

COMING SOON: EBAY PAYPAL BLOGS THE INTERNET

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In the late '90s, you couldn't find a motlier crew than the typical group of students who hung out in collegiate computer labs. Consider the computer science lab at my school: a long corridor lined with LINUX workstations with bulky, beige CRTs, filled most days with computer science students deep inside what could best be described as an IRL social network. Trenchcoats, *Lord of the Rings*, and Mountain Dew dominated the scene. To put it more bluntly, these were *< i>not</i>* the cool kids. There was, though, another computer lab on the other side of campus filled with—incredibly!—an even more socially malformed group of lesser-known nerds. The computer lab to which I am referring was known then simply as “the media lab.” It was the computer lab dedicated to (what we would refer to today as) the “creative industries”—web, print, user interface, 3-D, and interactive design.

It wasn’t exactly clear yet that computers would soon revolutionize the economic and communications landscape, and accordingly, the media lab had an understated campus presence. Unlike the computer science lab, which at least had a window, the media lab was a former storeroom in the back basement of the library with a notably low ceiling, due to a floor that had been raised to accommodate computer cables for the room’s four Macintosh Power PC towers. It was always terribly hot.

Though both rooms had scores of computers running software with roughly the same capabilities, the media lab differentiated itself from the computer science lab by the presence of a certain machine—a CD-ROM burner. This external device, when hooked up to one of the Macintosh towers could—seemingly like magic!—turn a blank CD-ROM into an audio CD. And while it may seem insignificant now, at the time this represented a giant leap forward. The ability to manufacture and distribute media in professional standards was still largely the

domain of top-down publishers—even an indie record required an indie record label. Therefore, to be able to burn a CD and play it on one's own stereo was still an unspeakable thrill. If today you could call up CBS and have them broadcast your home movies after Letterman, you might get some idea of the excitement felt by those in the lab as a result of having access to such a machine. This shift from professional to amateur would eventually migrate online and be known as web 2.0.

Basically, if you were interested in computers, but not able (or willing) to code bubble sorts and recursive arrays all day, chances were you were probably playing around on multimedia machines like the CD-ROM burner. There were only a handful of students who fit this description in the late '90s. And unlike the computer science students—who all shared an interest in programming—this group had nothing much in common. It was an assortment of various square pegs: cyberpunks, gravers (gothic ravers), virtual hoarders, and net freaks.

