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# Interview: Steve Dietz

Garnet Hertz

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Steve Dietz is the founding Director of New Media Initiatives at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. As one of the ten most visited art centres/museums in the US, the Walker boasts a multidisciplinary approach to its programming, which includes new media, visual arts, film/video, and the largest museum-based performing arts program in the United States.

He has organized and curated new media exhibitions, including "Beyond Interface" (1998), "Digital Documentary" (1998), "Shock of the View: Artists, Audiences, and Museums in the Digital Age" (1998-99), "Sins of Change: Media Arts in Transition, Again" (2000), "Entertainment, Art, Technology" (2000), "Art Entertainment Network" (2000), "The Millennial Museum: MCN Spectra" (2000), "Medi@terra: Open Source Lounge" (2000), and "Telematic Connections: The Virtual Embrace" (2001).<sup>1</sup>

As Director of New Media Initiatives, he is responsible for curating and programming the online Gallery 9,<sup>2</sup> and he initiated one of the earliest collections of net art: the Walker's Digital Arts Study Collection.<sup>3</sup> By archiving and collecting network-oriented art, Dietz is a catalyst for changing the mindset of contemporary arts institutions: to treat net art like any other contemporary art in their collections.





> **GARNET HERTZ:** Tell me about when you first  
> started getting into net art and when you  
> came to the Walker. What brought you there  
> and what specifically attracted you to net art?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** My family decided to move back  
> to Minnesota, which is where we were  
> originally from. I was doing consulting and  
> knocked on the Walker's door. They had a  
> technology line for something and they didn't  
> know what it was. So, I started consulting  
> with the Walker. That turned into the job  
> that I have.

> I came out of art school, and I had worked  
> with artists my whole life. So it was  
> really the combination of being in a  
> contemporary arts institution, working  
> with artists, and being involved with the  
> network: that was the job. The Walker  
> works with contemporary artists, and the  
> network is contemporary artwork.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** What were the initial attributes  
> of the work that brought you specifically  
> to net art?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** I had an interest in the net  
> because of its widespread publishing platform,  
> interactivity, and multiple media, which  
> were all things that I had been working  
> with since college. I don't think there was  
> a specific artwork; it was a combination of  
> seeing places like Ada'web, Stadiumweb,  
> Homework, what Vuk Cosic and jodi<sup>4</sup> were  
> doing—like the 7-11 list<sup>5</sup>—and then getting

> into that more intently with the exhibition  
> "Beyond Interface" where I dove in really  
> deep. That probably solidified things.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** What types of works are you  
> challenged by and interested in?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** I generally try to avoid giving  
> that top ten list; I spend a lot of time  
> curating selections of works that I think  
> are interesting related to a topic, ones  
> that I have commissioned. The works have  
> been in a context that I have provided for  
> over a hundred works and those are all  
> important to me on some level. I do find  
> myself often returning to the work of C5  
> and Mongrel,<sup>6</sup> but I also feel that I define  
> my curatorial role to be polymorphously  
> inquisitive. The moment I feel like there  
> is a correct or best strain of net art is  
> the moment I think I would be failing.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** What do you feel are the  
> primary functions of museums and galleries  
> in the contexts of the network and net art?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** I think in one way there is a  
> simple answer for places like the Walker,  
> which is a contemporary art centre. In our  
> mission statement we claim to be a catalyst  
> for creative expression and the ideas of  
> our time. If that is in our mission, then  
> we have to pay attention to the art that is  
> being made, whether it is performance,  
> film/video, installation, or net art.



> I think the web can extend our function of  
> providing information and promoting an  
> information commons. That said, what inter-  
> ests me is how some of the attitudes and  
> attributes of the network and net art can  
> infect what a museum is and does. That  
> includes being more interactive, more  
> two-way and open.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** Can you expand on your use  
> of the term "information commons"?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** I think the information  
> commons—and I certainly don't claim to be  
> an expert on it—involves two issues at  
> least. One is the metaphorical usage of the  
> idea of a 'commons' where in medieval  
> England there was shared property among the  
> community. That property started to be  
> fenced off and privatised.

> Secondly, in the digital realm, there is a  
> similar kind of privatising of intellectual  
> property through patents, copyrights, and  
> trademarks. As a result of this, people  
> have started using the term "information  
> commons" as a way of connecting with deeply  
> emotional and deeply human notions of  
> what's good for the community as a way of  
> countering the extreme privatisation of  
> intellectual property.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** At the Walker, how do you  
> typically go about commissioning a piece of  
> net art?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** With the emerging artists' grants at the Walker there is generally a broad theme. Most recently, it was specifically related to the network. We do an open call, look at all the responses, and make a selection.

