

# THE WORLD WIDE WEB: IN SEARCH OF THE TELEPHONE OPERA

from  
Peter Lunenfeld Snap to grid.  
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## Euretic Pleasures

Listen to me now or listen to me later. . . . Gonna get it together, watch it. Gonna get together, Ma Bell. Like Ma Bell, I got the ill communication!

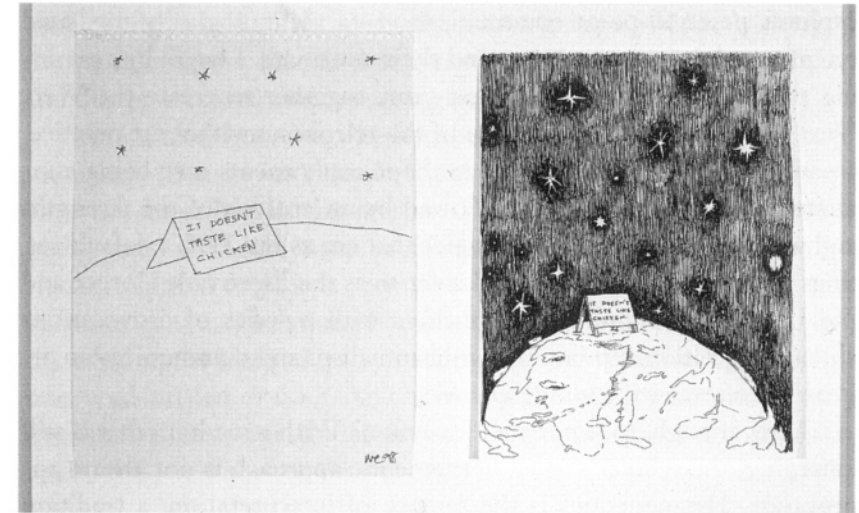
*Beastie Boys*<sup>1</sup>

It is in the process of the use of equipment that we must actually encounter the character of the equipment.

*Martin Heidegger*<sup>2</sup>

When logging on to local Internet service providers via a dial-up service, the first sound heard is a familiar one: the reassuring seven tones of a local telephone call. While not quite as homey as the clicks of a rotary dial (which are now to the ear as the lithograph is to the eye), these dial tones anchor most explorations of the World Wide Web.<sup>3</sup>

Links between the telephone and new media forms are not as circumstantial as they might first appear. One might begin with the oft-repeated maxim, “cyberspace is where you are when you’re on the phone.” It is hard to overestimate the impact of Bell Labs on the history of computing. The net’s nodal construction is based on the Cold War model of the interstate telephone system, which could switch routing almost instantly to ensure continuous communications even in the event of nuclear destruction of major urban centers. For the past decade, major telecommunication companies have been exerting growing pressures to determine how online environments will be billed—which is one of if not *the* defining issue affecting the next growth phase of the Web. And since the advent of cellular systems, telephones are suddenly sexy again.



These collaborative images are generated by a game—one artist creates a drawing and describes it over the phone to his partner, who then makes a new drawing based on the verbal description of the first. This process reflects the conceptual turn taken by most telephone art.

Michael Coughlan and Jory Felice. *Telephone* (“It Doesn’t Taste Like Chicken”) (1998).  
Courtesy of works on paper, Los Angeles.

The present relevance of “telephony” prompts a reconsideration of the history of art as communication in the twentieth century, and the related question of how technologies carry the weight of art. With the instantaneity of electronic mail bringing about a resurgence of epistolary culture, the Internet is—like telephony—a communicative medium par excellence. The Web has excited cultural producers as no technological development has since the arrival of video. From the start, people have been drawn to its communicative properties, its ability to create a dialogue between producer and audience, the first step towards the hazily grasped goal of fully interactive aesthetic practice. With the Web, the computer becomes an instrument unique in the history of audiovisual media—for the first time the same machine serves as the site of production, distribution and reception.

Rather than artists’ homepages, arts information resources, interactive tool chests, and those Web galleries that repackage existing work, I choose here to concentrate on Web-based art that specifically

explores point-to-point communication—a technologically mediated reciprocity between producers and their audiences. I begin by examining the specific communities that came together to create the Web. Next, I offer a history of the use of the telephone within art practice, creating a context for the hyperaesthetic experiments now being conducted on the Web. This is followed by an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the two strategies that are as the Web's default settings for such a practice—what I refer to as the Electronic Corpse and the Digital Questionnaire. I conclude with a series of provocations about the relationship between conceptualism and communication art in an era of ever-expanding networks.

