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The New New-Media Blitz

BY CARLY BERWICK   April 1, 2001

Natalie Bookchin, California Institute of the Arts professor, artist, and former member of the Net-art collective RTmark (pronounced ART-mark), developed a seminal piece through a coincidental collaboration with students and colleagues online. *Homework*(1997) was her course's required final exam, posted online. Bookchin's assignment required her students to do three things: "Build a site which uses outside links as an integral part," "construct a faux documentary or appropriate an official interface," and "build a site which is new media specific," such as one that would "give the illusion of choice." Then, she says, "Heath Bunting found and posted my assignment to an online list," which happened to include some of the most influential early Net artists—jodi.org, Alexei Shulgin, Vuk Cosic. "These artists saw it not as an assignment but a definition of Net art at the time. So they asked if they could do it, and if I could grade them." That experience solidified her perception that "the work in the end is about what action is created."

In another "classroom" piece, students put up for auction on eBay a university gallery space, where the buyer could hold a temporary exhibition. The students composed a press release in which they "tried to imagine what the most extreme thing that could happen would be," explains Bookchin. The release fabricated the claim that the North Koreans were bidding on the space and that, since that would constitute an instance of prohibited free trade with that country, the auctioners were discussing with then secretary of state Madeleine Albright the possibility of her sanctioning the sale. News services picked up the story, treating the release as if it were true. In the end a group called Fluxus Midwest tendered the winning bid of $565.55 and staged a real show in December 1999, featuring Shulgin as a special guest. For Bookchin, RTmark, and other conceptual artists working online, art is literally action—making things happen, one way or the other.