Questions of what constitutes art on the web

Written by Pedro Meyer

The prestigious **Prix ARS Electronica**, from Linz, Austria, just sent out a wonderful book presenting the winners of their 1997 awards with a running commentary by the Jury that gave out these awards.

We at ZoneZero had submitted our web site to this competition, thinking that it had a fair chance of receiving some sort of approval. So we were obviously disappointed when we did not receive so much as a footnote. But in good spirits we accepted the juror's prerogative to dismiss our efforts, after all that is one of the inevitable risks one takes when one enters a juried competition. So nothing to complain about on that level.

I started to read with interest the statement put out by the jury, describing how they worked and thought. To my dismay I discovered, that here was a jury of obviously talented and well meaning people making some of the most absurd statements as to how they proceeded with regard to the guidelines they had set out for themselves.
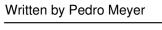
The jurors of the Prix Ars Electronica, stated the following:

"Museums or galleries where art is on show are clearly not themselves art - unless the building has a very special architecture, but then it would be the building that would earn this definition. And the documentation of a project is hardly ever a piece of art in itself. Nevertheless, the misunderstanding that reproducing or exhibiting analog art on the net will magically produce net art is a very common one, and far too many contestants insist on submitting home pages that merely "contain" art. After browsing them briefly, we invariably dumped them. (In fact, at some point we became rather vicious about it: "Oh, another gallery," we'd say, at that point using the term "gallery" as a generic term for home pages that were basically exhibitions of art)".

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Aside form the obvious arrogance that accompanies such patronizing comments towards work that never had a fighting chance of being even seen or understood, I believe that we should evaluate the issues in their ill advised conclusions in order to understand better what is happening on the web with regard to this notion of "galleries" or what constitutes art on the web.

Let me start out by taking a look at ZoneZero and this perception of "Galleries". First of all we have to acknowledge that we have created (and we are not the only ones) a very interesting salad of metaphors. We offer our guests/members (depending on if you are registered or not) the possibility to visit our Galleries, a term which is derived from an architectural metaphor (a physical construct with three dimensional space), but then once you are inside the Gallery of a particular photographer, we present you with text and photographs in a two dimensional mode calling them "pages". We are moving constantly between the three dimensional metaphor, and the two dimensional one, with out a single person of the hundreds of thousands that have come through ZoneZero - over these past two years- ever challenging our form of presentation. Quite the contrary, we have received a lot of very supportive comments on this sort of arrangement. We attribute this to the fact that our viewers are quite comfortable with this new fluid state of perception where in cyberspace you the viewers (or is it readers?) decides how things ought to be perceived, not by reality itself.

From my personal experience of having created the first CD ROM ever with sound and images ("I Photograph to Remember", published by Voyager), I was clear that we were about to enter a new era of how the photographic image would be used, seen and distributed. As soon as the internet appeared as a serious alternative to the CD ROM as a means of distribution, it was clear to me that is was only a matter of time for the technology to catch up so that the delivery of sound and images could be done in a serious way. Today we have already produced several exhibitions that are moving towards such a goal, of having a continuous sound and image presentation. In the pipeline we have a large number of new work which is based on this model of using sound and images. Something that obviously has nothing to do with previous modes of distribution such as magazines, books, or even Galleries.

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Before we move on to other aspects of ZoneZero, let us take a look at the notions expressed by the jurors of Prix Ars Electronica, the one about "a Gallery not possibly being art, other than as a building that houses the art itself ". The problem that first comes to mind is that these fine people where caught up in their previous analogue frame of reference and had not been able to move much more beyond that, as their neat architectural metaphor would inevitably crumble when bringing into the equation the two dimensional format of pages, and to make matters even worse, the introduction of sound, or video within the not too distant future.

So then what is ZoneZero? Is it a building that houses art? or is it a book that presents art? or is it a movie/ television/ video screen? As I see it, it is all of the above, I don't know exactly if it's either consecutively or simultaneously, but what I am sure off, is that it is not any single one of these metaphors by itself, as they so erroneously concluded.

