

Confessions of a whitneybiennial.com Curator

Patrick Lichty

voyd@voyd.com

Being an independent curator breeds strange bedfellows, actually stranger than I could have imagined. Sometime late in 2001, I got an e-mail from Miltos Manetas, of whom I'd known through the Net for a while regarding a project he was doing called whitneybiennial.com. The concept was to create an 'exhibition' concurrent with the opening night of the Whiney Biennial consisting of U-Haul trucks that would circle the museum showing projected Flash-based snippets through a program written by NY artist Michael Rees via rear-projection screens. The idea would be to question the relevance of shows like the Whitney Biennial, the material gallery and like strategies by recontextualizing such cultural spaces in light of online art, which had been accepted in the 2000 Whitney Biennial.

whitneybiennial.com called forth many issues, including community discussion of the use of applications such as Macromedia Flash in the creation of online art, the near-ubiquitous criticism of the Whitney Biennial, the conceptual history of Manetas' work and its critique on commodity culture, and to the potential subversiveness of an intervention such as the one being proposed. The questioning of materialism in artistic practice has been extant since at least since Duchamp's famous urinal and continuing on through many movements including Conceptualism. In so doing the artist's practice of circumspection of the gallery or museum as a valid entity is nothing new. However, the seductive quality of the new (as in New Media) when considered against the increasing acceptance of technologically-based art allows for a cultural 'Trojan Horse' to infiltrate the high art world.

But while considering the socio-cultural matrix surrounding whitneybiennial.com, personal issues regarding this intervention had to be taken into account. For example, significant parts of my personal stance towards the art world has involved critical discourse questioning traditional museological practice relating to materialism, legitimation, and archival of artworks in light of technological art, including 'net art'.

This body of thought began in 1998 with “The Panic Museum” (1) an essay that dealt with the state of museological practice vis-à-vis digital media, materialism, access, technology, and archival. In addition, other essays (2) and three independently curated online exhibits (3) explored possible alternative models for representing new media works integrating emergent technological methods. But this ‘alternative voice’ coupled with the fact my involvement in curatorial practice as well as having had work (under pseudonyms) in some of these exhibitions made me curious about my function in this project and what might be learned from this intervention. And lastly, there were some personal questions in regards to Manetas’ work and his exploration of branding (which I will explain later) that were of great interest to me, so I accepted.

The concept was that several independent curators and ‘chosen’ New Media intelligentsia (or ‘Neensters’, as Manetas would put it) would suggest Flash-based artists from the online community. These artists were to create Flash ‘snippets’ to be mixed together with a program coded by NY artist Michael Rees, the product of which would be projected from the rear aperture of a circling U-Haul truck on the opening night of the Biennial. The proposed scene would be a surreal circling of the wagons around the Whitney, but not creating a bulwark as in the Western movie tropes, but an elision of the center of attention entirely, having as much to do with the nature of the trends within the online art culture at the time itself.

Much of the discursive function of this intervention had to do with the production and techne of net-based art as its representation and content. At the time of conception of whitneybiennial.com, a great deal of heated discussion was transpiring regarding the use of Macromedia Flash as a creative tool, and whether the very structure of that development environment was a constraining factor in creating Flash-based work. There were many viewpoints on this subject, but many constructed a polarized argument centered virtuosity and craft in terms of code as art object or conceptual articulation. In framing this argument it might be useful to consider that no technology is neutral, as the legendary fable of Thamus and Thoth (4) illustrates in the case of language and writing, with the analogy of writing decentering the need for memorization. It isn’t to say that the use of Flash gives or takes from the creative process; the argument as it was unfolding at the time was questioning whether the use of an authoring tool necessarily shaped the content. There is a continuum of possibilities in this regard between the more open-ended software such as a programming language, which serves mainly in the creation of other software, to highly specialized programs like Bryce or poser, which by their

function tend to produce landscapes or figuratives, respectively. Therefore, the problem in contrasting the ends of the continuum questions which set of tools allows the digital artist to articulate a concept more fully through greater use of the platform, and whether the use of (more) tightly focused software inscribes certain agendas of form and style upon the artist.

