

The Unexpected Joy of Internet Art

With so many museums around the world closed, art made from the internet for the internet has been a saving grace.

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Aug. 26, 2020

A kind of infinite scroll spills across your mobile or desktop screen: small-print black text against a white background, punctuated by the occasional red heart emoji. At first, it looks like a long Excel spreadsheet, then a bit like a war memorial.

“All the best — stay strong.”

“Sending love to you and your children.”

“Continued prayers <3.”

The snippets of text — more than 200,000 bits of encouragement for hard times, repeated over and over — are culled from medical GoFundMe pages. They’ve been compiled into a piece of digital artwork called “Get Well Soon” by Sam Lavigne and Tega Brain, intended to speak to the strange ecosystem of online crowdfunding that has ballooned as hundreds of thousands of Americans have simultaneously become sick from the coronavirus and lost their health care along with their jobs.

This archive of well-wishes and fears, prayers and pleadings, represent a slice of the grief, love, medical costs and mutual aid that define illness in this country.

I discovered this piece in April, when it was part of an online exhibition of digital-born artwork co-commissioned by the Chronus Art Center in Shanghai, the New Museum’s affiliate Rhizome in New York, and Art Center Nabi in Seoul. And I’ve been coming back to it ever since.

With the closures of museums around the world, we’ve been kept at an odd distance from physical artwork. Though some American museums have started to reopen, many more remain in limbo, as their leaders attempt to figure out how to keep staff and visitors safe; their absence leaves strange, sad holes in weekend afternoons that used to be filled with in-person perusing of paintings, sculptures and photographs.

For me, though, the chance to spend time with net art — pieces like “Get Well Soon,” uniquely suited to these digitized times — has become one of the unexpected joys of lockdown.

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Defined loosely, net art is art that’s made from the internet, for the internet. It’s art that uses the web both as a material and a medium. It might pull from old GeoCities home pages, or Google Street View.

It can be a livestream or an interactive game, like Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn’s “The Graveyard” — a game in which the player’s only objective is to help an old woman navigate through a cemetery to a bench.

Sometimes net art has physical components, too, extensions of its online presence, like a project by Bunny Rogers and Filip Olszewski that included an abandoned storefront in Queens and an associated website. But mostly it lives online, as we all increasingly do.

I’ve tried experimenting with all the ways museums have attempted to bridge the gap between us and the art in their cordoned off exhibitions: trawling through their digital collections, taking virtual tours of museum interiors, following their Instagrams as they post pictures of objects. None of this really does it for me.

There’s already a glut of image-based content online, which leads to a kind of aesthetic collapse: A photo of a Cézanne still-life appears alongside an ad for Everlane jeans and a news article featuring a stock photo of a hospital. It is hard to look closely or deeply at a painting flattened like this. And there’s a certain awkwardness in clicking through uploaded images on the walls of a gallery, or trying to imagine a photographed object into three dimensions.

So I've been turning to net art. I've hopped around some of the new exhibitions that have cropped up during lockdown, including "Well Now WTF?," featuring more than 100 artists' digital-born works that make artsy, funny and sometimes dark use of GIFs. I've also spent hours scrolling and clicking through the Net Art Anthology, a collection of net art curated by Rhizome, featuring 100 pieces made between the 1980s and the 2010s.

One of my favorite works is called "Life Sharing." "Now you're in my computer," a pop-up windows tell you when you open the piece. The artists Eva and Franco Mattes live-shared the contents of their home computer on the internet from 2000 to 2003. Bank accounts, email, trash and projects in progress were all made public in what was at once a banal act of sharing and surveillance.

It isn't just that digital-born art is proximate to our online experience, but that it's part of it. What's most moving and refreshing about net art is that we have direct access to it. Right now, much of living is simulated: Work is remote, of course, but we also drink beers with our friends on Zoom to mimic going to a bar; we watch plays on YouTube and make believe we're in a theater; we go to church via livestream instead of sitting in pews.

This virtualized mode of living has led to some serendipity. But I am tired of simulation and approximation. The beauty of net art is that we can see it the way it was meant to be seen. And it's composed of the digital matter that has become primary material of our lives.

Sophie Haigney writes about visual art, books and technology.

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