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The art of failure



It's a card life: Business cards on show at Dot-Gone

Good art is all about suffering. So what better subject for an exhibition than the dot.com crash that has thrown thousands onto the dole queue? Maggie Shiels investigates.

The world of the dot.com has resulted in the best of times for some but the worst of times for many others. Now the wild ride that turned tech heads into overnight millionaires and then into instant paupers is being chronicled in an art exhibition.

Dot-Gone is believed to be the first art show to examine the human cost of that roller coaster ride and the mark it has left on society.

Artist Xenia Jordan says Dot-Gone offers a "critique of the dot-com phenomenon by addressing issues of overnight success, media sensationalism,

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technology and the instability of the stock market".

She, along with fellow artists Jamie A Michael and Lacey Hanada, drew on their own experiences in the industry to put the work together.



Each card contains a dead e-mail address

Mirroring the central obsession of the stock-optioned net heads, Dot-Gone features a wall to floor graphic of the Nasdaq share index, which has plummeted from 5,000 points to below 2,000 in 12 months.

The exhibition also features "working cubicles" with Herman Miller designer chairs that were favoured by the dot.coms, and computers that blink away showing the farewells posted by a host of defunct companies.

And of course no office would be complete without a water cooler, which is where everyone gathers to get the latest gossip and find out who is in and who is out.

Rather poetically placed above the cooler are faded pixilated pictures of CEOs of companies that no longer exist.

“
It really speaks to what a lot of people have gone through
”

Jamie A Michael

A crowd of about 70 packed into the tiny Lair of the Minotaur gallery in San Francisco's Mission district for the exhibition opening. Curator Mariah Robertson says she agreed to the show because it would resonate with a lot of people.

"It's very topical. And it was an interesting idea the way they presented it. Like a promise that was held out to a new generation of people coming from college and it failed utterly. It's

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really hit a nerve all over town."

House of cards

The centre-piece of Dot-Gone is a wall of a hundred business cards donated by ex-employees - something artist Jamie A Michael can relate to, having recently been laid off from her job in online advertising. She sees the wall as a memorial.

"The business cards really signify the individual and the company and the merging of. Your business card is your identity," explains Jamie.



One-time rising stars of the dot.com world

"You meet someone you give them your card and if that person were to call the number they would get nothing. The e-mail addresses don't work and it's kind of a piece of your identity that has been distributed who knows where and then it's ripped away from you and you are laid off."

The job placement firm Challenger Gray & Christmas says in the last 16 months over 75,000 dot.com jobs have been slashed in the US - 80% within the San Francisco and the Bay area.

This provided a rich seam of material for the artists who appealed to ex-techies to send them tokens of their former employment so they could turn them into art.

Social commentary

Among those contributing was Michael Schoolnik who thinks the exhibition is a great piece of commentary on what he witnessed first-

hand.

"I am on the wall of shame," he joked. "I was laid off from this company which is rapidly downsizing. They are throwing people off the plane like human cargo, so they can stay afloat."



Mariah Robertson: "The promise failed utterly"

Roslynn Layton, a financial adviser who has seen her share of shrinking portfolios, thinks the artists have tapped into something rather profound.

"This is something we are experiencing right now. It really speaks to what a lot of people have gone through. And to have someone document it in this way is very important."

Art critic for San Francisco ArtMagazine.com Sheila Novat was able to appreciate the irony of her position as she comments on an exhibition about former dot.com companies.

"I loved the show because it accurately depicts the way that everything happened so fast in this city. There was so much money and all of a sudden, without warning, it started to fade away"



Plety of downtime in which to attend exhibition openings

As well as documenting a moment in time, Jamie says she hopes Dot-Gone can deliver on some loftier ambitions.

"I really think this will bring closure to a lot of

people who put a lot into the industry and got nothing back. For me it's a good end to what kind of ended shakily."

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