

ARTS ONLINE

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Digital Artworks That Play Against Expectations

Ada1852 is a digital docent. She conducts tours of the online-art site Rhizome.org by replying to questions that are typed and transmitted over the Internet. Through these exchanges, she can respond to a visitor's interests and suggest viewings of specific Internet-based artworks, and then supply links to the pieces.

Like a human museum guide, Ada1852 occasionally departs from the scripted commentary to make oddly personal remarks. During a recent chat session, the virtual character was asked about a site and replied, "Perhaps I am slipping into madness."

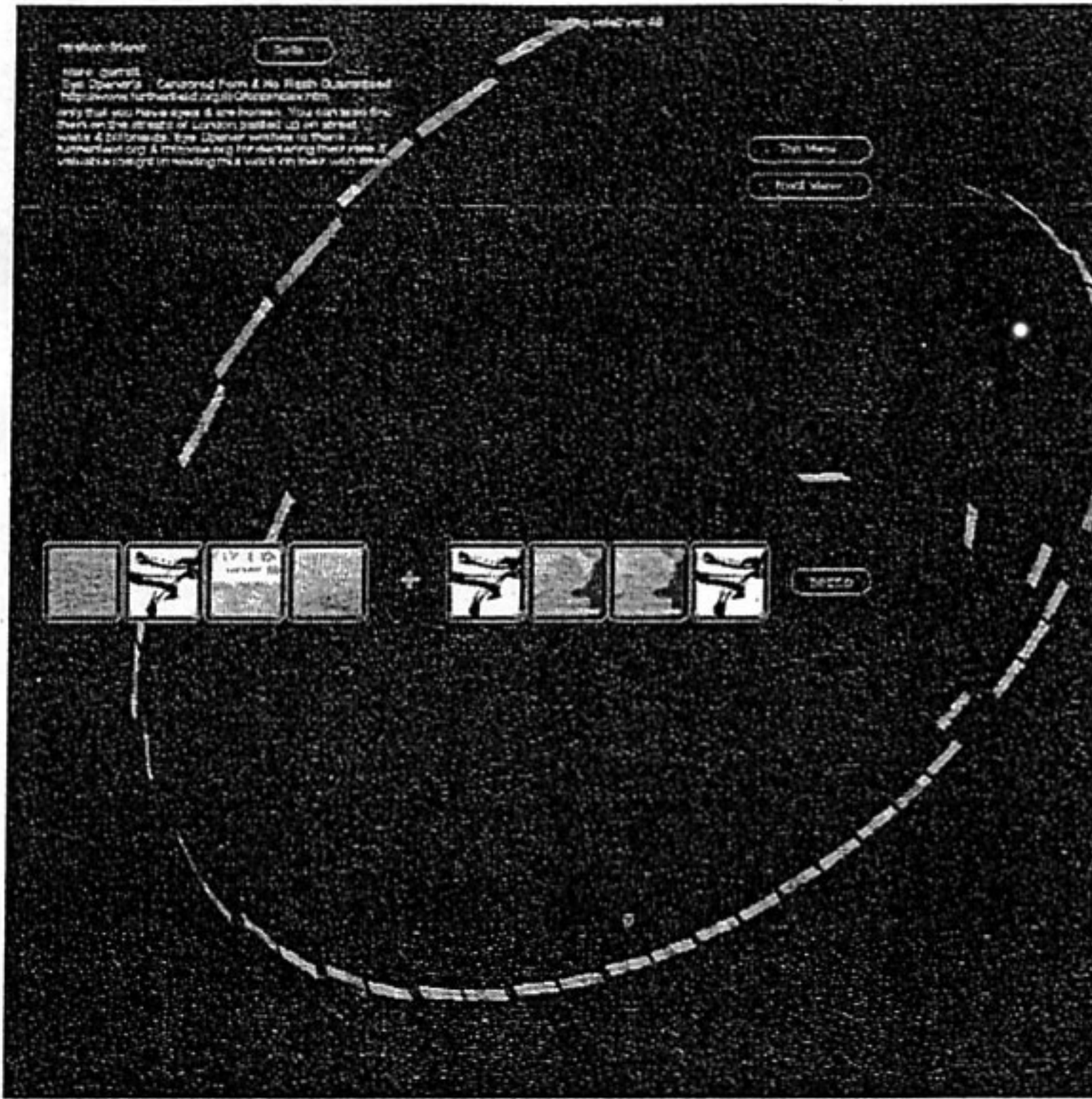
Ada1852 is the creation of Christopher Fahey, a New York artist who rewrote an existing artificial-intelligence program so that its bland, computer-generated conversations with people would seem less mechanical. "I did not want to build a person whose primary function was to be a nonperson," Mr. Fahey said. By giving Ada1852 a personality that verges on the disturbed, he is subverting many notions about artificial intelligence.

