Are theatre makers natural net-artists?
Janet Vaughan

The instinctive answer to the question "Are theatre makers natural net-artists?" might conceivably be "no", since at first glance it is difficult to imagine two more polarised art experiences than those found in the theatre and on the world wide web: the first a shared experience for a grouped audience in a space populated with live performers; the second, an experience which can be understood as being exclusive to the individual via their computer whilst (potentially, unconsciously) simultaneously shared with many geographically disparate audience members. Both theatre and internet art, however, are founded on person to person communication and it could be argued that both are multi-dimensional fictive contexts where truths and realities are played with, questioned and ultimately blurred.

Anecdotal evidence gleaned from discussions with fellow artists suggests that more and more theatre, performance or live art practitioners are making artworks for the web, and that many web artists and designers have crossed over from a theatre design/scenography training or practice. In short, there appears to be a striking number of artists from a background of performative practice (and therefore with a confident three-dimensional, audience-aware sensibility) inhabiting cyber-space, and perhaps beginning to make some of the most interesting work for the web. Companies involved in making devised performance work in the UK in the last ten to twenty years - such as Forced Entertainment, Third Angel, Blast Theory, Desperate Optimists and Talking Birds - tend to write about their work in similar ways, experiment with different combinations of media to explore their ideas and are, in general, making work which could be characterised as being informed by an 'urban' sensibility. All the companies listed have also made artworks for the web, generally as a natural progression from having experimented with film or video.

Although the artworks that these companies make, and the way that audiences experience them, are vastly different, all could loosely be described as making work which is descended from conceptual art and performance practice: experimenting with form and devising fractured or unconventional narratives in the exploration of a central idea or situation; often constructing performance from a series of intuitive connections or combinations of text and images - and having confidence in their audience's intelligence and imaginative ability to find (or construct) meaning in (or from) this web of fiction.

Theatre, like all art, relies on sign systems. It works by combining various elements - visuals, sound, text and live performers - with the imagination, knowledge, memories, associations and understanding of the members of the audience, both individually and collectively. The work is incomplete without an audience and so is made very much with the audience in mind. Not least because they will be in the same room and their instant feedback will affect the way the work is performed, received and remembered - each laugh, shuffle or cough has the potential to nudge a performance in a subtly different direction.

Successful design for performance will create atmosphere by capturing the essence of a place rather than illustrating or presenting its appearance in full. It will operate on levels of metaphor and suggestion rather than showing a realistic representation. It leaves gaps, courts ambiguity, creates a world into which it takes the audience and then refuses to give them all the answers on a plate. Such theatre allows, expects and relies on its audience to piece together the fragments they are given, fill the gaps and use their human desire for narrative to piece together an understanding from the fragmentary suggestions that have been put before them. Text is an important part of the piece, but rather than starting from a script, companies devising new work will usually be incorporating the various voices of the artists involved and often combining these with found fragments of text. (In some of these companies, one or more of the performers has evolved over time into a writer and work has become more scripted, but the fragmentary structure and cross-narratives remain).

I would argue that many of these features are also recognisable in online work; and that perhaps these

are some of the elements that make web artworks by theatre makers interesting. Perhaps a background in theatre enables a more complex understanding of the three-dimensional nature, and possibilities, of the internet. Maybe a theatre maker's understanding of an audience's desire to find narratives within a work, and their skill at manipulating content in a live/3D context over a fixed period of time for a captive audience means they have the best possible grounding for making the work which will influence the next phase of development of net-art.

New media - especially those which, like the internet, are adapted rather than invented media - take a while to find their feet, and artworks using such new forms will interrogate these forms themselves as well as using them to explore content. It takes time for those working with a new form to work out what it is, and what its potentials are. The extra dimension of the web is perhaps its organic, evolving, slippery-ness. A strength as well as a weakness, still no-one can pin down whether it is an art form in its own right, a tool to make art, a presentation opportunity for art works - or all of these things. As artists have evolved their practice into that which moves across and mixes media with scant regard for formal boundaries, so all art has becomes just that - 'stuff' engaged in and made by artists. The very nature of the internet demands experimentation with the form, and the resulting first decade of net-art is inevitably weighted towards the self-referential and throwaway - although, usefully, where the content of the work is strong and has the ability to engage its audience, the nature of the (web) form becomes less of a focus.

