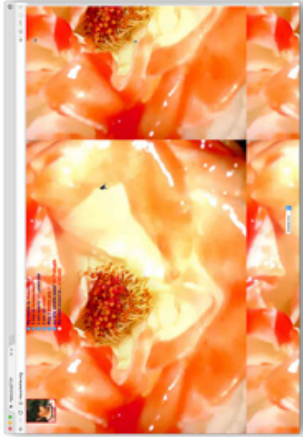


## 1.14 MARTINE NEDDAM *Mouchette*, 1996–ongoing

*Mouchette* is a fictional character, a young girl who is fascinated by suicide and strangers. *Mouchette* invites user interaction and participation across several ever-growing websites and performative actions. On *Mouchette.org*, the girl she shares her dark obsessions with her viewers and invites them to participate in interactive narratives. The site was published anonymously. *Mouchette.net* is an online interface by which users can pass for *Mouchette* and publish directly to her website using an “Identity Sharing Interface.” Performances included an April 2003 event



Martine Neddham, *Mouchette*, 1996–ongoing. Screenshot, 2016. Google Chrome 55 on macOS 10.12. [mouchette.org](http://mouchette.org)



Martine Neddham, *Suicide Kit*, 1997, from *Mouchette*, 1996–ongoing. Image from [www.mouchette.org/suicide/xmas.html](http://www.mouchette.org/suicide/xmas.html).

at Postmasters gallery in New York, where online visitors were invited to take over *Mouchette*'s website if they came to meet the author in person in New York. In a specially designed space, they could have a private meeting with the supposed author. This event was also the launch of the “Identity Sharing Interface.”

On *Mouchette.org*, the girl she shares her dark obsessions with her viewers and invites them to participate in interactive narratives. The site was published anonymously. *Mouchette.net* is an online interface by which users can pass for *Mouchette* and publish on her website using an “Identity Sharing Interface.” Visitors are invited to touch the screen, or to fill out online forms in response to personal questions: “Put your cheek on the monitor. How does it feel?” Responses are moderated by Neddham, and published.

Through these interactions, visitors contribute to *Mouchette*'s synthetic identity, and find communities of support around difficult topics such as suicide. It is a collaborative performance linking together artist, public, and technical apparatus, with the website serving as both stage and archive for a work that has been in progress for more than twenty years.

“The web character is not so much a portrait as a platform with a certain design; people exchange with each other inside that character.” —Martine Neddham



Caro Stakenas is shown in *Mouchette*'s performance at Postmasters Gallery, April 2003. Part of Franklin Furnace, THE FUTURE OF THE PRESENT 2003. Photo courtesy of Tim Whidden.



Video monitor showing the line to get into *Mouchette*'s “house” during event at Postmasters Gallery, April 2003. Part of Franklin Furnace, THE FUTURE OF THE PRESENT 2003. Photo courtesy of Tim Whidden.

## From “Every Page is Live, and Every Page Dies: Martine Neddham’s *Mouchette*”<sup>1</sup> Michael Connor with Martine Neddham

### *LambdaMOO*, early 1990s. Artist Martine Neddham joins the popular text-based online community, and creates a persona named *Mouchette*. ###

### MARTINE NEDDAM

The name was free, you know? Most names I was thinking of were taken. And I remembered this name of a little girl from a film, a vision of a little girl character who is not all pink and sweet.

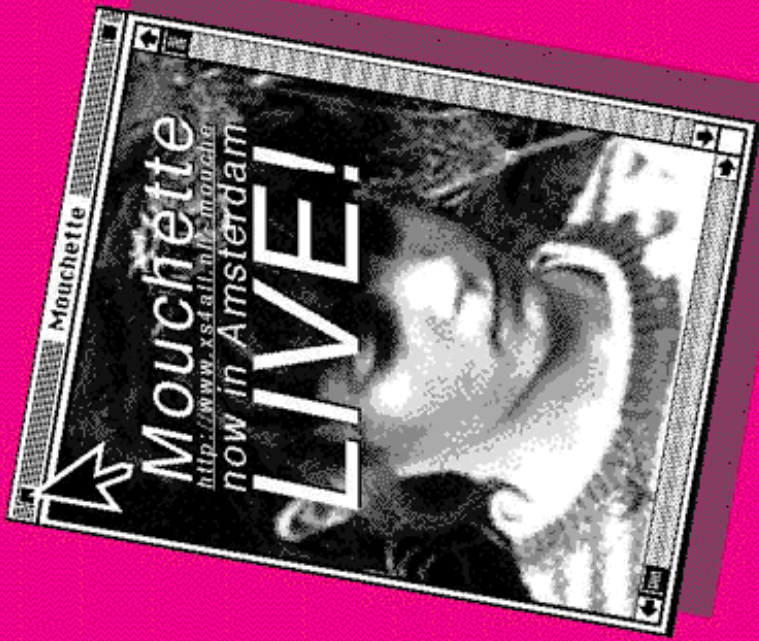
[Within the world of a MOO], you would design your space—my space was called AZERTY—the French keyboard. It was a text space—a girl made of language and made of text. You could reprogram parts of the MOO itself.

