

Challenging the Authority of the Physical: Internet Art in Exhibition

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Due in large part to the advent of the internet, immateriality and information seem to form the core of living in the 21st century and are, therefore, increasingly relevant themes in contemporary artwork. Thousands of workers go to work each day and, at the end of the day, they have made no physical objects but rather exchanged immaterial information amongst themselves. Friends keep in touch via immaterial letters called e-mail and tourists take immaterial digital snapshots on their digital cameras. As fast as digitization may be converting different aspects of contemporary life to immaterial forms, the complete demise of the physical is still very much science fiction. Electronic information is nevertheless quickly taking over many of the roles and functions which physical objects used to occupy. The museum gallery was a physical space first conceptualized in the 19th century purely for the display of art objects. This physical institution, however, must also adapt to information and immateriality where it exists in artwork. One of the major challenges for art galleries and museums since the mid-1990s has been how to treat and display information art, especially and most notably internet art, in the traditional gallery setting. Galleries seem to have tackled this particular problem of exhibiting internet art in the two most obvious ways: holding hybrid online/physical exhibitions or holding entirely online exhibitions. If success were measured by the art world based solely on the complete and authentic experience of a work of art, then the idea of an online exhibition of internet-based art seems clearly the most appropriate method of display. This idea, however, places galleries and museums on the very cusp of obsolescence in regards to their power and influence over the viewing and reception of internet art. At the very least, it seems that either the art world is excluded from internet art networks or internet art is excluded from an art world

discourse. Obviously, neither of these scenarios have happened and galleries and museums have found ways to adapt to internet art while internet artists, although to a lesser extent, have adapted to galleries and museums. Though the internet itself is a hybrid platform or medium, its immateriality and indistinct physical location seems to suggest that the most appropriate way to display internet art is in an online setting.

If it is assumed that a successful exhibition will allow for the complete and authentic experience of a work of art, it is necessary to pinpoint what constitutes this experience for the medium of the internet. Art on the internet is an especially challenging form of art precisely because it is so hard to gather together a single work on it. All works are inevitably linked through a network to or from other sites, other pages, and other information. Therefore, the complete experience of a work of art may be quite difficult to achieve. The only way to define a complete experience of the work is through exploration of it within the context given by the artist or artists. By limiting the methods taken to get to a particular internet work of art or limiting how it can be viewed, such as only allowing the viewer to visit that one particular site, the complete experience of a piece can not often be achieved. An internet artist must be aware that any person who browses into the site or even someone who merely types the link into the browser window can easily leave the site, go check his or her e-mail, play an online game, go back to the art work, or sign off. The limitation of this transient experience of browsing internet art can prohibit the complete experience of it. Authentic experience is even more difficult to pinpoint in internet art. If authenticity is taken as the artist's intent for the piece realized in the context in which the piece was created, most internet artwork must be experienced through a browser window, on a computer, and definitely not through simple screen shots

which can not be interacted with by the viewer. Interactivity is a part of internet art that few, if any, projects do not include. Therefore, watching someone else interact with internet art would not constitute an authentic experience of it, nor would seeing screen shots of the piece in a book. Perhaps more so than authenticity in any other media, authenticity in internet art is difficult to even come close to in reproduction or other second-hand experiences. In showing this artwork, these considerations of a complete and authentic experience of internet art seem to be the most important yet challenging for an exhibition to accomplish.

Particularly indicative of early internet art exhibitions, although not exclusive to them, the hybrid physical/online exhibition style tends to treat internet art in the same manner as any other digital art object, displaying it in a physical show in a physical gallery location where it could be physically visited by an art-viewing audience. One exhibition which seemed focused on the physical gallery space, although also showing work online, was the show *Port: Navigating Digital Culture* at the MIT List Visual Arts Center held January 25 through March 29, 1997¹. Other venues decided to take up a greater compromise between physical and immaterial by seemingly giving equal importance to both the physical and online spaces. One such exhibition which functioned in this way was *Dystopia + Identity in the Age of Global Communications* at the Tribes Gallery in New York from December 2, 2000 through January 13, 2001. Perhaps the most logical approach to displaying internet art but the most threatening to museums or galleries is placing an exhibition entirely online. One such exhibition which attempted an

¹ Exhibitions listed in Appendix of: Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004) 217-218.

entirely online exhibition was *Beyond Interface* which was sponsored by Walker Art Center in January 1998 and is still in operation online today.²

