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Artistic License: Creating a Space for Net Art

by Jeff Howe



Net-artist Maciej Wisniewski: developing a vocabulary for a new medium (photo: Michael Sofronski)

Maciej Wisniewski shifted his weight from one foot to the other and smiled nervously. He and about 20 other people were gathered outside Postmasters Gallery in Chelsea for the public debut of his meta-browser/artwork, *netomat* (downloadable at www.netomat.net). A table with bottles of water and juice, plastic cups, and a bin of ice had been set up on the sidewalk, but the ice had melted and the liquids had been quickly drained by the uncomfortable, sweaty crowd loitering outside the gallery. "God knows we tried. The show will be open tomorrow, June 25th. We will be ready," read the signs taped to Postmasters' roll-down metal gate.

"It's very early, in terms of the existence of the medium, and museums are slow to respond. But it's naive to get frustrated with them," says Mark Tribe, founder of Rhizome (www.rhizome.org), one of several Web sites that serves as an online forum for the emerging critical discourse on net-art. "I think across the board, they all want to find ways to get up to speed on net-based work, but it's a space that's still grassroots and below their radar."

For Wisniewski, it was a small disappointment in the context of a far larger one. The opening had been scheduled for June 24, a Thursday. On Wednesday morning Wisniewski received a call from MOMA curator Barbara London informing him that—contrary to a plan three months in development—the Modern would not be hosting *netomat* on its Web site. Nor would it place a kiosk featuring *netomat* in its exhibition space. The news sent both Wisniewski and Postmasters' director Tamas Banovich scrambling to provide server space for the artwork, which they barely procured in time for the belated Friday night opening. Up until London's call, MOMA had wanted Postmasters to take a backseat, and let the museum claim exclusive sponsorship of *netomat* for three months. In return, MOMA would promote and host the browser for a minimum of one year. "They made a lot of promises," Wisniewski says of MOMA staff.

It is the strategy that MOMA employed in courting Wisniewski that frustrates Banovich more than their decision not to exhibit the piece. "Realistically, it would have been a miracle if it'd worked out," Banovich says. "They can't make a decision in three months." Art institutions the size of MOMA slate their exhibitions years in advance, while the burgeoning field of what is loosely termed net-art transforms itself on a daily basis. Neither Banovich nor Wisniewski doubt London's interest in or enthusiasm for *netomat*, or net-art in general, just MOMA's ability to respond to a rapidly changing medium. "She tried everything, I could tell," Banovich says. "But I think at the last day someone else stopped it."

London won't go into detail regarding the impasse, but she does express regret over the failed negotiations with

Wisniewski. She also echoes Banovich's statements regarding the difficulties museums face in presenting net-art. "We're a big, lumbering institution, so not everything has worked according to plan. The Web moves at incredible speed. Software, hardware—it's constantly unfolding and evolving." And, she points out, museum decisions are reached by committee. "It's a collective voice. Not everything I'm interested in gets shown."

The "collective voice" of a museum at once constitutes one of its greatest strengths—what London refers to as the internal system of checks and balances—and in the case of emerging discourses like net-art, one of its greatest weaknesses. "What happens is, you get individual curators who are really interested and knowledgeable about what's going on, but everyone else is afraid of stepping into anything in which they're not experts," says Fred Wilson, one of this year's MacArthur genius grant recipients. He likens the obstacles net-art faces in finding a museum audience to those faced by artists exploring issues of cultural diversity 20 years ago. "It's outside [some curators'] value structure, so they don't have the impetus to take it seriously. I don't know what it's going to take for [Net-based artists] to overcome the barriers we face."

Perhaps just time. When video first emerged as a medium for artistic expression in the early '70s, curators and critics were quick to dismiss it. The trajectory traced by video art—from exclusion to a grudging, token inclusion to its current ubiquity—is an oft-referenced model for net-art. To communicate to a broad audience, artistic media require a critical framework—a set of conventions and a history through which the viewer can interpret the work. "People like Maciej are mavericks," says London. "They're still developing a vocabulary for the medium."

