

**DIGITAL**

# Internet Art Survives, But the Boom Is Over

By **BEN SISARIO**

**I**T'S dead. It's thriving. It's everywhere and nowhere.

Like most things in the online world, the state of Internet art is subject to no small amount of exaggeration. During boom times, as art made with ones and zeroes entered Chelsea galleries and blue-chip museums, the new form was seen as the wave of the future. But now, ask an artist or a gallery owner or a blogger about it and you are likely to get a groan.

"Internet art's golden age pretty much seems to be dead," said Cory Arcangel, a 25-year-old artist in Brooklyn whose reprogrammed Nintendo game cartridges are included in the current biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

There is no shortage of anecdotal evidence of a fall from grace. There is the declining presence of Net art in the new biennial — this year there are several "new media" projects, like Mr. Arcangel's, but no defined section for Internet art, as there was in 2002. Another indication was last year's layoffs at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, which had been one of the mainstream art world's big boosters of digital art.

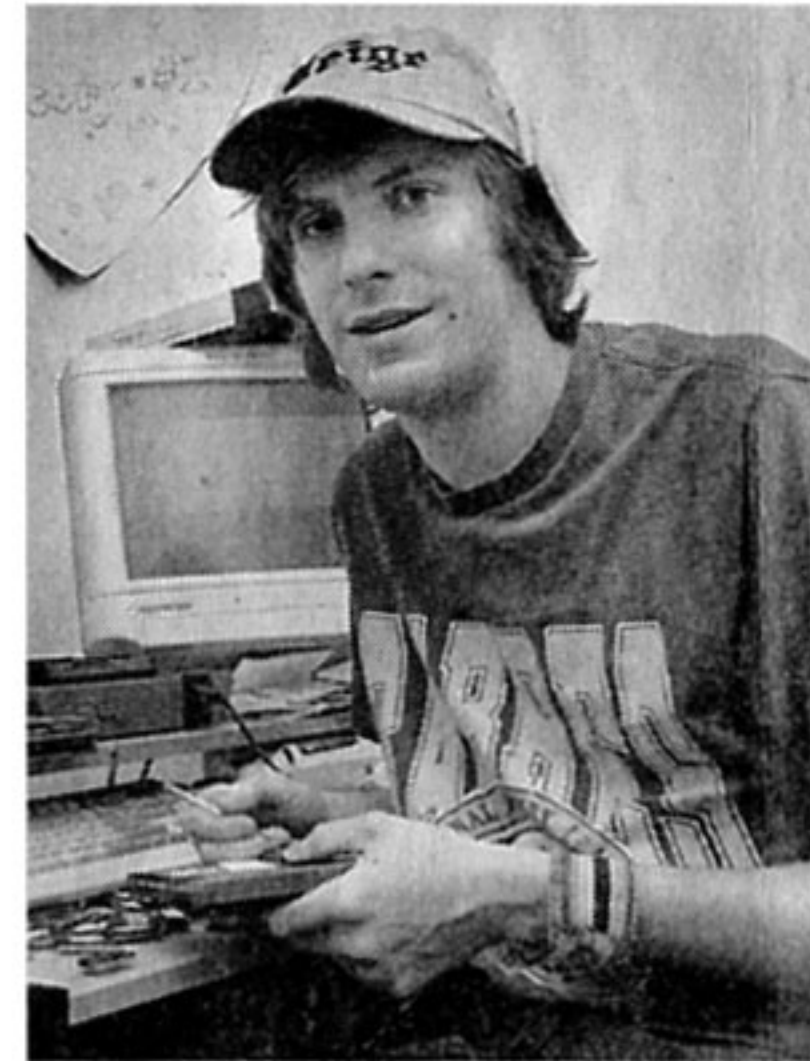
Then there is simple fatigue. Inter-

net art may have little direct connection to the dot-com financial bubble, but its reputation has suffered as the Internet itself has lost cachet. Many who work in the Internet art world report a sense of digital exhaustion.

"It can be really tedious to still be staring at a computer and trying to nurture these e-mail-based communities after seven years," said Rachel Greene, the executive director of the Net art hub site Rhizome.org, and the author of a book on the history of Internet art, to be published in June by Thames & Hudson.

But nothing on the Internet is quite so simple, and reports of Net art's death may be greatly exaggerated. Get past the groan and the bad news and you may hear about an astonishing quantity and variety of art on the Net, and about projects that reach vast audiences.

