The Web Biennial Project: Developing Distributed, Real-time, Multimedia Presentation Technologies to Develop Independent, Open, Collaborative, Exhibition Models.*

Abstract:_The Web Biennial (WB) is a large scale, non-national, bi-annual contemporary art exhibition created exclusively for the World Wide Web (W.W.W). Both of the Web Biennial's in 2003 and 2005 has been announced, produced, exhibited and documented exclusively on the W.W.W. WB is an open non-curated, non-thematic exhibition and it does not have any sponsors. In the "distributed system" of the WB the participants host their own contents separately in their own servers but still exhibit together. Technically, navigation is based on a custom navigation: a specially developed search engine and a special head tag code for every participant. The collaborative model not only helps a different technical structure to function but also to prove that non-monetary artistic cooperation can still exist in the 21st Century. As a result, the Web Biennial aims to offer an alternative approach to exhibiting online art and it brings an alternative method for exhibiting art online.

Key Words: Net-art; Web-art; custom navigation, Distributed systems, online exhibition; contemporary art; de-centralization; Biennial, Multimedia communication, open.

If it is Not New, then it is Just Medium._ There appears to be an extensive usage of digital equipments in the art world of today. However the focus is more on equipments rather than their contents or usage. Beemer's, LCD or Plasma screens, computers and mobile gadgets are invading the exhibitions, galleries and museums but the new media art is still being treated as "screen savers". Some institutions and art historians not only experience problems catching up with the conceptual shift but they insist on ignoring that there is a "change". [1]

It may seem that art festivals rather than museums, adapted to the change faster because of their relatively dynamic structures. Of course new media is easier to handle when you do not consider including a work into an art "collection". Still the "neo liberal" approaches of biennials do not radically differ from the conservative models, due to their heavy reliance on sponsorship. The patrons, either multi-national corporations and/ or nationalist art councils, keep on bringing the old rules and regulations on content, as if to confirm the post modern condition (Jean-Francois Lyotard, 1979). [2]

Today in Art World, the Beamer Became the Message! _New technologies always brought new presentation models but until today the presentation equipment and the presentation itself have never been diverged from each other this much while immensely becoming interdependent. The same content can be presented on different platforms, all at the same time. Still it is this divergence that creates a deficiency in our perceptions and we begin to miss-perceive the presentation tool as the art itself. This is a very important problem today.

However all through the history we realized that the technology had served for the content not vice versa. It was the invention of fire that enabled the first paintings to be painted on the walls of the dark caves. Then, the developments in architecture, established our notions of artifacts as both "containers" and "content". The Industrial

Revolution brought mass reproduction methods first for products and then for art works (Mumford, 1963). With the improvements in tele-communications technology the information started to lose its physical, material body. However it is the habits of the post-modern consumer society that restricted a shift to an information society with a digital revolution (Genco Gulan, 2001).

Today, we have a fast pace of technological development but not a parallel improvement in critical thinking. It is the (hi tech) products themselves that still dominate our perception. What we might call as a new trend; there are more beamers than paintings in art the exhibitions (For example in the 2003 Istanbul Biennial). However the real problem comes to the surface as we realize that also the plasma screens are being advertised with the slogan "pretty like a picture" [3] while what they show is not important. In new technology gadget presentation models content is mostly ignored. I can argue that today "the beamer became the message".

From Ancient Amphitheaters to Surround Home Theaters _The technology not only changed the physicality of the information but it also transformed its relations with time and space. It was the architecture that created acoustic environments that changed one-to-one story telling of the pre-historic caves into one-to-many. Still in the ancient amphitheaters both the performer and the audience must be present at the same place at the same time. With the invention of electricity, the audience still kept gathering around a single place like the camp fire but this time in a building again called theater. However in these theaters, the performers were represented by their recordings at first by chemical than by digital means. With the emergence of "new media", suddenly no one needs to present anywhere at any time for the sake of art. First the content become downloadable on demand, then the tools become mobile and the art become interactive. [4]I argue that this phase will bring a different set of relationships where the distinction between the artist and the audience started to be challenged.