Now on the question of art. Their naive and short sighted view of our "Gallery" as not being able to be an expression of art became all too apparent when I took every one of their own established parameters and applied them to ZoneZero. I will let you be the judge of where the art starts and ends.

The jury established the following working premises:

GRAMMAR:

"Just as a novelist uses narrative devices, a sculptor uses spatial arrangements and a director draws from cinematographic conventions, people on the net are working with and continue to develop a grammar. Basically, a grammar defines the layout of a home page; it's accessibility and its embeddedness. This grammar can be parsed into how one uses links, the transparency of the rules of navigation, the use of frames and backgrounds, etc. etc." these being the words of the jurors.

ZoneZero, has made it it's business that each and every one of the, now almost one hundred individual exhibitions, be tailor made to the material at hand. The backgrounds and the form of presentation are designed separately in each case, depending on what the photographer's work is all about. Other sites have a cookie cutter approach (it obviously reduces costs immensely) and one photographers' work is presented just as the next one.

As a photographer myself I found that anything less than a unique solution to each body of work would be offensive to the integrity of such photographs. Our thoughts were, if we were going to publish someone's' pictures, then we better make sure that the presentation adhered to the best that we could possibly come up with, not any common denominator that would just get the job done. Some Galleries got done and redone several times until we felt satisfied with the solution. We used frames when we thought it was appropriate, and we used other solutions when the alternatives indicated a different choice was better.

The navigation issues are a paramount concern in our design. For instance we want the viewer to know at any moment in time how many more images lie ahead. All too many sites overlook this, and one is left with the awful feeling of not knowing if one is about to finish looking at a series or how many images are ahead. The same goes for jumping forward, just as one would do in a book or in a Gallery. ZoneZero offers all the options possible for the viewer to navigate at their pleasure, and to know at all times where they are located with respect to the exhibition that is being viewed., To follow through on this discipline requires a lot of additional work, as all sorts of links need to be made to make this all come about, which as in the case of the individually designed pages, makes the site a much more costly one to produce.

STRUCTURE:

"All media we knew before the net are linear, time-based. There is a sequential orientation: a step-by-step chronology where one step is the (indispensable) building block for the next, and where the author of art is be necessity, as Canadian film maker David Cronenberg put it, imposing " a benevolent dictatorship". On the net, linearity may be abandoned. You can keep previous versions of your work online, you can offer people a range of routes to go through your story, allow archives to accumulate and mix them with your current work. Users should always be allowed to retrace their steps, to go through home pages in a variety of ways, none of them "better" or more meaningful than the other". (Statement by the jurors).

At ZoneZero the viewer can obviously accomplish all of the above, as was already established in the previous section. I actually felt that the jurors did not go far enough as all that the above relates to is a structural non-linearity, not a conceptual one. It is one thing to allow the viewer to jump around indiscriminately as if such non linearity were some sort of particular virtue, and quite a different one is to put the site through a more rigorous test as to the possibility that the wealth of the internet be brought to bear in how the work is presented.

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We have to make a serious parenthesis here, as it would appear that a site has to be all these good things for all of the work that is being presented at the entire site, for it to be understood as being the philosophy of how the site operates. Well, at ZoneZero, we do not think this is a valid premise. Again, the cookie cutter notion comes to mind. We find that the possibilities of the web are so diverse and so exciting, that it would be a serious mistake to just make a few choices and then to use them for all the work presented.

For instance. One of our exhibitions, that of Diane Fenster, uses links to other sites on the internet, which bring to bear relevant information that is related to the images and the poetry that she has made. Another of the photographers we present, José Raúl Perez, whose images on the Tarot are presented in a unique way, is best described by one of our viewers: " I was at the ZZ site last night, and you keep amazing me with your creativity. The Mexican Tarot by Jose Raul Perez was laid out with genius...with the rollover change of cards. (Of course I rolled over it by accident...you don't mention it...but that made it all the more of a surprise.) I thought, well, if you laid out those cards side by side, they'd be competing with each other for attention. This was a perfect way to handle it and, incidentally, something that is web-specific and would almost be impossible to do in print."