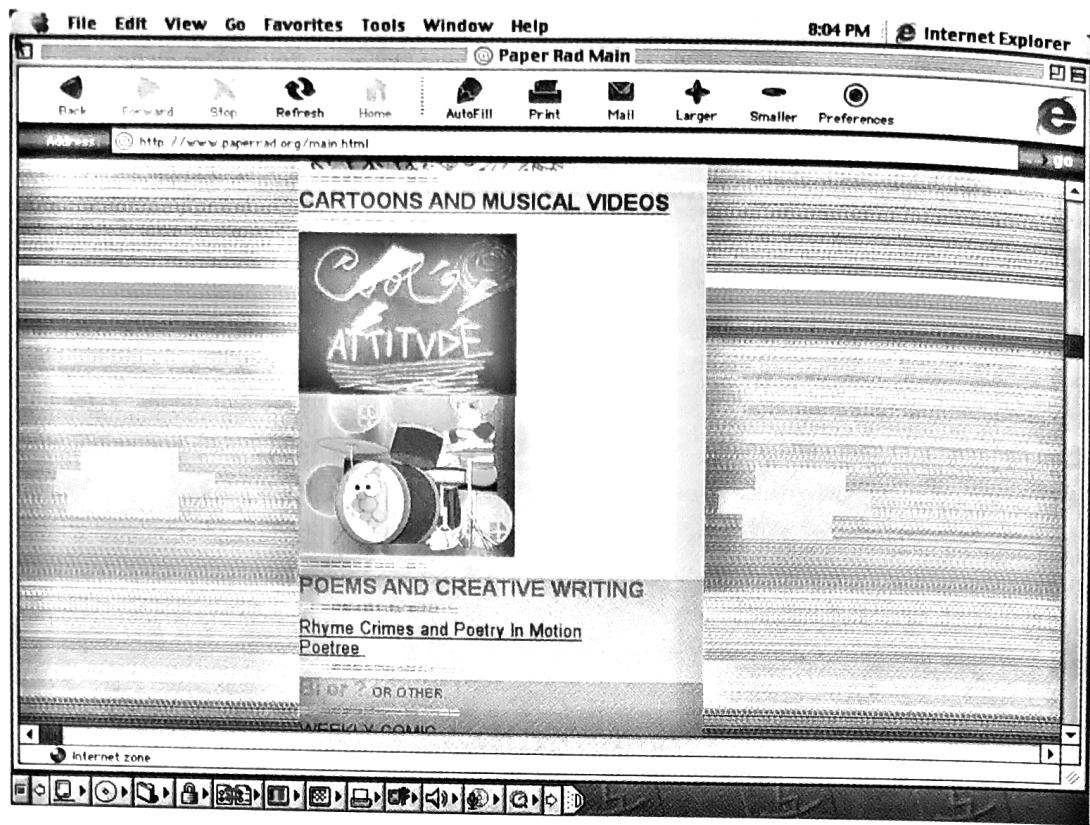
In a recent interview, Seth Price astutely describes the shifts in the culture around computers and new media: “‘Media art’ felt so geeky. I remember artists I knew in college who ran away from computers, never got a cell phone, listened to music only on vinyl. That was what it meant to be an artist, not toying around with your computer. That’s all changed now...back then there was a stigma attached to new media.”¹ There was, though, one art student who hung out in the media lab. This was surprising and rare. The media lab’s lone art student was a curious combination of backpack hip-hopper, Chapel Hill–indie rock polymath, and Anglefire.com enthusiast, who dressed head-to-toe in matching primary colors. His name was Jacob Ciocci, and in just a few years he would be a founding member of the art group Paper Rad—a group whose work would bridge the divide between the stifling geek-filled media labs of the '90s and the IRL “digital casual” of today’s world.

Active roughly from 2000 to 2008, Paper Rad’s primary members were Jacob, his sister Jessica Ciocci, and their friend Ben Jones (though depending on the project and year, other collaborators came in and out of the mix). The works they created were variously attributed to Paper Rad, to the individual members, or sometimes to both. In this way, the Paper Rad name was used similarly to the way a group of musicians use their band name as a collective umbrella under which charismatic individual players can operate. The group’s output was extremely diverse in both its medium and distribution. They culled found images and produced and published inspirational cards, videos, installations, performances, comics, and zines, all of which could be bought, traded for, or seen in galleries, bookshops, suburban garage parties, museums, and big box chain stores, as well as on TV and the internet.

Paper Rad's refusal to distinguish between hierarchies of distribution eventually led them to infiltrate nearly every level of popular culture. Bands and musical acts featuring members of Paper Rad (Extreme Animals, Dr. Doo, Doo Man Group, DJ Jazzy Jess, and Natural Rephlex) toured the country on the underground noise circuit, and their video work ended up screening at MoMA, on VH1, and even behind M.I.A. in concert. Once, even, in the mid-'00s, late and unprepared (as usual) to a class I was teaching at Parsons, I was able to duck into the Virgin Megastore around the corner from the school and buy their *Trash Talking* DVD to screen to my class. This wider diffusion of their works ensured that, to a certain generation of culture-forward youth, the group figured as a formative influence. Just *< i>last month</i>* I had two unrelated studio visits on the same day, and both of my visitors randomly mentioned they were into Paper Rad "in high school." Ultimately though, because the fine art industry—the dominant mechanism for the archiving of creative culture—has a limited amount of patience for practices that color outside the lines of its own dialogue, Paper Rad's dispersion led to their work slipping out of the art historical discussion.