Although the discussion of aspects of digital art production may appear tangential to the thrust of *whitneybiennial.com*, it actually forms one of the several disciplinary issues raised by Manetas. Questions engaging with formalist technical issues between arts created with custom code and prepackaged programs can also be likened to the differences between compiled (low-level) and interpreted (high-level) languages. Although the similarity may be dwindling as of 2004, a conversation in the 80's and 90's within the programming community was that low-level languages, although more difficult, allowed greater flexibility and control of processes while the higher-level languages gave greater ease, and that practitioners of higher-level programming were not fully utilizing the computer's resources. However, both techniques were suited for different applications, as say, BASIC or LOGO are not well suited to the crafting of operating systems, where C or Assembler is perfect for the job. But at the core of similar arguments regarding the validity of raw code versus 'environment-based' applications is a matrix of issues, from intent to the implication of 'craft', which is a discussion I will engage with at another time. However, there is a Fluxus-esque argument in vis-a-vis the dematerialization of the object if one considers the context of the link made within the digital conception of 'code as object', linking a simulated materialism, with dominant paradigms in programming parlance of object-oriented programming. This is reminiscent of the decrying of more ephemeral or conceptual works by the more materially based community, although as alluded to just recently, the issues are more akin to that of craft, material investiture, and implied virtuosity.

Another line of discussion relating to the controversy about Flash-based online art is the old interdisciplinary one of territorial boundaries between art and design. Flash was originally developed as a tool for the creation of graphic content by online animators, and was conversely adopted by many graphic designers for online content. In the case of Manetas, many of the artists (5) propositioned for *whitneybiennial.com* were, in fact, considered to be better known as design practitioners, possibly in part due to their use of tools such as Flash. So, would *whitneybiennial.com* be an intervention that questions the roles of art and design in regards to online art? This was one of the aspects put forth in the Manetas query (6), but if so, this merely reframes an old argument in a new context; namely that of the

online environment. Would Flash-based work, oft considered as an avenue for cutting-edge designers, now be considered as 'serious' conceptual work by the art world? Or perhaps more accurately, would the work by online designers be reframed as conceptual art if an artist with an established track record presented it? This would be decided in the back of a number of U-Haul trucks on the opening night of the Whitney, or so we would be led to believe...

Now that the personal and technical questions framing this intervention are taken care of, the location of the intervention comes into question. Why the Whitney Biennial? Why not critique shows like the Carnegie Triennial, Documenta, or even the Biennale de Venezia, many of which have introduced New Media works? Much of this has to do with recent history of New Media art and the role the Whitney has had in raising its visibility in the US art scene. The Whitney Biennial gained much attention for its inclusion of an Internet/New Media category in 2000, and this show was considered in the net art community as one of the 'break-out' institutional exhibitions for the genre (7). In specifically delineating a category for that particular genre, the Whitney then created a milieu in which the issues relating to New Media and its legitimacy in a high art institutional context could be critically engaged. When considering why an intervention like *whitneybiennial.com* has any validity, acquaintances within the New York art community relate to me that in a recent historical context, criticism of the Whitney biennial has been quite fashionable (99). Such criticism has served a multitude of functions from questioning the cultural agendas that the Whitney Biennial serves to reinscribing its own importance, and as trendsetter within the American art scene due to this increased notoriety.

Of course, the whole notion of fashion as concept fits well with Manetas' work. Taking the nod from Warhol in using fame as aesthetic construct and letting it morph it into legitimation as artifact of late capitalist marketing, Manetas engaged with corporate branding culture and its virtualization of meaning into pure image, thus taking a Baudrillardian stance towards the simulated 'image' of fame. In such a culture, companies use advertising firms to create incomprehensible brand names, and Manetas followed this practice in hiring Lexicon Branding to devise his 'Neen' conceptual brand. 'Neen' was "not exclusively about technology in art, but more about the style, about the psychological landscape" as he related to Salon Online (8). Therefore, Manetas' view of conceptualism illustrates the contemporary focus on image and style as content themselves.

