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@largeBy MATTHEW MIRAPPAUL [ETC](#)**An Attack on the Commercialization of Web Art**

Richard Rinehart thinks he may be next the next victim, and that's all right with him.

Last week, Rinehart sold a copy of his Web-based art work "[An Experience Base -- A Boolean Typhoon](#)" for \$52.50 on the [eBay](#) auction site, making him one of many digital artists exploring the commercial potential of their online efforts. But the sale makes him a likely target for activists who in recent months have been attacking such artists by copying their sites.

Operating under the pseudonym "Luther Blissett," the person or group has already duplicated two digital-art sites, the "Surface" showcase organized by [HELL.com](#) and the [Art.Teleportacia](#) online gallery, and posted the replicas on the Web site [0100101110101101.org](#).

In e-mail messages sent to arts discussion groups online, "Blissett" explained that the actions were based on "the conviction that information must be free" and the hope that the Web would be a no-copyright paradise where digital art would not "regress" by adhering to traditional art-world models of ownership and economics.

"Anyone can spin this any way they want, but in the final analysis, it is just simple theft," said Kenneth Aronson, the founder of [HELL.com](#). "It's a publicity stunt to create awareness for a bunch of people who have no apparent talents."

Luther Blissett was a British soccer player whose name has been appropriated by a number of media pranksters and cultural guerrillas. The [0100101110101101.org](#) site is registered to an address in Bologna, Italy, but a [Luther Blissett Project](#) site is hosted on the server for [Idiosyntactix](#), a Toronto-based arts alliance.

Dmytri Kleiner, an [Idiosyntactix](#) member, said his group supports



From the site of "Luther Blissett," who has been making unauthorized copies of Web art projects.

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Dmytri Klement, an idiosyncratic member, said his group supports the activists and supplies server space for them, but has not been involved in duplicating the sites.

Attempts to contact the activists via e-mail yielded only silly, off-topic replies, even less illuminating than the muddled manifestos that were posted to the arts discussion lists. Still, the copied sites highlight the challenges that digital artists will face in trying to assign a value to their easily reproduced work.

These issues are part of what prompted Rinehart, an artist in Berkeley, Calif., to put "An Experience Base" up for bid on eBay. At the end of the 10-day auction, Robbin Murphy, a New York artist and co-founder of the [artnetweb](#) site, made the top bid of \$52.50 to acquire a clone of the digital original.

Rinehart said: "Is \$52.50 the true value of the work? Well, it doesn't need to be, because I sold a copy of the work to Robbin, not exclusive ownership rights. I sold the only form of property relevant in the 'e-verse:' intellectual property. Maybe digital artists could make up in volume at low prices what they lose in uniqueness at high prices."

A campaign against efforts to make a market for Web art.

But supporters of "Blissett's" tactics maintain that intellectual property is an elusive commodity. Referring to the creators of the HELL.com project, Kleiner said, "I refuse to admit they have any intellectual property. They're just slightly modifying the intellectual property that we all share. In fact, they're threatening to steal it and package it as their own."

HELL.com is a private Web space for creative collaboration by artists, but the "Surface" showcase was opened to invited guests earlier this year as a prelude to its contributors' plans to launch a pay-per-view Web event later this year.

In May, the activists put the contents of "Surface" on 0100101110101101.org, as well as a playfully modified version of the online introduction to the HELL.com site. Calling it "cute," Aronson pointed out to the activists that the site was violating copyrights and asked for the material to be removed. It remains there.

"It's thumbing your nose at the 'digerati' kind of elitism," Kleiner said.

But Rinehart said the activists might be falling prey to their own arguments. He said he disagreed with "their narrow definition of the Internet as being purely a chaotic and idealistic free-for-all."

"Well, some of it is, but other parts are surely not," he said. "The Net and Net art are both big enough to contain many types of practice. I agree that it's important that we protect the 'free' part strongly, but not that we should become equally elitist and obnoxious dogmatists and declare that only one type of art is right."

[Auriea Harvey](#), a New York artist and a "Surface" participant, took a similar stance, but said she was untroubled by the site duplication itself.

"Every time someone looks at anything on the Web, a copy is made" in a browser's cache folder, she said. "I've even seen some masterful remixes of my own work online. Who cares about copying? If you don't want something stolen, don't put it on the Net."

"The problem I had was with this dippy and short-sighted notion that it is somehow wrong or anti-Net to try out new forms of presenting and generating revenue from your work as an artist," Harvey said. "A world where Net art as Luther Blissett wants it to be would be very boring indeed. Out of their chaos comes stagnation."

Harvey herself just bought a digital art work, Olia Lialina's "If You Want To Clean Your Screen," from Art.Teleportacia, the first online gallery where Internet-based art is for sale. Last month, the Blissett activists copied the site's files, altered them somewhat and reposted an "anti-copyright" version on 0100101110101101.org. Lialina, who operates the site, said she liked the copy so much that she included a link to it in the "Under Construction" section of the gallery.



[Internet links of interest to arts@large readers](#)

This is not the first time that an art site has been copied to make a point. In 1997, the Slovenian artist Vuk Cosic captured the contents of the Web site for the [Documenta](#) art exhibition, held every five years in Germany. That show's official site was taken down, but a facsimile survives on [Cosic's](#) site. Although Cosic remains mum on his reasons for copying it, creating a permanent online presence for a temporary real-world event has some artistic merit.

For his part, Rinehart now figures he is tempting fate. Even before he was aware of the "Blissett's" endeavors, he included a "Copyright" section in his piece. In it, he urges visitors to "steal this Web site" and gives examples of the flexible interplay between copyright and creativity in the art world.

Would it bother him if the work became part of the collection at 0100101110101101.org?

"I wouldn't care that much, although I may take a little wind out of their sails with some of the examples," Rinehart said. "I think their experiment is also worthy, purely by way of exploring new options. More power to them. But it leaves me a little less interested than some other art activities I've seen."

Rinehart noted that there may be a side benefit if his work reappears there. "Perhaps getting hacked onto their site will become a form of honor among digital artists, maybe even raising the price of their original works."

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