Just as software development can be described as having evolved in three phases: from the technical (programming), to the visual (art/graphics) to the dramatic (where games are structured using the dramatic/theatrical devices of character, perspective, fictional context, narrative, role, and super objective) so net-art's progression can be characterised, having mirrored/responded to the world wide web's transition from information exchange mechanism to shop window to immersive leisure environment/activity. Throughout this evolution, online artworks have encompassed and referenced gaming; and the humour and methods of audience interaction used in such works give weight to the web's 'playful' reputation. Perhaps this helps to explain why much web art can be characterised or dismissed as self-referential or throwaway. In a sped-up world we can't believe that anyone will really spend any time looking at our work. As we explore the form, whether dipping in and out of it or making a deeper excavation, the clock is ticking. The web is changing and we are only a click away from losing our audiences. The limitations of dial-up and the instability or unpredictability of a platform with too many variables (service provider/connection/bandwidth/density of traffic) will also have played a part in establishing the throwaway as the prevalent idiom. There's nothing wrong with throwaway net-art, or with net-artworks which are consciously self-referential, but perhaps net-art has reached the point where it's time for something else to develop?

Playfulness and humour don't always have to signal lightweight, throwaway and insubstantial. As in theatre, humour can be the key to exploring darkness, developing depth of content, meaning and audience engagement. As with theatre, there is surely an argument to combine playfulness, seriousness, humour, drama etc. within online artworks for deeper audience engagement and a more meaningful user-experience. Early web artworks by theatre makers tend to juxtapose text and image as if constructing a narrative form, whilst, with a nod to the non-linear/non-directed experience of the audience for web art, building in fluidity and flexibility: constructing a pick and mix order for collecting clues or story-parts and (as with much live work) relying on the audience's desire for narrative to make a sense for themselves out of the information they have been given, informed by the semi-immersive (theatrical) fictive context.

Web-art is constantly, perhaps unhelpfully, judged on its freshness and originality, but perversely, it is often also in danger of being appropriated by the gallery or museum; of becoming a commodity-artwork that must be conserved. As well as citing the limited success of translating web artworks into a gallery context, I would argue that, like live performance, the essence of web art is actually the audience/user experience rather than what appears on the screen (or stage). Therefore, like theatre, web art is really something temporary/temporal which should be preserved only in the memory - with its ideas, preoccupations, pixels and particles returned in time to the world for recycling through the future work of artists yet to come. Like theatre, it is fleetingness and ephemerality that is part of the

attraction for me in the net-art experience. Perhaps web-art has been misplaced in being appropriated by, or slotted into, the fine art timeline/evolution/frame of reference. Another measure of the success of a work is often how participatory or interactive it is - whether the participation is knowing (eg in the form of email submission) or unknowing (eg in the form of culled data pulled from a third party site into a work, or hyperlinks leading out of it). I would argue that an audience doesn't necessarily need an authoring responsibility in order to be deemed to be participating, since the liveness of their presence as audience is necessary to navigate or complete the web artwork in the same way as it is pointless yet possible to perform theatre without an audience.

Much of the writing about web art observes that projects made collaboratively seem on the whole to have more to them as a user-experience. The number of different sensibilities and specialisms brought to bear on a collaborative project, and the potential for sharing ideas within a critical framework can be an extremely productive and exciting way to make work, whether for theatre, the web or elsewhere. The difference with web work is that it allows not only for collaboration, but for the boundary between collaborator and audience to be usefully and productively blurred.

Talking Birds' web-art project **Web Demographic**, for example, was developed through email conversations with about a hundred self-selecting participants who had the option to adopt a fictitious personality and who freely submitted their information, opinions and images. From these we devised ten (potentially contentious) theories about the world. Although Talking Birds remains the author of the work, the audience/collaborators continually nudged the direction the work took. The participatory nature of the project and the unpredictability and enthusiasm of the participants made it both enjoyable and fascinating for us as artists, but at the point where the theories were channelled into the 'product' part of the artwork, the process became far more difficult. Having got to know the audience/ participants far more than we would have got to know our theatre audience - as individuals rather than a more generalised grouping - we now felt obliged to enable them to recognise something of their personal investment reflected in the finished artwork.