If one considers the difference between the times in which Manetas and

Warhol live, an analogy can be drawn from the private sector from which we can synthesize a possible analysis. In the fin de millennium markets, corporations are often hard pressed to justify their stock valuations through their holdings and net worth. Therefore, the value of a corporate entity in the turn of the millennium is considered not so much in terms of their material worth, but in terms of their 'brand value'. Naomi Klein, in her seminal book, *No Logo*, documents this cultural shift in the declaration, "Brands, not products." (9) In Warhol's time, cultural production was still linked to a product. Andy was linked to Brillo boxes and paintings of Campbell's Soup cans. Even the silk-screens of himself, Jackie Onassis, Elvis and Mao Tse Deng still exhibited an all too concrete link to 'fame as product'. But by the late 80's, corporate culture had begun its inexorable shift into the ephemeralization of the cultural product through ubiquitous branding, or image-as product. Artists such as Wyland and Kinkaide, and especially Kinkaide, have earnestly engaged with the lifestyle branding concept through the mass production of populist cultural artifacts such as mass-production 'hand embellished prints' (Kinkaide), sculptures, calendars, et al, most of which are never seen by the artist himself. In their case, what has become the product are the feel-good paradigms they embody, whether the Christian 'Painter of Light' or the artist of the oceans, giving the consumer the impression of identification with a sympathetic ideology. In Manetas' case, he takes it one further, in linking 'Neen' to the 'style of the virtual' itself. Neen takes the Warholian sense of fame that once was invested in agglomerations of capital and shifts into the simulated landscape of brand perception – the brand has become the star. In effect, Neen makes visible the allegory of the Emperor's New Clothes, or that "there's no 'there' there"(quote?). But instead of invalidating the assumption of the absence of the concrete, Neen revels in it, which reinforces the brand-as-concept meme, and with such a conceptual framework, what was going to transpire with *whitneybiennial.com* on opening night?

Meanwhile, the date of the Whitney '02 was looming...

"Hey Kids, Let's Put on a Show!" *whitneybiennial.com* in NYC

The context under which *whitneybiennial.com* was situated placed it in a milieu in which significant changes had been taking place. In 2000, the exhibition had included the Internet/Digital category, and was one of the first of its kind to do so. Opening invites in 2000 were highly sought after, and the NY art scene was abuzz to see how the Whitney would treat the

nascent medium. Notable tech artists such as Mark Amerika, Fakeshop, Annette Weintraub, and John Simon were included (10), but Internet pranksters RTMark would set Manetas' stage for subversion via technological art.

RTMark had begun to follow through true to their Dadaist/Situationist roots through their repurposing/lampooning the agendas of late capitalism well before the exhibition had even begun. Preceding the show, the collective received a number of prized invitations to the artist's opening, so valued in that there was great interest in the 2000 Biennial's inclusion of Internet art. RTMark promptly placed them on auction website EBay, where they reportedly sold the tickets to an Austin-based adult video producer who went by the name of 'Sintron' for over \$8000. However, this would not be the only playful maneuver with their cultural capital, as in the actual installation, RTMark announced that "being included in the Whitney Biennial touches us..." but "RTMark is passing on its Whitney Biennial "real estate" to any artist who wants it." As "a pretty clear way to say 'thanks.'" (11), RTMark allowed any 'artist' that wished to include their website to be exhibited in the Whitney Biennial as a form of cultural dividend for past support. Included within the installations were links to Bob Jones University, the Cockettes, and ourfirst analsex.com. In so doing, RTMark questioned the nature of Internet art in the gallery, the context of art practice as a whole, as well as the boundaries of the museum as agent of cultural representation.

Placed in context against the subversive precedent of the 2000 Biennial, what would the purpose of the announced circling of twenty-three U-haul rental trucks, equipped with projection equipment on the night of the Patrons' reception? Perhaps the goal would be to signal the problematic nature of containing Internet art within the museum, or to underscore the solidarity of the online art community, or to possibly question the traditional conceptual boundaries between 'high art' and design in light of developments in Flash-based Internet websites like Entropy8Zuper and Praystation, (12) that transgress these borders.

