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FEATURE ARTICLES

SPECIAL DOSSIER: MUSINGS ON NET.ART

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In this issue of the ISEA Newsletter, two artists give us different perspectives on net.art: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (Mexico/Canada) reports on the Webby Awards and Mary-Anne 'MEZ' Breeze (Australia) presents us with a 'performative text' written in "mezangelle", a linguistic form ripe with possibilities for email performance art.

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ARTISTS IN WEBBY WONDERLAND

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer interviewed by Katarina Soukup

Touted as the Oscars of the Internet, the Annual Webby Awards, which took place this past May in San Francisco, give out prizes to websites in 27 categories ranging from Activism, Commerce, Kids, Print & Zines, all the way down to something labeled "Weird". There is even a special category to recognize sites "that display art, are art, are about art, or provide art criticism". It might seem, however, just a bit risky for net artists to be sipping cocktails with the freshly minted multi-millionaires of Silicon Valley at events like the Webbies -what with DotCom euphoria sweeping (and perhaps dumping) Corporate America, the dizzying speed with which the web is being gobbled up by huge, hyphenated media conglomerates, and recent attempts by transnational corporations to squeeze arts organizations such as

Etoy and Leonardo off the web. The tensions were no more apparent than during the presentation of last year's Webby Award to Jodi, who reputedly shouted "Capitalist sons-of-bitches!!" at the stunned audience and organizers. With this year's web art winner, Webstalker, declaring that "technological development = class war," it seems the Webbies are increasingly becoming a platform for artists to repudiate the DotCom economy.

ISEA asked Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, who was nominated for the newly inaugurated SFMOMA Webby Award, to act as our "WebbySpy" and report on the uneasy commingling of aesthetic and commercial visions of the Internet at this year's Webby Awards. He also fills us in on the impact of the SFMOMA \$50,000 prize, and the role of the museum in the creation and presentation of net.art.

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INL:

What was it was like to be there as an artist in the middle of what has become quite a DotCom spectacle?

RLH:

It was great! In particular I loved the tension between the blatant commercialism, marketing, self-promotion and hype, and the veneer of psuedo-radicality that the industry is supposed to represent. The mix of geeks and venture capitalists running the DotCom economy wanted to prove that they can be radical with an Armani suit. Everyone wanted to be a

millionaire! Everyone wanted to believe in the new era of prosperity!

Everyone thought that they "think different".

It was a bit like a sporting event. For some of the smaller companies represented in the awards, this is really going to impact their day-to-day life, and when they won an award, there was an incredible effusiveness and explosion of happiness. The audience also cheered, in particular when "underdog" companies such as Napster won the Music category in the shadow of a lawsuit from Metallica.

Sometimes the ostentatiousness was embarrassing, but most of it was fun. I did get an opportunity to meet some of the artists who were nominated or who attended, some of whom are quite established like Bill Viola, Gary Hill, DJ Spooky, Michael Naimark and Rebecca Allen. so I guess I was happy schmoozing like everyone else. As for the award-acceptance speeches, which can't be longer than five words, there weren't any great ones, except, in my opinion, those of the artists. I think artists seize the opportunity to bring up sensitive or critical issues into this kind of event. We are party-poopers by definition. Look at Jodi's speech last year, or Webstalker this year, who said something like "Remember technological innovation equals class war". If I had the opportunity to be in front of these 3000 millionaires with immense prosperity, I would have also liked to say five words that would rub people the wrong way. I think that's what artists do in general: highlight or underline the hypocrisy of it all.

INL:

Do you think the artists there had an impact, or were they ghettoized and seen as the "freaks"? Do you think, for instance, that those DotCom millionaires got Jodi's message last year?

RLH:

Well, sadly, I think it serves the purpose of the event. When something like Jodi happens, they just paternalize them, or say "Way to go! That's the radical spirit!" Since the whole web economy is based on that hype, that youth and supposed radicality, it fits very well into the script. The attitude is: "Let's wait and see what the artists have to say and hopefully

it's something disturbing because it helps further our vision of our own radicality".

INL: Could you tell us about the Webby category in which your site "Vectoral Elevation" was nominated.

RLH:

It was a new award called the SFMOMA Webby Prize for Art. It is very different from the other Webby awards, for instance in that it has a monetary purse and its own separate symposium. It awards a lot of money - \$50,000 US- which is double or triple what you can get in any other net.art contest or competition that I'm aware of. The Award is not so much interested in one single piece as it is a body of work that involves the Net. The jurors were established artists like Gary Hill, familiar electronic art curators like Machiko Kusahara and Femke Wolting, John Maeda from the

MIT Media Lab and four of SFMOMA's curators.

