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Electronic Art Grabs Public Eye

by Reena Jana

8:24pm 22.Jun.97.PDT If you're in Kassel, Germany, to witness the 1997 installment of Documenta X, an international exhibition of contemporary art that occurs every five years, you'll miss some of the show's most exciting offerings - unless you log onto its Web site.

At the physical exhibit, presented at various venues from 21 June through 28 September, you won't witness Up to 625, the first Internet art project by artist Matt Mullican, who recently wowed Paris audiences with his 3-D drawings at the Pompidou Center. Although an interactive project by Mullican was commissioned specially for Documenta X, it exists exclusively online.

And while you will be able to see an offline version of Without Addresses, a complex and yet elegantly minimalist self-writing Web site by Joachim Blank and Karl Heinz Jeron (co-initiators of International City Federation, one of Berlin's most recognized ISPs), the installation of Without Addresses in Kassel doesn't offer visitors the opportunity of interacting with the artwork - one of the most crucial and compelling aspects of the piece.

Online visitors to Without Addresses type in their names, and a search engine collects matches and reassembles them into a new Web page - "a deformed mirror, like a homepage recycling machine," explains Blank. The pool of Web pages derived from the online version will merely be copied to the offline version once a day, but those at the Kassel exhibit are unable to participate, only observe.

The Documenta X Web site is such a separate entity from the physical exhibition that it has its own curator, Simon Lamunière, curator of new media at Switzerland's St. Gervais Genève museum. The artistic director of Documenta X, Catherine David, asked Lamunière to curate a Web site that would accompany the physical exhibition of Documenta X, hoping to enhance Documenta's established reputation as a showcase for the most daring and innovative artists working.

Lamunière was recruited only six months before the prototype went live on 21 March. His approach was to commission original projects that addressed issues relevant to the Internet. "To my knowledge, there had never been before a series of commissioned Internet artworks created specifically for a major

exhibition like Documenta," says Lamunière.

That the site not be "just a second-hand information service" was foremost of his concerns. States Lamunière, "Documenta itself is much too big a physical exhibition to be grasped even through a catalog-type site. The site that I've created, which features, so far, more than 700 pages - and is still growing - gives the viewer their own perception of the exhibition."

The Documenta site, available in both German and English versions, features sleek graphic interfaces in a bold red, white, and black color scheme, designed by Lamunière himself. The pages of eight commissioned Internet artworks (more will be added), created and programmed by the artists and their assistants, are categorized into three groups: "Surfaces & Territories," "Groups & Interpretation," and "Cities & Networks."

Art critics have already been quick to redirect their eyes and ink from the physical show toward the Web site. The summer issue of Artforum, for example, features an essay by German critic Cristoph Blase that trashes the physical exhibition of Documenta X as "a nebulous constellation of ideas ... that no one understands." The same issue devotes an entire page - although not necessarily a paean - to the identity and history of Lamunière's groundbreaking site, illustrated with photographs of the screens from Without Addresses.

Is there a danger of a well-curated Web site accompanying an exhibition overshadowing and distracting from the exhibition itself, like an offspring devouring its parent? Shoshana Berger, assistant arts editor at The Web Magazine, doesn't think so: "I don't think we should be losing sleep over well-designed Web sites eclipsing the exhibitions they accompany, being that they are two entirely different ways of apprehending art: one linear and passive, the other discursive and interactive."