



Shopping on the Home Image Network

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Shopping on the Home Image Network

Paul Zelevansky

Shopping without a List

46

The activity that most reminds me of the practice, as opposed to the transcendent communal dream, of websurfing is visiting the supermarket without a list or a plan. Now that I live in Los Angeles after spending most of my life in New York, I drive my car to the market and everywhere else, so the information superhighway metaphor takes on a deeper meaning. In a sprawling city where all errands, pickups, and deliveries are shaped and bracketed by traffic patterns and intersecting routes, and oversized graphic signage marks every source of commerce and display, the Internet meets its real-time model. I envision exiting the information superhighway, perhaps after crossing the bridge to the twenty-first century, stopping at a shiny superstore of my choice, where I can pick up a cornucopia of preselected and packaged information, put it in my car trunk, and drive it home.

A prescient soundtrack to these sorts of out-of-body experiences—even more effective when heard on a car tape deck while palm trees, strip malls, and gas stations fly by—is the 1978 Talking Heads song “The Big Country,”¹ in which David Byrne sings about looking down from an airplane and visualizing the linking of farms, cities, and motorists through the commercial food chain: “They buy it in the farmlands. Then they bring it to the store. They put it in the car trunks. Then they bring it home.” Byrne’s conclusion at the time was that he “wouldn’t live there if you paid me,” although he made an appearance on the Mass Moca website (<http://www.massmoca.org>) in celebration of his 1996 exhibition *Infinite Capacity*, and so in a sense he became another information tidbit to be dragged through the net surfer’s checkout scanner anywhere across the Big Country.

Calling this essay “Shopping on the Home Image Network” is a flat-footed attempt to link websurfing for art to the kind of consumerist behavior epitomized by TV shopping channels like Home Shopping Network or QVC. Although commercial television has always been driven by

advertising forms and prerogatives, it is a long way from the late-night hawking of Vegemetics and collections of favorite love songs to the thirty-minute infomercial—a form that is now used to sell both presidential candidates and telephonic spiritual healing. But the behemoths that swallow them all in scale, sophistication, and commitment to the marketplace are the home-shopping channels—twenty-four-hour-a-day services that introduce, pitch, and distribute a vast range of products from stuffed animals to expensive jewelry. I have spoken to partisans of both popular channels—HSN and QVC—but I have watched only QVC, where they have taken the Vegemetic model, souped it up with on-screen graphics, live call-in, and massive phone-bank services to celebrate the ultimate American family value—shopping.

QVC has a parallel Internet service called iQVC, which not only catalogues a multitude of products under departments like Arts & Leisure, Beauty, Books, and so on, but presents the “current on-air item” in real time. I checked, and it does. At 10:45 A.M. PST on January 4, as the Aero inflatable bed was being brought to life on TV, I was able to read its product description on iQVC. The iQVC iconography features a fireplace logo and menu masked as a wooden cabinet with open and closed compartments (*fig. 1*). There is a nervous energy to QVC that its silent Internet partner resists in favor of the meditative clicking of on-line shopping by mouse and modem.

Each product on QVC is allotted a five-to-ten-minute slot so that viewers can make their decision. But some small number of viewers become on-air callers and are given the opportunity by host or hostess to exchange pleasantries and comment on the featured product and related domestic issues. What is both seductive and jarring about this format is that the programmed informality of the exchanges is surrounded by the most well-oiled of marketing schemes. While Edna from Grand Forks, North Dakota, is sharing a brief Christmas anecdote or greeting the



FIG. 1 QVC Corporation, iQVC homepage, 1996. Screenshot detail from Mac Powerbook.

guest salesman, the “time left” and “quantity ordered” counters are alternately goosing the consumer’s excitement about the current on-air item and counting the money like Wall Street tickers. The resemblance to the relentless tabulations of TV telethons, and the encouragement given to both buyers who call in and on-screen visitors who have created products, makes the merchandising hustle even more disarming. QVC works hard to create the sense that accommodating the consumer’s expectations, circumstances, and needs is their primary concern.

The typical artist homepage, museum site, or on-line magazine and the twin QVCs share a common layering of information, personal appeals, and marketing strategies. While presenting and expressing different content and goals, homepage and shopping page/channel both engage a format that follows similar principles of orientation and display. This is characterized by the graphic integration of image and text; the domination of photographic imagery; the use of menu structure for access and navigation; the clean, concentrated color and light of the screen, which buttresses the technological and authorial power of the message; and

finally, the imperative to attract and hold the viewer’s attention in an environment where alternative options are available with the click of a mouse or TV remote.

