



RETURN OF THE PORTAL

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In a perfect world, the internet would have evolved in a planned and orderly way, and that means, quite illogically, that Web 2.0 would not have followed Web 1.0.

The plan hatched by experts at the World Wide Web Consortium, the body that supervises web standards, was for the second generation to be something a little different to Bebo and Facebook, called the Semantic Web.

"It means adding more meaning to the web," says web expert John Breslin of NUI Galway, "so that people and computers can work together more easily, so that computers in fact can do more of the work."

Put simply, Web 2.0 was supposed to be the time when search engines worked perfectly. And the semantic web is the technology that allows you more of a push-button approach to information issues, so you are not overloaded, but enabled.

Today marks the launch of the first such project for the buying public - the New York launch of MutualArt.com, a global initiative to link art collectors (the buyers) with artists, museums, galleries and information sources including the leading art publications, auction house information and prices. It is the first major application

of the semantic web to a consumer service.

"We have relationships with over 250 publications and over 1,000 news feeds," says Moti Shniberg, founder of MutualArt. "Our contribution is to analyse the users and understand their needs."

The project also has access to records of 140 leading public museums, including the Tate in London and The Museum of Modern Art in New York. "And," adds Shniberg, "the track record of artists from auction houses will be available." So too will catalogues from the thousands of galleries that are expected to sign up to the service (1,200 had signed up pre-launch).

At the centre is a service that learns user preferences. It learns what you want to know and uses those preferences to form relationships between information, events, artists, galleries and museums. In short, it structures an information world for you: a huge project, by any standards.

What the art world represents is the ultimate in information overload. Much of the business of art is private - even secret. And while, over the past 10 years, public information on art, as indeed in many fields, has proliferated with online art magazines, blogs and websites, it's not always clear how to find the information you need.

The semantic web is supposed to help. The semantic web is a way of saying that computers can do the Internet more intelligently. They can link information and relate it to people, places, events and purchasing, and with precision. Those principles have been applied to MutualArt.com.

It marks not only the arrival of the semantic web in consumer markets, also the return of the portal: the aggregated, congregated mass of information on a specific subject that before the arrival of the social networks dominated web commerce. Have portals been usurped by social networks?

“What’s great about the social web is it is creating connections that the semantic web will make use of,” Breslin points out. MutualArt has come at it from a different angle.

“Web applications are developing in two ways,” says Shniberg. “For people who want to socialise, and for people who want to do business. All our customers are senior people who mean business.”

The expectation is, as we can now do portals more intelligently, we should be able to do business more efficiently.

The MutualArt.com software was designed by Ronen Feldman, previously a founder of of Clear Forest Corporation, a Waltham Massachusetts-based company that specialises in what search experts call text mining and text analytics.

In the art market its new proposition might mean that if your main desire is to learn about, for example, Chinese contemporary art, the system will suggest that you may also be interested in the reinterpretation of Asia aesthetics.

The reasonable expectation is, if you collect Chinese art, you might be ready to buy in the area of other Asian artists. If you are uncertain, sensing you are moving out of your area of specialist knowledge, you have a system to turn to that has already structured the relevant information.

Anna Somers Cocks, editor of the Art newspaper, says: “MutualArt comes from a non-art context and is a product of that feeling that art should be more under control.”

She expects that in the future, collectors, who typically travel extensively, will be able to find, through MutualArt.com, relevant events and galleries near where they are headed, meaning they can avoid local listings and websites that will supply irrelevant information.

MutualArt is, potentially, just the first manifestation of semantics on the consumer web; in fact the technology is neutral, and applicable across industries.

At the everyday level it means something different. If you are a member of a portal on sport, for example, the fact that you regularly access information on rugby will lead systems like Google adwords and Amazon to recommend related products.

With text analytics you might find the system recommending information on key players and, depending on whether or not you read those documents, the system will dig deeper and stay alert for more information on whatever you show an interest in, all the while building a structured resource.

And if you belong to social networks, adds Breslin, “it might tell you which of your friends have similar interests”.

The point about MutualArt is that it is the first consumer application to embody a set of techniques that the software world is pursuing, techniques that are expected to create a more efficient information economy, regardless of what you collect or buy. If your real interest is the art of the deal, that’s something to write home about. ■■



A shot of MutualArt.com