

By MATTHEW MIRAPPAUL

This is a tale about what it means to be a museum in the age of cyberspace. The Tigertail Virtual Museum is a Web site containing 5,000 famous works of art that Robert Uzgalis, the museum's director, has "virtually restored." The works now look as he imagines they did at the time of their creation. Using software to alter images he has pulled from the Internet, Mr. Uzgalis intensifies colors on faded paintings and replaces body parts on chipped statues. He has even straightened the Leaning Tower of Pisa. "Some of the restorations are outrageous," he admitted.

But just because Mr. Uzgalis, a retired computer-science professor at U.C.L.A., calls his Web site a museum does not mean it is one, at least not according to the broad official definition of the International Council of Museums. This could be a problem if Mr. Uzgalis decides to acquire another online address, one with the word "museum" as its suffix. Since 1998 anyone looking for Tigertail could find it at tigtail.org. The .org suffix indicated the nonprofit status of his arts-education organization.

On June 30, though, the world's cultural institutions were allowed to start submitting requests for Web addresses using the soon-to-be-available .museum suffix. Mr. Uzgalis must consider whether to apply for tigtail.museum, if only to prevent another site from snaring it.

But even if he does apply, the request could be denied if his site does not fit the council's definition of a museum, which includes prerequisites like being a permanent institution in the service of society and acquiring and conserving evidence of people and their environment.

The issues have been unleashed by plans to reserve a corner of cyberspace exclusively for those who meet the council's definition of a museum. Sites that apply for the privilege and are granted entry into the club will be identifiable by the .museum appended to their Web addresses.

Of course anyone who wants to call a site a museum or plop the word in the middle of a Web address may still do so. But only those with a .museum at the end will have received a sort of Good Webkeeping Seal of Approval, one that most traditional museums will probably be eager to display.

So Is It or Isn't It a Museum? Only the Web Suffix Knows

This is a much-needed development, said Cary Karp, president of the Museum Domain Management Association, a nonprofit organization set up by the museum council and the J. Paul Getty Trust to administer the allocation of the .museum suffix.

As it stands, an Internet site that designates itself as a museum could as easily be a dealer in illegal cultural artifacts or a passionate hobbyist as a venerable institution. Online visitors, Mr. Karp said, "cannot recognize a scurrilous impostor as opposed to a bona fide museum. What .museum does is provide a seal of validation." That stamp will be bestowed by MuseDoma (as the association is called), using the council definition as a guide.

But the advent of .museum imposes a class system on what has been a successful Web democracy, said Jon Ippolito, a digital artist and new-media curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, who cautiously noted that he was not speaking for his institution.

Mr. Ippolito argues that the wide-open nature of the Internet accounts for its vitality. In the Web's early days innovative artists and curators established cultural spaces online, not the traditional museums that in most cases are still playing catch-up.

"The tearing down of the ivory tower was a characteristic that attracted a lot of people to cyberspace in the first place," Mr. Ippolito said. "A lot of artists would be diminished by roping off a patch of cyberspace and saying this is where you find art."

In practical terms Mr. Ippolito is concerned that someone looking for online culture will assume that .museum sites are the only valid place to find it. He is less concerned about quirky endeavors like Mr. Uzgalis's site being overlooked than invaluable repositories of Internet culture being missed. He cites, for instance, the archive of the sociocultural electronic mailing list of nettime.org or Olia Lialina's "Last Real Net Art Museum," a site in which the digital artist documents various versions of an online artwork.

Mr. Karp is sensitive to these issues but vows that .museum will be as unrestricted as a restricted domain can be. Although the council's definition of a museum will be used as the basis for assigning the Web addresses, he said, "we do not want anybody to feel unjustly on the outside. There is a notion of museum essentiality that is by no means beyond debate."

For Mr. Ippolito, though, the definition of what constitutes a museum is less significant than that an attempt is being made to define an online museum.

Maxwell L. Anderson, director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, agrees. "Who will define what a museum is?" he asked. "The taxonomy of the Web is not best arrived at through subjective rulings on which bricks-and-mortar entity is the most deserving."

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Mr. Karp, a 54-year-old native of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, who also serves as director of Internet strategy at the Swedish Museum of Natural History in Stockholm, is not to be envied. He must contend with outspoken critics like Mr. Ippolito yet satisfy the large, demanding museum bureaucracies as he tests a new system.

Mr. Karp stressed that .museum was still very much in the works. MuseDoma is accepting preliminary requests to reserve specific names within .museum, in part so Mr. Karp can see where problems arise before he starts granting addresses. He has received about 1,500 applications.

For instance, the Smithsonian Institution, www.si.edu, has requested smithsonian.museum, momentarily sparing Mr. Karp from decreeing which institution, if any, with a S.I. acronym will become si.museum.

His goal is to make the addresses as precise as possible, and that can cause conflict. There are, for instance, dozens of modern-art museums, so the Museum of Modern Art, now at moma.org, might have to become, say, modern.art.ny.museum rather than moma.museum or modern.museum. One also wonders if the Metropolitan Museum of Art's metmuseum.org will mutate into metmuseum.museum, about as redundant as "Please R.S.V.P."

Although many museums will welcome the official designation, they do not expect to abandon their existing Web addresses. The Modern, for example, has invested a fair amount of energy in its moma.org online brand and will continue to do so. For others it is a philosophical issue. Mr. Anderson said his museum would redirect its .museum traffic to its current whitney.org pages. "Unfashionable though it may be, I like the not-for-profit sanctity of a .org domain name," he said.

The primary question remains: Which sites will meet the definition of an official museum? And that definition continues to change. On Friday the council's general assembly voted to amend the meaning of museum to include institutions with "intangible" assets. Museums that depend on the Internet for their existence, either because they collect digital art or exist solely online, are eligible to join the .museum party.

Does that mean that the Tigertail Virtual Museum could become tigertail.museum? A leopard cannot change its spots, but it remains to be seen if a Tigertail can alter its address.

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