The nexus of Paper Rad's activities and mass-culture interventions—their "home," literally and metaphorically—was definitely their website: paperrad.org. But before I talk about paperrad.org, it's important to briefly consider what exactly *< i>is</i>* a website. Dragan Espenschied's observation that "everything inside a computer is a performance"² comes in handy here. Though Espenschied points specifically to the physical artifact that is the computer, the sentiment can be applied to the networked dynamics of the internet. A website consists of code that is transmitted across the globe through a dizzying array of gizmos—fiber optic cables, routers, and ethernet switches—and then rendered in real-time on a screen by a web browser running on an OS. It's complicated business! In this way, browsing a website is not unlike seeing a performance. I don't mean naked-people-in-a-gallery performance with a capital "P"; I mean something that happens in real time, at a specific time and location.

And since technology changes at such a rapid pace, it's actually very difficult to recreate these performances after a few years. Just to give you one of many examples, monitors are much higher resolution now than fifteen years ago, and this means they show pixels that are much smaller (so they can show a lot more). Therefore, if I were to see a copy of a website from 2000 on my laptop today, it would display nearly half the size that it displayed originally. What a world it would be if fifteen years after Koons made *Balloon Dog*, the sculpture shrunk to half its original size? SMH. Disconnects like these make internet art so difficult to consider historically, because you really did "have to be there." And for me, being "there" was seeing paperrad.org for the first time in 2001 on my shitty



Paper Rad with Andrew MK Warren, PaperRad homepage, historically accurate screen capture created using the digital archival technology bwFLA: Emulation as a Service, University of Freiburg. Courtesy Dragan Espenschied and Cory Arcangel

computer at work one day after clicking the URL Jacob casually emailed me. As discussed above, Paper Rad the group went on to many more triumphs over the next decade, but at that moment I saw—to paraphrase(ish) Jon Landau's famous quote about seeing Springsteen for the first time—the “internet's future.”

What rendered in my browser, on my 800 by 600 pixel monitor, was a long vertical webpage. At the top were oversized blue, white, and pink pixels arranged abstractly, creating what looked like a crashed Nintendo cartridge. Below this arrangement was a scanned drawing consisting of cartoon characters, peace signs, and colored lines in the style of a high-school-stoner notebook or a third-grade drawing contest. Below this was a kind of portfolio-style menu featuring links to other parts of the site, although it was difficult to make any sense of it, as the links had labels like “The Perfect Tan,” “Gumby: the C.P.U is G.O.D.,” and “K-A BBQ.” At the very bottom of the page, in what was perhaps the site's most confounding gesture, there was a link labeled “Main Site Index.” When clicked, it brought me to—confusingly—a totally *< i>other</i>* homepage that had a completely different design, though many of the same links as the first... but also a few more. *< i>What site had two main homepages?</i>* When I finally did navigate through this maze and found the FAQ—a common feature of sites of the day—it was less than helpful: “faq what? paper rad is a company non profit formed by members of paper radio, paper rodeo, and radical nation. we are making books and plan to make more things. like movies rock concerts and plays and audio stories. where? we might be moving so hold on?” At the end of this FAQ was a link back to the first homepage, not the homepage from which the FAQ was linked. This was a site like none I had never seen before. It was chaos. It looked like someone at JODI had handed the reins over to a fan fiction-obsessed preteen Geocities HTML coder.

The hints of JODI in Paper Rad were not surprising. As Olia Lialina maps out in her “Net Art Generations” online notes, the second generation of internet artists “studied jodi at university.”³ The second generation were “artists who were trained to pay attention to the Internet, understand the concept of media specificity, who see their work in relation to projects previously created.”⁴ JODI projects were—for a brief time in the '90s—something of an art meme. Links to their projects spread far and wide, and were even something Jacob and I ended up gawking over at the previously mentioned media lab. We browsed their projects carefully, and with a bit of trepidation, as it was rumored at the time that JODI was a group of East European hackers whose webpages would destroy computers. LOL.

