

Art for a new world

Internet-art pioneer Wolfgang Staehle captures our moment

By Bill Jones

Wolfgang Staehle first appeared on the New York scene in the 1980s as a video artist, but he has since become world-renowned as a pioneer of the uncontrollable, loosely defined field of Internet art. For the past decade, Staehle has given his full attention to building the "Thing," the international art world's first dedicated Internet-service provider. So it came as a surprise to many when he recently decided to return to the gallery context for a show at Postmasters in Chelsea.

"The Internet is very valuable as an information source and a way to organize people—a tool for activism. But people at a monitor don't have the kind of reflective mode to really be affected by what they see," Staehle explained three weeks ago, just before the show opened. "Life is short. I needed to stop and take a look around. This show gave me an opportunity to consider the world more carefully."

With this in mind, Staehle used the technical facility of the Thing to produce an exhibition of live webcam images—a diptych of the New York skyline, a single view of the famous television tower in Berlin, a view of a romantic castle in southern Bavaria—to be projected at monumental scale on the gallery's walls. In effect, the webcam technology typically used to offer real-time voyeuristic fantasies is converted to the aims of photography and video art, with a particular emphasis on the global reach of the Internet. "I see it as video, even as photography, since technically these are still images,

updated every few seconds," Staehle says of the new work.

It is often said that art reflects its times and surroundings. This rationale is especially fitting for what has become known as *digital art* or *net.art*, which deals with the same rapid-fire technology as every important cultural-media outlet. But, as Staehle says, alluding to the information overload of mass media, "Spending all my time working on my daily production at the Thing, I began to feel like my brain had been cooked in a microwave. With all this information and all these images available to anyone through the Internet, I just wanted to ask, Where does it go? What does it mean? What is it for?"

On the morning of September 11, Staehle, seeing the attack on the World Trade Center towers from

series of stills, which were constantly being replenished by the live feed once meant only for the gallery. True to his original intention of making a meditative work of art, Staehle offered achingly beautiful images tinged with sublime terror. Staehle's attempt to distance his art from the world of media instead folded back onto the Internet in a way that gave hope and comfort to artists and to the public at large, proving that there would surely be a place for art in the days to come. The results bridge the gap between the real world and the world of art in a way that Staehle himself could not have predicted, and yet these images combine to create an electronic art that is at once disembodied and physical, intangible and solid, because they are attuned to forces far beyond the artist's control.



Wolfgang Staehle, *Untitled*, 2001.

the roof of his building, on Ludlow Street, called the gallery and asked its director, Magdalena Sawon, to turn the piece on. Unlike other people who witnessed the tragic events firsthand or watched them unfold on television, she saw the searing vision of buildings collapsing through the prism of Staehle's art—which was no longer simply a means of contemplation or a reflection of the times, but a mute testament to something terrible as it happened.

In the media-saturated days following the tragedy, countless images were shared over the Internet, by artists known and unknown. And like his fellow "netizens," Staehle began posting a

In this installation, Staehle succeeded in pushing his medium beyond the basics of electronic communication. In light of the events of September 11, the work has become something that's both of the Internet and divorced from it, and finds a level of poignancy that this "un-media," as it was intended to be, has never before achieved.

This is the purpose of art: to cut through the proliferation of pictures with an unwavering vision—a vision that stands apart from yet joins with all the images of its moment.

Wolfgang Staehle's installation remains on view at Postmasters through October 6 (see Chelsea & vicinity).