How, though, to frame the discussion? With a medium that is still emerging, the scholar's usual hermeneutic approach is not always appropriate. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation, a tradition based on Biblical exegesis. The Web, however, has no Pentateuch, and exploded too quickly to have generated a canon. Gregory Ulmer has proposed, rather than hermeneutics, a "euretic" criticism, one based on the Archimedean "eureka!"<sup>4</sup> A euretic methodology explores the joys and stutters of discovery. My observations about the Web are, in this sense, essentially euretic: a series of inquiries into my own astonishment at what I have seen, and a subsequent questioning of whether this astonishment leads to the kinds of pleasures I expect from other arts and media.

### Communities and Communication

Understanding the history of the Web is important, not so much to grasp its technological development (well covered elsewhere), but rather to get a sense for the communities that came together to create a visually based, point-to-point communications medium.<sup>5</sup> Consider two distinct user groups: those who communicated with digital graphics and media, and those who used text-based networking to bring about interaction. This is not to say that graphics programmers did not have electronic mail accounts or that Internet Relay Chat and newsgroup users did not download image files. Though substantial numbers were card-carrying members of both groups, there were many who belonged to one or the other, each with its own history, emphasis, and argot. I write now in the past tense, because with the ad-

vent of the World Wide Web, these two groups effectively merged. Artists now create images that compress effectively for transmission, and dungeon masters incorporate graphics into on-line MOOs.

Yet we must question whether the specificities of each of the communities—what it was that drew people to them in the first place—have not been lost in the merger. What happens to the ever more highly nuanced digital image as it is subjected to the compression algorithms required to pipe it around the globe? Just as important, what becomes of the egalitarian community of text, which seemed to defy the usual social hierarchies by making the same channel open to anyone, credentialed or not?<sup>6</sup> And how does this egalitarianism affect the question of what constitutes art in this technologized and mediated era?<sup>7</sup>

### Telephone Art

Those looking for sophisticated strategies to transform the Web into a medium capable of bearing the weight of the aesthetic object would do well to examine earlier communications media. Will the movement from communications medium to art form be more successfully negotiated on the Web than it was over the telephone? One way a hyperaesthetic critique can generate new questions, if not answers, is to investigate how artists have utilized the open and responsive channels of other, earlier media to effect aesthetic interventions.

Has there ever been any important art created specifically *for* the telephone? And is this different from the issue of whether there has ever been any art *on* the telephone? A distinction is needed because in its first decades, telephonic communications also functioned as proto-mass-medium distribution systems, along the lines of contemporary cable television. Starting as early as 1881, there were experiments in Europe and the United States using telephone lines to pipe news, sermons and entertainments from one place to another. Royalty had live lines installed from the opera houses, heads of state from parliament, and "nickel-in-the-slot" public telephone stations piped in the latest from the popular theater. To comment on just one renowned user, in 1911 Marcel Proust subscribed to Paris's Théâtrophone; thus the neurasthenic novelist could remain at home, listening to the operas of Wagner and Debussy from his beloved bed.<sup>8</sup>

The most sustained point-to-point telephonic distribution system lasted over three decades in Hungary, where Telefon Hirmondó was a fixture from 1892 to 1925. Targeted at the Magyar-speaking, nationalistic upper classes, Telefon Hirmondó offered a schedule of market reports, news of politics and foreign affairs, sports, and nightly performances from the likes of the Royal Hungarian Opera House and the Folk Theater.<sup>9</sup>

The first proposal for a specifically telephonic art was an unrealized provocation offered by the Dadaists in 1920. The *Dada Almanac* proposed that an artist could call in an order for a picture by telephone, and have it made by an artisan.<sup>10</sup> In 1922, László Moholy-Nagy claims to have indeed ordered five paintings in porcelain enamel by telephone from a sign factory. According to Moholy-Nagy, these *Telephonbilder*, as he called them, were created when he sketched out his paintings on graph paper with the color chart from the factory in front of him, and relayed his instruction via the telephone to the supervisor of the factory at the other end of the line. Moholy-Nagy wrote years later of the process: the supervisor “took down the dictated shapes in the correct position. (It was like playing chess by correspondence.)”<sup>11</sup>