One of the first attempts to hold an exhibition of internet art was *Port: Navigating Digital Culture*. Developed through a long discourse of online chats and proposals, the exhibition attempted to include both the physical and internet space in the time-based exhibit. A great amount of energy seemed to be devoted to the physical layout of the gallery and presentation of the pieces in the space. The website for the exhibition specifically seemed to emphasize the physical environment of the gallery and includes a detailed architectural map of the gallery space (Illus. 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) and images of the views of the exhibition from each cardinal direction and from several vantage points in what appears to be an attempt to recreate the physical space of the gallery (Illus. 6, 7, 8, and 9).³ The recreation of the material world in an online setting was also attempted through a 3-D VRML (Virtual Reality Modeling Language) simulation. It is rather paradoxical that the website should be so concerned with recreating the physical environment of the gallery while, simultaneously, the physical space is equally concerned with recreating the virtual or digital experience in the gallery. This case only seems to serve as an example of the absurdity of the notion that “cyber-space” is any kind of space at all. There seems to be a tendency in American vernacular to assign architecture to ideas which have no real physical equivalent.⁴ This exhibition seems mired in the futility

² “Beyond Interface,” Steve Dietz, curator. Walker Arts Center. Jan. 1998. <<http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/beyondinterface>>.

³ “PORT: Navigating Digital Culture,” Robbin Murphy and Remo Campopiano, curators. MIT List Visual Arts Center. 25 Jan.-29 Mar. 1997. <<http://artnetweb.com/port>>.

⁴ Rosalind E. Krauss, “Postmodernism’s Museum Without Walls,” *Thinking About Exhibitions*. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, eds. (London: Routledge, 1996) 341-2.

of trying to recreate either materiality out of immateriality or immateriality out of materiality.

The display of the works, using computers attached to giant projection screens, seems quite a bizarre way to mimic the experience of internet art in a gallery. Although it is, by far, the most logical and traditional way to show the work in that it can be experienced by the individual viewer but also benefit the greater number of people who may be attending the exhibition, it provides quite an unnatural way to experience the medium of the work due to the fact that the internet generally operates as a private, personal space accessed by a viewer in an often voyeuristic, one-on-one manner. The concept that a group of other people can observe the viewer of the work interacting with it seems counter-intuitive to the common use of the medium.

If the artist, in fact, had intended the pieces to be utilized by one person, observed on screen by a group, it would change the medium entirely – not to one of purely the internet at all, but to the internet plus the projection which can not be cancelled out of the equation as mere convenience of display. In the case of this particular exhibition, it seems the artists, though many of them were the pioneers of internet art as viewed through the usual private internet browsing methods, were very aware that these time-based pieces were meant to be interacted with in a non-private setting in the gallery arrangement with projection screens.⁵ In this way, the curatorial team has not merely chosen works of internet art but rather initiated and staged them in such a way as would be suitable for gallery display and art world discourse. The art was simultaneously shown online during the duration of the exhibition so that a web surfer could browse the website and explore

⁵ Robbin Murphy, "Proposal Guidelines: PORT-MIT, MIT Visual Arts Center, January 25-March 29, 1997," *PORT: Navigating Digital Culture* 20 Nov. 1996. Online. 1 Nov. 2005. <<http://www.artnetweb.com/port/guidelines/guidelines.html>>.

the work in a natural internet setting, but the physical space was justified by the communally commissioned nature of the pieces. Although the viewing of the pieces solely on the internet from a private computer terminal seems to function more true to the form of the medium of the internet itself, the curators effectively gave internet artists the opportunity to adapt to a physical gallery space by planning and acknowledging the way in which the networked participatory pieces would be viewed and received. One thing that does seem to work very well in the exhibition is the temporality of the artwork. This time-limited characteristic of the show very eloquently mimics the temporality of websites in general which often spring up and disappear from existence just as quickly.

Overall, the PORT exhibition demonstrated that it is far more functional to forgo elaborate physical installations which force internet art to transform into the medium of computer terminal and projection rather than private computer terminal for the single individual. However, it still remains an issue, if PORT's method was not adequate, as to how to curate the exhibition of online artwork. Another exhibition which attempted to tackle the problem was *Dystopia + Identity in the Age of Global Communications*. While the exhibit was presented in both a physical space and online through its website, the internet work was left completely separate from the physical space and other media such as video were presented in the space instead. Meanwhile, the gallery's website held the works of the internet artists.⁶ (Illus. 10) This seems to function fairly well for a number of reasons. One reason this set-up works well is that the gallery still continues as a physical entity which attracts the art-going public. The people visiting the gallery undoubtedly are exposed to the internet art or at least given the website so they can go

⁶ "Dystopia + Identity in the Age of Global Communications," Cristine Wang, curator. Tribes Gallery New York. 2 Dec. 2000-13 Jan. 2001. <<http://www.tribes.org/dystopia/>>.

explore it further on their own. Meanwhile, the medium of the internet art is not perverted or distorted in any way by the gallery and the experience of the art is not hindered by placing it out of context in a white cube or in an awkward viewing arrangement.