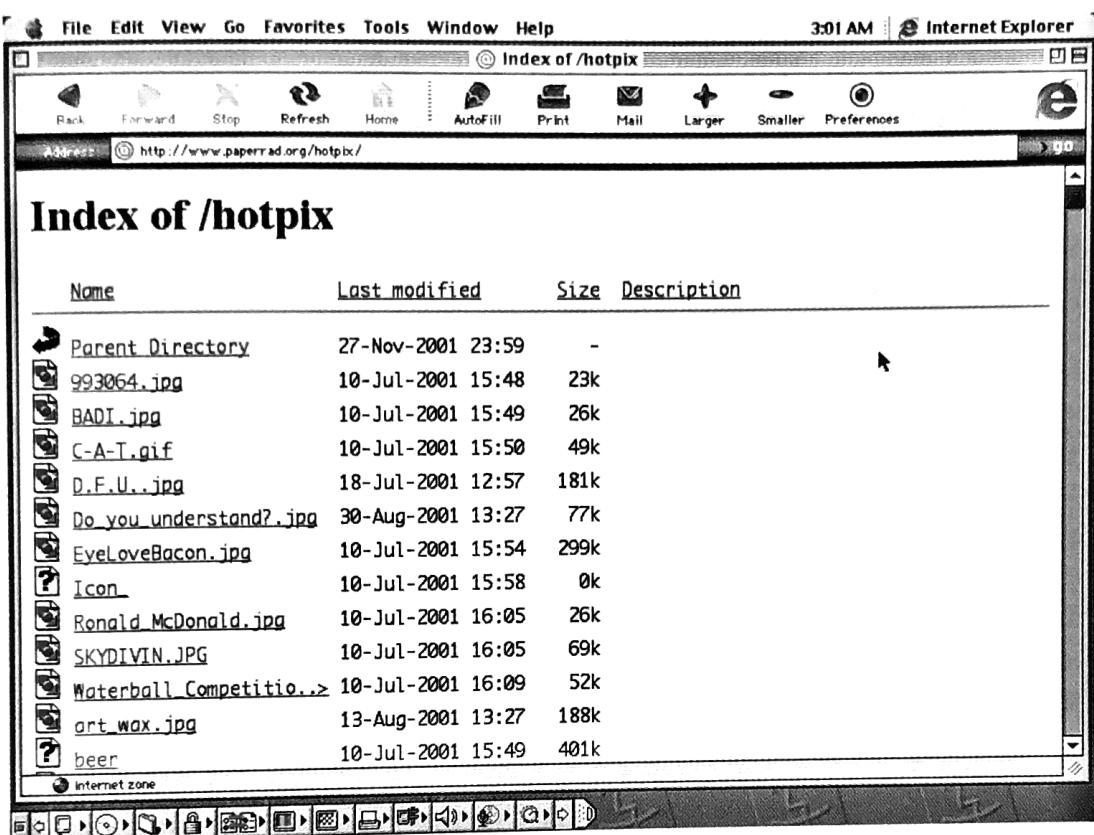
What distinguished Paper Rad's website from the work of this earlier generation, though, was an appreciation and use of “my kid could do that” elements of digital vernacular expression, and a use of the language of pop culture in their

work. Their site was littered with default Photoshop elements, low-res digital doodles, vernacular “Welcome To My Homepage”-era HTML design, as well as references to pop culture imagery like Gumby, hot-rodded vans, Pink Floyd, and video games. After the incredible (though relatively dry) structural browser and coding experiments of the late '90s, this use of both pop and amateur digital vernacular sources was lid-blowing, and ultimately made it possible for Paper Rad's work to have its own reach in the popular sphere. There was also—in a link near the bottom of their homepage labeled Hot Pix—a crystal ball-like early experiment in public image sharing.

The “Hot Pix” link led to an open directory filled with images located at paperrad.org/hotpix. An open directory refers to a folder on a server that has no HTML file or style sheet associated with it, in which case the server software generates a file listing in a default template. While not exactly common in the late '90s and early years of the twenty-first century, open directories were spotted from time to time, usually at some long-lost and unknown URL on a big corporation's website. Thus, peering into one often felt a bit like trespassing because the directory was either in-progress or not supposed to be public.

