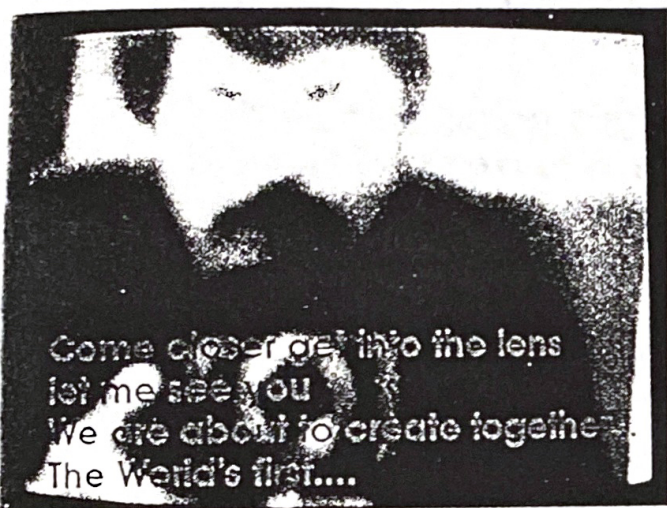


Because the winning works in the competition were demonstrated for the audience from an on-stage computer, a brief look replaced a self-guided experience of them. Voyager has produced all 25 of the winners and honorable mentions on a CD-Rom that was released in August. But the shockingly expensive technology of CD-Rom disks currently makes their production impossible for most artists. Distribution possibilities are also limited. What multimedia artists need are the sort of services provided by Electronic Arts Internix, the savvy, New York-based rental-distribution outlet for selected video artists.

Oct. 20: Bulletin Board Chat Fest

Today I went on line with Echo—the self-styled hip, arts-oriented New York bulletin board and on-line service provider—and began to monitor the conferences run by sponsors like the Village Voice and the Whitney Museum of American Art. (Echo can



From Douglas Davis's Web site *The Sentence*, a collaborative work in progress.

be reached at (212) 292-0900; for those with a computer and modem, Echo's log-on number is (212) 292-0910—type "newuser." Echo's Web site is: <http://www.echonyc.com>.) The Whitney is the second museum to host an ongoing conference on a bulletin board. (The Smithsonian's conference on America Online has been around longer.) Museum curators and guests occasionally log on for real-time chat events, but the conference mostly provides ongoing bulletin-board style discussions on such topics as "Artspeak from Hell," "My Favorite Works of Art" and "The Biennial."

I discovered that one can initially read months of old postings and then decide whether or not to add to the "conversation." Unfortunately, the discussion is almost invariably pretty unfocused, and too reminiscent of all-night, college bull sessions. The Whitney's "Art Critics" discussion-topic, for instance, began in mid-1994 with these posted comments:

Tetsuwan Nemo: Why isn't everyone a critic?

KZ: I thought everyone was.

Neandergal: I usually like reading any kind of criticism more than experiencing the actual "thing" whether it's a book, movie, painting etc. That's why I spend all my time on Echo instead of reading books . . . It's all commentary and you never have to feel anything.

Ironically, of the entire 15-or-so months of postings I perused, these first comments seem most representative—and salient.

One problem with the BBS (bulletin board service) format—which allows users to post messages and conduct on-line "discussions"—derives from its unnuanced quality vis-à-vis spoken conversation. (Just how much irony *did* Neandergal intend to communicate?) Another difficulty is anonymity. Vast numbers of bulletin board and Internet users employ "tags" or "handles." Many users find this elective role-play liberating and have referred to the intimacy-inducing quality of such exchanges. But I remain dubious about the state of intimacy in our television- and radio-talk-show-ridden culture. What can intimacy mean when it's cloaked in anonymity?

This week I also started to monitor *The Thing*, which may be the oldest visual-art bulletin board in the country and certainly provides the most challenging level of posted art discourse—or on-line chat—of any I've encountered. (*The Thing* can be reached at 212-604-0698; its log-on number is 212-366-1199.) *The Thing's* several hundred subscribers sometimes passionately debate cultural and critical theory. (Users from branches—or nodes—in London, Geneva, Düsseldorf, Cologne and Vienna can also join the conversation.) Its conferencing areas are augmented with files of images and essays, access to such publications as the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, and frequently changing exhibitions and artworks.