It makes sense that in the heyday of conceptualism, the telephone made its way back into artistic practice. In 1969, Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) opened a show titled “Art by Telephone.” The MCA asked over thirty artists, including noted conceptualists like Joseph Kosuth, to telephone in to the Museum, or to answer the Museum’s call, and then to instruct museum staff about what their contribution to the show would be. The Museum then produced the pieces and displayed them. A “record-catalogue” was produced, replete with recordings of the telephone engagements between artists and Museum.<sup>12</sup> My favorite proposal for this show was English Fluxus artist George Brecht’s poll of public opinion on his plans to move the land mass of the British Isles into the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>13</sup>

In 1980, Allen S. Bridge founded the Apology Line in New York City. In a project that tested the boundaries between art and the mass media’s evolving culture of confession, Bridge posted flyers around the city offering a telephone number that people could call anonymously to apologize for sins, real or imagined. These confessions were then

re-purposed as installations, audio tapes, and, after transcription, published in *Apology Magazine*.<sup>14</sup>

In the past decade, artists have explored the aesthetic possibilities of our most stable communication technology.<sup>15</sup> In Santa Monica, CA, Martin Kersels wired his dealer’s telephone and fax to trigger a cacophony of taped sounds so that anytime a ringer went off the whole assemblage would erupt in a frenzy, bringing any kind of discussion in the gallery to a grinding halt.<sup>16</sup> Ian Pollock and Janet Silk organized *Local 411* (1997), a telephone project about the uncompensated displacement of 4000 people to clear the way for San Francisco’s Museum of Modern Art and the Moscone Convention Center. *Local 411* featured sound installations and live performances centered around an interactive voicemail system that played narratives about the area for anyone who called in. As the artists wryly noted, while admissions to *Local 411* were the price of “regular telephone calls,” any “long distance toll charges apply.”<sup>17</sup> In “Telephone” (1998), Michael Coughlan and Jory Felice create a game to generate work:

Player A creates a drawing.

Player A telephones Player B.

Player A describes the drawing to Player B. (If Player B is not home, Player A may leave a message.)

Player B attempts to recreate Player A’s drawing based on this description.

Player A and Player B’s drawings are placed side by side.<sup>18</sup>

Coughlan and Felice’s telephone drawings slyly point out that language’s encapsulation of the visual is a hit-or-miss proposition. “Try, try again” offers two remarkably similar boxed cacti with human hands emerging, while “Footloose”—two drawings of a severed limb emerging from a Christmas stocking—could not be more dissimilar.

Though this survey of art for the telephone is incomplete, its abbreviated nature is indicative of the telephone’s limited influence on the course of twentieth-century art, avant-gardist or popular. This is obviously in stark contrast to the impact of film, radio, and television.<sup>19</sup> Telephone art—from Moholy-Nagy to Coughlan and Felice—has not developed forms or strategies specific to the medium itself. Telephony

can not lay claim to a unique aesthetic practice, as sound recording can to the three-minute pop single, or television (and radio before it) to the half-hour situation comedy, or the cinema to the ninety-minute feature-length narrative. Indeed, this chapter's title invokes something that is not; there has been no telephone opera, no Wagnerian total work of art, or *gesamtkunstwerk*, for this communication medium.<sup>20</sup> This is not to imply that telephony is not important (the telephone has molded modernity at least as much as broadcast media), just that it is not a system that has generated a sufficient number of discrete cultural objects to slot into the discourses of criticism and art history.

### The Electronic Corpse and the Digital Questionnaire

So what do ruminations about telephone operas as yet unborn offer to a eutetic investigation of the Web? Start with two default uses of the Web as communication art: the Electronic Corpse and the Digital Questionnaire. The Electronic Corpse is the digital era's take on the Exquisite Corpse, the Surrealists' parlor game in which paper was folded over and phrases or images were inscribed on the quadrants, each person unaware of the contributions of the others. The paper was then unfolded and the sentence or drawing seen in its splintered totality. The game takes its name from the first sentence produced using its method: "The exquisite corpse shall drink the young wine." Though created to take advantage of an unmediated communication between individuals in proximity, the Exquisite Corpse has been the inspiration for generations of experimentation and its extension into communication media has been inexorable.<sup>21</sup>

There are innumerable projects on the Web which ship bits and bytes of art from one point of transformation to another, and artists continue to explore the potential of the Electronic Corpse as a discontinuous continuum. The best of the Electronic Corpse pieces, Douglas Davis's 1995 Web-based text project *The Sentence: Breaking Out (of the Virtual Closet)*,<sup>22</sup> is a hypertrophied provocation—the combinatory sentence has simply grown too long to read. Davis's piece is less about juxtaposition than the sheer additive mass of almost countless contributions from browsers of the site. While this strategy can be productive when text-based, things become muddier—literally—when visual images become involved.