[Paperrad.org/hotpix](http://paperrad.org/hotpix) displayed a file listing that contained about one hundred files. The images contained in this directory were found on the net, drawn in digital paint applications, and scanned. They were mostly cartoons, digital doodles, photographs, and drawings. By clicking on the “last modified” heading, the files could be arranged in the order they were uploaded, therefore the directory could be visited like a current-day social media feed as recently uploaded images would show at the top. The directory itself was created in order to organize various images that Paper Rad members and friends were emailing around to one another for fun at their office day jobs (many were contributed by Andrew MK Warren, a friend of Jessica and Jacob's at the time). As recounted by Jessica: “I think maybe at some point Jacob or I made that directory to sort of just more easily ‘dump’ or centralize or collect a bunch of those images, which had probably been emailed to each other.... This would have been in the day, after college, of lots of us having mostly boring ‘office’ day jobs.”

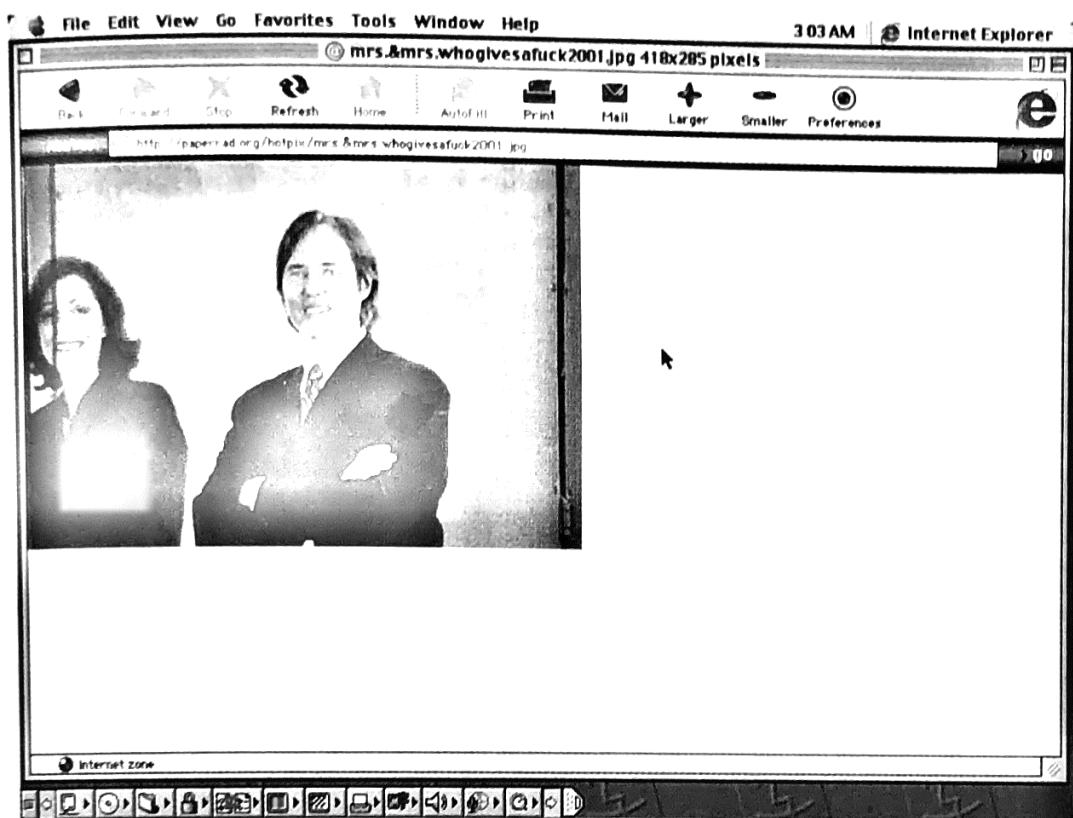
Filenames are usually hidden on the web, but in paperrad.org/hotpix they were “active.” For example, `mrs.&mrs.whogivesafu..`, `f**ckthapolice.jpg`, and `stoner_freak_out.jpg` were setups to the images themselves that functioned as punchlines. And what images they were! OMG. The file `mrs.&mrs.whogivesafu..—fuck2001.jpg` (Last modified, 10-Jul-2001 16:01; Size, 68K)—was a scan of a slightly crumpled paper print of a photo (obscured by several abstract black lines) of a man and woman in suits smiling smugly at the camera. It was possibly