We have of course found a large number of different approaches, such as the Eurídice Arratia-Santiago Echeverry exhibition, or the Pablo Cabado presentation, or Muriel Hasbun, just to name a few that are very different from any of other photographers work.

So all in all the non-linearity espoused by the jurors, looks a bit shallow when compared to the wealth of options that we have actually been able to bring together at ZoneZero.

PUBLIC SERVICE AND NET-AWARENESS:

"Does a page, program or interface provide the net with a public service, with some kind of community information? Does a home page or interface enhance our knowledge (or sensation) that we are part of a giant, global network? Is it able to acknowledge what else is happening on the net and use that as a treasure, as a joke, a metaphor, as something ironical, as something to dwell upon or fantasize about? (Statement by the jurors).

At ZoneZero we take the issue of public service very seriously. Consider the following facts. ZoneZero has been a bilingual (English/Spanish) site from its very inception. You need to consider that creating a bilingual site implies an additional layer of complexity to what had been described earlier as an already quite demanding task. Since the site has to be done twice, one for English and the other for Spanish, this literally has translated into doubling all our production costs.

At the beginning our site was visited by Spanish speaking viewers only about one percent of the time. A discouraging number to say the least, when one factors in the effort to produce the site in a bilingual format. We thought that having an only English site was culturally unacceptable even though the number of readers was so low. We thought that the numbers would increase

as soon as there were more Spanish viewers on the net to begin with, and these would increase as they found something worthy of their attention. This is exactly what has happened. Today our Spanish viewers are about 20% of a much higher number of overall viewers. This is an exponential growth, and we believe an important contribution on our part to make the web as diverse as the world to which it wants to cater to. This is why we call the web, the WWW. (World Wide Web), and as we all know the world does not all read or speak only in English.

ZoneZero has also become in the process of it's own development, a training ground for web site creations. Our personnel consists of students who have received grants to come to ZoneZero to learn how to produce web content, on the other hand, 95% of the artists or writers we feature at ZoneZero knew nothing at all about producing a web page. We feel very satisfied that our efforts have brought the web a lot closer to such a large number of very talented artists as are showing their work at ZoneZero. Had we not designed and produced the pages of ZoneZero, the majority would have their work presented to such a large audience as comes daily to visit the galleries or pages, of ZoneZero.

On the biweekly column commented earlier on, Arthur Bleich, our writer, has stated the following:

I doubt I will ever write for the print medium again. The power of web writing is simply awesome. You can discuss things that are right up-to-the-minute. Make corrections almost instantly, if necessary. And get the kind of immediate feedback that gives writers a super-high. And just think of the quantity and quality of audience you're reaching...and on a worldwide basis.

And also the fact that everyone who reads your stuff has access to the web- which means you can enhance your work by saying..."and by the way, go here to see more of this, go there if you want to know more about that, and at these sites are some great examples of what I've been telling you." A writer's power is increased by a hundred-fold as you add "living" footnotes and instantaneously available references to your work.

CO-OPERATION:

"Does a project reflect that it is embedded in the richness and vastness of the net, or is it insulated? Is it something various people work on or with? Are there any outside links? Is material from other places on the net being incorporated, commented upon, drawn from? Does it stimulate cooperation and contributions? Can one interact, or is one supposed to just click a few buttons and consume? (Statement by the jurors).

At ZoneZero, we have a section that is best described as an "encyclopaedia of information" available on the net. Links to information related to photography that would be of good use to a student of photography. Many times the problem is how to find something on the web, here we have attempted to create a space that has narrowed the information to specific topics, making the access to such data a lot faster and easier than the usual search engines.