With the emergence of media art, at first the art works started a de-materialization process (Lucy R. Lippard , 1997) then with the emergence of new media art representation became an important problem. [5] As the real-time information becomes more and more fluid, de-territorialized (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 1987) , non-traceable, non-recordable [6], what we are left with at the end is the hardware and/or a piece of software but never the whole process. As it is not easy to perceive the dynamic contents of online transmitted "net-art works" or real-time "interactive pieces", the physical presentation tools and methods begins to be perceived as more important than they should be. For example when we search the term "theater" in google.com, "home theater" equipments appears with in the first few items in the first page and not in the sponsored links. [7]

In this paper, instead of discussing existing exhibitions and comparing them with current theories, I will present an alternative model that I have been working on, namely: "Web Biennial". Unlike many other exhibitions, Web Biennial is purely about content and navigation. The art works in the Biennial is not represented in any other form but they are presented as they are. Unlike many other Biennials, Web Biennial does not exist in a city or a building but it exist exclusively on the World Wide Web. Both the audience and artists do not need to come together physically at any place, in any time but still they exchange information. In this structure there is no strict distinction between the artist and the audience and the audience can become an artist at any moment if he or she wants. Last but not the least, Web Biennial is not in theory but it is a simple working model.

Web Biennial: Virtual Biennial, Real Art _Web Biennial is a non-national, contemporary art exhibition model, developed exclusively for "web-art" and "net-art" [8] that takes place every two years. It is an Internet-only, non-representative, non-commercial art show exclusive for online art. One can reach this media specific project from anywhere on the World by using our portal http://www.webbiennial.org/ or using our custom search engine or simply using any search engine by typing the phrase "Web Biennial". This year in 2005, the second of the series started in January first and online art will be available till the end of December. 119 artists from many different countries participated in the project.

The Web Biennial is produced, realized and exhibited exclusively on the Web. We especially tried to utilize the resources and possibilities of the W.W.W. to its fullest extent. All announcements, software development, daily communication and basic translations were done online. The open call translated into English, Turkish, French, Chinese, German, Spanish, Dutch, Russian, Greek, Portuguese, Italian and Japanese. The call for proposals was ongoing all through the year hence the number of artists and galleries kept on increasing all through out the year.

Unlike many other Web based exhibitions/ presentation models, Web Biennial was not exhibited on any single site. Like there is no main physical exhibition space, there was not single site showing all the works in detail. The information is not hosted on a single server or a database as well. All participating artists hosted their own contents in their own servers in various different locations. Hence the project was completely de-territorialized.

The navigation is based on a simple portal, almost like a link list, linking only the index pages together, a custom search engine developed for this purpose and custom Meta tagging by all participants. [9] This voluntary re-coding was a declaration for the participation, collaboration and acceptance of the rules and conditions. All artists are responsible for the production, maintenance and the contents of their own websites. We did not claim a full control on the sites hence we assume that the exhibition kept evolving all through the year as un-hierarchical as possible.

a) Open Exhibition Model _Web Biennial is an open exhibition. It is open to any one in any case. There are no curators, no jury or selection of any form. We try not to discriminate any people. We did not invite anyone, any friends or family. And we did not ask information other than the required ones. No questions asked. No questions asked about education, social class, gender, nationality, race [10] , bank accounts and credit card numbers. We are interested in art and not about identities of the artist. We have Meta tag requirement for all which proves the ownership of the project and few other simple rules; no corporate sites and no portfolios sites. We believe that these simple rules eliminate commercial and documentation web sites and leave us with non-commercial art.

Our project was not only open to all people but also virtual person's or even to web-bots. The Web Biennial site is hacked for a week and we considered this as a form of contribution to our project as well. There are virtually no limitations of any kind: Usage of media, appropriation of content according to a concept or anything else, size and nature of the project, plug-ins or number of artists. There was no deadline as well. The open call is ongoing all through the year. This open exhibition model provided the artists and the audience a chance to shift places.

Today curating in general is about networking and navigation among institutions however Web Biennial exists as a network of artists and as an online navigation model itself. As the structure of the Web Biennial enables an open model, an open model enables Web Biennial to exist on the W.W.W. This two way relationship creates a unique model and an alternative existence.

b) History of the Web Biennial, A Parallel Reading of History of Net Art Exhibitions
_Web Biennial is the result of 8 years of art and research. During this process I have collaborated with many other projects and worked with friends that I would like to refer to. I have to first give credit to "Eurynome`s Gambit/ Chaos in Action" net-art project, coordinated by Evgenija Demnievska and Wolfgang Zimmer. The net-art pioneer Demnievska described her project as a "happenstance" at the portal http://koeln.heimat.de/. I had the chance to participate to these events both in 1997 and than in 1998. We exchanged art simultaneously online all through Europe with many people I never met in person. The project It was a magical moment for me when I saw a photo I receive as an attachment; saw the amazement on the faces of young people in Krakow Poland observing my first digitally manipulated image prints I published online an hour ago.