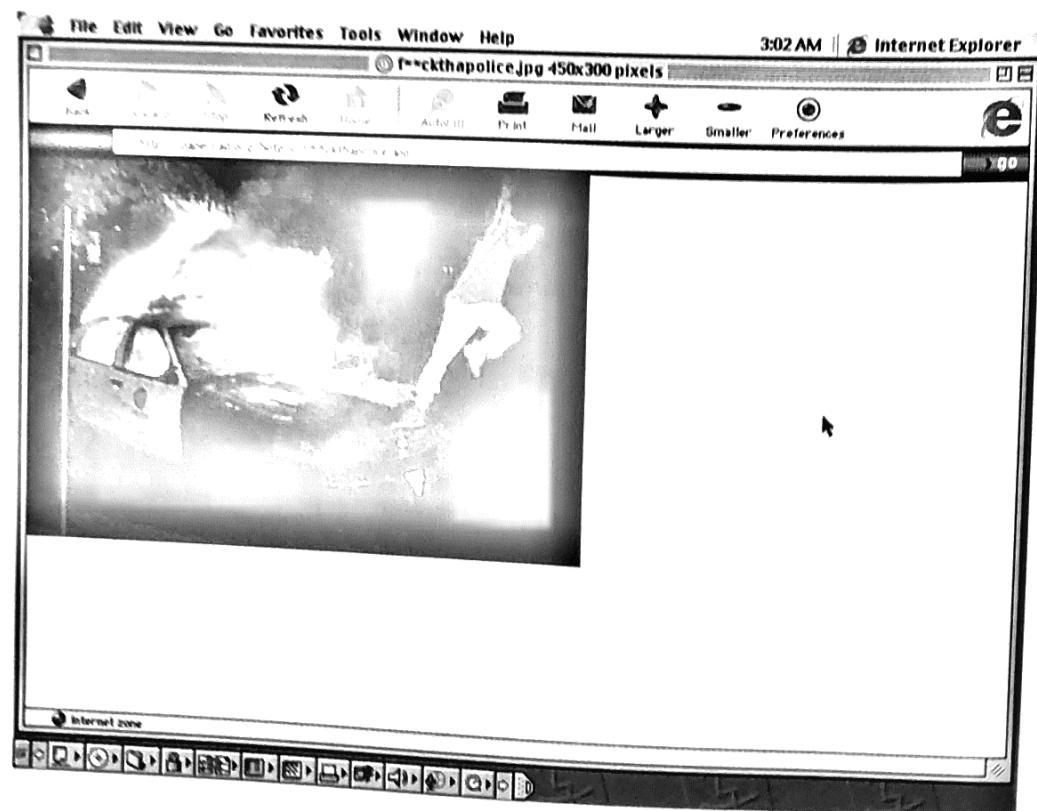
Paper Rad with Andrew MK Warren, HotPix
Directory, historically accurate screen capture
created using the digital preservation technology
bwFLA: Emulation as a Service, University of
Freiburg. Courtesy Dragan Espenschied and
Cory Arcangel

