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By MATTHEW MIRAPPAUL [EIO](#)

A Different Kind of Demonstration Software

If it is often said that art transcends the political, then it is just as frequently stated that *all* art is political, from the anti-war sentiments of Picasso's "Guernica" to the not-too-feminist thrust of the Shania Twain song "Man! I Feel Like a Woman."

With the emergence of the digital realm as an outlet for creative expression, it was inevitable that artists inspired by social and political causes would start to employ elements of the medium to advance their activist agendas, not unlike the "hacktivists" who try to break into government sites and alter data as a form of protest.

Two recent online projects, the [Natural Selection](#) search engine by Mongrel, a London-based collective, and the redesigned home page for [RTMark](#), a group of anti-corporate agitators, show how the artistically inclined are using the Internet as a soapbox in ways that go well beyond posting a manifesto on a Web page.

Launched in January, Natural Selection at first appears to function like a normal Internet search engine. Type in a keyword, and the software will churn out a list of genuinely related pages. Enter one of 5,000 racial epithets, though, and the links lead to a series of sites of exaggerated bigotry, many containing the same coarse language and crude imagery as the racist sites they intend to parody. (Clicking on the generic-looking advertising banners will get you there one step quicker.)



The RTMark site appropriates the look of a much larger organization.

Natural Selection could be deemed an act of aesthetic hacktivism, since its skewed results are generated through the unauthorized use of legitimate search engines. Graham Harwood, one of Mongrel's four core members, admitted, "It's a hack that's had to move a bit because we keep getting caught."

Created by Mongrel and Matthew Fuller, one of the developers of the artist-designed [Web Stalker](#) browser, Natural Selection has more than racial politics on its plate. Harwood explained that the project is also meant to raise questions about the data-classification systems built into Web directories like Yahoo and the hierarchies they present.

Natural Selection is part of a much broader Mongrel project called "National Heritage" that tackles racial issues, British art history and digital culture. Among its components are "BlackLash," a downloadable game for Macintosh computers in which the goal is to slay Nazis and insect-like police in a quest for freedom, and a Mac program called "Heritage Gold," which Harwood described as a hacked version of the Photoshop image-manipulation software.

"Instead of the red, green and blue [color options] that you get in Photoshop, you get Aryan, African and Asian," he said.

Part of the National Heritage project exists offline. Last weekend, during the [Next 5 Minutes](#) new-media conference in Amsterdam, Mongrel unveiled an installation with three video screens displaying images of racially stereotyped faces. Clicking on a computer mouse sends spit onto the faces, transforming a routine move into a shocking gesture.

Although Mongrel was founded in 1993, Harwood said: "We waited a long time before we did anything on the Internet, because you need a space in which things are already occurring if you want to do some tactical work in there. Before, it was too new."

But with the Web's growth, Harwood said, the group finds it is struggling to overcome the medium's bland, safe familiarity. "A couple of years ago," he said, "there was plenty of room to maneuver. Now that business has consolidated its control, you have to deal with boredom. The Internet is still a very good place for doing political work, but always in the chinks and gaps that business and governments leave behind."

RTMark (pronounced "art mark") also strives to exploit those gaps. The U.S.-based group gives monetary rewards to rewards those who subversively modify commercial products like Barbie

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dolls to make anti-corporate points. When it came time to overhaul the RTMark Web site, company home pages were quickly identified as new targets for alteration.

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As a result, every 10th visitor to the just-relaunched site will see something other than the group's basic site: a facsimile of the [McDonald's Corp.](#) home page that in reality serves as a gateway to information about RTMark. Except for the "mcrmark.com" at the top and a photo of the Ronald McDonald mascot with his face obscured, the rendering is nearly perfect.

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An RTMark spokesman and active member who uses the pseudonym Ray Thomas said the graphic designers who built the site are at work on a variation of a chemical company's home page and would probably put it up in a few days.

The effort resembles the British artist Heath Bunting's [now-extinct appropriation](#) of the home page for the Southland Corp.'s 7-11 stores, which for all the world looked like the real thing.

But Thomas declined to call the fake site an aesthetic endeavor. "We just see it as propaganda; it works to convey a message," he said. "We get thought of as art, but I never call it that, and I don't call myself an artist. I think of it more as activism. RTMark is just like any other corporation, except with some key differences, like we're not out to make money, we're out to make culture."

Thomas did concede that the group's effectiveness relied to a certain extent on its artistic sensibility. "We're different from other activists because we have a sense of humor, and we care about how things look and are perceived," he said. "We want to present these issues in a pleasing way. In that sense, we're artists -- but no more so than Mao."

Some RTMark-sponsored projects rest solidly in the creative domain, like [Deconstructing Beck](#), a 13-track CD assembled entirely from snippets of the sample-obsessed musician's own songs and reprocessed by a variety of contributors.

The disk was released last year on the covert Illegal Art label, and a follow-up, [Extracted Celluloid](#), is scheduled to be released on April 9. The CD's pseudonymous producer, who calls himself Philo T. Farnsworth, said the new album would sample music from films like "Titanic," "The Wizard of Oz," "Saturday Night Fever" and "Dr. Strangelove."

RTMark also helped sponsor last year's politically motivated assault by the [Electronic Disturbance Theater](#) on the Pentagon's Web site. The protesters called the attack a form of conceptual art.

Ricardo Dominguez, a New York artist and EDT member, said his colleagues were developing a Virtual March system, to be released later this year, for the staging of online protest events. "VR March will enable people to log on, see and interact with others as they move through a site, and put up posters for all to see," Dominguez said.

Those who consider street demonstrations a form of performance art would not hesitate to see an online march as an aesthetic event. But is a rally really the work of an artist?

"It's not that we don't consider ourselves artists, it's just that the word artist has become disempowering," RTMark's Thomas said. "Artists aren't taken seriously here. But we have the same goal as artists: we're just trying to change the world with something we do."

arts@large is published on Thursdays. Click [here](#) for a list of links to other columns in the series.

Related Sites

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- [Natural Selection](#) (Note: Contains strong language and graphic imagery.)
- [RTMark](#)
- [Web Stalker](#)
- [Next 5 Minutes](#)
- [McDonald's Corp.](#)
- After the Southland Corp. threatened legal action, the bogus 7-11 stores page was [removed](#) from the Web
- [Deconstructing Beck](#)
- [Extracted Celluloid](#)
- [Electronic Disturbance Theater](#)

Matthew Mirapaul at mirapaul@nytimes.com welcomes your comments and suggestions.

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