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We have created something that we are quite proud of, due to its utmost simplicity but profound cultural impact that in the long run we imagine it might have. Next to each photographers work we have placed the email address of the artist. So that a viewer can interact directly without any intermediary with the artist whose work they are looking at. Many sites try to avoid such an alternative, as the implication is one of loosing control of who says what to whom. If you want to purchase someone's' work, the gallery wants a cut, if some one wants to publish the work of a photographer, there are commission to be collected, if a photographer is offered an exhibition, there are at least credits to be garnered. At ZoneZero we felt that all of this represented the exact opposite of what the web ought to be, an open environment.

First of all, the possibility for a viewer to have a dialogue with the artist directly, something that rarely happens in the analogue world. From the artists whose work we have presented we constantly hear how they are absolutely marveled at the levels of feedback that they are getting. They also share with us the excitement about work they have sold to publications, exhibitions to which they have been invited to, comments that they have received, etc. The overwhelming majority has had this experience.

We sense that there is no parallel in how such a level of communication can be developed and the importance that this will have for art in general. I am always astonished how little use is being made of such a simple solution as just having the address of the artist right there next to the work itself, or how little effort is being made to promote it's use and wide spread acceptance.

We have also created FORUMS for discussions on certain topics, creating in the process more and more a community effect. We are still in the process of learning how best to manage such options. We are in the midst of producing an interactive project that will include a writer and a photographer, who on their second leg of the journey will share live with an audience, right there from the field from which they will be reporting, their opinions and running commentary. As such

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modalities are put in place we learn as we do. We are clear there will be faults and errors, and that the only manner for us to acquire the experience is in actually doing the things we want to do, and see how they develop. The form might be brought to question, not the content. The talent of the people involved guarantees us that.

COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY:

"The net allows people to meet, mix and mingle in new ways: people of various backgrounds who live in widely varying places can meet and swap information, create communities, build worlds and develop a sense of belonging. Does a program, interface or homepage promote the sense of community? Does it allow you to exchange information? Has this community any influence on the analogue life of its participants? Does it allow people to overcome some of the disadvantages they may encounter in the analogue life, such as sex, age, color, disability, lack of social status? (Statement by jurors).

I don't believe that the nature of ZoneZero will necessarily become that of a community. Understanding this term, as a collective where all parts speak to each other on a regular basis. Going to a movie house to watch a film, or listening to a concert might be a collective experience, but that does not make a community out of the people participating. However I do believe that ZoneZero is an excellent forum to exchange information and will increasingly be better as time goes on.

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I don't consider that one can argue that the community of ZoneZero has had any influence on the life of its participants, if participants are solely the viewers. But then, what about those other participants, the authors and artists who are presenting their work at ZoneZero? These indeed have the potential for a experiencing a big influence.

Work that is being presented in public, that had previously not seen the light of day because the costs of production had inhibited the possibility of publishing it. Work that is being seen around the world, in over 90 countries, which would have been impossible under the traditional forms of distribution, related to the analogue world.

Such a wide spread audience is a new phenomenon altogether underexplored and under reported. When would an Argentinean or Mexican photographer have their work published in Japan? Or a Chinese photographer in Guatemala, not often I assure you. Today this is happening with complete regularity through ZoneZero. So I would say yes we are having an influence on the lives of the participants, and in so doing overcoming some of the disadvantages they may have encountered in their analogue life.

We have now covered the template of ideas that the jurors of Prix Ars Electronica had set for themselves in order to evaluate the sites they were judging for the competition. It is obvious that in not even taking a look at a Gallery as they themselves very candidly and unapologetically recognized, they were introducing all the miscalculations of the analogue world in looking at the web, even though their intentions surely were otherwise.

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The question is, is ZoneZero a new art
I look forward to your comments,

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February 1998

http://zonezero.com/editorial/february98/edi98.htm

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