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ART & DESIGN

The Mission to Save Vanishing Internet Art

By FRANK ROSE OCT. 21, 2016

In the 1990s, art found a new medium. Anarchic and unconstrained, the World Wide Web attracted an oddball collection of people ready to do almost anything and call it art. Often their work looked weird and amateurish, with pixelated graphics, tinny chiptune music and garish colors. But what it lacked aesthetically it made up for in conviction.

In Australia, four women who styled themselves VNS Matrix posted a "Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century," followed by a vagina-framed poster in which they joyously proclaimed themselves "saboteurs of big daddy mainframe." In Moscow, a young woman named Olia Lialina created "My Boyfriend Came Back From the War," a forking narrative, poignant and oblique, that combined text with grainy black-and-white imagery. An anonymous woman in Amsterdam, eventually identified as Martine Neddam, built a brightly colored site that purported to be the home page of a 13-year-old named Mouchette, after the girl in the 1967 Robert Bresson film who finds a life of torment and abuse too much to bear.

In the early days of the web, art was frequently a cause and the internet was an alternate universe in which to pursue it. Two decades later, preserving this work has become a mission. As web browsers and computer operating systems stopped supporting the software tools they were built with, many works have fallen victim to digital obsolescence. Later ones have been victims of arbitrary decisions by proprietary internet platforms — as when YouTube deleted Petra Cortright's video "VVEBCAM" on the grounds that it violated the site's community guidelines. Even the drip paintings Jackson Pollock made with house paint have fared better than art made by manipulating electrons.

Now the digital art organization Rhizome is setting out to bring some stability to this evanescent medium. At a symposium to be held Thursday, Oct. 27, at the New Museum, its longtime partner and backer, Rhizome plans to start an ambitious archiving project. Called Net Art Anthology, it is to provide a permanent home online for 100 important artworks, many of which have long since disappeared from view. With a $201,000 grant from the Chicago-based

Carl & Marilynn Thoma Art Foundation, Rhizome will release a newly refurbished work once a week for the next two years, starting with the 1991 "Cyberfeminist Manifesto." By 2018, Rhizome will be presenting works by artists such as Cory Arcangel and Ms. Cortright.

In addition to salvaging the past, the aim is to tell the story of Internet-based art in an online gallery that serves much the same narrative function as the galleries in the Museum of Modern Art. "There's a sense of amnesia about the history these things have," Michael Connor, Rhizome's artistic director, said as he sat in the New Museum's ground-floor cafe. "This is an opportunity to really be rigorous."

Broadly speaking, the story Rhizome is telling can be divided into two parts, with the dot-com collapse of 2000-1 as the inflection point. The post-bubble side looks relatively familiar, facilitated as it is by high-speed, always-on connections and characterized by rapid commercialization and the emergence of social media and streaming video platforms like Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005) and Tumblr (2007).

But before the bubble in internet stocks burst, before Google took over and Netscape collapsed and Apple was resurrected from near-death, the web was "an entirely new world," as Mr. Arcangel, 38, put it in a telephone interview from his home in Norway. "Sometimes it was not even clear what you were looking at — was it an artwork or a web server that was broken?" Even so, he knew something exciting was happening.

Mark Tribe, Rhizome's founder, who is now the department chair of the M.F.A. fine arts program at the School of Visual Arts in New York, described that era as feeling "very new and different from everything else that was going on." It also felt anti-commercial — although as Mr. Tribe pointed out, "it's easy to be anti-commercial when the market doesn't care what you're doing."

Rhizome has been part of the Net Art story from the start. Mr. Tribe, the son of the Harvard law professor Laurence Tribe, was a 29-year-old artist living in Berlin when he established it in 1996. He'd delved into the nascent movement at Ars Electronica, the annual electronic art festival in Austria, and considered it "an online community waiting to happen" — which is why his organization started out as a mailing list.

Its name was inspired by the French post-structuralist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari, whose book "A Thousand Plateaus" Mr. Tribe had taken to Berlin. He encountered the word "rhizome" while poring over the index. A biological term referring to the laterally spreading, underground stem systems of plants like tulips and bamboo, it was applied here to the propagation of ideas. "It was a metaphor for a horizontally distributed, non-hierarchical network," Mr. Tribe explained — in other words, for the internet.

Net Art's political posture was characteristic of the feverish, techno-utopian excitement shared by netheads in general. "There was this radical idea that the internet was going to change the way art

is made and shared," said Lauren Cornell, who was Rhizome's executive director from 2005 to 2012 and who has since moved to the New Museum as a curator and associate director of technology initiatives. "That it might even do away with traditional institutions and gatekeepers" — that is, museums and curators.

Instead, it was Net Art that started to disappear. Rhizome began trying to preserve it in 1999 with the creation of ArtBase, an online archive that has since grown to more than 2,000 works. The organization became an affiliate of the New Museum in 2003, saving the group from almost-certain oblivion. But even then it was apparent that to keep Net Art from vanishing into the ether, something drastic would have to be done.

Preserving this work is not just a matter of uploading old computer files. "The files don't mean anything without the browser," Mr. Connor, 38, said. "And the browser doesn't mean anything without the computer" it runs on. Yet browsers from 15 or 20 years ago won't work on today's computers, and computers from that era are hard to come by and even harder to keep working.

Dragan Espenschied, Rhizome's preservation director, has been working with the University of Freiburg in Germany to develop a sophisticated software framework that emulates outdated computing environments on current machines.

Another iteration of this approach is oldweb.today, which Rhizome began in December as a free service. Oldweb lets you time-travel online, viewing archived web pages from sources such as the Library of Congress in a window that mimics an early browser. A second Rhizome initiative is Webrecorder, a free program that lets users build their own archives of currently available web pages. That can help preserve online works being created today.

Too bad it wasn't around in 2011, when YouTube deleted Ms. Cortright's "VVEBCAM." The video itself is innocuous enough: not quite two minutes of Ms. Cortright gazing impassively downward while cartoon figures — cats, dogs, parrots, pizza slices, what have you — drift across the screen. Less innocuous were the comments left by people who had been drawn to the video by the keywords she'd attached to it as bait — "names of celebrities, sex stuff, Pokemon, Nascar, sports, politics," she said in a recent interview, a laundry list of topics that were completely irrelevant to what anyone actually saw.

"VVEBCAM" was provocative, and it got a strong response. "People were really nasty," she said, "and my policy was always to respond in a way that was equal to or greater than the comments they made." Rhizome intends to embed the video in a reconstructed YouTube player, but there's no way to recreate the reaction the video provoked. "It's not like you were taking screen shots," she said. "When it's gone, it's gone."

Which could be said for Net Art itself. "Net Art is not over," Mr. Tribe said, "but it is over as an avant-garde art movement." In its place is art posted to the internet not by art world renegades

but by professionals for whom the internet is one medium among many — people like Ms. Cortright or Mr. Trecartin, whose deliriously disjointed videos are equally at home on YouTube and at the Saatchi Gallery in London.

The term that's being used is Post-Internet Art — not "post" in the sense that the internet is over, but that it's ubiquitous. In the post-internet era, the internet is simply assumed.

"It's different, now that everybody's online," said Ms. Cortright, 30. "Even 10 years ago, it was not as much a part of people's lives as it is today." She considers it "admirable" that Rhizome has committed itself to preserving artifacts from a past that's so recent and yet so distant, "Otherwise, they really would be lost."

And yet, she added, "you can't be too attached to something that's completely fleeting. I don't know. It just happens."

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