

ART+TECH BLOG



AN INTERVIEW WITH NEW MEDIA ARTIST JAN ROBERT LEEGTE

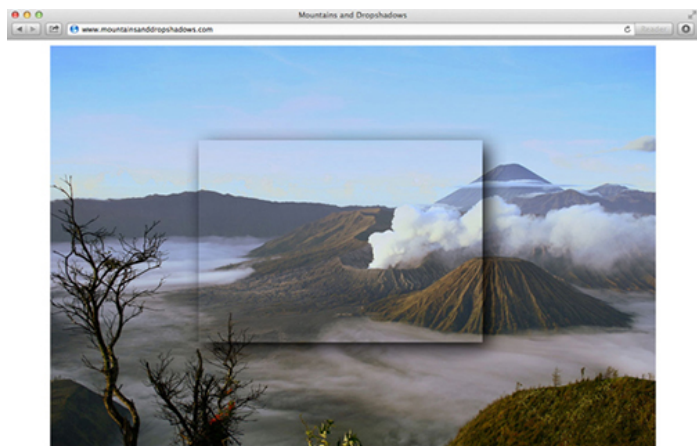
Michelle Kasprzak  
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I met **Jan Robert Leegte** for a coffee before seeing his new show *Mountains, Drop Shadows, Source Code and Stuff* at **Gallery Joey Ramone** in Rotterdam. "This is kind of backwards," I admitted to him, but in retrospect I was glad I got to know the artist first and then his work (even if only to reverse the usual sequence of work then artist). Leegte explained that he had taken some time off from the art world (something we artists, curators, and critics all consider, threaten, and sometimes really do – the most prominent example recently being Dave Hickey's vehement "I quit" notice: ). After this brief hiatus, he's back with a bang times two: a solo show at a private gallery in Rotterdam and a large group show in Amsterdam.

During our conversation over a couple of cappuccinos, one question that Leegte asked stuck with me: "Where is the artwork?" His art often examines elements fundamental to the web browsing experience (scrollbars, etc) or explores originality and translation. This question of originality, exclusivity, and the hallowed hand of the artist has plagued media art from the beginning – and still does. Playing with notions of where the artwork resides, what can be bought and sold as an artwork, and how to make scarcity out of abundance, Leegte hits on the hot button issue that no-one in the media art world has been able to truly resolve.



Jan Robert Leegte, *Mountains and Dropshadows*, 2013

At Gallery Joey Ramone (a great name for a gallery if there ever was one), he's exhibiting his 2013 piece *Portrait of a Web Server*, which scrolls through the Apache web server code on a monitor in the gallery. It scrolls by faster than you can read, but this is of course part of the point: in any portrait, we can only glance at surfaces, and we never truly gain access to any understanding of the person (or machinery) underneath. His *Mountains and Dropshadows* piece uses the Flickr API to grab random images of landscapes and then applies a dropshadowed rectangular selection to the center of the image. The randomness appeals to Leegte. "It's too clean if it's all carefully selected," he says. We agreed that some grit in the oyster is needed to make a pearl. My only wish was for a more massive wall of these images to bring out a bigger appreciation of the variances and similarities in them in all their randomly selected glory.



Jan Robert Leegte

The next day in Amsterdam I attended the opening of *Notes on a New Nature: Place, Myth and Memory* at **Arti et Amicitiae**. Curated by Nicholas O'Brien, this group show features notable media artists including Rafael Rozendaal, Constant Dullaart, and Tale of Tales. It also includes a piece by Leegte that beautifully expresses the curator's aim, which is to engage in "...and on-going examination of the tropes and stigmas that revolve around landscape representation as posed by other, more traditional, art forms." Leegte used **Minecraft**, a platform for "breaking and placing blocks" and also devising "wonderful, imaginative things," to create a remake of Robert

Smithson's famous Land Art piece *Spiral Jetty* that is serenely perfect and beautifully rendered on a flat screen in a dark room. Recreating this classic artwork in a digital world may seem like an easy translation from real to virtual, and Leegte and I spoke about my disappointment with Second Life on the grounds of a failure of imagination: when placed in a virtual world when anything is possible, most people choose to flatten their abs and expand their biceps instead of doing something more radical, like becoming a subatomic particle or a rainbow. But this recreation of *Spiral Jetty* is miles away from American Apparel setting up shop in Second Life. Smithson was fascinated with **entropy** and *Spiral Jetty* itself is constantly under threat of destruction. In the absence of any clear instructions from the artist, who died shortly after the completion of the work, what should be done to save the work, if anything? Leegte's remake is a clever, subtle rejoinder to this whole debate: most of us will never see *Spiral Jetty* in person anyway. So to treat it as an iconic shape, and to see it as a part of a landscape, whether virtual or real, asks us to consider how important the original is, and what the sculpture means to the viewing public, when we are more likely to encounter it in its virtual form than its slowly deteriorating physical one. Where is the artwork, indeed.

**Gallery Joey Ramone:** <http://www.joeyramone.nl/>

Jan Robert Leegte: Mountains, Drop Shadows, Source Code and Stuff continues until May 18.

**Arti et Amicitiae:** [http://www.arti.nl/arti\\_en.php](http://www.arti.nl/arti_en.php)

Notes on a New Nature: Place, Myth and Memory continues until June 2.

**Michelle Kasprzak** is a Canadian curator and writer based in Amsterdam. She is a Curator at V2\_ Institute for the Unstable Media and the Dutch Electronic Art Festival (DEAF). In 2006 she founded Curating.info, the web's leading resource for curators. She has written critical essays for C Magazine, Volume, Spacing, Mute, and many other media outlets. She is a member of IKT (International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art). She is also Akimbo's European Art + Tech correspondent and can be followed [@mkasprzak](#) on Twitter.

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