That was really my first love. It was a space for creation and participation at the same time. That’s

how I fell in love with the internet—you can participate but you can reprogram. You don’t just inhabit the little text field that is given to you. One way or another, I still experience the web with that possibility of re-programming.

### *Amsterdam*, late summer 1997. Pink posters appear around the city, pasted in grids, advertising an upcoming appearance by *Mouchette*. At the appointed time, a man named René Paul Vallentgoed—an agent representing poets—takes the stage in her place, offering to answer the audience’s questions.

A visit to the web page listed on the flyer yields little additional information about *Mouchette*. Instead, it offers a web form with questions of its own:



AT TRIPLE X FESTIVAL



Martine Neidman, *Mouchette* lives in Amsterdam LIVE! 1997.

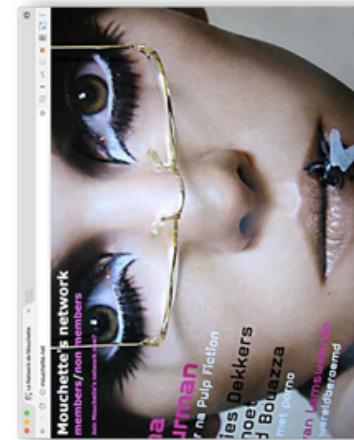
*Have you seen my posters hanging everywhere in the city of Amsterdam? What was I doing there? Did you meet me? Do you remember? Nearly twenty years later, visitors to the page, now hosted on Mouchette.org, continue to share their experiences of encounters that never happened. ###*

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The web character is not so much a portrait as a platform with a certain design; people exchange with each other inside that character.

The anonymity was really important. If you assume it was made by a man, it might be made by a pervert. If made by a woman, it might be made by a feminist. It created... a sort of projection surface for your imagination.

...



Martine Neidman, *Mouchette's network*, 2003–ongoing. Screenshot, 2017. Google Chrome 63 for macOS 10.13, mouchette.net.

*### Haarlem, The Netherlands, December 1998. A Suicide Kit for Christmas is shown at Galerie Tanya Rumpff. The browser-based work opens with a still image of a girl with angel wings and a Santa hat standing on the bench in a computer-generated courtroom. She is labeled with the tag "Mouchette," as if she is an avatar from Palace Chat. She delivers a line via speech bubble: "A suicide kit for Christmas?"*

*On the next page, Mouchette asks the visitor, "What is the best way to kill yourself when you're 13?" ###*

For maybe a year, I would collect the answers by email. They would send a story, I would rewrite them into HTML pages and post them. Even in these HTML pages, I would reply. My sense of the web was that it was an ongoing conversation with the viewer.

Through Mouchette, I would see the web change and expand and modify, and Mouchette would change in response to what was happening.

In 1998, people weren't using search engines, they were surfing, jumping from site to site, from link to link.

Suddenly, the search engines exploded. People were coming en masse and starting to send personal messages. It really touched me...

It went beyond art. It was not enough to just receive these things and put them back online like a month later and just share some witty comment next to it. It was something where I had hit on a sort of social fact, and I was involved in it.

After a while, I realized that there were some users who came once in awhile to post funny stories, of course with certain dark tones about suicide. It was a stage where I wasn't even needed. Visitors cared about [consistent contributors such as] Lucy Cortina more than they cared about Mouchette. They carried the story of the web character in their own way.

It has been a big part of my life, that moderation. I even went to court because they thought I was hosting suicide recipes.

With suicide, there are issues of free speech at several levels. In most religions, suicide is a sin. In certain cases, you may not even mention it or talk about it to children. So the problem of prevention of suicide is made really complicated, because the people who are tempted by suicide cannot seek help. When they mention it, people reject the idea or the thought of it.

That's why I got all these people coming to me. They had to vent all their anxiety that they probably couldn't in their normal surroundings. Today, of course, you have serious sites where you can vent and exchange, but at that time it didn't exist yet.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from an article published on Rhizome in December 2016.