The next step beyond an exhibition of this multi-media, multi-platform type, is an exhibition of purely internet art which is curated and presented solely in an online setting. One such exhibition which attempted this was *Beyond Interface* which was curated by Steve Dietz and sponsored by the Walker Art Center.⁷ The internet exhibition has all the same characteristics of the physical exhibition, but it presents the work in the medium in which it is most comfortably viewed. (Illus. 11) The curator still plays a major role in how the work is “hung” – as in the layout of the website hosting the links to the artists’ work. The curator still chooses which works he or she feels are appropriate for the themes of the exhibition or are worthy of recognition in exhibition form.⁸ In an exhibition such as this, where only internet art is presented, it seems the most natural for it to be presented in the networked way it was created. The institutions of museum and gallery and the role of the curator are still in tact in this type of exhibition, but the set-up is moved to an entirely new arena where the work can be experienced more in the way it was meant to be experienced.

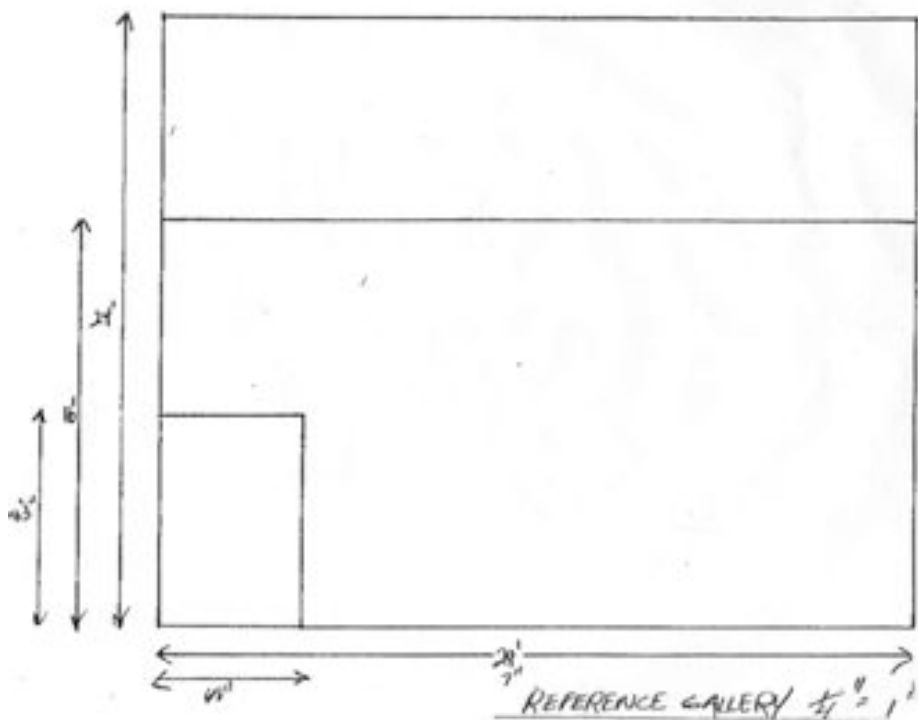
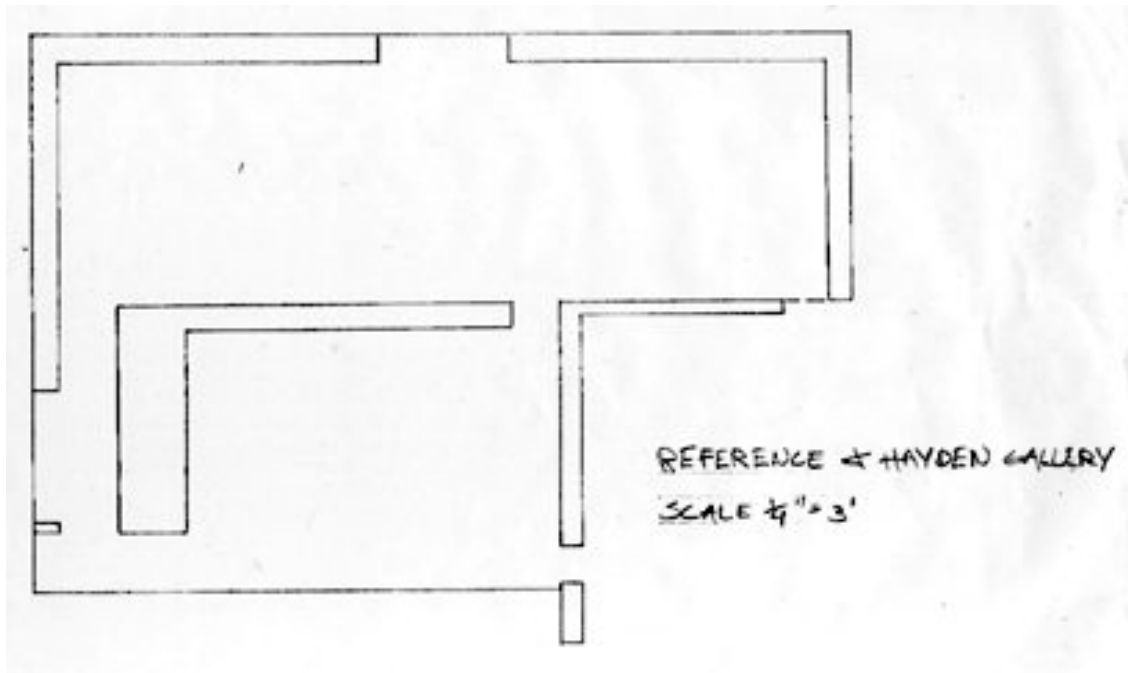
The issue of context has always been a problem in the modern and contemporary re-thinking of galleries. In the case of internet art, however, it almost impossible to experience the work in any way other than through interacting with it on your computer. Unlike the removal and installation of artwork such as medieval altar pieces from