From the perspective of the designer or artist, the communicative look and feel of a computer screen is dominated by the available graphic software and tools and the limitations of the monitor frame. This flawless, slick surface is now familiar and ubiquitous to passive audiences and web-surfers alike. It is Photoshop style, the same stance taken, in varying degrees, by contemporary magazines from *Time* to *Wired*, which pump up their narrative voices with dynamic graphics, loud colors, hybrid images, and multiple typefaces. And in the case of art, music, fashion, and lifestyle magazines like *Vibe*, *Paper*, and *W*—or Net providers like America Online, Prodigy, and Netscape—promiscuously mix editorial and advertising references and conventions.

The connection between magazine page and Internet screen is not surprising, given that both are designed to be read as a form of visual/verbal collaboration accentuating short or condensed hits of information keyed to a menu of

choices. The content structure and spirit of the commercial magazine is the model for the overwhelming number of websites I have looked at over the last few months. But contrasting that kind of reading and looking with the experience of viewing art in museum, gallery, or studio points up some very basic problems endemic to viewing art on screen. For the artwork: the limitations of size and scale, the elimination of texture, materiality, shadow, reflected light; the absence of other images in the visible environment with which to measure and compare size, scale, texture, and so forth. For the viewer: the denial of the body's and the eye's immediate perception, coordination, and assimilation of all of the above. Art on the Net, however it may be layered or connected to other sites and graphic perspectives, is art on the electronic page that disappears when that page is turned—the present site abandoned—and a new link is engaged.

From the perspective of the website artist or designer who must imagine an audience and then develop a strategy for attracting and keeping it, the need to present an accessible agenda quickly and explicitly is essential. This is not a conceptual problem that will give way easily to formal aesthetic solutions alone, but one influenced heavily by the gestures and expectations defined by the limits of the technology and the individual user. To name only a few: the variable waiting times required for downloading visual and textual material; the physical and mental fatigue brought on by the constraints of sitting in a chair and staring into a monitor; the extreme limitation of tactile pleasure bounded by pointing and clicking the mouse or typing on a keyboard; the enticement of ever present and accessible escape routes—hyperlinks that promise continuation if not continuity—something more, something new, or just the option to keep moving for its own sake. On the information superhighway, a lane change may be as satisfying as a turn off an exit ramp into a rest stop. Navigation on the Net moves fast or slow, with the ebb and flow of the site's media density and the audience's technical capacity, and the boundaries of attention span move with them.

Local, anecdotal evidence (that is, the kind of commentary consistently heard from acquaintances and friends) suggests that the rewards of looking at art discovered on the Net run a distant second to the activity of searching for it, and then following various threads that are offered. When serendipitously encountering a site, the graphic payoff is often no different from turning the pages of a book or magazine, but it can seem a lot slower—*seem*

because literally watching the download countdown only intensifies the wait. This pacing also provides an excuse to cut off the exchange before it really begins. The sense of anticipation as the image scans in, line by line, or as the chunk of data unfolds can create an interesting tension—particularly if you're expecting something bizarre or pornographic—but this striptease can quickly lead to frustration when the visible fragment of the image does not appear promising. I often give up on an image in midscan, and my anticipation amplifies the feeling of disappointment when the result does not meet my expectation. But what is the content of that expectation? New information, titillation, a voyeuristic view into a contradictory mix of personal and public appeals and signs, an intensely private immersion in a cognitive zone where one can temporarily lose an orderly, programmatic sense of time? Driving—particularly high-speed freeway travel at night—again comes to mind. Where and when did this drive begin, and how did I get where I am now?

There is certainly the possibility too that my more jaded response to Net riches is the result of an unwillingness to admit that a social shift in regard to definitions of community, speech, interpersonal relationships, commerce, the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge is unfolding on a scale that for the time being resists any easy explanation. A collection of essays in the recent anthology *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier* considers "Self and the Community Online." Several writers focus on text-based gender swapping, role-playing, and simulated sex in electronic spaces known as MUDS (multiuser dungeons) and advance the proposal that such opportunities for anonymous conversation, acting out, and projection can provide some degree of social balm and enlightenment:

*The player is the most problematic of all virtual entities, for his or her virtual manifestation has no constant identity. MUD characters need not be of any fixed gender or appearance, but may evolve, mutate, morph, over time and at the whim of their creator. All of these phenomena place gender, sexuality, identity and corporeality beyond the plane of certainty. They become not merely problematic but unresolvable.*²