One artist, a 30-year-old New Yorker named Jonah Peretti, has reached millions of people with a series of subversive online projects he calls contagious media that spread, viruslike, by quick linking and electronic word-of-mouth. His 2001 e-mail exchange with Nike over an attempt to order a sneaker customized with the word "sweatshop," for example, has been seen by more than 10 million people, he said, and a Web site he created with his sister Chelsea in 2002 called "Black People



William C. Lopez for The New York Times

**CASTING A WIDER NET** Artist Cory Arcangel at his home in Brooklyn.

Love Us," which satirizes a white couple who consider themselves enlightened on race relations, had three million page views in one month.

Web sites that track Internet art projects, like Rhizome.org, Turbulence.org and the Whitney's own "Artport" at Whitney.org, are overflowing with new work, from pulsating Flash programs to software parodies, from full-blown museum exhibitions to esoteric hacks.

Though the mainstream art world now has less money to commission Net artists, its support has not dried up. The Walker Art Center laid off its popular and influential new-media curator, Steve Dietz, but it still has a five-member new-media staff, according to its director, Kathy Halb-

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reich, and has four major interactive projects lined up.

Mr. Peretti, who works for Eyebeam, a center for new media art in Chelsea, is bullish on Internet art because, as he sees it, the pressure of being the next big thing is off. "Net art' is over as a movement, but there are more creative projects happening online now than ever before," he said. "Most people making this new work do not self-consciously call themselves Net artists."

Internet art, in other words, has become more integrated into the art world; artists who create work out of ones and zeroes are more likely to simply call themselves artists, period. And as the field has evolved, the Internet has become more of a tool for art rather than the primary subject, as it was for the many in the first generation of Net artists like Vuk Cosic, who parodied famous Web sites and created ASCII animations, and Jodi.org, the team that sometimes buried designs deep in a site's source code.

Mr. Arcangel said that part of his motivation behind the Nintendo hack was not just completing it, but creating a Web site that showed how he did it. The project itself — his "Super Mario Clouds v2k3" from 2003, at the biennial, erases everything from the game display but the puffy white clouds floating in a pixellated blue sky — may have been physical, but it was designed partly for an online audience. "While it's not really Net art like Net art used to be defined," he said, "it is Net art because half the reason I made it was so I could put it on the Internet and have it participate in Internet culture."

Even as Internet art has grown and the Internet has become a fixture of everyday life, Net artists have come to face a new problem: do they have any relevance to a larger culture that is no longer very curious or afraid of the technology? There may be lots of Internet art out there, so it cannot be dead. But if it has lost its sense of novelty and excitement, is it really alive?

"It's undead," said Mark Tribe, the founder of Rhizome.org who is now the director of art and technolo-

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gy at Columbia University School of the Arts. "Although more artists around the world are creating art that happens online, it does seem to be less relevant to the culture at large." Privacy and surveillance are the new hot topics, Mr. Tribe said.

But is it fair to hold a new art form up to such demanding standards of broad mainstream resonance? Many curators and online arts workers are still waiting to see where it goes.

"It takes a long time for artists to understand a new medium and understand what it can do," said Lawrence Rinder, the curator of contemporary art at the Whitney and the chief curator of the 2002 biennial. "If people thought the Internet was suddenly going to replace painting as

the default medium of contemporary practice, that isn't the case."

Mr. Rinder and others draw a parallel to the development of video art in the 1970's. First ignored by the art establishment, video artists concentrated on proving themselves with work that was focused on the formal possibilities of the medium itself. After finally gaining mainstream acceptance, video art has become integrated into contemporary art.

"Increasingly, artists using both video and the Internet are blurring the boundaries of these media," Mr. Rinder said. "Now you have artists including video and videolike effects in their installations and in their sculptures, and they're not necessarily identified as 'video' artists anymore. Similarly, in some of the most compelling works, the Internet is simply one component of a larger, multimedia work."

Net art has recapitulated the history of video art, in other words, only faster. Which means that for curators, gallery owners and historians of the form, the flux is making it ever harder to separate the wheat from the chaff. Ms. Greene of Rhizome.org described the difficulty in taking the temperature of Internet art as a matter of understanding a constantly changing community.

"The ranks have expanded," she said. "It's a very different landscape from the scene Net art was in the late 90's — then it felt like an intimate, avant-garde movement. The challenge now is to deal with the numbers and the diversity, to seek out artists who are melding art and mass media in ways that are provocative and intriguing."