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Whitney in Webland

by Giovanni Garcia-Fenech

The **Whitney Biennial 2000** opened on Mar. 23, and for the first time you don't have to leave home to see it -- at least, you can view the nine Web works from the comfort of your own desktop. This section of the Biennial was organized by **Lawrence Rinder**, a San Francisco curator who so impressed **Max Anderson** that he hired him as the Whitney's new chief of contemporary art.

At a symposium prior to the opening of the show, Rinder admitted he knew nothing about web art. He described his research process as going home after work and sitting in a dark room in front of his computer monitor for two or three hours a day -- an experience that would qualify most web surfers for his position.

A perfunctory review of the projects found altogether too much random content -- aimless links, pointless animations and text fragments you don't want to read. Contrary to what that other new-media visionary, Nam June Paik, may think, a hodgepodge of images does not reflect the true nature of communication today.

By far the best project is by [@Tmark](#) (pronounced "artmark"), a group of caustic conceptual and political artists whose online project transcends the medium. True to form, the group has taken advantage of its inclusion in the exhibition to poke fun at the art world, auctioning off [tickets](#) to the show's gala party on eBay and altering its site so that Whitney visitors who try to view it will instead see a rotating set of Internet pages submitted by the public, including a porn site and a Backstreet Boys tribute page.

Several of the projects are in hot competition for last on my list, but that dubious honor would have to go to **Darcey Steinke's** nonlinear, illustrated story titled [Blindspot](#) (1999). The format -- a central text linked to numerous shorter, ancillary texts -- is not only familiar but clunky. Call it click-fatigue, but I didn't bother to read the whole thing. The site was originally commissioned by [ada 'web](#).

The last time I saw [Fakeshop](#) (**Jeff Gompertz**, **Prema Murthy** and **Eugene Thacker**), they struck me as hippies hiding their true nature behind high technology. Their site broadcasts their own live performances in real time, and will host a live event for the Biennial in collaboration with other digital artists, musicians and theorists.

Another artist doing a long, random text piece, and one who has previously gotten a certain amount of attention for it, goes by the name of **Mark Amerika**. His 1997 [Grammatron](#) is a dense, nonlinear narrative composed of images and text about Abe Golam, who is pretentiously called an "info-shaman," and who has an alternate persona named Grammatron, a "genderless digital being." The site is supplemented by [Hypertextual Consciousness](#), which is billed as a "companion theory-guide."

If you're looking for something hipper, try **Lew Baldwin's** [Redsmoke](#), 1995, which features a stylish cartoon action thriller called *Platters* that is suggestive of Japanese monster movies from the 1970s. The problem with this piece is that it's more like a Beastie Boys music video than an artwork. The site also features a seemingly random amalgam of abstract animations and interactive "games" accompanied by electronic sound effects, mysterious links and unexpected dead ends.

One especially popular site is bound to be **Ken Goldberg's** [Ouija 2000](#), a real Ouija board in Goldberg's lab that can supposedly be manipulated by web visitors moving their computer mice. Users can see a live streaming video of the board's progress on the web page. The work was built in collaboration with engineers and designers at the University of California, Berkeley.

The online Minimalist of the show -- I'm thinking of Sol LeWitt here -- is **John F. Simon, Jr.**, whose [Every Icon](#) (1997) features a Java applet that generates all possible combinations of black-and-white squares in a grid of 32 by 32 units, or a total of 1,024 squares, beginning with all white squares and ending with all black. 'Nuff said.

Ben Benjamin's [Superbad](#), 1995, is a jumble of graphics, images and text laced with references to popular culture and featuring everything from a child's story about Captan [sic] America to pictures of Robert DeNiro, along with, yes, abstract animations. The site changes continuously, with new material added every day.

Finally, the documentarian of the show is **Annette Weintraub**, whose [Sampling Broadway](#) (1999) presents 360-degree images of five locations along Broadway in Manhattan along with movies and animations interspersed with text, voice-over narration and sounds of the street. This piece was originally commissioned by [Turbulence](#).

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