

Kevin Bewersdorf

Spirit Surfing

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One of the most beautiful experiences I have had with a piece of internet art was not had at my computer, it was had while seated in traffic on Texas Interstate 35. A post I had seen on the surf club nastynets.com suddenly dawned on me there in my car – with no computer around to distract me, the true nature of this post was revealed. The post didn't end at the edge of the computer. The post was woven into the same source code as the world. It was part of a borderless art, an art constructed of only spirit and no material. The post was everywhere, a fog in the universe waiting for someone to walk in to it. Looking past the taillights in front of me, I could see the post weaving through traffic.

I am greatly indebted to the surfers of Nasty Nets for getting me excited about art again. Simply by typing a series of letters into a browser I was connected to a shapeless organization of users who rearranged bits that were unimportant individually but who's sum amounted to something so massive that it could only be thought about and never seen. Ever since Nasty Nets ended, Paul Slocum and I have wanted to feel part of a strong surf community again. Over many phone calls our mutual feelings on surfing have solidified, and we have developed a philosophy of surfing that I will attempt to express here as part of the founding of a new surf club, spiritsurfers.net.

INFOmonks and INFObrats

Joseph Cornell collected tidbits that he came across in his daily life and then set them into frames. The frames were rectangular windows that reclaimed the objects through his choice. A fork in Cornell's box was an object of focus made powerful by its framing. The act of choice to put that fork in that particular box pointed to choice (more than raw invention) as the essential act for a world overloaded with objects. The choices involved in Cornell's boxes are remarkably similar to choices involved in surf club posts. Is the box 8" x 7" and made of white wood? Is the `<td>` for the images 500 pixels by 400 pixels with a 4 pixel border of #FF0099? Should the wooden spool sit above the rubber ball? Should the animated gif sit above the midi file?

Critics and artists alike are certain that Joseph Cornell's boxes constitute art, yet many remain skeptical of web surfing as an art practice. These skeptics are confused about surfing because they move the internet around like forks at a dinner party. They see the web as a practical and entertaining service: Amazon.com, United.com, Ebay and Facebook and iTunes. They

bounce around on the exterior of banners and buttons. They're information brats. INFObrats are on the web for obligations in their material and practical lives. They shop, instant message, pay bills, relay practical data, and consume.

Not everyone on the web is looking for practical information. Some look to remove the fork from the dinner table and set it into a frame of their own devising. Some pay homage to the fork as it is. Some treat the web not as a shopping mall, but as a spiritual realm. They work towards the glorification of the web and the spirit that constructs it. They work for no reward other than the credibility bestowed on them by fellow surfers. They are not just surfers, but monks. Behind the shopping mall of the web there are beautiful gardens being cultivated by these INFOmonks.

The Boon

As I have gathered from watching some of the great surfers of our time at work, surfing is the balance of making choices and being led. Surfing is being led by the wave as you make your choices. The wave stirs up gifts, and it is the ability of the great surfer to recognize his or her arrival at a worthy gift. On Spirit Surfers this gift is referred to as a boon. The boon is revealed at the eureka moment of a surf when the surfer becomes enlightened by the INFOspirit.

Areas of high potency on the web may be filled with boons begging to be shared. The boon may strike the surfer in a single icon, or be hidden in the source code. It may be a cluster of jpegs left untouched, or a gif with a single frame added. Some of the great surfers of our time have found incredible boons in something as tiny as a 256 pixel bitmap. Other surfers rearrange their finds in attempt to encapsulate the surf in a more profound way. A hyperlink or list of links is not much of a boon. A link is an entry to another surf, a starting point. A boon is a jewel. These jewels are what separate surf clubs like Spirit Surfers from social bookmarking sites – the posts on Spirit Surfers are jewels publicly removed and reset.

The Wake

As you surf you are able to view the beauty of your own wake as it fades around you. Any boons you encounter come within the context of everything you have encountered before and after them. You are able to

contemplate not just the jewels of your search, but the entire wake of your path. The form of each boon is therefore the shape of the wake made during the process of the surfing.

How can we better let others experience the wakes made by our surfing? In attempt to emphasize the process of surfing, posts on Spirit Surfers are divided into two sections – one for the boon, and one for the wake. In the wake section surfers will try to provide insight on the process that lead to that boon. I have often wondered about the wakes of some of the great surfers. How and where did they find these jewels? Perhaps this will be best expressed through a literal list of links, through a description of perceptions had during the discovery of the boon, or (if the boon has been massively altered) through some elaboration on its rearrangement.

The Frame

I hear it chanted often on the web, “finding is making, finding is making.” Perhaps finding is making, but finding is not enough. A jewel set into a poor setting degrades the jewel and does not do justice to its beauty. A jewel set poorly also does not allow others to develop a criteria for recognizing the most beautiful jewels. It is the framing of the finding that rewards us with the greatest bounty.

Surfing is often an activity we resort to when at a loss for what else there is to do. We wander around the web, unsure of ourselves. INFObrats surf in this way, clicking around on links as they shop and consume. The mere act of surfing has no status as a gift. But INFOmonks use great care in the framing of their boons, and these frames give the otherwise modest activity of surfing the status of a gift. INFOmonks are adept not only at finding, but at framing a boon in a way that best reveals its ineffable truth.

What then is the criteria used to frame a boon? Criteria of the physical world does not help us enter net art. There is great subtlety in the framing of boons, a subtlety that we are only just beginning to build a criteria for. Perhaps if we strengthen our criteria through experiencing many boons on a standardized forum such as Spirit Surfers, we will see new beauty in the web.

The Cloak

One day Joseph Cornell found a playing card and a toy bird in an empty lot and carefully arranged these items inside a box. One day an INFOmonk found a .gif logo and a .midi file on a real estate website and framed them in an html table. Both the INFOmonk's and Cornell's choices were made with intelligence and inspiration and an acute personal criteria. Both sets of choices resulted in subtleties worthy of further study. But while Cornell received a check for thousands of dollars after he made his choices, it is generally accepted that the INFOmonk will never receive any money in return.

What the INFOmonk will receive in return is a spiritual currency. A nonmaterial act reaps a nonmaterial reward. The pious surfer does not surf for the glorification of the self but for the glorification of the web. For this reason the INFOmonks on Spirit Surfers will be known only by their usernames. These usernames are not chosen, but given to them by other surfers. Identities are not annihilated, but cloaked. Total secrecy is not important. Surfers may choose to reveal their usernames on other sites. The cloak is just a gesture of anonymity, a message that says, “the web as a whole is more important to me than my own name.”

The INFOspirit

The INFOmonk is often disinterested in physical art and is not always fulfilled by objects. Rightfully, the INFOmonk turns to the spirit world for fulfillment, surfing for boons that will give him clarity. The INFObrats still believe in physical masterpieces. The INFObrats try to produce physical masterpieces, and they even use Google to search for physical masterpieces so that they can go visit them or purchase them.

The greater masterpiece isn't something that can be found on Google. The greater masterpiece is the INFOspirit that constructs all of Google. The greater masterpiece is the INFOspirit that constructs all YouTube videos and all celebrity gossip blog posts and all jpegs of Van Gogh paintings and all of officemax.com and all net art yet made. While the physical connections of copper and silicon that contain the web could be destroyed, the INFOspirit cannot be destroyed. The INFOspirit is not bound by the constraints of the universe. The INFOspirit reveals to us an art that is unreachable, but right at our fingertips – an art that is infinitely sized, but as

simple as a cigar box of thimbles.

The goal of spiritsurfers.net is equally simple: surfers, reveal to others the majesty of the INFOspirit.

Kevin Bewersdorf, March 2008.