I am happy that they made this a separate category, - it's not a ghetto where the artist is a token representative. It is more a way of recognizing that established art institutions need to somehow help produce work or maintain the operations of people who are pushing the envelope of on-line art. Despite the fact that most net.art is independently produced and non-objectual I think it is crucial to have this kind of institutional support.

It was interesting to see that Auria [Harvey] and Michael [Samyn, creators of the winning website Entropy8Zuper,] do not see themselves as artists in the traditional sense of the word.

INL

I know Michael calls himself a failed designer and an ex-artist!

RLH:

And that's great because when they are given this position by the museum, which is supposed to officially legitimize their practice, the museum feels that artists kind of 'owe it to them' to play the traditional role of the inspired genius. It was wonderful because Michael and Auria did not do that. For example they said that video art had really missed the boat on interactivity and contact with people -saying this in front of video art super star Gary Hill (who indirectly defended himself saying that all art is interactive). They also refused to accept the idea that the museum could have such an important role on the development of net

art, which was quite controversial and fun to hear in front of all the SFMOMA curators.

I personally believe that the museum can have a role, and one of those roles is precisely to give an award such as this, to pump a bit of money into an ecology that is quite volatile. Now the question is, what does the museum want in return? My feeling is that they don't want to be seen as mausoleums, they don't want to be seen as dead institutions, and I really welcome that. I think every museum should be trying to establish some kind of Net Art operation, whether it's production, presentation or conferences. The most frustrating or most perverse thing you could do as a museum is to purchase or collect sites as if they were collectable objects, and then have links on your websites, or desktops within the institution to access them. This is perverse because the nature of Net Art is that it is disseminated, distributed, it's a dialogue, it grows and is uncontrollable and cannot be classified.

But I do think museums could help the artists develop special versions of those sites, which are closer to interactive environments. The issue here is how a net experience is interfaced to reality, through alternative interfaces, through large screen projection, through 3-D positional sound. Something that enhances the experience of the Internet practice beyond what you could have at home with a keyboard and mouse. Something that is more immersive, body-based, performative or collective. In the language of

amusement parks, they call it "location-based entertainment". Sure, people could have a DVD or a Net connection at home, but in order to experience a simulator rock with a huge screen, you have to get out of the home and get into a simulator in an entertainment complex. To the degree that a museum is a place where people share experiences, it would be wonderful if net art or electronic art had that kind of vectorial quality where it could be interfaced in a unique way in the museum.

INL:

What has been the impact of the Webby nomination and being involved in this whole spectacle (besides \$6500 US for having been awarded an honorable mention!)?

RLH:

Since getting the award we saw the visits to the site go up ten fold, although they went back to normal two weeks later. The money was nice and we are using it to publish a book.

As for the whole experience, this is the first time I've come into contact with this Californian ideology, and see first hand what Wired Magazine is talking about all the time. I am sometimes in Mexico City reading headlines from Wired Magazine that say "This is the long, economic boom, and we are living in incredible, unsurpassed prosperity!". And then I look around me and I see totally the opposite: an intensification of economic violence, widespread insecurity and panic, ecological disaster and a concentration of power away from governments and into corporations. So finally in coming to

the Webbies and meeting these people, I recognize that they do live a very artificial reality. They live a new trans-national, post-everything wealth. It's amazing. It's seductive and blatant. To me it's interesting.

INL:

Interesting in what sense?

RLH:

It's perversely interesting. To me this whole scenario is a micro-ecology of people who refuse to acknowledge that the rest of the world does not enjoy the same prosperity that they enjoy. They just fail to make the connection between global, liberal, transnational capitalism and economic violence between North and South for example. They don't get that. Everyone is kind of innocent in a way, enthusiastic, and full of ideas setting up their corporations. And it's so artificial and fake. It is unique, and that is what makes it interesting: such a concentration of wealth in young people's hands. Imagine if they decided to use that prosperity to really seek radical change. but why would they? To them this is the promised global village and everyone can have a part of it!

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (aka DJ Clifford Porner) is a Mexican-Canadian media artist who works in relational architecture and technological theatre. His latest piece can be seen at <http://www.alzado.net>