> " 4-8 November 1997 …The projects from 11 cities, simultaneously connected by contemporary communication technology interacted and created through the Internet. On 7 Novembre 1998, for the second action "Me that's Somebody Else" at Métafort in Aubervilliers / France , 8 European cities met somewhere between the real and the virtual." [11]

For this project, which presented from the portal of Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Istanbul Bogazici University, Networks Research Lab supported me and allowed me to use their labs and expertise for free. I have been collaborating with them ever since.

After having been acquainted with Internet I established Istanbul Contemporary Art Museum as a virtual museum on the W.W.W. in 1997 then as a portal in 1998. [12] Afterwards, I conceptualized the Web space as a container: "the Museum", I started to seek content for it. It was till 2002 when I started with the first online exclusive exhibition "Reload: Net Art Open", I did not got convinced with the content I got. During this time I started producing individual net-art and web art works and keep on participating into projects. I also participated in the irishmuseumofmodernart.com/'s Net Art Open which was later presented at Whitney Museum 's art-port.

> "For two years (irishmuseumofmodernart.com) curated The Net Art Open an open submission net art exhibition in which all entries were accepted. This was a serious attempt to explore new approaches to net art curation which resulted in two popular, critically acclaimed exhibitions." [13]

I have to admit that the "irishmuseumofmodernart.com" project Net Art Open was quite inspiring for me. I found their "open" concept and the simple portal design very similar to what I was trying to achieve: A virtual structure for virtual art and faking a fake. Still Web Biennial is quite different from all, it was faking none and than we developed an alternative meta-tagging search system which really worked fine.[14]

On the academic level, Web Biennial as a project has been presented in various conferences including but not limited to ISEA in Helsinki, Finland; ISIMD in Istanbul, Turkey in 2004. This year in 2005, we presented the project at ISIMD in Istanbul , Turkey and Refresh! Conference, Banff , Canada . The project got press coverage both online and on paperback; it is referred to by Newsweek International Editions in comparison with the Istanbul Biennial and in New York Arts Magazine's Art Fairs International.[15] Also this year we succeeded to start our e-symposium with online participation from all around the world. All the panels were online utilizing a custom designed java chat together with Skype, MSN, Yahoo IM's. [16b]

c) What Does Web Biennial aim to Prove? _The first point that the Web Biennial proves is that there is a large, heterogeneous, international community of people (86 artists in 2003 and more than 119 people in 2005) [17] producing "net-art" and "web art". Though the art institutions are still reluctant to except online works as a new art form, online artists as a new generation, online art exits and they are widely practiced today

despite all technical/ cultural/ social problems.

The second thing Web Biennial aims to prove is that a new generation of artists exists on the W.W.W. These people are active on the Web and other electronic networks, they spontaneously collaborate individually or as a group and they create new models for communication, community formation and art production. Commissioning celebrities to make net-art like many museums do today, might not be the proper way to handle the situation. Furthermore the virtual communities are not only about programming, games, music and hacking but also art.

The third point, we started to experience a new era where the whole "many to many" communication process is de-centralized, dematerialized, de-territorialized and run by different people. This international community is a lot different than the previous definitions. The term international – in the case of Web Biennial- does not mean bringing together different national identities but it may mean ignoring any form of identity – race, gender, education, social status- including the national one.[18] We have to keep on building over the studies on virtual identities. (Sherry Turkle, 1997)

The fourth point; Web Biennial proves that, large scale international art exhibitions without a major –corporate or institutional- sponsor, is still possible in the 21 st century. The old fashioned model of artist solidarity still can work today. Either as collectives or individually collaboration models and gift economy may still work in certain structures. Practically, the overall maintenance cost of Web Biennial project is relatively low. But rather the whole project is build up on the idea of voluntary participation. Today *liberte, egalite, fraternite* still may mean something to some people other than just French version of "peer to peer". The whole structure of the Web Biennial is designed to be self sustaining as the original design of the Internet which is designed to survive a nuclear war. We would like to cooperate with other institutions as well but if it does not work, for example like in our case with ZKM of Karlsruhe, the project needs to be self sustaining and it is so.

To sum up: Developing code and Finding Survival Methods. In the second millennium the media is changing so fast that creating new media art is about developing code and finding survival methods. The technology is developing in such a fast phase that we either adopt information or it simply disappears in the so called "Recycle Bin". To cope with the speed, we have to understand what is happening first. And to understand new media art, we need to work on the theory and the technology behind it; even claiming to develop a new field of digital theory. We also have to develop new methodologies for making and presenting art as we develop new codes for understanding and coping with the speed of technology and its destruction.