In 1964, two years before his death, André Breton maintained that one of the intents of Surrealism was to "attain the point at which . . . painting 'must be made by all, not by one.'"<sup>23</sup> The Web is circling around that point insofar as images can be shipped remarkably easily from one person to another. Bonnie Mitchell's group at Syracuse University has been pursuing online versions of the Exquisite Corpse for some years now with projects like *ChainArt* (1993), *Digital Journey* (1994), and *Diversive Paths* (1995). Mitchell describes *Chainreaction* (1995) as "a worldwide collaborative art project that involves digital image manipulation and networked integration of visual communication and the visual environment . . . [artists] collaborate to build a structure of images that reflects the multiplicity of the experience."<sup>24</sup>

Mitchell is not alone in her desire to use the communicative potential of the Web to ship images around the globe, but the question of whether this effort is justified goes unasked.<sup>25</sup> The problem with the Electronic Corpse is that the additive processes and multiple manipulations do not necessarily reflect a "multiplicity of experience," and in fact too often end up in a dismal sameness of murky rasterbations. Artists (and site developers) tend to create Electronic Corpses simply to show that they are capable of networked collaboration, not because the collaborative effort will result in something richer or more complex than work done individually. Telematic artists too often forget that collaborations between people seated side by side are not made more interesting on any level beyond the technical if some of the artists are in Addis Ababa and the others are in Jakarta. Electronic Corpses tend to be demonstrations of creative potential rather than systems worthy of critical engagement.

If the central concern of the Electronic Corpse is shipping data from point to point, then that of the Digital Questionnaire is responding to data. The best known of the Digital Questionnaires is Komar and Melamid's *Most Wanted Paintings* (1994). Their project uses the ubiquitous point-and-click forms of commercial Web sites, that is to say, a series of questions and answers spread over several pages. These questions are about personal aesthetics, with queries about favorite colors and sizes, preferences for "traditional or modern style," and the wonderfully loopy "Would you say that you prefer seeing paintings of wild animals, like lions, giraffes or deer, or that you prefer seeing





When Komar and Melamid moved their brilliant observations on polling and market research to the Web, they created the ultimate Digital Questionnaire, simultaneously exploiting and critiquing the utopian promise of direct response.

Komar and Melamid, *Most Wanted Paintings* (1994), screen grab of *America's Most Wanted* from <[www.diacenter.org](http://www.diacenter.org)>.

paintings of domestic animals, like dogs, cats or other pets?," limiting the answers to the three equally nonsensical choices of "wild animals," "domestic animals," and "both."<sup>26</sup>

Responses are organized by the respondents' nationalities, and Komar and Melamid then paint two canvases based on this empirical material, yielding what this method determines to be each country's most and least wanted paintings. The next step is posting thumbnails and larger images of the paintings themselves which (as Internet propagandists trumpet) are then available twenty-four hours a day, from anywhere, by anyone with a modem. The United States' *Most Wanted* painting is a large-scale landscape with deer standing in a lake under a blue sky with George Washington looking on. The Least Wanted (modernism be damned) is a small, reddish abstraction of triangular forms.<sup>27</sup>

Ever since emigrating to the United States from the Soviet Union during the Brezhnev era, Komar and Melamid have been honing their Russian irony to investigate populism in art, in both the East and the West.<sup>28</sup> From their detournements of Socialist Realism in the 1970s, to their proposals to recycle Communist monuments after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, to the *Most Wanted Paintings*'s brilliant observations on the West's obsession with polling and market research, Komar and Melamid explore and critique the utopian promise of the artist's direct response to the desires of the audience, without ever succumbing to that promise. The Digital Questionnaire is so obviously resonant with the communicative capabilities of the Web that artists have created dozens of variations, from the Techno-Ethno-Graphic Profile at Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Roberto Sifuentes, and James Luna's *Cybervato* site to Victoria Vesna's *Bodies*® *INCORPORATED*.<sup>29</sup> What artists want with all this information is not a question to deal with here—it is more important to address what they do with that data. Specifically, if artists request data from their users and in turn pledge to respond to that data, are they obligated to follow through on their promises?

