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Art Museum Abandons Its Real-World Space

The [Alternative Museum](#) had no alternative. After 25 years of showing art in its downtown-Manhattan galleries, the museum has relocated to cyberspace.

On June 2, the Alternative Museum launched its site on the Web, where it will display Internet-based interactive art works and reproductions of digitally created images, as well as "virtually curated" exhibits with screen-sized versions of paintings and other works made in more traditional media. The museum closed its most recent home, a 4,000-square-foot gallery space on Broadway in SoHo, in January and has no plans to reopen in a real-world location.



alternativemuseum.org

The Alternative Museum now exists only in cyberspace.

"We have been freed from the bondage of the physical object in the physical space," said Geno Rodriguez, the Alternative Museum's founding director, in a telephone interview Tuesday.

By "deinstitutionalizing," as the practice of abandoning a physical space for a virtual one has come to be known in the culture world, the museum has also been liberated from the kind of expenses that can drain a cultural organization's bank account. For the nonprofit Alternative Museum, these included exhibition-related costs like art installation and removal, crating, shipping, storage and insurance, plus rent that at times soared near \$100,000 a year.

But Rodriguez, who turned 60 last week, maintains that economic factors were not the main motivation for the move to the Internet. Noting that museum sites are rarely more than virtual advertisements for real-world objects, he said: "Our primary reason for changing was the excitement of doing something that wasn't being done. I feel like I'm back to being 35, which is when I started."

The Alternative Museum was founded in 1975 to present socially and politically charged work, often by minority artists who could not find other outlets. Today, there are many more options for presenting such work.

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"By 1990, people were asking, 'What's the difference between you guys and the New Museum or [Exit Art](#)?' " Rodriguez said, referring to two progressively minded art spaces in New York. "We realized that we'd done our job well enough that the new generation didn't see any difference. So we started thinking in terms of change."

The Alternative Museum began to focus on more technologically oriented shows, including "The Luminous Image" in 1996, an exhibit of illuminated photographs for which the catalog was produced solely on CD-ROM. Rodriguez and his colleagues also started to consider expanding into cyberspace, a choice eventually mandated by the museum's financial situation.

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"It was so hard to make ends meet," Rodriguez acknowledged. "We'd always been an underdog and underfunded. We accepted that as a compliment, because it meant we were doing things that were not pleasing everybody. But it got really bad in the last four years, and we said there's no point in trying to develop an electronic museum *and* to run this place."

Rodriguez said he has always been more interested in the discourse about art works than the objects themselves. The museum has no permanent collection, having given away the few pieces it had acquired. To stimulate dialogue with virtual visitors, each exhibit on the Web site will be linked to a feedback form.

The opening exhibits on the Alternative Museum site include a Web-based version of Virgil Wong's "GenoChoice," which allows viewers to construct a genetically healthy child, and "Between the Real and the Unreal," a collection of Simen Johan's photos of children and teens that have been digitally altered in disturbing ways.

The museum will soon award four virtual residencies to digital artists whose work will be shown on the site, and Rodriguez is assembling a team of international curators to develop exhibits. He also hopes to exploit the Web's multimedia capabilities by adding an area devoted to world music, and to present timely works in response to news events.

Funding remains an issue, especially with older patrons and foundation executives who "believe art is something you nail on the wall or put on a pedestal," Rodriguez said.

Operating from the Web can also be just as costly as running a real-world location, said Martha Wilson, founding director of the pioneering [Franklin Furnace](#) performance-art venue.

Wilson sold her organization's TriBeCa loft space and relocated to the Web in 1998. She now uses the Internet for regular cybercasts of performance-art events. She said her annual budget remains close to what it was two years ago, and that funding has not been more of a concern than usual. "The same five foundations will pick up the phone and talk to me," she said.

Indeed, like Rodriguez, she said finances were not the determining factor in her decision to abandon a physical location.

"I had this sense," she said, "that the old model of alternative space was going to dry up and blow away like a leaf and not make a dent on culture. In order to continue to be an effective in-your-face arts organization and also have an impact on the future of cultural discourse, I needed to transform."

She continued: "The key would be to reach audiences who don't know very much at all about contemporary art issues, and I think we are successfully doing that."

Wilson said site traffic was "many times higher" than her 75-seat theater would have allowed, and that she is reaching an international audience. "I don't know how long people spend or what kind of quality experience they are having," she said, "but we're proud of our numbers."

Rodriguez conceded that the Alternative Museum would lose some of its traditional constituency in its shift from SoHo to the Web. But having watched too many visitors speed through the real-world gallery, he is now wondering how he can create an involving online experience, especially one that will attract young arts enthusiasts.

Of course, not all avant-garde arts presenters are abandoning the real world.

Jeanette Ingberman, a founder of Exit Art, said the gallery was developing some Internet-art initiatives but had no plans to give up its physical presence. She cited the "magical" experience that viewers can have when they are face to face with an actual art object.

"Exit Art is very much about the public and the art," Ingberman said. "Everyone who comes in here has access to me. Our interaction with the public is critical to us."

In his new online home, Rodriguez will have one advantage over Exit Art and other real-world galleries: virtually unlimited space, exceeding even the vast expanses of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"In months, we'll have more than 40 exhibitions up, because I don't have to take them down," he said. "We'll be as big as the Met -- except this won't have a coffee shop."

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