⁷ “Beyond Interface,” Steve Dietz, curator. Walker Art Center. Jan. 1998.
<<http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/beyondinterface/>>.

⁸ Steve Dietz, “Curating (on) the Web,” *Museums and the Web* 1998. 26 Mar. 1998. Online. 1 Nov. 2005.
<http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/papers/dietz/dietz_curatingtheweb.html>.

churches to white-box gallery spaces, the removal of internet art from web space to white-box gallery removes one of the most essential aspects to the experience of it: its interactivity. Therefore, often the work can not be experienced completely or authentically in the gallery. In fact, it is no where even close to the experience it should be. While it is possible to appreciate the medieval alter piece, to a large extent, in its new context of the gallery, it can be nearly impossible to experience the interactivity of internet art when one is not sitting in front of a computer screen with hand on mouse ready to click away at the site's interactive aspects. This is perhaps the major reason it is most appropriate to house an internet art exhibition on the net itself, through the sponsorship of a physical institution and with the help of a curator, therefore not threatening the art institution nearly as much as it could and creating a filter of quality for works of art.

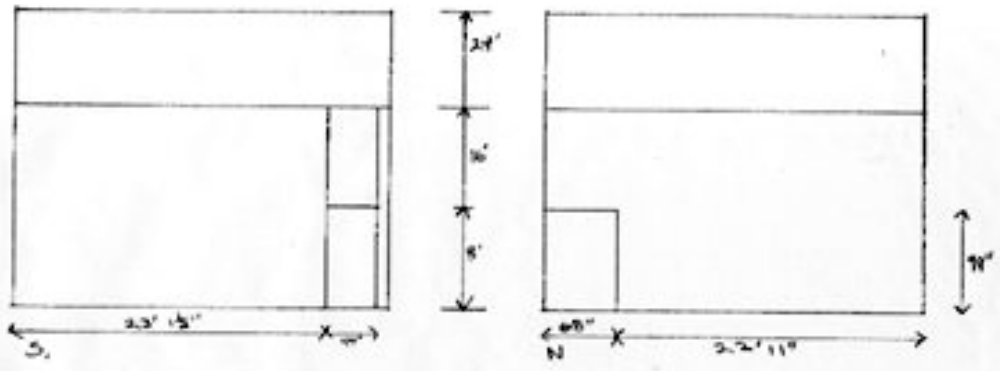
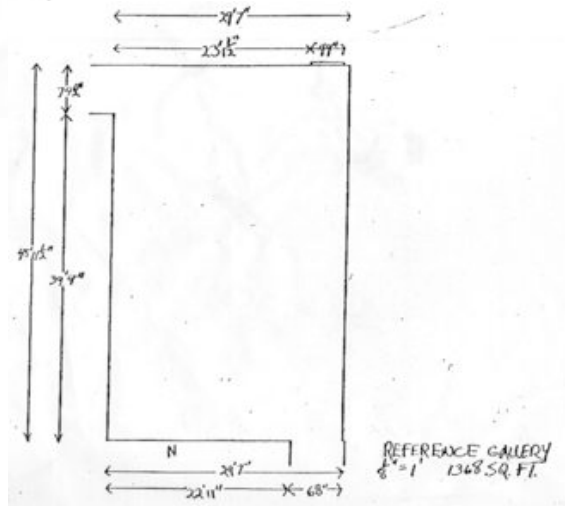
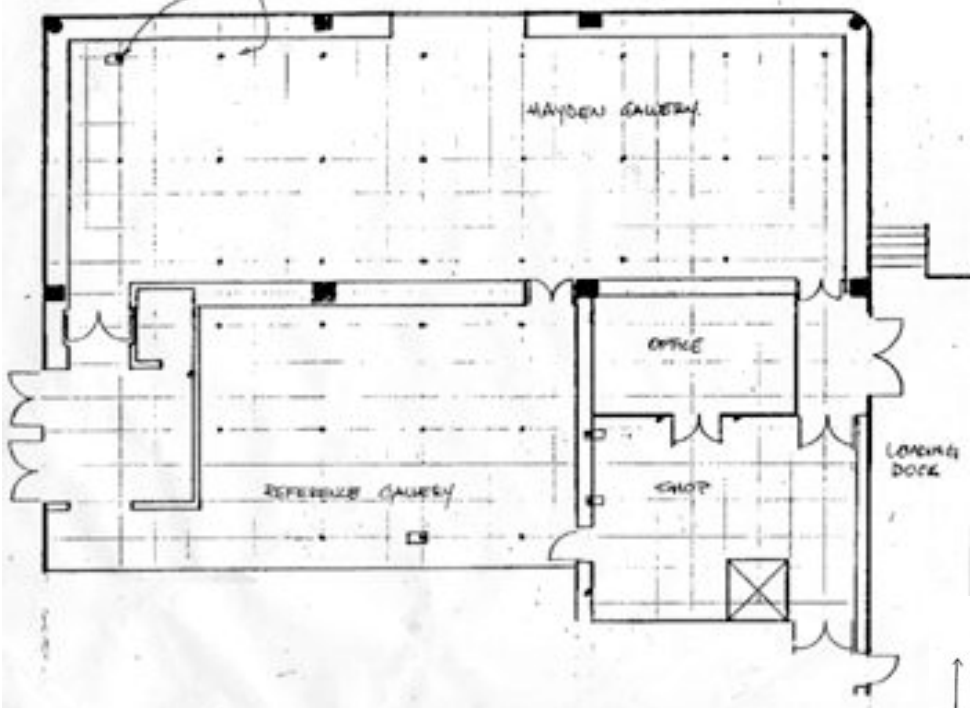
Just as, in the foreseeable future, the physical world will still be an essential and utilized medium for art production and exhibition, the physical gallery is not going away. However, the recognition of internet art requires a rethinking of some of the traditional methods of exhibition of art. Although many different types of exhibition have been experimented with in regards to internet art, they seems to fall in a few general categories: exhibition focusing on the physical, exhibition presenting more of a balance between physical space and immateriality, and exhibition entirely online. For the presentation of internet art, past exhibitions have seemed most successful when the artwork which was designed for the internet was shown there. For artwork made of pure information, there could hardly be a better way to communicate its intents than an immaterial exhibition.



