art or a function related to, but separate from, actual art?
Tribe: There are a lot of artist groups and projects that create platforms as artwork. rTMark is another example. I don't actually see Rhizome in that way. I am an artist and I did nothing but make art until I started Rhizome. I still make art some of the time, but Rhizome doesn't feel like an artwork to me. It feels like a platform and an organisation, although I think it fulfils the same role in my life that making art did, in that it's very creative and it's a kind of articulation of my world view.

Fuller: I wonder if over the years you've seen the kinds of material, or subjects of the material circulated via the mailing list has actually changed? Do you see there's any broad patterns or focuses of discussion on the list?
Tribe: Yeah, definitely. For one thing, the media that people are interested in have changed. When Rhizome first started people were still doing a lot of work with CD Roms, and some with virtual reality. CD Roms have pretty much died off as an art medium, with the exception of Jodi's (**http://www.jodi.org/**) OSS. The Web-based work that people talked about went from really basic text and simple graphics to more sophisticated software like the Webstalker which is a kind of Internet browser by I/O/D, or Netomat, another alternative browser or John Cleamer's Glass Bead. And also much more visually rich work like entropy8zuper!'s Wirefire performances. But in terms of the issues, I think at the beginning net.art wasn't even really seen as a movement and didn't yet have a name, and suddenly net.art with a dot in the middle, net.art, was coined, somewhat ironically by Vuk Cosic I believe from Slovenia. And there's a small circle of artists that got pretty hot pretty quickly and started travelling

around talking about their work. And so suddenly there was something to react to, and now especially recently net.art has started to become accepted by mainstream institutions like museums. I think one of the main points of discussion is how should this community respond to these institutions? What's the most appropriate way for net.art to be exhibited in a museum, things like that.

Fuller: What do you see as good examples of that occurring, and also, what do you see as ways in which museums are unhelpful in this kind of area?
Tribe: I think the best example today is a show which was up at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the United States last spring - I think it was up in March or so - called Lets Entertain. It was a really interesting gallery show organised around the idea of art as entertainment or intersections between fine art and entertainment. And Steve Dietz, who's the director of new media projects at the Walker, created an online component for the show, kind of a parallel exhibition that existed only online. He commissioned some original works, he worked with a net.artist, Vivienne Selbo to create a very artistic interface that was in a way an artwork in itself, then pulled together a show linking to lots of different net.art projects. That part of the show was called the Art Entertainment Network, and I think it was very clever and very appropriate. What they did not try to do is install the net.art in the gallery, which is what the Whitney attempted for the biennial and it really failed. The Whitney included net.art in the biennial this year for the first time, and they had a black box room with a computer linked to a projector and a bunch of benches. So when you came in either you would sit down at the bench and watch while someone else surfs, or you would sit at the computer and click while everyone else watches. And that destroys or adds violence to the fundamental paradigm that net.art is intended for, which is somebody sitting alone with a computer in a very intimate one-on-one interactive relation to the work. Instead, you are forced either to be a performer or a passive viewer, and neither of those roles are ones that are intended in the primary net.art paradigm. I think there is a strong future for Net installation, for museum curators working with net.artists to commission works that are made specifically for off-line environments where there's interaction between virtual space and real space.

Fuller: What do you think that net.artists have allowed people to see or to find out about the Internet, about networks in general, that maybe isn't articulated so well by mainstream Internet culture? What do you think people can get out of viewing net.art or using it?
Tribe: I think a lot of what artists do is re-contextualise everyday experience so that the most interesting or problematic or beautiful features of it are drawn into focus. Actually, I think your recent projects, A Song For Occupations, titled after a Walt Whitman poem is a really good example of taking something that has become totally normalised. It is the incredible excess of menu options and features on Microsoft Word, and making it strange in a way. By making it visible we become more aware of how our choices, our constrains, controls, how our desires are channelled.

Fuller: With Rhizome.org you've looked at developing alternative interfaces to your normal interface which is clear and useful. But you also have these other interfaces called Starrynight and Spiral. Could you explain those?
Tribe: Over the past four years we've been building up an online library of articles, texts that have been written by people in the community. And now we have somewhere upwards of 1600, and they're all indexed and categorised with the name of the author, when it was posted and various keywords and such. Normally the way people access the content is by doing keyword searches, the way you would on a search engine like Yahoo! or AltaVista or Google. And that's very effective, and it's an efficient way to find information, but it doesn't really give you a sense of the breadth and depth of what's there and the relationships between the different types of content.

