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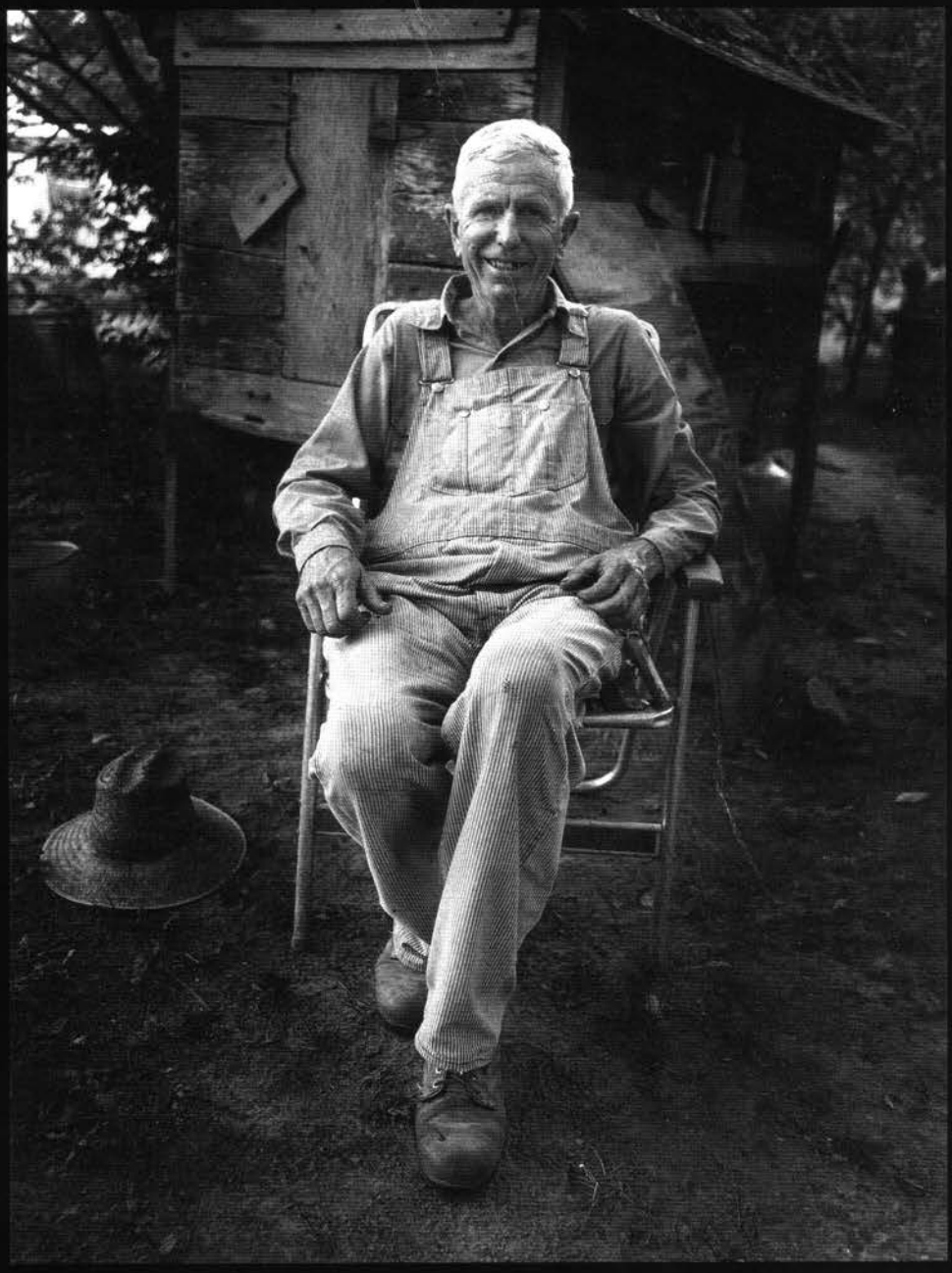

Clyde Brannon, A blueberry farmer in north Alabama. Mark Gooch

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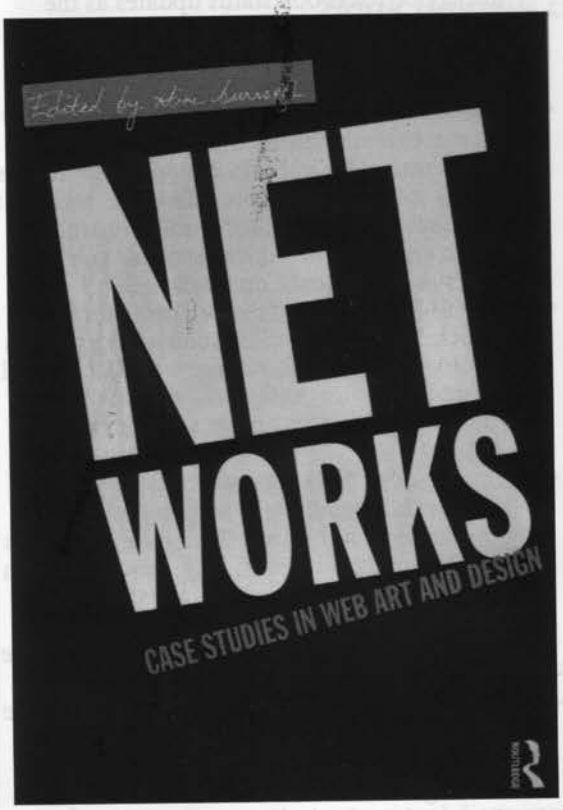
Book Review