from a law firm advertorial, but any further explanation was left to the imagination. It also looked like the paper print itself was adhered to a door for some reason. Much more clear was f**ckthapolice.jpg (Last modified, 10-Jul-2001 15:54; Size, 70K), a photo of someone jumping off of an exploding police car while giving the peace sign with one hand and a thumbs up with the other. And stoner_freak_out.jpg (Last modified, 10-Jul-2001 16:06; Size, 276K) led to an image of Jessica herself playing the flute, backed by a bass player in a motorcycle helmet—a glimpse of Paper Rad in action at their HQ, presumably. It's also worth mentioning a few other Hot Pix images uploaded after my first visit to the directory. The file titled debbie.jpg (Last modified, 02-Mar-2002 19:26; Size, 133K) showed an image of a cheery teen Debbie Gibson posing in her bedroom in front of a Kenny Scharf-style painting she painted. And 11FANS1.jpg (Last modified, 11-Jan-2003 15:57; Size, 18K) depicted an LA Raiders fan, dressed up in a black-and-white KISS cosplay-style, Roman-inspired tunic with an Egyptian headdress. He is standing on the flat bed of a pick-up truck, holding a Raiders flag, and fittingly for Paper Rad, also giving a peace sign. I could go on and on. There was a glamour shot of a male figure skater (elvis.jpg; Last modified, 10-Jul-2001 15:53; Size, 29K), a school yearbook-style photograph of a swim team (team2000.jpg; Last modified, 10-Jul-2001 16:06; Size, 247K), a screen still of a Simpsons character drawing a cartoon cat on a computer (C-A-T.gif; Last modified, 10-Jul-2001 15:50; Size, 49K), and a photo of a hot tub full of overweight, naked men featuring a long-range rifle (end.jpg; Last modified, 11-Oct-2002 12:57; Size, 32K). Clicking through the nearly one hundred images, one got a stark picture of contemporary American life: violent, enthusiastically ignorant, and extremely bizarre. Paper Rad's eye is and was unrivaled. It was the best Instagram feed I ever saw, not only ten years before such a service existed, but before I had *ever* seen a curated collection of found digital images.

My wife and I have lived in the same apartment in Brooklyn for nearly ten years. At a certain point in the building's history, our apartment was the superintendent's, and so he raided it whenever something was needed elsewhere in the building. Thus, our apartment is missing moldings, lighting fixtures, and many of its doors. Due to our lack of practical knowledge (I know how to fix software—anything else, not so much), we have never bothered to put in any doors, and therefore over the last decade have gotten used to hearing most every movement in the apartment. But in the last few years, I am often startled by an eerie silence. It is a silence that can happen any time of day, and can last from as little as thirty seconds to as much as a half hour. Luckily, at this point, I know better. It means my wife is somewhere in the apartment, usually standing, in an Instagram hole, scrolling endlessly through her feed, neither moving nor



Paper Rad with Andrew MK Warren, website,
mrs.&mrs.whogivesafuck2001.jpg image file,
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the digital preservation technology bwFLA:
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Courtesy Dragan Espenschied and Cory Arcangel

