The Web as new-mediaistan juggernaut is already an old anthem, and it was only slightly refreshed by a politically hip twist at the twenty-third annual Ars Electronica new-media festival. At a cost of nearly $1.7 million dollars and with 1,737 artists submitting work for the Prix Ars, which takes the Oscar-like form of the Golden Nica, the festival is no small affair. Still, like digital art itself, it has remained marginalized in the larger arena, and its codirectors, Gerfried Stocker and Christine Schipper, took a calculated risk this year at greater art-world relevance. Riding the coattails of Okwui Enwezor’s postcolonialist Documents 13, they chose the catchy theme “Unplugged: Art as the Scene of Global Conflicts.” Africa was their focus, but their argument ultimately dovetailed to an imagined case of modern envy.

Throughout the festival, Stocker kept talking brightly about the utopian possibilities of a networked world, but a devastating equation emerged from five days of symposia: 1 + 1 = 2, but also >. That is, business-to-business networks easily connect continent to continent (and consumer to consumer), but just as easily offer redundant uses for a terrorist-to-terrorist network conspiring carnage at the speed of light. More to the point, as various speakers noted, the Third World doesn’t need Disney.com—it needs water, medicine, food, debt relief, and, by the way, widespread electricity to plug into. Broadcasting in a million laptops, fun as it might be, especially if they come with satellite, probably won’t tip the scales against the mountain of disease, mayhem, and poverty.

Amid this cheerier patter, I kept coming back to one nagging question: Where’s the art? Where’s the difference in the work chosen to reflect the political theme? It was displayed like an afterthought on a balcony above the conference hall: a half-dozen websites that proclaimed the network dream but the dystopian arrogance of power. No doubt the fact that none of these projects was by an African—indeed, that there was almost no work at the festival, because those with more influence—confirmed the curators’ notion of unpluggedness, but it struck a charging note on the hopeful globalist ear.

And works such as 


What was interesting was a comment of Stocker’s. He argued that the look of the interface is less the point: The art is in the interactivity. The formulation stuck me as strange but familiar, the inverse of an argument made thirty-five years ago, in fact, in this magazine. That was when Michael Fried published “Art and Object-hood” and characterized Minimalism as a theatrical art dependent on the spatial engagement of the beholder to participate, to complete the experience of the work, which was not pure enough to provide the instantaneous epiphany that begets grace. But interestingly, Net art and a lot of other new-media work seems participation as the very essence of its quality. Online gaming is often the metaphor for and the means of interacting its goal is release (for better or for worse) from our daily lives through a medium of entertainment, not through grace.

Is this bad? Not necessarily. Entertainment in place of spiritual grace is surely a different calculus of community—as other, more compelling, work at Ars Electronica suggested. Among the sixty-seven honorable mentions and award winners on view in the Prix Ars exhibition, the theatrical and interactive were there in full sensorial

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forces, for example, the visually dull but awfully stimulating FastStation, 2001, by Volker Morawer and Thomas Ruff—a contest of funsthat punishes the loser’s gaming hand with electric shocks (literally not the faintest of heart). Far more pacific was Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s winning Body Memory—Relational Architecture No. 6, 2001, whose huge screen in Linz’s main square showed its Golgothian photo-graphs of passersby upon which our own shadows danced, triggering a change of the image and locking into the idea that the power of new-media art derives finally from the instant inventions of interaction.

The communal was underlined by the festival’s most satisfying work, despite its creakily clever name, a-portable, 2001, by David Rokeby. The work’s seven Mac computers and monitors hang from the ceiling in a darkened theatrical space filled with the dulcet tones of machines murmurings and skewer sentences based on the words of visitors picked up by microphones. Each monitor showed an ear, hand cupped beseeching to it or covering it in rejection, as if to say, “Too much input!” The computer’s polite nonsense Louis Carroll would have envied: “The twice silvered davenport outlives the little. The designated distance forms the beggared half.” But occasionally, when left uninterupted by human speech, they chanted the same words in unison—an oddly comforting gathering of voices that suggested all the scattering in our lonely heads quieting to one universal speech, at once silly, fantastic, and ephemeral.

Here was hope and a little bit of madness, and it captured the corrosive politics of Ars Electronica, with its servers and servitude, mixed signals and mesmeric gloop. W.H. Auden wrote that art is “one of the most powerful means of transforming closed communities into open ones.” That art can actually propel political change is doubtful now, but no art more thoroughly courts the possibilities of openness than that networked art of interactivity. These are still early days for the technology. When the visual, the aural, and the feeling touch truly join the interactive, this art will grow beyond mere novelty: It will be new. [1]

Steven Henry Madoff is a frequent contributor to Artforum.