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ARTS ONLINE

Getting Tangible Dollars for an Intangible Creation

By MATTHEW MIRAPPAUL

In a strong endorsement of a young genre, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation is acquiring two works of Internet-based art for its permanent collection and today is hanging them, so to speak, on a special section of the foundation's Web site at guggenheim.org/internetart. The works are "net.flag" by Mark Napier and "Unfolding Object" by John F. Simon Jr.

Jon Ippolito, the Guggenheim Museum's associate curator of media arts, said, "The objective is both to demonstrate our conviction that these forms of cultural expression deserve to be safeguarded for the future and also to demonstrate a method for doing it."

Now that the artists' development of the works is finished — a relative term for projects that will continue to change as online visitors alter them — the Guggenheim can officially acquire them, a process that is expected to be finalized at the foundation's spring board meeting.

Although there are a few online pieces in other collections, museum acquisitions of Internet art are still rare. Steve Dietz, new-media curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, said, "What the Guggenheim is doing is what every contemporary arts institution should and will do: treat Net art like any other contemporary art in its collection."

But for a museum whose primary purpose is to collect, exhibit and preserve art, online works pose a fresh set of challenges. How do you collect art that exists everywhere — and yet nowhere — in cyberspace? What does one acquire when there is no tangible object to possess? The artists have conceived two new works, but what they have created is computer code, the underlying set of software instructions that determine what is seen on the screen and how it responds to user input.

So what does a museum pay for online art and what does it get? Mr. Ippolito declined to reveal what the Guggenheim is spending, but a person familiar with the acquisition process said it was in the range of \$10,000 to \$15,000 for each piece. In return, the museum receives the work's code and the exclusive right to exhibit it.

Arguing that a discussion of contract terms misses the point, Mr. Ippolito said: "The Holy Grail of selling a Web site is a red herring. To collect an artist Web site is less about owning property than stewarding heritage."

So the Guggenheim has set up a small preservation fund, the Variable Media Endowment, to pay for recreating works endangered by technological obsolescence. This is part of the museum's larger initiative to work with artists in all ephemeral media, including video and installation art, to make sure that their intentions are followed in case their works are remade under different conditions.

How effective this will be remains to be seen, and the Guggenheim's two Internet-based works are among the guinea pigs. No one knows what it will take to preserve works in a genre that is less than a decade old and subject to constantly evolving technical standards, but some action is inevitable. Mr. Simon said, "With Internet art, it is only a question of time before there will have to be changes to the code."

A painting may require the occasional cleaning, but software-based art could demand a complete overhaul on a regular basis. Thus, for instance, a piece that runs on today's Web browsers may fail in future versions, assuming there will still be browsers in 10 or 20 years.

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There are also shorter-term preservation issues. Both Internet projects build on previous visitors' input, so they must be copied onto multiple computers on a daily basis. A painting may be stashed at a Guggenheim archive on the West Side of Manhattan, but "Unfolding Object" will be stored on computers in Seattle, Mr. Ippolito's office and Mr. Simon's studio. Recalling that the Guggenheim's computer network was knocked out on Sept. 11, Mr. Ippolito said, "I can't let the destiny of these works be at the whim of a power surge."

Although the cost to acquire the Internet works may be modest, Mr. Ippolito said it does not reflect their true value. One must also consider the museum's commitment to sustaining the works.

Mr. Ippolito said: "A pet owner who spends \$5 on the runt of the litter may be willing to spend thousands to keep it alive over time. Which is a better marker of the value of that animal?"

Ultimately the works' real value will be determined by their aesthetic impact. Neither "net.flag" nor "Unfolding Object" represents a technological breakthrough, but technology-based art need not be cutting edge. Instead, these projects are refinements of ideas that both artists have gnawed on before.

Mr. Simon's "Unfolding Object" confronts visitors with a Josef Albers-like square within a square. Clicking on one of the central square's edges causes another square to swing open from it, as does clicking on any of the successive squares' edges. As the virtual object unfolds, each square contains marks indicating how many visitors have previously opened that exact square.

Playing with "Unfolding Object" is akin to popping the pockets in Bubble Wrap, but there is a more serious purpose. As in the "Alter Stats" project on his www.numeral.com site, Mr. Simon has built a history of past interactions into the work. Visitors to the new work must decide if they want to follow well-trod paths or strike out on their own, a nice metaphor for the creative process.

In "net.flag," Mr. Napier lets visitors wage a symbolic battle over virtual turf. On the site there is a flag that can be digitally changed however one likes. A French flag could be replaced by an Italian one, or the red stripes in the United States flag could be turned into an Arabic green. The work gained new resonance after Sept. 11, but it is more about whether it is possible to stake a claim in cyberspace, where there are no boundaries.

As in other projects on Mr. Napier's Potatoland.org site, he encourages visitors to obliterate what past viewers have done. But this is the first time that he is ceding control of a work to another. He said: "There's a definite tug for me. It's like the male version of an umbilical cord."

The acquisitions are the remnants of an ambitious plan conceived in 2000 by Thomas Krens, the Guggenheim director, under which the museum was to commission 20 online works the first year.

Because of the Guggenheim's financial troubles, that plan fell by the wayside along with the stalled Guggenheim.com e-commerce venture. An online exhibition space, the Guggenheim Virtual Museum, also seems moribund. But Mr. Ippolito said he continued to discuss the possibility of future commissions with other digital artists.

For Mr. Simon, the Guggenheim's ownership of his work provides a rare possibility for the digital artist: a promise that his work may outlive him. He said: "If the museum buys the art work and values it as part of its permanent collection, there will be an economic incentive to keep the code running. The museum is the archival storage for my code. Isn't that what a museum does for art anyway?"

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