The opportunity to step in, or on, another person's shoes without having to pay any face-to-face price may be no more than an imaginative or manipulative game, but it is arguably a form of improvisational theater. This, I think, bears on the question of whether the personal material pre-

sented as visual art on the Net should be viewed in the same light as gallery/museum-based work, where the character of a discrete artwork can be more easily considered apart from its explicit appeals for participation or communication. Disgruntled or passionate artlovers at the museum have no e-mail to transmit their concerns to artist or institution and so must come to terms with the work and its maker on their own. Is art on the Net more correctly and positively seen as a form of minimally filtered art therapy or intimate self-advertisement, which the meandering web surfer can accept, reject, or respond to as testimony or revelation? As for the MUD model of interaction, discussing the issue of simulated sex on the Net is guaranteed to raise the heat of any measured debate on the authenticity of life via modem. But however the claims are considered, they turn on profound questions about relatedness and dialogue in a time when many facets of life are mediated by the functions and protocols of machines and technological systems.

At present, art is a relatively small area of Internet production. That said, the range of art-related sites on the Net is sufficiently vast and diverse to discourage any adequate survey of them. Ultimately, after picking through sites recommended and found, I considered several broad categories of activity that, in practice, overlap in many cases where links are provided: art, literature, criticism magazines—self-contained or collections of related sites; personal artist homepages, and zines; collaborative projects and performance spaces, communal and cumulative; listservs for discussions; museums and institutional sites; event-related sites for conferences and one-time exhibitions; resources and news; contemporary art history.

Hovering over “Shopping on the Home Image Network” is the basic question of why anyone would want to seek out art in this electronic environment—that is, beyond access to institutional collections and databases. From the perspective of artists and designers producing content, the choice is easier to understand. Anyone with access to the technology can create a site and therefore reach potential audiences either presumed to be monopolized by the art-world powers that be or simply unaware of the visions and values of the artistic experience as defined by the website creator. In an on-line article “Why I Like the Web” (<http://www2.awa.com/artnetweb/views/tokartok/java.html>), accessed through an extensive website called “the thing” (<http://www.thing.net>), G. H. Hovagimyan expresses this position quite explicitly in relationship to art as well as to the sensibilities of extended virtual communities:

Artists of course control the means of production but they are totally dependent upon galleries and museums to distribute their work. This sets up a Byzantine system of patronage and marketing that has more to do with who is behind any particular artist than it has to do with the quality and relevance of the artists’ work. The web effectively eliminates the middlemen of the art world. No curators, no critics, no filters, no-one claiming the absolute right to define culture.

Beyond questions of how quality and relevance are defined, this analysis is unapologetic in championing wide-open opportunities for public exposure for artists, of any and all degrees of “quality and relevance.” There are strong echoes here of arguments and solutions advanced by artists participating in correspondence-art practices throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and into the present.³ In those cases as well there was often a willingness to believe that the content of ideas transcended the terms of their packaging and distribution. Hovagimyan’s polemical vision of an art community liberated from judgment, standards, and commerce does not factor in the limits of screen-based form, particularly for the viewing audience. Web artists with access to the right equipment are unchained to be sure, but the web-surfing audience in search of art must pick its way through endless fields of Photoshop detritus and sometimes highly provincial, if not amateurish, displays.

But however viewers might feel about the glow of on-line computer graphics, from the artist’s standpoint there is very little basis for projecting an equation between the experience of artwork in real-world space and work on screen. To begin with, artists must acknowledge the degree to which graphic software, and html and server conventions, shape the fundamentally commercial look and feel of web-screen design; they then have to find ways to make accommodations for the sensory gifts that art in real time and space can provide, and that the Web denies. Artists should of course be confronting the technology of their own time, but if the technology is not completely to dominate the communicative terms of engagement, the practical and conceptual pitfalls of the form must be analyzed.

