

Caught in the Web

Only a few short years ago, the birth of the World Wide Web greatly extended the capabilities of the Internet by allowing pages of text and images to be created and transmitted in a simple way. As with previous technological developments such as the cassette tape, people soon harnessed this to create their own magazines. Until last year, the expense of space on the rapidly evolving web placed it beyond the reach of independent projects, other than those within universities. However, by last summer, competition between service providers brought a position where anyone with an Internet account could get web-space and set up some pages.

One of the first UK arts projects to have a web presence was the Manchester-based Index group, whose pages document the group's 7 years of performance and video installations. These well-assembled pages feature the artists' statements plus small (and hence quick to obtain) photographs of each event.

In autumn 1995, the Society of Scottish Artists obtained web space through Cyberia Cafe. Artists participating in their annual exhibition were able to place a photograph of their work in a virtual display over the following year. This is very much an on-line catalogue, which lists works by category and enables the viewer to see small images of any individual's works and then obtain a closer view if they wish.

Around the same time, the Stirling Marginal Review was created. The original intention was to use text-based pages to meet the real need for critical discussion in the Forth Valley area, where projects are rarely covered by the Glasgow and Edinburgh based "national" media. Locally, 1995 had also brought intense discussion around issues of the urban environment and public art in Stirling. These too could have benefited from a forum for debate.

However, after a short time the Stirling Marginal Review pages began to develop towards being a site for arts projects. These have rapidly changed from mere documentation of works to a more complex situation. Sometimes the web pages complement the work: for example the critique of Scottish primary schooling in Karen Strang's *Ricky 1963: Wound Strap Watch Table*. Alternatively, the web pages can be the only realisation of the work; an example of this is the Hanging Together group-work *X-Site*, which was prevented from achieving real existence by logistical difficulties.

This changing focus is in line with developments elsewhere. A couple of notable recent web-works have been the *Hypertext Journal* by Nina Pope and Karen Guthrie, texts and images gathering around a journey to the Scottish islands, and Simon Yuill's *Alma Mountain Review*. He is also involved in *elevator*: a Dundee-based web-zine which is experimenting with collaborative works in images, real-time discussion and video work.

As I've noted, web projects fulfil a variety of functions. Starting from the secondary function of documenting past and present real-life projects, there is the movement towards the web pages being integral to

ongoing projects, or even becoming the sole manifestation of the project. And, importantly, there is a push towards collaboration, where boundaries, whether of geography or specialisation, can be breached. The original purpose of the web was, after all, to link diverse parts of a project. So, for example, some people involved in Index will create a 24 hour web piece for World Aids Day in conjunction with others in Australia, Hungary and Canada.

Other groupings are now taking their first steps towards a web presence: for example Locus + in Newcastle. Again, these are starting as documentation sites but, in time, the web aspect may become more integral to their activities.

The number of people who have looked at all these sets of pages remains relatively low—far lower than, say, a Star Trek fan page. However, what has motivated people to become involved is probably a combination of curiosity to explore a new medium, with a desire to make something different in the short period before the net becomes dominated by "official" pages.

Paradoxically, some seem to long for the bonds of official involvement, for the arts agencies to become involved. Echoing the pursuit of grants for status more than monetary value, such a desire takes managerial quality control at its face value—the good faith that selection and presentation by an agency do indeed "separate the wheat from the chaff". This reinstates the very hierarchy of managers and clients which can be side-stepped by autonomous projects.

In the case of the web, and the net in general, the institutions can provide very little which isn't better done for yourself. It is quick and easy to learn how to create web pages, and the medium has none of the distribution problems of conventional zines or cassettes: once the pages of a project are available on a directory like <http://www.altavista.digital.com> it is accessible to any enquirer anywhere.

Where official pages have been set up, such as the new British Council/ Scottish Arts Council pages at <http://www.scotarts.org.uk> these don't go beyond providing a Scotland-wide institutional phonebook, with each page a destination rather than a node. This may have its uses, but it is unlikely that they could, or would want to, move towards collaborative projects.

Another aspect of concern to some is the copyright issue. Artists' concern to obtain recompense for their works has led them to support the copyright laws. This is despite these laws having been introduced to protect middlemen like publishers rather than originators. There is no getting away from the fact that a work made public on the web is one which can be loaded onto anyone's computer, for as short or long a time as they see fit. Indeed, some web arts projects are constructed around repeated adjustments to an image by many people. If one wants to retain control over an image, then web pages (like any form of publication) should be avoided. But if one seeks collaborators to

develop a theme, then the web opens possibilities which transcend the limitations of geography and commercial distribution.

In a feature on Radio Scotland's *The Slice* in May, artist Karen Strang summarised this viewpoint: "The great thing about Internet web sites is that anyone can have a go... I'm anti-copyright, anti-censorship. This is the last bastion of free speech".

The copyright problem affects far more than just artists. In his article "The Economy of Ideas" John Perry Barlow tries to bypass the current wrangles over intellectual property by looking forward to a future whose economy is "based on relationship rather than possession... a world made more of verbs than nouns". Whatever the hyperbole, and the suspicion that this attitude fits the interests of a stratum whose careers allow them to avoid attachment to any one place, that does seem to be an interesting possibility. If the web can provide an opportunity to assemble networks from

Many of these pages are accessible at :

<http://www.almac.co.uk/personal/adickson/index.htm>

Others can be found easily using the Alta Vista search tool.

diverse projects each rooted in its own particular location, perhaps we can re-place ourselves in a way that bureaucratic plurality cannot.

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