I have presented that t he Web Biennial not only to offers an alternative approach to exhibiting online art but also for presenting contemporary art online. The project also proves that "content –of this era- can exist without a container". This situation not only may mean that online art can exist independent from physical presentation models but it also mean that art can exist without a sponsor, patron, curator, jury, major institution, major building, a city or a country. Furthermore Web Biennial is not a techno futuristic utopia but a very simple practical working model.

I believe that we should not only consume but also utilize the new media art. A digital shift is possible not only if we manage to use the technology to its full extent but also if we try to fully understand the new relations of information. We have to find a way to ride the waves of change –like surfing- because we can not stand against them. I insist on arguing that the changes in technology will trigger a radical change some how, as it had always happened to be (Jurgen Habermas, 1981) and we will find a way to get rid of today's post-post modern situation.

Footnotes:_ * This paper was presented at the REFRESH conference, First International Conference on the Media Arts, Sciences and Technologies held at the Banff Center sept 29-oct 4 2005 and co sponsored by the Banff New Media Institute, the Database of Virtual Art and Leonardo/ISAST.

[1] Caitlin Jones, The Guggenheim and the Daniel Langlois Foundation Fellow in Variable Media Preservation, Article with the title "Hardware and Meaning: Variable Media Preservation". Paper presented at ISEA Conference 2004, in Helsinki Finland. Her paper started with following lines: "There is no doubt that electronic art poses multiple challenges for curators, conservators and producers of contemporary art. These challenges however are not unique to the digital realm." For the full text see: http://www.isea2004.net/content/allpres.php

[2] Microsoft Corporation's text editing software Word 2002 considers the surname of Jean-Francois Lyotard as a mistake and underlines the word with red color.

[3] "Pretty as a Picture" By Darryl Wilkinson. Last Update: October 14, 2005. See; http://www.hometheatermag.com/

> "Panasonic knows that people who have a love-hate relationship with their TVs won't like the look of their plasma TVs no matter how Panasonic designs the chassis. The best solution is to disguise the customer's plasma TV with a custom-built frame that enables the homeowner to "add an elegant, personalized accent to their Panasonic plasma TV and transform it into a functional piece of art."

[4]I think the comparison of the film industry and video game industry can provide us a valuable evidence for an increasing interest in to interactivity. According to Matthew Yi's article in San Francisco Chronicle on December 18, 2004, video game became an industry now even bigger than Hollywood.

[5] Genco Gulan, New York Arts Magazine, May 2000. Article in English; "Representation Problem of the Web: Genco Gulan talks with Barbara London, on Moma.org".

[6] Ibid.

[7]When we search the term theater at the google.com search engine http://www.hometheatermag.com appears as the fourth item in the list as of 11/02/05. I find this as a very significant evidence as this item appears before; http://theater.nytimes.com/pages/theater/ and http://www.londontheatre.co.uk/

[8] I define net- art as "networked art" which means that: an art work which requires a network or Internet for its existence. Without the net these art works simply can not exist. If you unplug a net-art piece to archive it is dead. Deriving from this definition, I define "web-art" as: Every art that exists on the W.W.W. except "net-art".

[9] Peter Dalhuijsen, a software programmer whom we also met in a forum on the web, designed our alternative search engine for us for the first time. In this search engine there were embedded words in the search parameters, "Web+ Biennial+2003". These helped us to search for special Web Biennial 2003 title tags and hence helped facilitate a search for a clustered sample of our participating artists on the W.W.W. Without such a

navigational system it would be impossible to create our complex de-centralized structure. The search engine developed by Dalhuijsen was very useful however in 2004 we decided to utilize the services of google.com/ and together with Kemal Kaplan from IBogazici University of Istanbul, Computer Engineering department, we developed the new custom search engine that we are still using. We are also currently developing software for an e-conference and for integrating mobile applications to be used for next Biennials.

[10] Newsweek international edition covered Web Biennial in August 2005. Also see; http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9024840/site/newsweek/site/newsweek/

> "In every area of life, a new generation of young Turks is reaching outward. This year's Art Biennale will draw artists from Bosnia, Iran, Egypt, Greece and Lebanon—a most uncommon mix—while the Web Biennale will feature work by Armenians, Ukrainians, Serbs, Macedonians and Romanians. "Istanbul these days has as much dynamism as New York," says Genco Gulan, director of the Istanbul Contemporary Art Museum. If anything, he enthuses, "Istanbul is more alive. There's more interest here in doing something new."