The **Web Demographic** process threw up an interesting conundrum for us, in that web-art, though ostensibly representing a lower risk engagement for the audience, potentially has a much higher risk engagement for the artist. The geographically distant single audience member has no joint context to inform how s/he responds to the work, as is the case within a geographically near theatre audience and the relationship can become much more personal (despite being remote). Interestingly and surprisingly, the artist/audience relationship assumes a state of flux with the 'power balance' constantly shifting to and fro. Any pre-conception of who is in control is almost always upset. There is arguably more at stake for a theatre audience who have paid for a ticket and are trapped in room for an hour. The web-art audience can spend just seconds on a web-artwork if they aren't immediately drawn in. This is not, by the way, an argument to provide easily digestible chunks of web-art to suit the click-happy browser, but is rather a plea for more experimentation, which stretches the audience, by developing web-artworks which invite exploration and have a degree of "carry-out", something the audience takes away from the experience.

Theatre makers don't make web-art in order to present a straightforward story; a film or a piece of text would be more effective for that. Theatre makers are interested in using the technology to explore new ways of making juxtapositions and connections, fuelled by the power of suggestion. But we are also interested in it as a new vehicle for ideas, a new formal challenge, a new way to engage with our audience. For theatre artists making work for the web, the challenge is to use our live performance experience to make good use of the things that only the web can do, whilst at the same time experimenting to stretch the form and the expectations of the audience. Either we can continue to treat the web as just one method of communicating a story (utilising legitimate and recognised navigational formulae in order to allow the audience to understand how they may view it) or we can take up the challenge of making work for the internet that treats it in a fundamentally different way.

Audiences can be scared off by complex forms, unclear structures and intuitive navigation, but despite this I would argue strongly for us to persevere with developing complexity of content, aesthetic and navigation - not giving our audience the answers on a plate (and accepting that this will mean some

loss of audience) - and continued development of humour as an audience 'hook'. Complexity of content - not the same as complexity of form, which in an online context can be manifest as florid programming masking shallow content - means giving the audience something to get their teeth into, leaving gaps for their imaginations to fill, giving them an experience which lingers in their minds and trusting them not to click off. Essentially creating the conditions where an audience wants to be as engaged in the work as they would want to be in the theatre, and then rewarding them for making that investment. Building complexity, or 'soul', into either medium is key in establishing trust in the audience/artist relationship.

Such trust and artist/audience collaboration could transform an audience's ability to engage with our complex future web-artworks and be key in countering the inherent difficulties of the non-linear (web) art work - where an audience feels they might not have clicked on every link; might have missed something important; are having an Emperor's New Clothes experience; or are left with a flat 'Is that it?' Greater trust and complexity might lead to web artworks that engage and move an audience in the way live performance can and might make it possible for an audience to start to care about web artworks.

As the web and the public's relationship with it continue to evolve, the challenges for artists making works for the web continue to shift, but there are fundamental questions remaining about how artists and audiences engage with web artworks. I would argue that the challenges for the next wave of development in web-art could be characterised as;
- To find new ways to attract, develop, grow (and retain) an **audience** for web-art;
- To develop the user **experience** through exploring the artist/audience relationship;
- To find new ways to communicate **meaning** to an audience through a complex non-linear, non-directed (web-art) experience;
- To explore ways of subverting the throwaway idiom, developing **humour** as a hook to explore matters of note;
- To determine whether a web-artwork can be interactive or participatory whilst maintaining a strong **coherence** of audience-experience and audible artist's voice;
- To explore whether, as audience, it is possible to be **immersed** in and moved by a web work while remaining in control of how you view it;
- To experiment with form, content and complexity to achieve a mutually-satisfying **balance** for artist and audience between enough and too much interactional **choice**.

If some of these challenges reflect the 'immersive leisure environment' third phase of the web, and if some of the factors that are lacking or under-developed in current web-art are those that theatre makers already have detailed knowledge of, maybe it is indeed theatre makers who are best placed to meet these challenges?

Perhaps, after all, theatre makers are the next natural net artists.