To go back to one of the controversies in the net art community in the creation of online art, I discussed the schism between the code-based net artists and those deciding to use more design-driven Macromedia Flash-based works. As mentioned on the Crumb New Media curating maillist in 2001 (13), one perception of the proliferation of Flash-based net art is that of post dot-com boom designers trying to distinguish themselves in the online milieu, thus the 'art world' not taking these Flash creators as serious artists, although this is a somewhat reductive discourse. To

compound this, the split between code-based artists and Flash/Director artists fracture the nature of online art along lines of traditional disciplinary difference, technique, and craft. *whitneybiennial.com* positioned itself to take several critical positions between disciplines, the extant and emerging art worlds, and between ideologies in the online art community itself. However, the proof of whether any of these questions would be answered on opening night.

Execution of a Concept/Explosion of an Idea: Opening night for whitneybiennial.com

The media hype for the event had been taking hold. In fact, briefly before the opening, Matt Mirapaul of the New York Times actually gave more attention to *whitneybiennial.com* than the actual exhibition itself. (14) Artists and other participants within the intervention were on site, such as people from the Archinect maillist who had contributed, as well as other NY-based practitioners. Artists and patrons were beginning to arrive at the Whitney for the opening, but one thing was missing; the trucks...

Time passed on, and no trucks arrived. No projectors, no trucks, no circling, showing the surrounding intervention. However, a large website at *whitneybiennial.com* incorporated all of the clips within the webspace under the rubric of Manetas' interface and Rees' mixer. The Whitney Biennial opened as planned, but the recorded timeline of the actual events in relation to reactions to Manetas' act is sketchy. Online news, through lists such as Rhizome and Thingist, reported that there were irate participants who had shown up for the unveiling, and Manetas subsequently buying copious amounts of drinks at a questionable Russian bar until the wee hours of the morning. However, when looking at the reported events, this documentation fits neatly into Manetas' brand mythology of Neen's focus on centrality of the image. A general shape of the events can probably be held as reliable, but such an account assumes greater importance in the building of the mythology of the evening in the building of the *whitneybiennial.com*'s brand value.

But in the following days, Manetas claimed the event a success in numerous organs such as Salon.com, WIRED Magazine, and so on. Although the trucks were proffered in news releases, Manetas claimed that the trucks were there, "in your mind" (15), and that the intervention had gone off as planned. In reviewing Manetas' manifesto on Neen, his original concept was to challenge the physical through the virtual, and the problematizing of physical representation by, although he would not say

this originally, a translation 60's conceptualism into the online arts of the 1990's. By offering a synthesis of conceptualism linked to the virtual through corporate branding paradigms, Manetas was both challenging the role of disciplines and institutions in the online art world. But with much of the attention focused on himself as artist, or as Tribe would refer to Beuys in saying, a "Social Sculptor" (16), by focusing the discourse upon *whitneybiennial.com* as a Manetas-based intervention, he also makes the shift from Warholian conceptions of fame to neo-corporate 'name branding' by collecting this body of work, atelier-style, under his mark.

From a personal perspective, there was a great deal of ambivalence in having participated in a rather opaque process where I had not idea whether the ruse was real or not. Being that I had personally taken part in numerous hoax-based interventions, the irony of my own feelings in this case was not lost. Of course, Manetas' issues of play with private sector culture were similar to ones I had engaged with at other times in other projects, but the irony was that I had allowed myself to become a temp for Neen, Inc. Manetas, while making the claim of supplying the trucks, had not really mentioned whether he would actually hire them. For all other aspects of the intervention, most of Manetas' claims were tightly framed, and one could argue that his assurances in the construction of *whitneybiennial.com*, taken under a given framework, were all essentially true. But within all of these assertions significant ambiguity existed that when pressed for detail that it could be seen, when viewed through Manetas' conceptual lens, the fine print in *whitneybiennial.com*'s cultural contract was pretty clear. In short, *whitneybiennial.com* was an intervention that was the epitome of everything Neen.

Post Mortem of an Undead Intervention

This reflection upon *whitneybiennial.com* came from a query by Manetas himself, who asked me in January 2003 to write this very essay for a CD release to be released in February or March. The deadline was tight, and the original request was for a quick analysis of the piece. However, being part of the intervention, somehow I still felt entitled to go behind the scenes to put *whitneybiennial.com* in greater context. No such backstage door opened, and the query was met with a murky opacity behind the corporate obsidian sheen of Neen. As long as the process of developing *whitneybiennial.com* was extant, it was as if the "machine to destroy itself" was still in its last smoking, dying moments. I was still part of Manetas' social sculpture. However, the experiment continues as I write, the conceptual corpse continues to shamle into 2004, and the idea of adopting

a DeCerteau-esque ‘in-between’-ness while participating in the closing movements of Manetas’ symphony of identity seems, if anything, perhaps a little more interesting while taking one last ride on the conceptual Matterhorn ride.