Doing research for this article involved spending a number of hours locating sites, reading, looking, playing around, and often following links to other, unanticipated locations. Whereas gathering sources and following lines of content and argument are necessary for any research, there are distinct qualities to being on-line. First is the problem of hardware. Access to the computer is defined by the gen-

Some Sites

50 eral availability and particular capabilities of the technology. There was a time when that could be said of books, too, but the roadblocks to computer access, when they exist, do not allow for compromise. I use a 520C Mac Powerbook, and a 19,200 baud modem. That means my screen size is small, and download time is relatively slow. People writing critically about the Net, or just looking in, have to ask whether their commitment requires them to own the highest order of equipment or whether they can use what they already have. This raises questions and problems for creators of sites, as well. In a medium that claims an absolute commitment to interactivity and democratic access, should designs be geared to minimal or sophisticated levels of technology? My experience as a graphic designer on various computer-based projects for museums and classrooms made it clear that before advancing the content, or the form expected to deliver it, basic strategies must be considered in regard to the nature and capabilities of the audience, and the quality of interaction desired.

The second issue for a reviewer is how to acknowledge the process of accessing and reading sites. Since a large part of the activity involves sustained periods of mouse-mediated searching, opening, and linking, the logic and sequence of website events is affected by the user's shifting attention span—quick, sometimes arbitrary decisions driven by impulse, taste, patience, and conditions and circumstances both in the ambient environment and on the screen. This reading is also framed by whatever global graphic interfaces the local website nests in, which in my case includes the Powerbook desktop, the Netscape browser, and any e-mail that may arrive. In addition, staring at a screen for several hours provides its own punishments and rewards. The critical moment when eye fatigue, back pain, and the tenth mundane link combine is not going to bode well for the reception of the eleventh site.

A third issue is how to define and narrate the sometimes skittish path of linking: sustained shopping characterized by impulse buying. The phenomenological problems associated with concentration, comprehension, and stimulation are attendant on any reading/viewing situation, but the physical and conceptual requirements of the computer dominate the web-surfing experience. As noted by Ben Davis in a recent article in *Scientific American*, there is an art to scanning and consuming material on the Web, which simulates for the user something of the experience of making art: "The painful crawl at which digital art must arrive, however, highlights the fact that art on the Internet is not a thing, it is a condition: a conceptual place for an aesthetic idea to unfold and be communicated."⁴

A. Art/Lit/Crit Magazines

ArtCommotion, issue 2 (<http://www.ArtCommotion.com>) is a Los Angeles-based magazine focusing on art and literature. The interface is straightforward and easy to use. On the home screen, word headings function as buttons; additional buttons and images sit on cast shadows. E-mail addresses for staff are included. This issue includes an interview and a short animated sequence, focused on a recent exhibition by the artist Rachel Lachowicz. There is also an article by the critic Peter Frank on the history of Fluxus, which provides background for a special project—*One Woman Show*—by the Fluxus artist Yoko Ono, which is linked to the website at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles. Ono's piece is a "continuation" of a performance first done at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1971.

The link to the present, and to the Web medium, is made through the metaphor of the housefly. The conceptual conceit is that, sprinkled with Ono's perfume in 1971, these flies have made their way to Los Angeles, and the public is asked to document any sightings and report back to the website. The best part of this for me was the animated fly button, which links to other facets of the project, although a series of attempts to find connections through this button froze my machine.

A search on Yahoo for the magazine *Face Value* (<http://www.pobox.com/~nino>) brought up seven listings but no *Face Value*. I tried the link to *Favela*, another Los Angeles-based publication. While waiting for a *Favela* frontispiece image to scan in—a steam engine spewing yellow smoke which engulfs a figure or head resembling a mythical creature or deity—I am able to read a list of short comments about the site by various "readers." Return e-mail addresses are included: "You guys have too much time or money or what? Call yourself Favela.org because tres chic? Anything to do with real Brasil and real slums?" (Vienna, Austria). "Down for whatever." (Miami, Fla.). The comments are funny, but the site is still loading in. I give up.

B. Home Pages

Kenny G's home page (http://www.ubuweb.com/vp/found_frames.html) was recommended by a friend involved with visual poetry. The site does present visual poetry, along with a piece on John Cage, and a music guide (Kenny G has a radio show on WFMU, 91.1 FM, in the New York area). The intro or menu pages are simple and tasteful black or red text over a repeated line drawing of a martial arts figure in gray. There is no effort to be overly friendly or utopian. The site is devoted to Kenny G's projects and



FIG. 2 Kenny Goldsmith, "Jack Free Ads," Kenny G's homepage, 1996. Screenshot detail from Mac Powerbook.

interests, including a fascinatingly creepy series of anonymous Post-It ads pulled from a bulletin board at a Citibank in New York. Called "Jack Free Ads" (fig. 2), they are built around requests for various barter exchanges, such as home-cooked meals for limo services, a blue dress for thirty dollars' worth of phone calls, and so on. These appeals, even if the product of Kenny G's imagination, are particularly appropriate for the website form, which functions well as a sanctuary for private obsession. The Jack Free Ads are a bizarre print version of a homepage appeal to listen and to share, and Kenny G's presentation of them is an astute, self-conscious display of the nexus of voyeurism and exhibitionism that many homepages inherently rely on, but rarely acknowledge.

