A Wary but Interested Eye on the Web

By MATTHEW MIRAPAUL

L
ike a poker player tempted by the dice table, an artist who succeeds in one medium is often drawn inexorably to try another. Strindberg painted. Julian Schnabel directs films.

So it is not surprising that some artists, lured perhaps by the promise of a vast audience, have been irresistibly attracted to the Internet. Among those who have experimented since the Web was born are John Baldessari, Karen Finley, Yoko Ono and Tony Oursler. So far, such artists have not hit the aesthetic jackpot.

Yet the Internet still beckons. Glenn Ligon, a New York artist best known for his vaguely legible paintings of texts by African-American writers, is the latest to try his luck. Mr. Ligon's roll of the dice is "Annotations," an interactive photo album created for the Web site of the Dia Center for the Arts in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. An advance look at the work shows...
An advance look at the work shows that although Mr. Ligon has not rolled a perfect seven, he has not crapped out either. The work is online at www.diacenter.org/ligon.

Initially "Annotations" looks like a typical family photo album, in this case including faded, fuzzy snapshots of Mr. Ligon's relatives posing for the camera. But as one clicks on the screen to flip through its 20 pages, the album starts to unsettle, and it becomes clear that it is a work of fiction. First, one realizes that the captions reveal little about who is in a picture or when it was taken. Nor is there a chronological progression, with familiar faces aging as one ventures deeper. Most startling is an image unlikely to circulate after any family's Easter meal: a murky pornographic image of a man.

Who selected these pictures and why? What unhappy scenes are not being shown? These questions could also be asked the next time a family portrait of a missing child or a lost soldier flashes across the television screen. In an interview last week Mr. Ligon said that he had been thinking "about the hidden histories of family photo albums and what can be represented in them — and what cannot." When picking pictures for their albums, people are highly selective in how they portray their lineage and personal history, frequently omitting embarrassing or controversial material. "Photo albums are fictions," Mr. Ligon said.

In assembling "Annotations" he used his family's snapshots, as well as photographs bought at flea markets, in Greenwich Village shops and through online auctions. Clicking on each image will expose another picture, a few cryptic words or, in several instances, an audio clip of Mr. Ligon singing songs appropriate to the picture's era. But these annotations defy interpretation. Instead the annotations that matter, Mr. Ligon seems to suggest, are those the viewer brings to the experience.

Mr. Ligon is not the first artist to blend personal and found memorabilia. He is obviously not the first to challenge the truth that photographs appear to present. But in putting his work on the Internet, where the line
between private and public space is blurred, he shows how the family album is an equally blurry proposition: a private document conceived for public consumption. Yet viewing "Annotations" on a screen feels as intimate as leafing through a friend's high-school yearbook. Mr. Ligon is well aware of how his work is enhanced by the Web. "It's very different from a museum space or a gallery space," he said, "partially because you can see it in private."

As with other online projects by artists who are new to the Internet, "Annotations" is limited in how it uses the medium. It does not link to other sites and visitors cannot contribute. While Mr. Ligon's work will benefit from being freely available on the Web, it does not need the Internet to exist. It could be published as a DVD.

"Annotations" is the 20th Web-based artwork that the Dia has commissioned since 1995. Other artists include the choreographer Molissa Fenley and the architects Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio.

Lynne Cooke, the Dia's curator, said the center favored artists unfamiliar with the Internet. "Artists who work with something where they don't know the rules beforehand are more inclined to push the envelope than those who are already very dextrous," she said.

The problem with this is that artists who arrive new to the Internet do not always fully grasp its capabilities or history as well as digital artists who have devoted themselves to that medium. Yukiko Shikata, an independent curator in Tokyo, said that most artists who arrive from other media "regard the Net as the same as existing media and just place their former works or methods" there.

For instance "TimeStream," Mr. Oursler's 2001 Web project for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is essentially a video-art piece stuffed onto a hard-to-navigate Web page. On the other hand, Mr. Baldessari's 2001 project for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, "Still Life: Choosing and Arranging," is a crude complaint about how few choices there are in so-called interactive art. But any number of digital artworks made the same point in the mid-90's.

As far as Wolfgang Staehle is concerned, everyone is welcome. Mr. Staehle is the executive director of Thing.net, an online resource for new-media artists. In the mid-90's he invited Mariko Mori and Vanessa Beecroft...
mid-90's he invited Mariko Mori and Vanessa Beecroft, among others, to contribute online works to his site. Mr. Staehle said: "These guys are not interested in being accepted into the pantheon of Net art, but if they want to put it out there, let them. Maybe some people who didn't see their work before will become acquainted with it that way."

There seems to be some truth to this. After a profile of Ms. Beecroft was published in The New Yorker magazine recently, her area of Mr. Staehle's site became so clogged with traffic that it was temporarily taken offline.

For Benjamin Weil, head curator at Eyebeam, a new-media center in New York, the issue has less to do with the artists than with those who commission them. In addition to providing technical assistance, cultural institutions must also give them sufficient time and information to adapt to the medium. "It's really a matter of guiding people," he said, "and engaging them, and letting them understand that what they can do with this medium is different from what they can do with others."

In the mid-90's, while running an early digital-art site, Mr. Weil commissioned projects from Jenny Holzer and Lawrence Weiner. They are still intriguing works. Mr. Weil said the artists adapted well to the Internet because "they are conceptual artists, so they are much more idea-driven, and form is something they don't really care much for anyway."

But there is another possible explanation for why artists from other mediums struggle so mightily with the Internet: it is just too new. "I don't think artists quite get the Web yet," Mr. Ligon said. "Maybe it's too new to be thought through."

Web Site: Glenn Ligon's Annotations at Dia Center
Web Site: The Thing

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