In reflecting upon *whitneybiennial.com* then, what are the questions did it ask, and continue to put to us? Does it posit a fundamental shift in the art world with radical implications for future exhibitions in light of online art? Does it herald the invalidation of the legitimacy of major shows like the Whitney Biennial through the capability to create media attention via tactical means? Does it suggest that with the advent of new media art, the space of representation for the work of art has now become nomadic, and free of the institution? Or perhaps more succinctly, could *whitneybiennial.com* have been a further conceptual expansion on Manetas’ play with the insidious practice of branding as a unique part of American culture? Or had it asked questions that had already been asked in previous Whitney Biennials, but merely in different terms.

Putting all of these issues in context, more macroscopic topics could be missed. *whitneybiennial.com* both challenged and reinscribed traditional art agendas by positioning itself against the gallery, testing the porousness between art and design, and looking at the technological issues in the online art world. But in so doing, Manetas did not address many issues beyond the art world, except those that might apply to his conceptual frame created by Neen. The one point that Manetas does address is that it doesn’t matter whether he exists at all, thus positioning his style of branding as another form of the death of the author (17). What is proven is the exhaustion of aspects of contemporary art and the art world via Neen’s evacuation of meaning and the shift of aspects of cultural valuation through branding as style, carried on through *whitneybiennial.com*. To paraphrase the late 90’s spoken word piece, Virtual Paradise (18), which says, “Reality? ... Well, it’s ALL virtual!” he combines the perceptual value of contemporary art with the implied value of branding to erase his own identity to leave only at best a flickering signifier. And perhaps that’s what the whole purpose of being ‘Neen’ is, to show that the Emperor is wearing no clothes by going nude oneself.

References:

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(2) This body of work includes museum crits and essays such as “Histories of Disappearance” (Arte e vida seculo XXI, D. Domingues, ed. Camara Brasileira do Livro, SP Brazil, 2004)

(3) “Through the Looking Glass: Technological art at the turn of the Millennium”, 2000, Beechwood Arts Center, Beechwood, Ohio USA (online catalogue: <http://www.voyd.com/ttlg>), “(re)distributions: Nomadic Art as Cultural Intervention”, (2001) (online catalogue: <http://www.voyd.com/ia>)

(4) Postman, Neil, *Technopoly*, Ch. 1, Vintage Books, NY, NY USA 1992

(5) Although the lines between design and art were radically blurred in the case of the Flash artists of whitneybiennial.com, artists like Amy Franceschini (Futurefarmers) at the time were receiving almost as much attention for the design of their pieces as the content.

(6) Manetas, Miltos, Whitneybiennial.com call for works, Newsgrist, <http://newsgrist.net/newsgrist3-6.html>

(7) Whitney Museum of American Art NYC, Whitney Biennial 2000 Exhibition

(8) Salon.com “The Man From Neen” 3/21/2002, <http://www.salon.com/people/conv/2002/03/21/manetas/>

(9) Klein, Naomi, No Logo, Pp. 21, 2002, Picador Press, NY NY, USA

(10) 2000 Whitney Biennial, *ibid.*

(11) RTMark, Whitney Biennial 2000 installation, <http://www.rtmk.com/exhibit/>

(12) Many of these sites, like www.praystation.com have undergone significant changes and do not represent the same aesthetics they did at the time of the opening of the whitneybiennial.com site.

(13) Crumb New Media maillist - www.newmedia.sunderland.ac.uk/crumb/

(14) Mirapaul, Matt, If You Can't Join 'Em, You Can Always Tweak 'Em Arts Online, New York Times, March 4, 2002

(15) Bratton, Benjamin, Nettime, <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists->

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(18) Virtual Paradise, Earwax productions (date unknown, '90's) <http://www.earwaxproductions.com/galleryradio.html>