> For other projects, it is like any kind of art commission: there is someone you are interested in and have been talking with for several months or even years, and there is an opportunity in terms of money, time, and context that makes sense for both parties. Then, you draw up an agreement.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** So you're also involved in archiving these pieces. . .

> **STEVE DIETZ:** Right, and archiving at this point primarily means that they remain accessible over the internet.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** Do you define that process as "archiving" pieces of net art, or do you avoid using that term within the context of the network?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** The formal term that we use is "study collection," which is a sort of way of fudging it. I think that archiving is not inappropriate since, with äda'web for example, we started maintaining the access and it was no longer a growing entity. Things weren't being added to it; it was basically a delimited entity, and in that sense we were archiving the bits. The bits remained available in the archive, but I have no illusion that it is the same thing as when Benjamin Weil and Vivian Selbo were running it on a day to day basis.<sup>7</sup>

> **GARNET HERTZ:** What challenges do you see down the road with maintaining those archives, records, or pieces? The responsibility of keeping the archive alive: is it as simple as just moving the work onto a new piece of hardware when the server dies, or is the future of the net art archive more than that?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** I think the challenge is to figure out what it means and how to do it. There is no clear path to that. On the other hand, I think that most contemporary institutions have to archive and collect extremely complex projects: whether it is a huge earthwork or a meat dress. There are many difficult kinds of works that have to be dealt with.

> I actually think that it is one of the things that institutions may be relatively good at. Once you figure out the machinery and the way of doing it, then there is a mechanism to do it. Figuring that out will take effort, and it will take the involvement of artists, professional archivists, technology people, and curators. However, I don't think it is an impossible task.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** What are the specific challenges that you face when the Walker commissions or archives a piece of net art?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** When we took on äda'web, we did a lot of fixing. There were a lot of things the artists hadn't got around to making work just right. So we spent a lot of effort on that. Most of the other projects that are going right now, we are still working on. Down the line, when technology changes, it is something we will have to face. So, we are thinking about how to handle that, but it hasn't really come out at this point.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** What new projects have you been working on over the past year, and what are some new directions that you're looking at?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** The biggest project right now is the new building at the Walker. There is a role in thinking through the information, creation, and delivery systems within the building, as well as dedicating space for new media art. That will be a big issue.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** Tell me more about that process. In what format are you designing the physical space to present new media art?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** We are actually interested in placing the media spaces in relation to the performing art spaces. I think that conceptually this is an interesting conjunction that we didn't plan on; at first, it was going to be another gallery grouped with the visual arts.



> There will be four different kinds of  
> spaces. Firstly, there will be an installation  
> space that is like a black box that artists  
> can do what they want with. Secondly, there  
> will be a room that is screen-based,  
> because I think that this is the intent of  
> lots of artists: to have their work viewed  
> on screens. There will also be a kind of  
> lounge area where we are going to create an  
> environment that is intended to be sociable  
> and will encourage sociable viewing. Finally,  
> there will be a lab for production. We have  
> really broken up the four kinds of things  
> that we want done. The specifics of the  
> furniture, of the walls, coverings, and the  
> floor are being worked out.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** I'm interested in your  
> thoughts on speed in reference to the net  
> work, the view of the web as primarily a  
> proprietor of speed in contrast to a tool  
> for bringing things together in an archive.

> **STEVE DIETZ:** There is a lot of discussion  
> and conflation of technology with speed and  
> spontaneity, with "instant this" and  
> "instant that." That is just one pole: I  
> call this the "Verilio pole,"<sup>8</sup> which is  
> oriented around speed.

> I think what is equally important is the  
> digital system's ability to store information  
> and distribute it asynchronously upon  
> request. As important as the idea of  
> instantness is that something can be saved,  
> slowed down, and archived. Really sort of  
> the [Friedrich A.] Kittler side of the equa-  
> tion. I think it is an impoverished view to  
> identify the network exclusively with speed.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** Specifically within the last  
> year or so, linked to the economic downturn  
> of the whole dotcom era, have you sensed  
> any change in the production of net art, or  
> is it just a continuation of artists taking  
> more time to think about their work?

> **STEVE DIETZ:** I think for a while now there  
> has been a thickening of net artmaking, in  
> that it is not necessarily as rapid, and  
> it's a larger milieu that it has been hap-  
> pening in. Because of this, there may be  
> some greater reticence over publicly sharing  
> small projects. I also think that projects



> that rely on net community input are not  
> automatically visited by everyone without a  
> certain amount of extra effort.  
> Basically, I sense that artists are inter-  
> ested in taking a little more time and  
> thinking through what they want to do and  
> are being a little less public about the  
> process than they might have been four  
> years ago.