It's a sentiment with which few artists working in net-art would disagree. As in all applications of new media, the technology's largely untapped potential provides its greatest appeal. As such, net-artwork is often as exploratory as it is revelatory. Wisniewski's *netomat* reinvents the Internet, and serves up the results through a visually mesmerizing interface. A search engine that retrieves sounds and images as well as text, *netomat* facilitates an associative, experiential journey through the chaos of the Internet. It addresses the medium in a formal sense, but escapes the trap of becoming tech qua tech. The viewer, user, whatever, dominates the art. That said, it's also challenging stuff, not so much questioning traditional conceptions of objecthood (where is the art?), meaning (what is the art?), and authorship (who makes the art?) as leaving them behind altogether.

Is it any wonder that curators who specialize in, say, minimalist sculpture (and last went online to get cheap tickets to Venice and Basel) don't get it? Net-artists themselves—many of whom, like Wisniewski, have backgrounds in programming—are still trying to figure out what it means to make art out of ether. "It's very early, in terms of the existence of the medium, and museums are slow to respond. But it's naive to get frustrated with them," says Mark Tribe, founder of Rhizome (www.rhizome.org), one of several Web sites that serves as an online forum for the emerging critical discourse on net-art. "I think across the board, they all want to find ways to get up to speed on net-based work, but it's a space that's still grassroots and below their radar."

And that, he says, is just fine. Because net-artists happen to use extremely marketable skills in the development of their art, the paradigm of the garreted artist suffering through soul-sucking day jobs to support the art habit breaks down when applied to net-artists. The community that makes up what might be termed (again, loosely) the net-art world bears little resemblance to the traditional one that exists in three dimensions. Wolfgang Staehle, a founder of The Thing (www.thing.net), a combo research lab/"virtual nightclub"/online exhibition space, says many net-art practitioners have problems with the term "artist." "I personally prefer cultural activist," he says, and points out that the community (he prefers the term "social sculpture") that gathers on The Thing is made up of political activists, hackers, writers, and programmers, as well as artists working in traditional media. In addition to the explosion of Web sites that serve as repositories for net-artwork, numerous net-art festivals are held each year, though mostly in Europe, and a major resource center called ZKM (www.zkm.de), described by critic Robert Atkins as "the Bauhaus of digital art," recently opened in Karlsruhe, Germany.

"One thing that attracted me to the Internet as a space for art making is that it allowed us to work independently of the entrenched institutions that dominate the world of contemporary art. At this point, we don't really need the museums," says Rhizome's Tribe. The question remains, however: do museums need net-art? Many forward-thinking curators obviously think so. David Ross, former director of the Whitney Museum and current director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, serves on Rhizome's board and has acquired Web-based art since arriving at SFMOMA. Sarah Rogers, director of exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, recently curated a well-received show called "Body MŽcanique: Artistic Explorations of Digital Realms." "There's so much fascinating work taking place that utilizes technology. Sure, museums should be featuring that work." She notes, for instance, that this year's Venice Biennale

featured only one tech-based artwork. "Institutions don't support contemporary work enough period, whatever the medium."

But however sparing institutional patronage for net-art might seem, no one disagrees that there's a great deal more than there was even two years ago. In an *Art in America* article published last August, Atkins criticized American art museums for "waiting until the dust settles before committing curatorial resources to online art." He's since become greatly encouraged by the steps museums have taken to get involved in the medium. MOMA commissioned three Web-specific projects for last spring's exhibition, "The Museum as Muse." The Guggenheim continues work on its ambitious Virtual Museum as well as commissioning ongoing Web projects. The Walker Art Center continues to expand its already extensive collection of Web-based art. Dia Center for the Arts recently announced a partnership with Stadium (www.stadiumweb.com), a site featuring work not only by artists like Wisniewski, but also those known best for working in more traditional mediums, like Louise Lawler and Allan McCollum.

But above and beyond what net-artists can offer traditional art institutions, and what those institutions can offer in return, Atkins feels the Internet itself is where net-artists' contributions are most valuable. "The online realm is desperately in need of their distinctive way of seeing things," he says. "If the Web becomes increasingly commercialized, the influence of artists will diminish. Art has always been appropriated by fashion photographers, etc., but on the Net, artists can affect culture at a much deeper level, offer an alternative to the glut of commercialization and information that the medium will become if we leave it in a corporate entertainment state."