Mr. Fahey's troubled tour guide is one of five online-art projects commissioned by Rhizome.org, a nonprofit organization in New York. (The new works were to be put online today at rhizome.org/commissions. Starting Wednesday, they also can be seen at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo.)

With more than 16,000 members, Rhizome is among the most popular virtual communities devoted to the digital arts. It is an online-only meeting place where participants can announce new artworks, request technical assistance or debate obscure issues. (Other sites that focus on digital culture include nettime.org and bbs.thing.net.)

But while most virtual groups are content to carve out a comfortable corner of cyberspace, Rhizome continues to expand its domain. Commissioning the five new works cost \$20,000, a substantial sum for such a young genre. Rhizome also has started to sell Internet services to its members, and has a partnership with the New School in Manhattan to offer online-education courses about new-media subjects.

These initiatives are something of an accomplishment for a nonprofit digital-arts group that a year ago wasn't sure it would survive the double whammy of the collapse of the



John Klima's Darwinian "Context Breeder" can be seen at Rhizome.org.

dot-com economy and the cutbacks in arts grants after the attacks of Sept. 11. Mark Tribe, Rhizome's founder, said it had been living from grant to grant.

Gradually, though, Rhizome has acquired an aura of respectability that Internet entities rarely achieve. As a result, Mr. Tribe, 35, is less concerned that his donors — including the Rockefeller, Jerome and Warhol Foundations — will desert him. "Things are rosier now," he said.

Karen Helmersen, director of the electronic media and film program at the New York State Council on the Arts, said of Rhizome: "They're definitely established. Straight out of the gate they were demonstrating leadership in the field." She said the agency would support Rhizome for a third year. Rhizome, which has an annual budget of \$440,000, has also turned to its members for donations, mounting an annual fund-raising campaign modeled after those for public television. Despite the widespread conviction that everything on the Internet should be available free, the site's members contributed \$25,000 last year.

Mr. Tribe founded Rhizome in 1996 while in Berlin. An artist interested

it turned away from me," he said. "Some of my friends were worth hundreds of millions of dollars briefly on paper, and I'm one of the few who still has a job."

Rhizome takes its name from the botanical term for a rootlike structure that grows horizontally, and Mr. Tribe envisioned the site as a grassroots endeavor. Anyone can post messages on the site, and the content is uncensored.

This openness is not always a delight. For every notice about a new artwork or a forthcoming conference, there are a dozen sophomore messages. One writer noted last week, "I just discovered that you all seem to be addicted to insulting each other over a safe distance."

As Rhizome has expanded, it has been criticized for being too populist. Ms. Helmersen praised Rhizome for making digital art accessible to general audiences, but not everyone thinks this is so great. Josephine Bosma, a sound artist in the Netherlands and a longtime Rhizome contributor, said the site "might be a nice pool of information on developments in the digital arts, but it lacks critical perspective."

Rhizome may prove to be a valuable resource for historians, however. With nearly seven years of messages in its archive, it documents the Internet's chaotic birth as an aesthetic medium. Someone interested in, say, cyberfeminism in the arts could search for the phrase and receive two dozen links to artworks, interviews and reviews.

Rhizome's database for digital artworks contains more than 700 entries of variable quality. Many of the entries are merely links to other sites, but 200 of them are digital duplicates of the original pieces.

This ArtBase, as Mr. Tribe calls it, provides the raw material for another of its new commissions. "Context Breeder," a clever work by the New York artist John Klima, invites viewers to select four works from the ArtBase. These four choices prompt the appearance of another group of four, and the two sets of four are "crossbred," creating a third set of four works. Pieces that are chosen most frequently become stronger and appear more often on the screen, making them and their "offspring" more likely to be chosen in the future, while rarely chosen works will become extinct.

This is cultural Darwinism applied to the Internet. But is Rhizome itself strong enough to survive? Ada1852 had a ready answer, "Why not?"

A site that's open to all cyberartists, and it's solvent.

in the Internet, he realized that at that time the only way to monitor developments and trade ideas was to attend the digital-art conferences in Europe. He said, "It just seemed like, we all have e-mail, we all have access to the Web, there should be some sort of online space where this kind of exchange could take place."

So Mr. Tribe started an electronic mailing list and about 100 people joined. He soon moved to New York and like innumerable dot-com entrepreneurs set up a Web site. Mr. Tribe said: "It was a time of incredible optimism. There were a lot of people who, like me, truly believed in the transformative potential of the Internet."

Rhizome began as a commercial venture. But by 1998 Mr. Tribe saw that this approach was doomed and applied for nonprofit status. "I turned away from the money before