> **GARNET HERTZ:** Thinking back to it, it  
> seemed like that was happening in 1998.  
> After [Natalie Bookchin's] "Homework" and  
> [Alexei Shulgin's] "Desktop Is," things  
> seemed to change, to "thicken."

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> **STEVE DIETZ:** Today, I think there is a less  
> heady atmosphere for sure: dotcoms are not



> such a hot thing, and there is some spill  
> over. Altoids Mints, for example, may not  
> be as interested in featuring net art as  
> when the dotcom craze was in full bloom.  
> However, the main thing I have heard is  
> that new media teachers feel like their  
> students aren't trying to decide between  
> making art and making a million bucks. It  
> is easier to make the art decision than it  
> was three years ago.

## Notes

1 "Beyond Interface," 1998, (20 February 2002). <<http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/beyondinterface/>>.  
"Digital Documentary," 1998, (20 February 2002). <<http://www.partsphoto.org/digital-doc/>>.  
"Shock of the View: Artists, Audiences, and Museums in the Digital Age," 1998-99, (20 February 2002). <<http://www.walkerart.org/salons/shockoftheview/>>.  
"Sins of Change: Media Arts in Transition, Again," 2000, (20 February 2002). <<http://www.walkerart.org/salons/sinsofchange/>>.  
"Entertainment, Art, Technology," 2000, (20 February 2002). <<http://www.walkerart.org/salons/eat/>>.  
"Art Entertainment Network," 2000, (20 February 2002). <<http://aen.walkerart.org>>.  
"The Millennial Museum: MCN Spectra," 2000, (20 February 2002). <<http://www.artsconnected.org/millennialmuseum/>>.  
"Medi@terra: Open Source Lounge," 2000, (20 February 2002). <<http://www.mediaterra.org/mediaterra2000/en.cgi?opensource>>.  
"Telematic Connections: The Virtual Embrace," 2001, (20 February 2002). <<http://telematic.walkerart.org>>.



2 Visit Steve Dietz's homepage at <<http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/dietz/>> or Gallery 9 at <<http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/>>.

3 Visit the Digital Arts Study Collection (1998-ongoing) at <<http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/dasc/>>.

4 "ada 'web," February 1995, (20 February 2002). <<http://www.adaweb.com>>.  
"Stadium," 1995, (20 February 2002). <<http://www.stadiumweb.com>>.  
Natalie Bookchin, "Homework," (20 February 2002). <<http://art-slab.ucsd.edu/ART-SLAB/Homework/>>.  
Vuk Cosic's work can be seen at <<http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/>> and <<http://www.google.ca/search?hl=en&q=%22vuk%2Bcosic%22&meta=>>>.  
The work of jodi can be viewed at <<http://jodi.org/>>.

5 In the words of Vuk Cosic, "I call 7-11 a collaborative meta net.art project. It was initiated in Ars Electronica by Heath Bunting, jodi, Alexei Shulgin and myself with the idea to somehow come out of the creative block in the Nettime list. We needed a forum that will be a context and not an audience, as Heath once said." Marta van der Haagen, Interview with Vuk Cosic, Syndicate Newsletters, 7 March 1998, (20 February 2002). <<http://www.v2.nl/mail/v2east/1998/first/0125.html>>.

6 Joel Slayton, C5, (20 February 2002). <[www.c5corp.com](http://www.c5corp.com)>.  
Mongrel, (20 February 2002). <<http://www.mongrelx.org>>.

7 Benjamin Weil began ada'web in the fall of 1994 and released its first online project in May 1995. During the course of the project, ada'web worked with several artists to experiment and reflect on the web as a medium and means of distribution for their work. For more information on the history of ada'web, see <[http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/dasc/adaweb/g9\\_ada\\_weil.html](http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/dasc/adaweb/g9_ada_weil.html)>.

8 Paul Virilio is an urbanist, political theorist and critic of the art of technology. He is the inventor of the term 'dromology' or the logic of speed. For an overview of his thoughts toward speed, information and the Internet, see <[http://www.ctheory.net/text\\_file.asp?pick=72](http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=72)>.

9 Cited above. For details on the emergence of these pieces, see <[http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/beyondinterface/bookchin\\_work.html](http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/beyondinterface/bookchin_work.html)>.