Antonio Muntadas's *File Room* project (<http://file.room.aaup.uic.edu/FileRoom/documents/homepage.html>), celebrated in numerous lists of important sites on the Net, is a graphic database that documents individual cases of art censorship around the world. It functions as both a cross-referenced archive with listings by medium and country and an evolving source for recording and presenting new instances of abuse. Although this project began in 1994 as a conceptual project for the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago, it has become a resource that reaches out to cover any form of cultural censorship imposed from the right or the left. Beautifully designed, with a well-thought-out interface, cross-referenced categories of access, and an appeal to participation that goes beyond a call for e-mail comments, the *File Room* does not explore the boundaries of art on the Net, but certainly justifies claims to its power as a source for collective discussion.

Searching for *ArtCrimes* (<http://www.graffiti.org/>),

a project that catalogues worldwide graffiti activity by country, state, city, and artist, I discovered the *Who's Cool in America Project* (<http://www.getcool.com/~getcool/index.shtml>), which is a self-proclaimed Good Housekeeping seal of approval assigning "coolness" to selected homepages. The concept is funny and astute—the logo contains a pair of animated googly eyes behind glasses—but the list includes a number of artists promoting graphic-design services, which means that the images are elaborate and/or overproduced, and so take a while to scan in. Unless you are seeking commercial talent, why bother waiting? Yet, coming upon Pammie's Station, rated in the top 100 of the *Who's Cool* listings for June 1996, provided a surprise.

This is an exceedingly friendly homepage put together by a Fort Worth policewoman who provides photos of herself in uniform and mufti, has several cockatiels as pets, likes Beavis and Butthead, and wants "your" e-mail. The graphics are slick—clever use of police iconography like crime-scene tape, badges—but why is it there? Clearly this is not a life story to make it to *60 Minutes*, and even though the graphics are well done, it certainly doesn't aspire to be art or literature. So what is it, and what does it mean that an idle web traveler from anywhere in the world can happen on to it? On one level, this is a benign version of Jack Free's pathological appeals for attention, but this opportunity for a brief, blind encounter has a sweet elementary-school pen-pal quality about it. I have a distant memory that sometimes that kind of communication worked out quite well, but this site raised another question for me about the very fuzzy line between public and private that discourse on the Web trafficks in.

Although Pammie's Station exemplifies a certain kind of expression and is *artfully* done, my interest is not in making the case for its being art, vanguard or otherwise. Yet in most respects its graphic style and affect is similar to other specifically art-identified sites. With the homepage, the private becomes public and remains so until there is a reply, and then the character of the exchange floats in some nether world between intimacy and self-aggrandizement. If, for example, I wanted to reproduce Pammie's images, I would feel a responsibility to contact their creator directly, and so begin a *conversation*, as opposed to a *transaction* with a permissions department at a publisher. Whatever else art on the homepage may lack, it places the audience in the potentially awkward position of having to answer for their judgments to the needy or clever mortal on the other end of the Net line, if not to themselves.