The correspondence logs of *Bodies*® *INCORPORATED* raise precisely this issue, which is perforce an ethical one. The site invites participants (Vesna prefers this term to user) to construct a virtual body from pre-defined body parts, texture maps, and sounds. The participant's virtual body then joins the site's larger body-owner community. The possibility of creating a representation of the self (however modified or fanciful) has its appeal, and many people responded to Vesna's questionnaire in hopes of seeing their individualized bodies rendered at the site. *Bodies*® *INCORPORATED* promised a payoff for participating, but did it deliver? In the summer of 1996, one Borsi Tebroc posted the following messages to the site's communal bulletin board:

ATTENTION BODY OWNERS!!!! HAVE YOU WAITED OVER 3 MONTHS, SIX MONTHS, A YEAR!!! Do you sit expectantly at your monitor waiting for a response of some kind from the academics and tech heads that enticed you into this web site bodyshop?? Join the growing hundreds of body owners who wonder where their bodies are!! Horrors!!!! . . . Send us your testimonial,

Send us your grief, tell us your tales of woe!!!! WRITE THE BODY CONSTRUCTION GRIPE LINE . . .

It would seem, when first stepping into your website, that participation would render benefits to both parties. Yet, after several months of waiting and hearing from others having waited OVER A YEAR that concrete body is a one way street!! You have our data now what about your end of the bargain!!!!<sup>30</sup>

An integral part of communication is establishing a framework of reciprocity: if a work on the Web requests input from users in the promise of some form of response, there would seem to be an imperative to respond. Yet like any generalization in art, this one is meant to be transgressed, especially if the piece is conceptualized—specifically—to frustrate users seeking this kind of reciprocity, if its very function as communication art is to demonstrate the difficulty of communication.

### The Killer App?

Confounding this medium's ability to communicate is to challenge the very status of the World Wide Web as the Killer App of the Internet. The Killer App (short for "application") is yet another grail of the computer industry: the hardware/software combination that creates an entire market segment for itself. For the first generation of IBM personal computers in the early 1980s, the Killer App was the financial spreadsheet (specifically Lotus 123) that convinced millions of small businesses that they had to computerize to compete. For the Apple Macintosh in the late 1980s, it was desktop publishing (made possible by the development of PostScript and WYSIWYG—"What You See Is What You Get"—packages). For Silicon Graphics in the 1990s, the Killer App was three-dimensional animation (accomplished via programs like Alias, Wavefront, and Softimage). The Web itself has been hailed as the Internet's Killer App precisely because it added a crucial visual interface to a previously text-based medium.

Is conceptualism the Killer App of Web-based communication art? The answer to this is contradictory. First, claiming conceptual art as a Killer App violates the very premise of conceptual art, at least as Sol LeWitt defined it in 1969: "The conventions of art are altered by works of art. . . . Successful art changes our understanding of the con-

ventions by altering our perceptions.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, if conceptual art were to function as a Killer App, it could do so for no more than an instant, because its very presence would alter the conditions of its production and consumption. On the other hand, Killer App or not, a rigorous conceptual phase could rescue the Web as communication art from the worst failings of both the Electronic Corpse and the Digital Questionnaire. There is a link here to the telephone art works covered earlier: those few projects had a conceptual edge because they did not simply involve communication; they interrogated the very idea of communication.

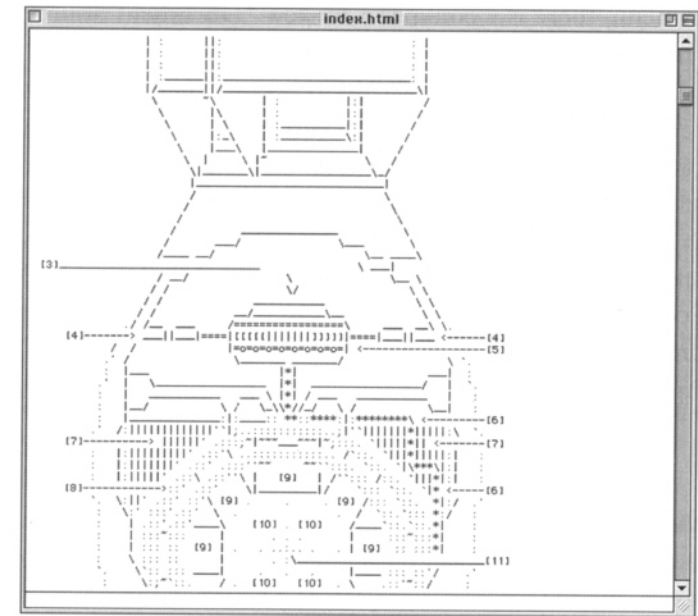
Too many artists have posted home pages without interrogating what the proliferation of individual representations implies for representation itself. If we can read Douglas Huebler's project of the 1970s, "To Photographically Document the Existence of Everyone Alive" as a conceptual lampoon of August Sander's plan early in the twentieth century to record visually every category of German citizenry, what are we to make of the Web? If everyone with a computer is well on the way to his or her own home page, then the Web is advancing towards Jorge Luis Borges' map as big as the world.<sup>32</sup> With the Web, Sander's catalog and Huebler's conceit—like Davis's *Sentence*—abandon the realm of metaphor and become literalized.