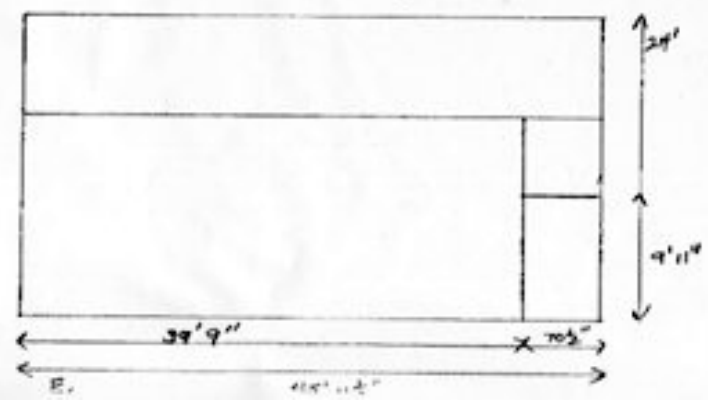
Illus. 1-5 Architectural views of the gallery space for PORT

From PORT site: <http://artnetweb.com/port/>

FLOOR FLOOR OUTLETS 12" O.C.

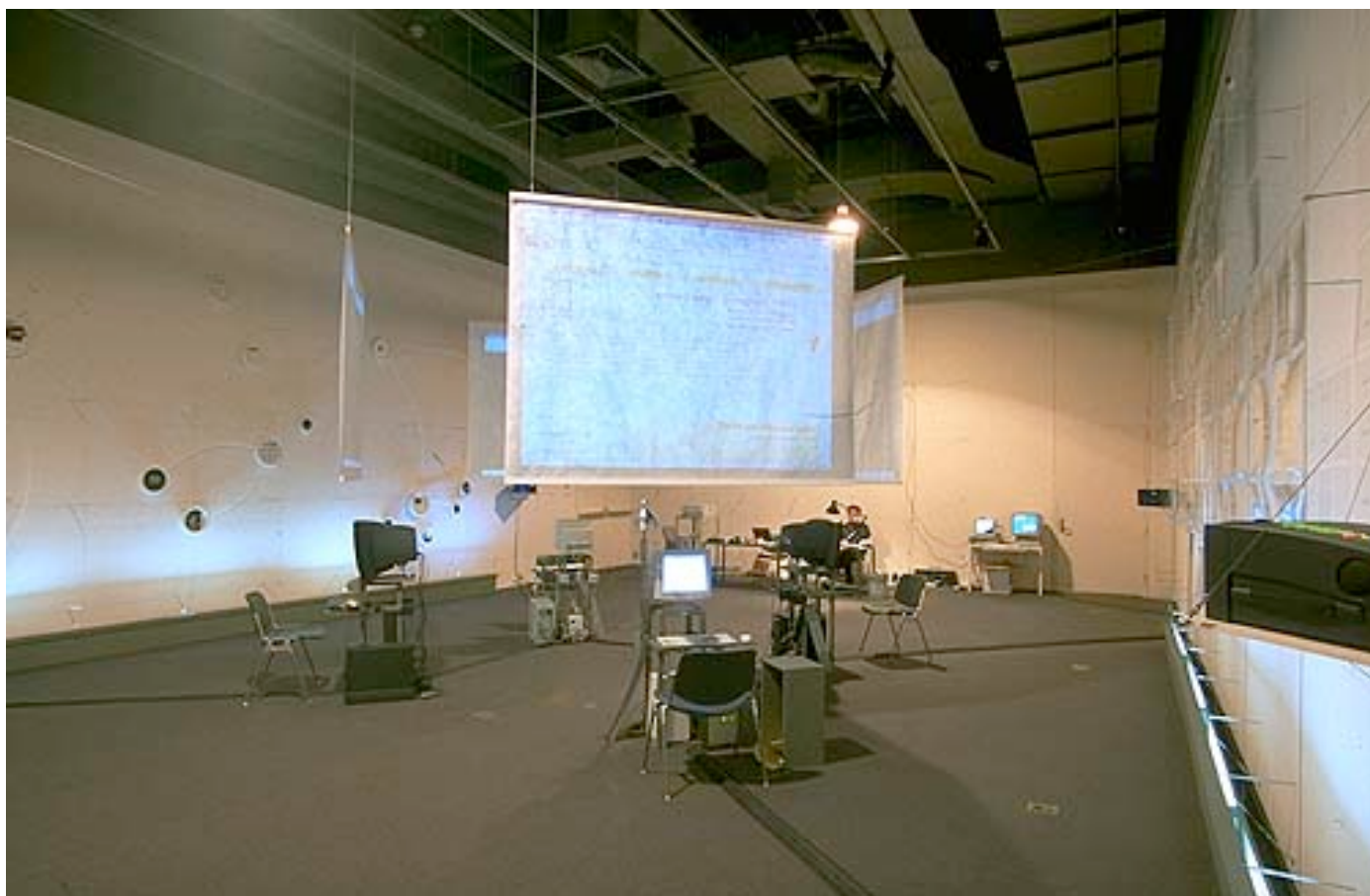


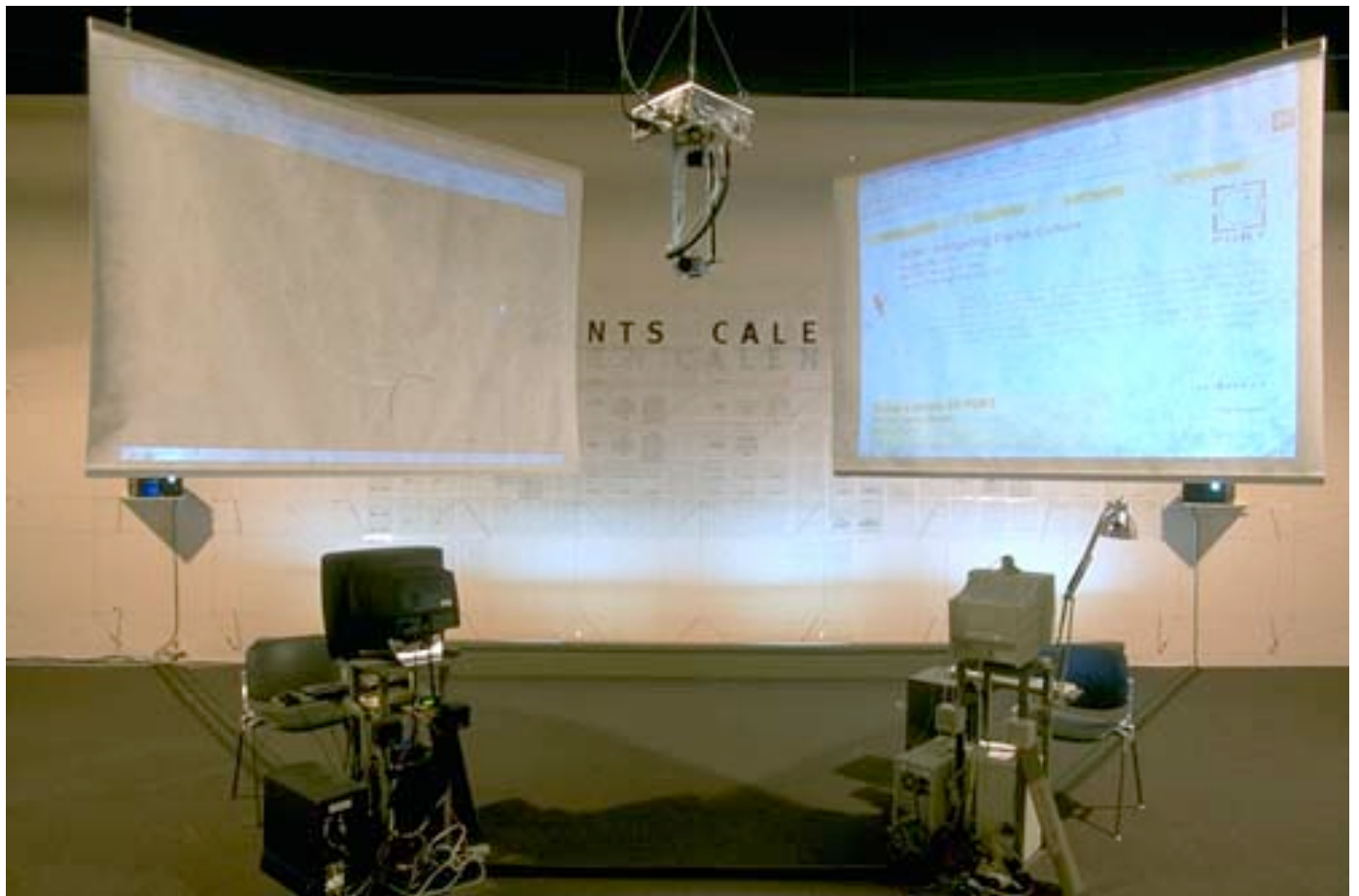
REFERENCE GALLERY
1/8"=1'
1368 SQ. FT.