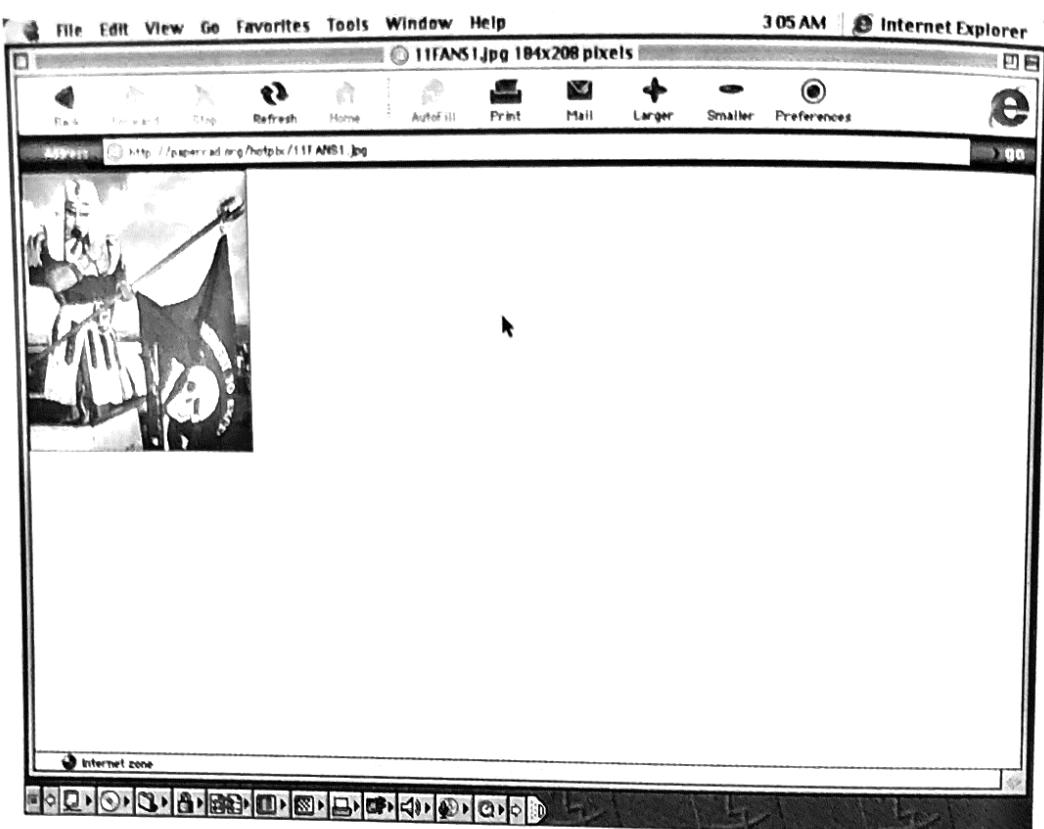


Paper Rad with Andrew MK Warren, website, stoner_freak_out.jpg image file, historically accurate screen capture created using the digital preservation technology bwFLA: Emulation as a Service, University of Freiburg. Courtesy Dragan Espenschied and Cory Arcangel

Paper Rad with Andrew MK Warren, website, f*ckthapolice.jpg image file, historically accurate screen capture created using the digital preservation technology bwFLA: Emulation as a Service, University of Freiburg. Courtesy Dragan Espenschied and Cory Arcangel

Paper Rad with Andrew MK Warren, website, debbie.jpg image file, historically accurate screen capture created using the digital preservation technology bwFLA: Emulation as a Service, University of Freiburg. Courtesy Dragan Espenschied and Cory Arcangel





Paper Rad with Andrew MK Warren, website,
11FANS1.jpg image file, historically accurate
screen capture created using the digital
preservation technology bwFLA: Emulation
as a Service, University of Freiburg. Courtesy
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making a sound. Full disclosure: this situation is often reversed, but with me it's Twitter. In these uncanny moments of pure silence, I often think back to my first experience clicking through paperrad.org/hotpix. Like the CD-ROM burner in the media lab Jacob and I hung out in at college, it embodied all the excitement of the expressive possibilities of the near technological future.

So just imagine for a second that it's 2001. It's a world where your computer science friend recently told you about a cool new search engine called "Google"; a world before moms could email; a world before mileycyrus.com; a world before chic galleries showed anything involving computers; and a world before social networks like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. And now imagine experiencing the possibilities, energy, and euphoria of those technology-driven situations, and they were brought to you—while you were at work!—not by some dweeb Silicon Valley CEOs, but by a group of media lab nerds and bored office workers who somehow transformed themselves into an internet art Wu-Tang. WTF! This is what it was like to have been "there." This was Paper Rad.

This essay was commissioned in 2014 for the present volume.

NOTES

1. Seth Price, "Interview, Chris Bollen & Seth Price," *Distributed History* (Jan. 2012), <<http://www.distributedhistory.com/Thisthaang.pdf>> (accessed Sept. 12, 2014).
2. Dragan Espenschied, "Big Data, Little Narration," *1x-upon* (Sept. 2014), <<http://1x-upon.com/~despens/keynote-digital-preservation-2014/>> (accessed Sept. 13, 2014).
3. Olia Lialina, "Net Art Generations," *Teleportacia* (Nov. 19, 2013), <http://art.teleportacia.org/observation/net_art_generations/> (accessed Sept. 12, 2014).
4. Ibid.