During the 1994-95 season, the range of *The Thing's* on-line art extended from James Nares's swirl-art-evoking prints to David Platzker's quicktime movies of artist's books by John Baldessari, which were simultaneously on view under glass at Printed Matter. I found the former seductively eye-popping; the latter—though crudely produced—provided a welcome look at the artist's classic, two-decade-old works. *Thing* projects are also exhibited on its Web site at <http://www.thing.net/thingnyc>.

Two years ago, I asked artist Wolfgang Staehle—one of the founders of the nonprofit bulletin board—whether or not the four-year-old enterprise constituted his art. He adamantly denied it. Now it's the New York resident's full-time creative work and another "social sculpture"; it also brings to mind the salon-style talk-fests that Tom Maroni has been hosting for two decades at his Museum of Conceptual Art in San Francisco. In the face of mounting competition from corporate on-line services, boutique boards like *The Thing* are the Mom-and-Pop-store Davids battling the chain-store Goliaths. Staehle is currently scrambling to broaden his audience by providing subscribers with full on-line services and Internet access.

Nov. 8: The World's First Collaborative Sentence

Douglas Davis opened his exhibition *InterActions 1967-1981* at the Lehman College Art Gallery in the Bronx. (He co-directs the college's Center for Long Distance Art and Culture with gallery director Susan Hoeltzel.) Davis has long pioneered the creation of interactive performances and installations that humanize technology by revealing the desire embodied in cold steel and cathode rays. He's exhorted viewers to reach up and press their hands (and other body parts) against video monitors, and he produced the first global satellite performance in 1977. In the exhibition, the documentation of such activities, and the presentation of related art works,

demonstrated the continuity of his output.

At the opening of his show, he presented an on-line performance called *Discours Amoureux*, which was a scripted dialogue with Russian artist Nathalie Novarina, who responded on a computer in Galerie St. Gervais in Geneva. Their elliptical, bilingual discussion of the nature of love was carried live on Echo.

In December, Davis inaugurated a Web site through the center's server or host computer (<http://math240.lehman.cuny.edu/art>). The title says it all: *The World's First (and probably longest) Collaborative Sentence*. [See review on p. 93.] As of September, more than 50,000 collaborators had left their mark on this text. Thirty or so lines into it someone wrote: "who do we think we are James Joyce's great grandchildren" and someone else responded, "or some kind of gertrude"; *The Sentence* is a surprising, often amusing work that makes ingeniously simple (and cheap) use of the hypertext medium. Davis recently presented the piece in gallery format at Korea's Kwangju Biennale. A first: in the spring of 1995, shortly before his untimely death, New York mega-collector Eugene Schwartz purchased *The Sentence* for "what dinner for eight would cost at a decent restaurant."

Nov. 11: The Electronic Café

A branch of the Santa Monica-based *Electronic Café International*, conceived by artists Kit Galloway and Sherri Rabinowitz more than a decade ago, finally opened in New York—at *The Kitchen*. (Other branches are located in France, Germany and throughout the U.S.) *The Electronic Café* is less a physical place than a slate of on-line events that will take place in the *Kitchen's* gallery and auditorium spaces. Opening night featured *Café Barbie*, a panel discussion about the iconic doll moderated by Barbie-maven M.G. Lord and augmented with live teleconferencing from Santa Monica and Paris. It was a technical disaster in the tradition of art transmissions via satellite ca. 1980: *The Paris link* didn't work, depriving us of the chance to see—although we could hear—performance artist Cindy Jackson, the surgically altered "Living Barbie." Video from the Santa Monica café looked like a poorly dubbed movie because the "CU-see-me" (video) format unsynched speakers' words from the movements of their mouths.

The event was also a showcase for performance-art-style aggression à la early *Kipper Kids* or Karen Finley. An ill-tempered Lord rudely cut off performer-participants in Santa Monica who were showing us their altered (now anatomically correct) Barbie and Ken readymades in order to screen videotaped comments by Camille Paglia and Raquel Welch. This event offered the audience no greater participation than seeing a film at the nearby Chelsea Multiplex. Why not cablecast it—live or taped—on that still much-needed art-world cable channel for performance and video art?

The *Kitchen* went on to produce close to two dozen on-line events throughout the '94-'95 season, some of them without the participation of the *Electronic Café* network. Perhaps the most resonant were two evenings of excerpts from Morton Sobotnik's *Angel Concerto*, which the composer claims is the first full-scale electronic opera. On these occasions, teleconferencing flawlessly linked