For those interested in an extensive list of links to

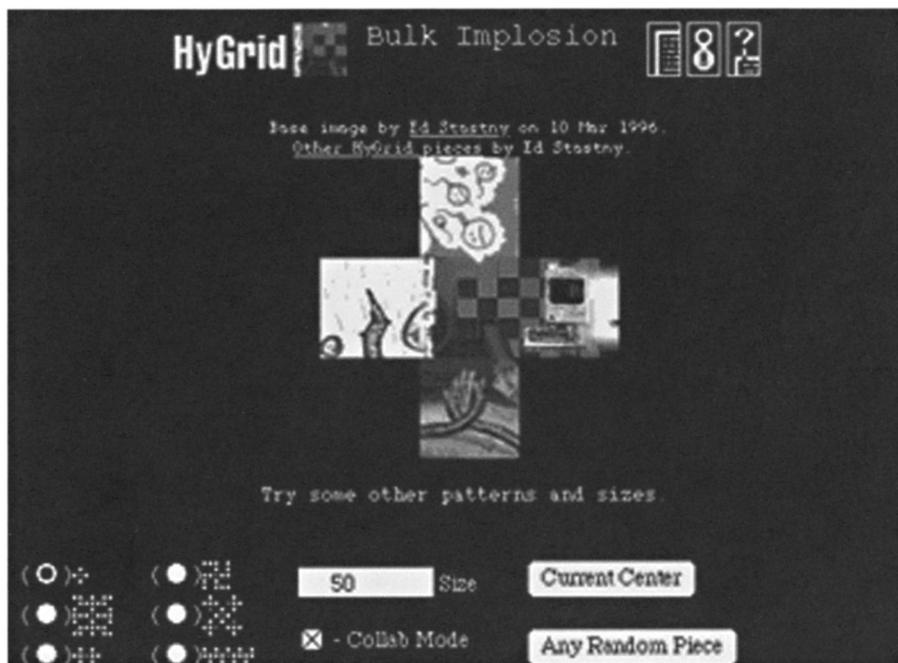


FIG. 3 Ed Stastny, *HyGrid*, 1996. Screenshot detail from Mac Powerbook.

individual artists' homepages, the primary source is OTIS/SITO (<http://sunsite.unc.edu/otis/otis.html>), an archive created by the Nebraska artist Ed Stastny. I was originally led to this site through the magazine *LiveCulture* (http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/projects/live_culture/lc0/abstracts/references10.html), a production of Columbia's Teachers College. The user's response to the work exhibited in this archive will reflect their notion of what art is, how and why it should be seen, and whether its presence on the Net exhibits a critical cultural leap, or solidarity with the friendly spirit of Pammie's Page.

At the very least, an artist's presence on the Net does open up the possibility that he or she will be discovered and evaluated by *someone*. Any artist or any site mentioned in this article has a temporary spotlight cast on it, which will informally test—if any readers of *Art Journal* bother to locate identified sites—whether visibility translates into credibility. On-line artists who presume that curators, historians, and critics are nothing more than accomplices and lackeys of the art market had better be both skilled at selling themselves and very confident that they can deliver a product that anyone, no less the professional art world, wants.

C. Collaborative Projects

One rest stop on the road within OTIS/SITO is a collaborative project named *Synergy*, which includes *Infinite Grid* and *HyGrid* (fig. 3), a collection of square graphic elements that can be arranged in various formatted constellations and altered in terms of size and the choice of the central anchoring image. Each square is designed by a dif-

ferent artist, and provisions are made for new participants to make new elements that can be uploaded to the site. In addition, some squares have sounds associated with them—providing you have the appropriate audio software—which means that rearranging the grid allows for rudimentary composing. The site also includes charts with information about the artists and their active images, so it is possible to keep track of the growth of the site and to contact individual players.

Although the staging area is small, the interface is clear and straightforward, and playing around with the forms is engrossing for a time. Some of the images are animated, so that a repetitively bobbing head might form the center of the grid, and in general there is the feeling of participation in the construction of *something*—even something foolish—which is as close to touching on the art-making process as any of websites viewed here seem to achieve.

Picked up on a friend's trip to Denmark, a black-on-bright-yellow flyer announcing a project called *Name Diffusion* called for the collection of ten-word descriptions of the "souls" of participants. The goal was to give "artists and researchers" the opportunity to project and protect their own identities in a public, yet coded way; both to resist the official encoding imposed by governments and credit card companies, and collectively to create a "gene bank" of self-actualized souls. This was the first site I had come upon that promised some acknowledgment of the fragile particularity and connectedness of Net users—expressed not in terms of some imagined, like-minded community speaking with one great freedom-loving digital voice, but in terms of the simultaneous efforts of the thou-

