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Internet column - July 1998

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Just Schimmelpenninck

The World Wide Web is simply the most important tool for the individual. Ever. Period.

Auriea Harvey

The internet is the ideal medium for an individualized society. No better way exists to approach people as individuals. And this is something that commercial providers on the internet are thoroughly aware of.

The consumer, tucked away in the privacy of his own home, can best be reached by giving him the feeling that he is the company's only client. For example, anyone who has placed an order with **Amazon** (the world's largest internet bookshop) even if only once, will be addressed by his forename on each subsequent visit. And the offers of the day are adjusted to suit each client's personal taste.

There is a great need to be addressed as an individual amongst people in the West. It is precisely when people feel themselves living in a stressed society that they are glad to feel important and in control of things. Despite the fact that it is quicker to phone the telephone company's information service to find a telephone number, many people prefer to look up the number for themselves on an **internet site**. The door-to-door public transport information obtainable by telephone in The Netherlands on 0900-9292 is now available **on the internet too**, and obviously it is much more fun to see the travel information appear on the screen for oneself than to hear it from some anonymous voice over the phone. And of course no one can resist the temptation to go on to plot the most complicated journey in the Netherlands. In this way a serious service can at the same time have considerable amusement value. That the internet can sometimes give the user a sense of power is beautifully illustrated by the installation **In Conversation** by **Susan Alexis Collins**, which was to be seen in June during the event 'Avatar. Of postmodern times and multiple identities', in the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam. A video projection of a mouth was on show in one of the small chapels. From time to time the mouth said

something in a synthetic voice. The mouth was controlled by internet users who saw and heard people in Amsterdam standing and looking at the moving mouth via a live video link. When they typed in a sentence on their keyboard the same sentence was spoken by the mouth, unfortunately much delayed. In this way rudimentary conversations could be held which to be sure were rather dull for the visitor in Amsterdam because of the long waiting time but were something of a sensation for the lonely soul in front of the screen.

The fact that the web-surfer was only represented by a projection of an elegant female mouth and the visitor to the exhibition had nothing to hide behind, made the installation more than a 'normal' internet environment, because in it everyone matched themselves against a virtual personality, an 'avatar'. It was this inequality that made In Conversation interesting: the interface-face relationship. It was precisely this direct communication between virtual space and existing space that created the great tension which could be felt particularly by those seated at the computer. The controller of the mouth asked for the door of the chapel to be closed, and it was done. Or the person in Amsterdam started a discussion on whether this was necessary. The visitors to the exhibition were naturally suspicious and asked questions intended to prove that the mouth was controlled by somebody responding at once. A Turing test in miniature.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the delay in the exchange of sentences, this installation was about one-to-one communication. It encouraged the participants to think about the nature of human contact.

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