Net Works: Case Studies in Web Art and Design

Review by Karie Hollerbach
Book Review Editor: Erik Palmer



xtine burrough, Editor

Net Works: Case Studies in Web Art and Design

242 pages

New York, NY: Routledge • 2012

$39.95

Creativity coach and blogger Quinn McDonald says that we do not find meaning in life but rather we make meaning by creating it. By working deeply, artists can sink into their creativity, experiment, become more aware, possibly produce a tangible work, and be in a constant state of what McDonald calls "evolving, solving, and being alive."

For college-level educators in visual communication and the arts, finding and executing pedagogical strategies that help students follow McDonald's lead is a persistent challenge. But important help has now arrived in the form of *Net Works*, a collection of essays on new technologies and teaching practices by xtine burrough, a faculty member in new media at California State University–Fullerton.

Net Works uses case studies from the first-person narrative viewpoint about web art and digital design projects that all seek to make meaning within their respective theoretical realms. Editor burrough says in the book's introduction that she sought to create a book that bridged the gap between theory and practice so that it could be used in a variety of classroom situations.

She chose the ten themes for the book based on topics she herself had been teaching in the new media classroom for a decade: formalism and conceptual art, collections and communities, crowdsourcing and participation, data visualization, error and noise, surveillance, tactical media and democracy, open source, hacking and remixing, and performance and analog counterparts. Then burrough personally invited media scholars and practitioners to write brief introductory chapters regarding the theoretical aspects of each theme and artists to write case-based chapters to amplify, from both a theoretical and practical standpoint, each of the themes.

The result is a lively and successful interplay that clearly relates theoretical constructs to the actual practice-based act of creating new media projects. Several of the projects described in the cases could be assigned to more than one of the book's ten themes, which illustrates the larger point for readers that boundary spanning is an inherent descriptor of new media works.

Each of the book's ten parts opens with an establishing essay on the theme and its theoretical implications. Two additional case chapters on diverse digital new media projects accompany each essay and bring the theoretical components to life. The case chapters follow a fairly standard format (with slight variations among the artist authors): project summary, project developer background, starting points for the work, technical descriptions, conclusions, and outcomes. According to burrough, the order of the themes and the supporting cases were intentionally structured with the students' technical learning curve in mind; thus readers will find that the technically less complicated projects and themes appear earlier in the text. Pairings of themes and case projects include the following:

- Formalism and conceptual art is explored through the creation of browser color field paintings and of an online video about the YouTube Play button.
- The theme of collections and communities provokes a parody of the online game World of Warcraft that has players trying to guide an assortment of historical and contemporary figures to make sense of the gaming world. Another case explores the San Francisco Garden Registry, which operates as an online platform allowing people to demonstrate for their right to know how their food is sourced.
- The book illustrates crowdsourcing and participation concepts with an online Olympic Games in which anyone can compete in an event and everyone can vote for gold medal winners. The second participation case is the Google Maps Road Trip, which uses map imagery and streaming video technology to create an alternative version of the classic American adventure.
- Data visualization brings Superfund 365 to life with an online platform that makes it possible to learn about hazardous waste sites and to also connect with others for possible action. Another case highlights Pastiche, a dynamic data visualization that maps keywords from blogs about New York neighborhoods to create the city of the mind.
- Error and noise is explored through the Lucscious project, which strips commodification from advertising photos by turning them into visual anagrams of color hues and tones. The book also reviews the use of Tumbarumba, which is a web browser add-on that can insert story fragments into loading web pages.
- Surveillance takes on new meaning via the display of Facebook status updates as the source for video performance art. A second case chapter uses Traceblog as a daily ghost log of online searches.
- The section on tactical media and democracy examines a multipart video project on democratization in Latin America as it relates to U.S. interventionist policies in the region. It also deals with the online game Oligarchy, which critiques the oil industry and our society's dependence on fossil fuel.
- Open-source creativity is explored through the Real Costs, a Firefox web browser plug-in that inserts emissions data into airplane travel e-commerce sites, and Add Art, a Firefox add-on that replaces online advertising with art.
- The theme of hacking and remixing takes flight with Pigeonblog, a project that enabled homing pigeons to fly with air-quality sensors in order to allow users to blog about pollution conditions, then comes back to earth with Joycewalks, a Google Maps project that remaps James Joyce's *Ulysses* to any city in the world.
- Performance and analog counterparts sees the reenactment of Ghandi's Salt March in Second Life via treadmill and the use of Alerting Infrastructure! to demonstrate the concern that physical spaces are losing ground to virtual counterparts.

According to burrough, many observers might classify these projects as net.art works. But burrough chose the title *Net Works* based on her belief that these projects go beyond the scope of art alone and are relevant to students who are interested in a variety of professional communication industries. The ten themes and their twenty corresponding case projects should clearly resonate with both art and communication specialists and should help connect McDonald's creative values with the practical needs of college-level teachers and students.

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