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The Stargazer of Silicon Alley: New York Media and Net Art Archive Rhizome Undertakes Pioneering Work

By Barbara Basting

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In the middle of New York City's Times Square stands a small pavilion, an American military recruiting office. But these days, the effect of Uncle Sam's well-known order to "Join the Army" is lost amongst the over-sized advertisements. Directly in the middle, the Nasdaq's mesmerizing multi-media show plays on-screen. Digital cascades of color overwhelm passersby, seducing them with the dawn of a new Gold Rush age. Everything is called "dot com." The omnipresent advertisements of an Internet fattened by new, often speculative, capital speak of the territorial skirmishes currently underway in New York's mile-long Silicon Alley.

Today, not five years later, Rhizome.org (not dot com, mind you), a non-profit organization with government support, counts itself among the most vital and thoughtful projects in this area. It is a point of entry for those interested not only in Internet art, but also the cultural/political debates surrounding this medium.

But alongside the profiteering latecomers stand the "Early True Believers," who see beyond the Internet's commercial and capitalistic applications to its cultural and artistic potential. One of these is Mark Tribe, 33, a graduate of Brown University. Instead of striving for a serious career in business, he went to art school at the University of California San Diego. A year of study in Berlin in 1995 brought him into contact and discussion with the local Internet community, whose members felt that the Internet should not be left to commercial interests without a fight, but should instead be used for art and critical discourse. Back in New York in 1996, Mark Tribe founded Rhizome.org (www.rhizome.org), a platform and archive for the developing new media art scene.

Today, not five years later, Rhizome.org (not dot com, mind you), a non-profit organization with government support, counts itself among the most vital and thoughtful projects in this area. It is a point of entry for those interested not only in Internet art, but also the cultural/political debates surrounding this medium. Only the German artist Wolfgang Staehle's *The Thing* (www.thing.net), in existence since 1991, is older. The people at Rhizome are the first to admit that *The Thing* is flashier, sharper, and slicker, but in comparison it is also more elitist and hermetic.

What makes the Rhizome site (with its well-organized Archive) so remarkable, measured against the rapid development of the Internet, is its historical depth and its anchoring in the scene that supports it by contributing content for free. These contributors are thus guaranteed to capture the attention of an interested audience, one which sooner or later is guaranteed to be marketable in a communications society.

Members of the Scene, which includes net artists and new media curators, also move in more traditional circles as critics, university professors and web designers. The list of international advisors reads like a *Who's Who* of the Internet avant-garde. Rhizome has good relationships with the media institutes of Berkeley and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston, as well as the star web designers from Razorfish. The archive also includes an ArtBase with carefully catalogued links to more than seventy works net art. Within, one may find countless classics of the genre, like Mark Amerika's "Grammatron," Simon Bigg's "Great Wall of China," Eva Grubinger's "Netzbikini," I/O/D's "Webstalker" and Jodi's "OSS." There is also a text archive with approximately 1,500 texts concerning net and media art that otherwise might be difficult to access. The drawback is that, in a sense, Rhizome controls, or at least directs, the discourse.

From the keywords of the catalogue, Tribe and his partner Alex Galloway have created a delightful interactive web site called *StarryNight*. From the screen shines a map of the stars. Move your mouse over a star and lists of keywords become visible. Click on one of these pop-up menus and land on a corresponding text. When you click on a star, it becomes brighter, but the click also allows Rhizome to track the interests of its users. The keywords "Public Space/Privacy," "Design" and "Media Activism" are especially popular. The aesthetic and conceptual refinements of the navigation interface have also made Tribe and Galloway pioneers

in web design. "Spiral," which will offer a chronological organization of the text archive, will be added in the near future.

Subscribers to the free "Rhizome Digest" (the unfiltered "Rhizome Raw" is a bit much) receive weekly reports, edited by Galloway, concerning the discussions, lectures and publications of academic contributors, as well as commentary regarding new Internet works or events organized by Rhizome. Tribe and his four colleagues, who include new media art curator Jennifer Crowe and fundraiser Mary Beth Smalley, quickly learned that the virtual world is easier to deal with when one is firmly anchored in reality.

All of these services are gratis. But, Rhizome.org's precarious financial situation has the potential to improve considerably. Trend setting businesses from American Express to the Barbara Gladstone Gallery are eager to be recognized as supporters of such an innovative and successful project. That Tribe has employed a fundraising professional as head of development speaks volumes. The most important topic in the online discussions of the Internet community is for him the transition from a marginalized art form, reliant on free labor and a barter economy, to a recognized art movement accepted on a broader level by established art institutions and funders.

"How can we gain the support of art museums, galleries, foundations and businesses without compromising our original convictions?" Tribe is not the only member of the early Internet community to ask himself that question. Will those who currently provide free labor lose interest in doing so once their underground genre has been institutionalized and their objective to draw attention to themselves and their work has been achieved?

With an average of 600,000 visitors per month, Rhizome draws a coveted amount of attention. Do projects like Rhizome, set within a commercialized Internet landscape, have any kind of a future? "So far, I see the dot coms not as a threat but as partners and facilitators," states Tribe. The unifying theme is Tribe's unshakable belief in technology and his conviction that "Internet art is the most important art form today, and it's just getting started." One doesn't have to share his euphoria to appreciate his visionary work.