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Art Made at the Speed of the Internet: Don't Say 'Geek'; Say 'Collaborator'

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When Robert Rauschenberg and a buttoned-down Bell Labs engineer named Billy Kluver began thinking, in the mid-1960s, about ways that people from the world of technology could help artists make art, Mr. Kluver surveyed the mighty gulf between the two groups and almost thought better of the idea. "I was scared," he said once in an interview. "The amazing thing was that it's possible for artists and scientists to talk together at all."

Nearly half a century after that influential experiment, one in the same spirit, though crazily compressed into a single day, was taking place on Friday in a chilly loft office on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. An artist and a technical whiz sat together at a long table, their faces made silvery by the glow from their laptops — the only tools they had brought, besides their digital cameras. Anyone unfamiliar with the pair — Evan Roth, a kind of Web-centric graffiti artist, and Matt Mullenweg, a creator of the popular blogging platform WordPress — would have had to listen a long time to figure out which one came from which world. They free-associated at Web speed, their conversation sprinkled with things like hex values, detection algorithms and executable code.

"Let's try to stay away from the Web-nerdy stuff," Mr. Mullenweg, 26, warned, as Mr. Roth, 32, trolling for help on Twitter, was compiling video clips for the work of art they had conceived that morning.

The two were part of Seven on Seven, a project conceived by Rhizome, the new-media art organization in New York, to match seven artists with seven "technologists," a Google engineer and an early Facebook developer among them. The pairs were given a reality-show-era deadline of 24 hours in which to sit together in rooms across Manhattan and come up with creations to present on Saturday to an audience at the New Museum, where Rhizome is based.

Whether the brainchildren of these collaborations ended up feeling more like apps or like art was up to the teams, and the distinction didn't seem to matter to artists nearly as much as it might have even 14 years ago, when Rhizome was founded to explore the emerging field of Web-based art, said Lauren Cornell, the organization's executive director.

But Ms. Cornell, who created the team-up project along with some of her tech-world board members and supporters, added that even now, after decades of increasing overlap between art and technology, the idea remained daunting to many of the artists and Web people she approached. "This was something we went into with the knowledge that it was an experiment and that it could end up being a failure," she said. "A lot of people I called to see if they were interested, people I know — friends of mine — didn't even get back to me."

More than 150 people turned out for the New Museum presentation, some paying as much as $350 for tickets. With a couple of exceptions what they saw were not objects but ideas — some funny and entertaining, some deadly serious — situated at the fertile nexus where social networking and the Web's data-gathering power is providing artists and scientists with immense piles of raw material about society

and psychology.

Joshua Schachter, a software engineer at Google, and Monica Narula, an artist from New Delhi, came up with a rough plan to convert private guilt into charitable giving, allowing Internet users collectively to assign dollar values to various misdeeds so that guilt might be assuaged through donations. (On Friday the team paid Web users small amounts to help come up with categories of misbehavior and attendant fines. They arrived at $47 for forgetting one's mother's birthday, for example, and $20 for "being mad at my spouse because of a dream.")

The artist Ryan Trecartin and David Karp, a creator of the short-form blogging platform Tumblr, came up with a streaming video site that feels like plugging YouTube directly into the cerebral cortex. The artist Kristin Lucas and Andrew Kortina, who builds social Web applications, proposed a way for people to exchange identities — in essence, to take a break from themselves — via Twitter. Ayah Bdeir, an engineer and designer, and Tauba Auerbach, her artist collaborator, made a randomly moving moiré-pattern sculpture designed to freeze when a viewer enters the room, leaving its actions when unwatched a mystery.

Jeff Hammerbacher, a former Facebook engineer, and Aaron Koblin, an artist specializing in data visualization, theorized about Wiki ways to improve the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. And Hilary Mason, a computer scientist, and Marc André Robinson, a sculptor, both intrigued by trying to change the culture of disposable goods in the United States, took on the "cheap umbrella issue" in New York. They created a prototype for an umbrella-sharing service in which the umbrellas would record their own histories, using embedded cameras and GPS.

Mr. Roth and Mr. Mullenweg, who like the other teams were not allowed to confer before meeting — they had a brief Skype chat only to say hello — arrived Friday morning at the offices of Kickstarter, a Web fund-raising service, which had loaned its spare, tin-ceilinged back room as a workspace. Both men knew they had a resource that most artists throughout history could only envy: a potential audience of 12 million people, the number who use WordPress to create blogs, which Mr. Mullenweg could tap into as easily as tapping his keyboard.

Their idea, one that might seem a little esoteric to the nonblogging populace but that drew a hearty round of applause when introduced on Saturday, was to create a new function on WordPress called "Surprise Me. (Funmode)," so that when a blogger hits the publish button — an act that Mr. Roth described as a moment of great existential loneliness, "like sending the bottle out to sea" — a random congratulatory video suddenly fills the screen. (The example they showed on a large screen was a heartwarming slow-clap locker-room clip from the movie "Hoosiers." Mr. Mullenweg and Mr. Roth also collected feel-good video from "The Price Is Right," "American Idol" and the Beijing Olympics.)

They described their creation as an "emotional plug-in," a virtual artwork to celebrate the "sacred act of publishing," which the Web has transformed as fundamentally as Gutenberg did and which is, in turn, transforming society. After some highly anti-climactic code programming by Mr. Mullenweg and a lot of cackling by Mr. Roth, who sat with his earphones in, compiling clips — "there's way too much happiness on the Web," he said at one point — the two finished their project at 3:30 Saturday morning and introduced it on WordPress, announcing its existence by blog, mostly to users in Europe and on the Indian subcontinent, who were awake.

By Sunday afternoon New York time, more than 11,000 people had decided to turn on the "surprise me" feature and experience some randomized positive-reinforcement art, a response that heartened its creators. Though Mr. Mullenweg, in perhaps his first professional encounter with art critics, noted worriedly that 563 of those people had already decided to turn the art off.

"The opt-out rate," he said, recasting the age-old language of creative rejection in the precise words of the technologist, "is higher than I would like."