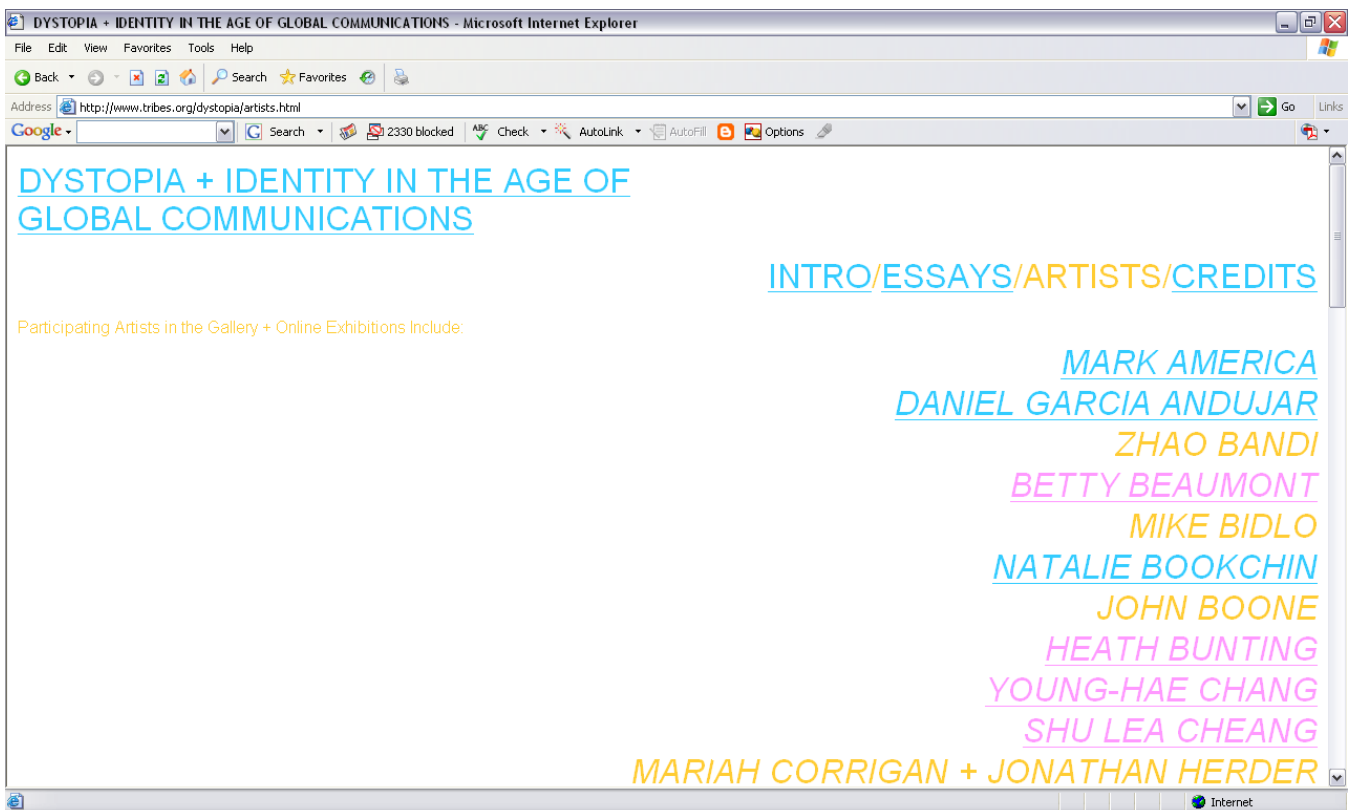




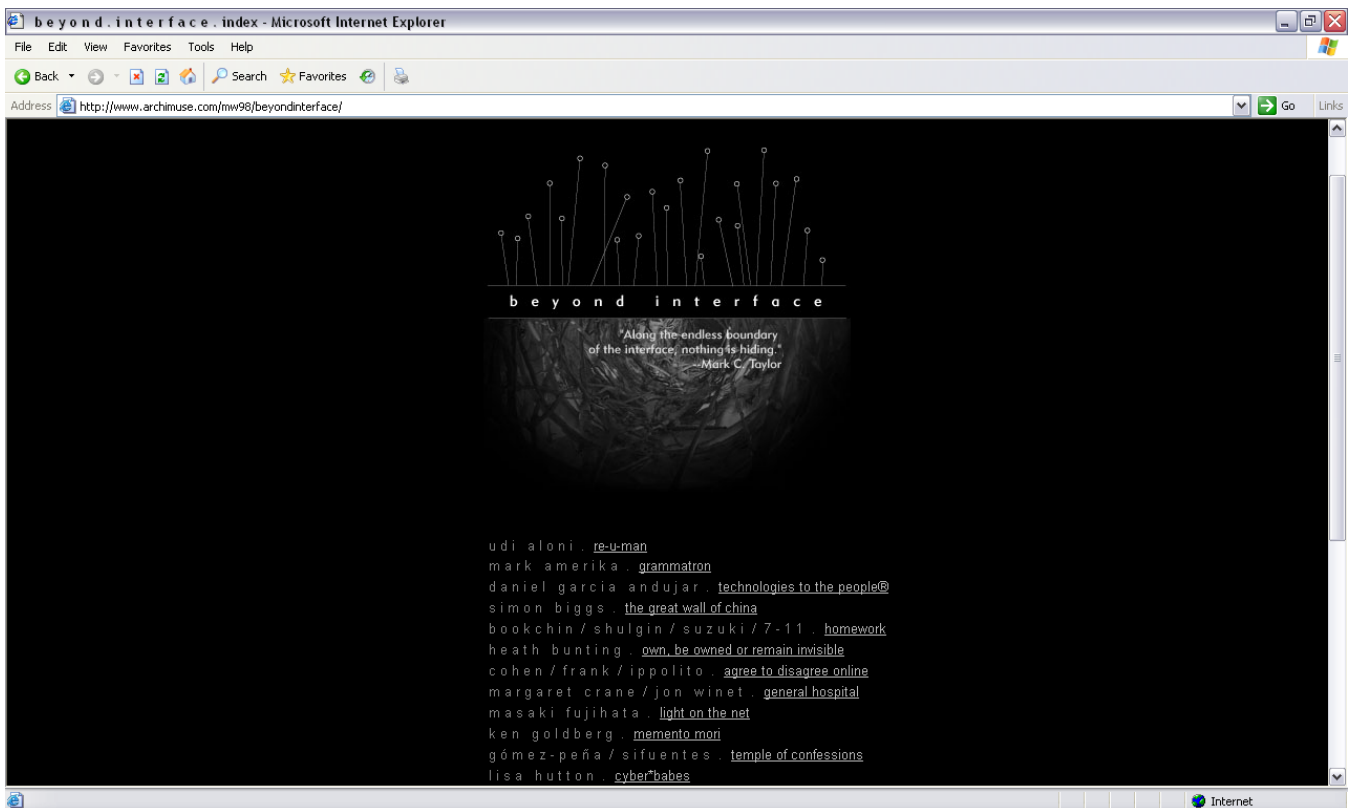
Illus. 6-9 Gallery views posted on PORT website
From PORT site: <http://artnetweb.com/port/>







Illus. 10 Screen shot of online exhibition of internet work
From Dystopia + Identity website: <http://www.tribes.org/dystopia/artists.html>



Illus. 11 Screen shot of online exhibition of internet work
From Beyond Interface: <http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/beyondinterface/>

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