If we can indeed speak of schools in a medium just a few years old, then the "net.art" movement has indeed led the way towards a conceptually provocative practice for work on the World Wide Web. Net.art emerged as a subgenre of art on the net, and was composed of artists as diverse as England's Heath Bunting, Americans Cohen/Frank/Ippolito, the Berlin-based Slovenian-born Vuk Cosic, Russians Olia Lialina and Alexei Shulgin, and the Belgian/Dutch team of Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesman who live in Barcelona and go by the name JODI. Artists rarely like to be lumped together under rubrics like "net.art" (and Bunting claims that the term itself "for many of the practitioners is a joke and a fake"<sup>33</sup>), but there is no denying that these net.artists and a group of others shared certain approaches, emerged at the same time in the medium and communicated regularly with each other. As compelling as their investigations into the conceptual and material conditions of the Web are, net.art is also interesting because it is the first international art movement since the Second World War in

which artists from Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have been able to have completely unfettered communication with their colleagues in the rest of the industrialized world.<sup>34</sup> No other art movement has ever been so instantly accessible from so many different locales, and so fully primed for instantaneous critical discourse. Because the work is archived and searchable, there has never been an art movement whose history has been as easy to track as it evolved. If net.artists tended to make better communities than art works, creating a transnational TechnoVolkgeist around the aesthetics of the Web was no small achievement.

For a good period of time, the only non-gallery, stand-alone arts Web site to which I returned for pleasure—rather than out of a sense of information-age duty—was *jodi.org* <jodi.org>. Like so much of electronic media, Web sites should be critiqued along the lines of live performances (which are time based and not necessarily accessible to the reader) rather than as discrete objects (which can be cataloged, recorded, and presumably visited in the same state in which they have been described). The discussions offered here on this paradigmatic net.art site have more in common with the way theater writers critique actors for their particular interpretation of a role like King Lear than they do with either the hermeneutics of textual criticism inherited from literary studies or the veneration of the unique object that still drives so much of art history and criticism. That noted, these are some impressions of *jodi.org* at a single moment in time.<sup>35</sup>

The first screen is simple: lines of green characters on a black screen, with a green highlighting function cycling down. Long-term computer users will find their experience tinged by nostalgia: for me, the font, colors, and black background were reminiscent of the first portable computer I ever used, a little Kaypro with a tiny monochrome screen. There are no identifiers, no marks of authorship or ownership, no indication that clicking on this essentially meaningless screen will lead into the rest of the site. The next screen to appear creates a vaguely three dimensional, gridded space with variously colored directional arrows. Clicking on any element of this page simply reshuffles the arrangement and direction of the arrows. This section is indeed interactive, but to absolutely no purpose. There are other nodes of the site: they are independent, but somehow connected in their interroga-



*jodi.org*'s pulsing green and black blankness is not so blank as it seems; one just needs to know where to look.

JODI (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesman), <jodi.org> (1997), screengrab.

tions of the schematic, from the 2.5-dimensional mapping of the first grid, to machine age blueprints, to information era interfaces that mock the icon-happy user friendliness of so much of the rest of the Web. As the critic Susan Kandel notes, “www.jodi.org is ludic, entranced with the computer’s potential for aesthetic play, but not at all unserious.”<sup>36</sup>

As enigmatically satisfying as the site is, *jodi.org*’s home page is truly the center of the project, for there is a secret there. The gnosis that opens up to the initiated confronts a central facet of aesthetic production on the Internet: the World Wide Web is a medium in which the creative coding—hypertext markup language (HTML), virtual reality markup language (VRML), and whatever comes next—is visible at the same moment as the audiovisual object.<sup>37</sup>

*jodi.org*’s pulsing green and black blankness is not so blank as it seems, that is; one just needs to know where to look. In the browser’s