I have to add that we might and might not have artists from "Armenians, Ukrainians, Serbs, Macedonians and Romanians" because we do not ask artists their Nationalities. This is also why I use the term non-national instead of inter-national.

[11] http://www.artmag.com/techno/te/chaos.html/

[12] Today Istanbul Contemporary Art Museum exists both on the virtual and the physical space in Galata Istanbul but still as an alternative artist run organization.

[13]http://www.stunned.org/imma/ On the web site they also commented on the strategy of their project:

> " The site which was found at the URL irishmuseumofmodernart.com since 18th November 2001 until last month was not the website of the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The site was an artwork which re-imagined the IMMA web presence created by Irish artists Arthur X Doyle and Conor McGarrigle."

[14]http://www.isea2004.net/content/presentationpage.php?id=271

[15]http://www.artfairsinternational.com/articles/webbiennial_article.html __[16] The titles of the e-panels of the e-symposium were: "Net-Art versus Web Art"; "New media or Media Art"; "To Archive or Not to Archive "; "New Art What is Happening in Turkey ?"; "Virtual Real versus Real Virtual" and "How Much Asia?". These panel texts will be published as ISEA Newsletter Spring 2006. __ [17] The artists of the Web Biennial 2005 are: Andrej Tisma, Varriale & Tomaselli, Enrico Mitrovich, Doron Golan, Miika Nyyssönen, Johannes Auer, judsoN, KUNSTKOMMT, Anouk de Clercq, Genco Gulan, Babel, Eva Sjuve, Random Studios & others, Dimitris Fotiou, Valery Grancher, Tamara Laï, helmut grill, Gruppo Sinestetico, Daniela Alina Plewe, John Douglas, Patrick Carpenter & Kelly McErlean, Toshiaki Saiki, Ellie Harrison, Ana Carvalho, Aleksandra Smiljkovic Vasovic, Dylan Davis, Hans Christoph Steiner, Deb King, Grégoire Zabé, Ian Wojtowicz, Krister Olsson, Liz Walsh, Andy Deck, Myriam Thyes, Jody Zellen, Oliver Musovik, Daniel C. Boyer, Dorothee Gestrich, Avi Rosen, Euro Screen 21 Projects, evrensel belgin, Carlos Katastrofsky, thomson & craighead, Paul Camacho en.ve.lope, Myron Campbell, Roman Keller, Joey Bargsten, Alan Fels, Isabel Saij, Angelo Plessas, Gianluca Costantini, mIEKAL aND, Marcello Mercado, yto.cl (isabel aranda), Joel Weishaus, LA TOAN VINH, Jason Nelson, Knut Birkholz, Geert Dekkers, Pierre Larauza, Jessica Iapino, MAD, Susanne Schuricht, Tahir Un, David jhave Johnston, Rafael Marchetti & Rauel Renno, Raquel Renno & R. Marchetti, Kristina Maskarin, Evgenija Demnievska, Anaisa Franco, Judy Malloy, Yvonne Martinsson, Melinda Rackham, Sébastien Steffes, Nicola Stradiotto & Fabio Guin, Thomas Petersen, Javier

Viver, Per Pegelow, Jim Hamlyn, Yoshio Terajima, Dion Laurent, THE NET OBSERVER, Quirin Brunnmeier, Baris Acar, Igor Marinkovic, Frans van Lent, Lars Vilhelmsen, ConiglioViola, tats, Gregorios Pharmakis, jess loseby, Antonio Costa, Hughes Rochette, Ali Miharbi, Cezar LAZARESCU, Bovey Lee, Michael Takeo Magruder, Carlos Rosas and Robert Dansby, iMAGE z[ONE], Bovey Lee, Michael Takeo Magruder, Carlos Rosas and Robert Dansby, GLOBALGROOVE, Panos Kouros, Andrew Spears, Leslie Mumme, Simona Sarti, Hotmails, Mike Austin , Juliet Davis , netzfunk.org, Good_God[s]product, Tsila Hassine, Ashley Tucker, Päivi Hintsanen, david zerah, Thomas Barnett, CHONDROS & KATSIANI, Nanette Wylde, Christine Clinckx .

[18] I have to admit that some other forms of virtual identities started to emerge around the barriers of languages and technical infrastructure. For example we do not share same Latin letters with Chinese or Indians and we can not really talk about an equal technical infrastructure or band with for Africa and America. These examplese can be subject to an in-depth further research.