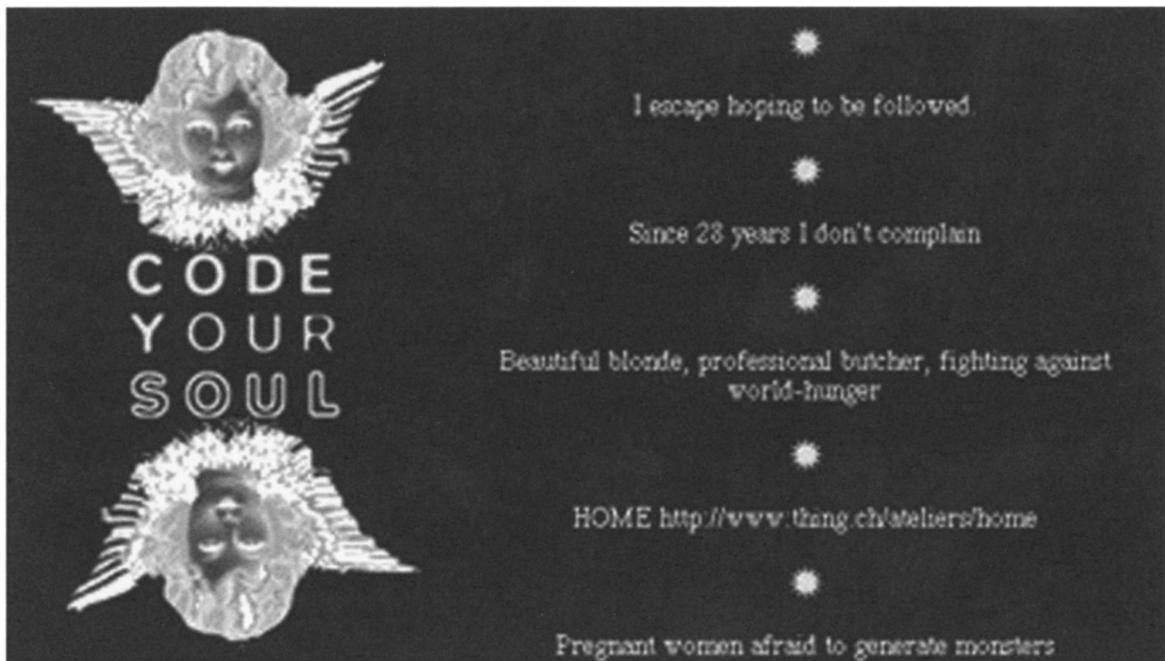


FIG. 4 Marita Liulia, *Soul Codes*, 1996. Screenshot detail from Mac Powerbook.

sands of isolated individuals seeking access for any number of disconnected personal reasons.

Seduced by the power of the soul metaphor, I tried several variations of search by selecting parts of the address—reminding myself again that effective searching is its own problem and skill. Along the way, I saw sites for Bambi, the City of Escondido Parcel Lookup, and Busto On-Line, until “namediffusion” led to a homepage that seemed related but was not ultimately the full soul code site.

Three weeks later, I did another search and I found the soul code fill-in form (<http://www.edita.fi/kustannus/bitch/named/inten.html>) and collection of personal codes I had been seeking (<http://www.edita.fi/kustannus/bitch/named/codes.html>). This group of participant descriptions expressed confidence, diffidence, disavowal, dislocation, and loss, as well as a touch of classified-ad hype and desperation. But on-screen, in yellow type on a plain black background, there was a poignancy to the appeals. The code name “I escape longing to be followed” (*fig. 4*) seemed a particularly resonant reply to the problem of establishing a sense of place and identity within the tangled mass of Net mixed messages.

The search continued with a website tied to a conference on digital storytelling held in October 1996 in Crested Butte, Montana (<http://www.dstory.com>). An illustration of a campfire surrounded by logs (recall the iQVC use of same) and another of a window providing a view of a northwestern landscape had the right mix of intimacy and wide-open space about it. The interface menu divided the conference into days and then listed the available stories. My first choice was “Virtual Virtue” by SallyAnn Wokun-

zyk. It turned out to be more of a report on the author’s problems with getting her words and images on-line. This piece was problematic not only for its self-elated friendliness but also for the multiple typos, which verged on being intentional malapropisms—“freriendly” people able to “quaft” beer, sharing the problems of writers working through “long periods of insolation.” Typos are often a by-product of e-mail enthusiasm, but at a digital storytelling conference beamed worldwide?

The next story, “Homeless on the Web” by Diane Vivanti, was also a personal account of conference experiences, better written but similarly emphasizing the enlightened sense of community that digital pioneers seem to embody. Apparently there was more “humanity” in this “maverick, high tech community” gathered in this piece of Montana than the author had found in “NYC pretensions.” I read on for a while, but, not inclined to check out other digital stories, I followed the author’s hyperlink to Justin Hall, who turns out to be at the center of various high-profile Net initiatives. Hall presented a stream-of-consciousness diaristic patter punctuated by multiple links with titles like “where my mom and I sat,” “birth anniversary,” and “insincere salesmanship.” Whether you wanted to know all these intimate details of his life or not, the flood of verbiage and association was breathtaking. He seems like someone absolutely comfortable with using the medium as a platform for expression and exchange.