We created an alternative interface called Starrynight that represents each of the texts in the archive as a star in the dark night sky, and the brightness of the star is determined by the number of times that the corresponding article has been read. So the brightest stars correspond to the most popular texts. Right away, looking at this night sky you see these constellations of bright stars and dim stars that represents the texts in the library and how popular they are. Then by mousing over, by rolling the cursor over one of the mice it brings up the little pop up list of the key words for the corresponding text in common with the other texts. And then if you click on one of those keywords it draws a constellation that maps together all the texts that have to do with a common theme, so for example, if you rolled over a star that brings up a list of keywords that might include gender, identity and the Internet. If you click on gender, it draws a constellation: the gender constellation, that links together all the stars that have to do with gender. And then clicking on a star brings up the text in another window, so it actually becomes a gateway, an interface onto the data beyond just visualising it.

Fuller: Do you find with that, that because you're just focusing on texts that are most popular that some basically just disappear and no one ever clicks on?
Tribe: Yeah, that was one of the original critiques of it, when we first put it up. It would be a self-reinforcing feedback system where people would click on the brightest stars. But it seems like, given the nature of the Rhizome community, that isn't such a problem. People are almost more interested in clicking on the dim stars.

Fuller: Related to the Starrynight interface, you've also got one called Spiral. Could you explain how that works?
Tribe: Spiral takes the Starrynight metaphor of stars representing texts in a night sky in a slightly different direction. It organises the stars chronologically, in a galactic Spiral. As you pull the scroll bar down on the right side of the window the galaxy spirals outward and you go back in time. And the arms of the galaxy, the strands of the galaxy, represent different types of texts, discussion threads, interviews, theory, commentary and announcements. Similarly, clicking on a text brings it up so you can read it on the screen.

Fuller: One thing that interests me about your archives, or how you use archives, is this sense of them being interrogable by keywords. I wondered if you could explain how you use keywords, how you arrived at them, and perhaps what keywords begin to mean in the context of a database or in terms of a networked archive.
Tribe: Keywords are really valuable because they enable you to do searches on words or concepts that aren't actually in the body of the text. So you might have something that was written by a cyber-feminist, and she might never use the word 'gender', but if you wanted to find that article you might have the word 'gender' in mind. So what we did was define a vocabulary of words that we thought mapped out the range of key concepts that define the field of new media art. Then whenever we get a text that seems to really demand a new word we give some thought to it, and if it seems like there's going to be more need for that word, well, actually add it to the vocabulary. But it is a restricted vocabulary of words that we can use, that grows slowly over time.

Fuller: One thing related to your mailing list archive is the art.base archive which you launched about a year or so ago. Perhaps you could explain that?
Tribe: The art.base is an online archive or database of Internet-based artworks. The impetus to start it came when we discovered that some of the works created by net.artists in the early years of net.art, say around 1995, 1996, had disappeared. For one reason or another, an artist when they create a work of Web art finds an intranet server somewhere, puts it up, maybe moves onto the next project, and from time to time a systems administrator might just not realise how important the work is and hit the delete key. And there goes our history, in the click of a mouse. We also realised that if you go to one of the major search engines and you type in 'net.art' you're not likely to find very much. People kept asking us for a list of important net.art projects. So we wanted to create a good way for people to find and access

net.art, and also to make sure that it was still around in several years. So we started making copies, or what we call clones, of these projects and putting them in our online database, and keywording them and gathering a statement and a biography from the artist, a thumbnail image and making them accessible online.

Fuller: How did you begin to decide what pieces of work were important to you and what not?
Tribe: We tried to distinguish the art.base as an archive from a curated collection, so we tried to make it more inclusive than exclusive. If someone submits something and it is net.art, meaning it's an artwork and not something that's clearly not art - like say, for example, a commercial design project. And if it's net.art as opposed to something else - meaning it's not someone's water colours that they've scanned in and want to put their portfolio online - then it more or less belongs in the art.base" and accept it. Where selectivity comes in is in terms of where we apply our limited resources to gather the information about the work, doing quality control on the keywording and the bio and the statement and the other materials the artists submit. So we do a better job of archiving the work that we feel is most historically significant.

Fuller: This term you use, new media art: why have you come to that as being the defining locus of what Rhizome discusses as compared to, say, net.art, as compared to Internet culture? Where do you see new media? What's the newness or what's the media going to move on to next?
Tribe: The reason we chose new media art as opposed to, say, new media culture is to focus on precisely the intersection of contemporary art and emerging technologies. But we chose not to make it net.art or Internet art because we recognise that Internet art is not going to be new media for ever. So we see new media as an embracing term that covers the shifting terrain where contemporary artists are exploring and experimenting with whatever new technologies are coming down the road. So today it's net.art, tomorrow it may be genetic art or wireless technologies or biotechnology.

Links
Rhizome - **http://www.rhizome.org/**
Spiral interface artwork - **http://rhizome.org/spiral**