

The Multi-Cultural Recycler
Realtime World Wide Web Art Project
<http://shoko.calarts.edu/~alex/recycler.html>

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Overview:

There has been a recent proliferation of video cameras on the World Wide Web. These cameras provide documentation, surveillance, and a very specific representation of the camera owners and their surroundings. Ordinary people and places around the world are instantly subject to becoming part of the mass culture - and are potentially also subject to cultural recycling. The Multi-Cultural Recycler, in addition to its tongue-in-cheek attempt at performing cultural recycling on ordinary situations, also examines the meetings and collisions of all of these disembodied representations out in "cyberspace."

When a visitor accesses the Multi-Cultural Recycler, s/he is presented with two options for how to "start" the Recycler:

Option 1) The default version. The Recycler selects two or three camera websites from anywhere in the world at random, and captures the live or latest image from their cameras. The Recycler then performs digital image processing on these images to "recycle" them into a new image - a new object of "Web art." Since the actual process used is also selected at random, each access to the Recycler site produces a unique image.

Option 2) "Make your own Cultural Compost!" If the visitor selects this option, s/he is presented with menus from which s/he can select the source cameras to be recycled. The visitor may also select, in place of a camera, the immediately previous "recycled" image, or one of the recycled images from the Gallery page. Since these previously recycled images were created by other visitors to the site, visitors have the opportunity to perform "cultural recycling" on each other's work.

Whichever camera selection option the visitor chooses, the live or latest images will be captured from their websites, and processed through one of roughly twenty image processes. These image processes vary - some processes combine the images through the use of mattes, others create collages through repetition and superimposition of the images. Some processes result in very abstract collages in which it is difficult to recognize the subjects of the original images, while others leave the original images in a very recognizable form. All of the processes result in

both juxtaposition and merging of the original images, creating a collage which is a document of their relationship as fragments of Web culture, and of their chance meeting in cyberspace.

The Recycler's processes usually complete within fifteen seconds. However, because of the unpredictability of net traffic and server speed at each of the camera sites, Recycle processes can occasionally take longer. Therefore, while the visitor waits for her/his Recycled image to appear, a text message advises him/her that "Cultural Recycling takes a minute or so. Please be patient - it is probably not stuck." This message is in itself a tongue-in-cheek reference to the speed at which actual cultural recycling seems to occur in society.

After recycling, visitors may wish to exhibit their finished artwork in the Multi-Cultural Recycler Gallery. The Gallery is comprised of six "recycled" images posted by visitors to the site. In keeping with the idea of cultural recycling as a virtually immediate occurrence in society, the Gallery site is programmed so that when a visitor posts to it, the Gallery immediately updates to display the new image as an object of art. Each image is displayed along with its creator's name and linked URL (the URL is optional.) In this way, other visitors can link to the image creator's site and learn more about him/her. Thus, the visitors become, like the web camera subjects, part of the "famous" of the web. And therefore, the visitors' work is also subject to "cultural recycling"- as mentioned above, each image placed in the Gallery becomes available to other visitors for recycling. Further, the exhibitors' names appear in the camera selection menu, e.g., "Bob Smith's Gallery Image," in keeping with the idea of creating "instant celebrities" for further cultural recycling.

Visitors can also look in "The Recycling Bin" to see the source images that comprised their "recycled" image. From the Recycling Bin they can link to the images' original websites to learn their actual context.

Historical Overview:

I created the Recycler as a personal art project. I had become interested in the ever-increasing number of cameras on the Web and had begun considering people's motivations for putting cameras on their sites. Though many cameras have commercial or public relations purposes, all of the cameras seem to indicate the owners' desires to reflect a portions of themselves to the world. I began to think about this in relation to ideas such as Andy Warhol's "everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes" and the cultural recycling of those who we collectively deem to have achieved fame of some sort. I decided that the next logical step would be cultural recycling of the "famous" of the Web. I also thought it would be visually and conceptually interesting to juxtapose these disparate images as a collage.

Mission Statement:

The Recycler's purpose is to a) comment on and contribute to Web culture and its relationship to popular culture b) create visually interesting images through chance processes c) create a website in which something happens each time a visitor accesses the site (image captures, while-you-wait image processing), so that each visit is unique and a product of the specific moment at which it was created, d) integrate the idea of the Web's geographic and cultural diversity into a piece of Web-based art.

Technical Development:

The Recycler runs on Silicon Graphics workstations at California Institute of the Arts. A combination of Perl programs and UNIX shell scripts perform camera selection, image downloading, digital processing decisions, management of user input to and from the "Gallery," etc. The image processing of the "recycled" image is done using the "Eddie" compositing program - processes were created using Eddie in its normal interactive mode, then, when the actual images are selected and downloaded, these are input to the Eddie renderer using UNIX command line scripting. The final image is then output by Eddie and downloaded to the visitor's Web browser.

I hope the Recycler will encourage the public and creators of Web-based work to continue to explore the Web's potential for realtime activity and dynamic websites. I also hope that it will encourage other artists to continue to consider ways in which their current work can lead them to ideas for Web-based work.

Credits:

The Recycler was created at California Institute of the Arts, using the facilities of the CalArts School of Music and the CalArts Computer Animation Lab. The credits are as follows:

The Multi-Cultural Recycler was created and programmed by:
Amy Alexander

Imagegrabbing utility (wwwgrab) by:
Jeff Ballard, University of Wisconsin

Technical and Aesthetic Support :
Tom Erbe
Palle Henckel
Steev Hise
Sara Roberts
Michael Scroggins

Previous and upcoming exhibitions:

SIGGRAPH '97 Electric Garden, Los Angeles, August, 1997

Dai Nippon Printing "Award '96" (Internet World Expo), WWW/Japan, December 1996. Winner - \$5000 Achievement Award

Festival Internacional de Video y Artes Electronicas (FIV), Buenos Aires, October 1996. Winner - Best World Wide Web Project

Enclosed are some sample screen grabs from the Recycler.