One more link within Justin Hall to “Vagabondage” led to Howard Rheingold’s site *Electric Minds*, which Hall has collaborated on. *Electric Minds* is an elaborate shiny mix of Net communal outreach, conversation, and information

sponsored by Netscape, the Well, and Sun Microsystems. My only previous encounter with Howard Rheingold—editor of the *Whole Earth Review* and author of *Virtual Communities*—was through his appearance in a Kinko's Copy TV ad, so it was a bit surprising to drop through the Net rabbit hole anticipating novel approaches to storytelling and to end up with an Internet personality with star billing through whom salesmanship and art converge.

Time to QUIT.

Going Home

In all the sites I looked at there is a great deal of effort to speak out and link up. There are also thousands of new images produced and presented. But I expected more invention in the mix of form and content, some shift of perspective on the part of artists and writers, which would interrogate the Net artist/Net surfer encounter. Instead, many seem content in their individual cars mesmerized by the beauty and expansiveness of the information highway. There is boundless, self-conscious enthusiasm about the means to make things available—"Hey kids, let's put on a website!"—but little self-reflection about the implications of creating form and content in this medium, no less what the experience might mean for the audience. In that regard, I still think it appropriate to treat web surfers as an expectant viewing public uncertain about the parameters of the game. No matter how many links and e-mail bonuses are provided, being offered the opportunity to consume free information and commentary *and* to express an opinion is, as the hosts of radio talk shows know, often a very cheap date passed off as democratic dialogue.

Further, speaking as a browser and an artist, very little of what I have seen provides the experience of art that I most value: the opportunity to take a physical stance in relationship to a work; to engage in contemplation in both the cognitive and the philosophical sense; to compare one artist's vision, sense of space, composition, timing, and balance with another's; to consider in regard to materials, touch, scale, and surface what it might have meant to conceive and produce such things.

Whatever the reach and the goals of a site, the screen and the software turn everything into the same shiny, flickering skin, which is always in a state of incompleteness. Each site, and each connected page within a site, pauses on the brink, somewhere between the preceding link and the leap that follows. In this sense, every gesture, image, and source associated with net surfing is infused with transience. When everything is reduced to the same size, scale, and glossy glow, no image has any more weight and presence than another. Immersion in the content or the manipulation of a site can be engrossing, mesmerizing, or agitating, but without the possibility of shifting perspective, without touch, engagement is ultimately an abstract mind game

played within elusive boundaries, with repetitive gestures and rituals and an insular form of speech. The metaphors of highway and surfing suggest otherwise, but clicking one's way through the multitude of voices making claims on one's time and attention does not feel like travel to me, because the decision to leave, like the commitment to stay, exacts the same physiological, if not psychological, price.

Amid all the hodgepodge of messages and earnest appeals, there seems to be a searching for some anchor, some meaningful point of contact, to justify this electronic shopping for pen pals, products, and ideas. Whether homepages and websites are amateurish or slick, their authors and designers want a response, just like someone engaged in a real-world conversation or a real-world advertisement. But no one out there on the Net usually requests a visit with the author or artist in advance. It is the other way around, since the website purveyor is determined to seek a sympathetic ear. You can hear the products arrayed on the web shelf saying, "Hear me, buy me, need me, let me know what you think."

One related question for early explorers of the Internet to consider is whether the virtues of transmission and distribution mask the problems of transience and reduced attention span. In a world of multiple circulating, crisscrossing, present moments linked by electronic synapses, is the individual communicative act the essential, sustaining content? On QVC the individual sale represents the market's public face, but it is the moving tabulation that tells the real tale.

Any time spent with a computer, for any reason, assumes a leap of faith into a world in which ephemerality is the medium and the source of power. For artists, Net surfers, and critics, the challenge in this environment may be not only to shape, capture, and evaluate fragments as they fly by, but, like air traffic controllers, to monitor and coordinate the varied patterns to which the flights, arbitrarily or purposefully, conform.

Notes

1. David Byrne, "The Big Country," in *More Songs about Buildings and Food* (Sire Records, 6058-2).

2. Elizabeth M. Reid, "Text-based Virtual Realities: Identity and the Cyborg Body," in *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 327.

3. For listings of contemporary mail art projects and appeals, see issues of Judith Hoffberg's magazine *Umbrella*, P.O. Box 3640, Santa Monica, CA 90408.

4. Ben Davis, "The Culture Machine: Science and Art on the Web," *Scientific American*, August 1986 (<http://www.sciam.com/0896issue/0896revcom1.html>).

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