

Anonymous Mouchette inception 1996

"My name is Mouchette. I live in Amsterdam. I am nearly 13 years old. " This seemingly innocent introduction by a child artist hides the shocking content within Mouchette's website. Allegedly authored by a twelve-year-old French girl, "Mouchette" is a complex site consisting of various secret links, electronic interactive texts, and poems that reveal the multiple faces of the artist, along with her fears and obsessions. Loosely-based on the 1937 book by Georges Bernanos and the 1967 Robert Bresson movie, *Mouchette*, the website seems to expand upon the basic storyline of the film. The movie portrays a girl suffering from the pains of abuse, an alcoholic father and dying mother. Eventually she finds that her only escape from the hatred and sexual abuse in her life is suicide. Not only does the net artist draw several character similarities to the female protagonist of the film *Mouchette*, but also relates similar thematic ideas. The various subpages of the site use visually-shocking pictures, images of flesh and blood, and interactive forums of taboo subjects to explore themes of sexual abuse, violence and hatred, and loneliness. The anonymous authorship of the site, as well as the user interface, poses an underlying question of identity, leaving the viewer curious what the true nature of the website. By creating an interactive site that encourages audience participation, *Mouchette.org* challenges the viewer to confront these disturbing themes and make a decision of further conduct.

Since the website launch in 1996, the true identity of the alter-ego behind *Mouchette.org* has been a closely-guarded secret. By concealing his or her identity, the artist preserves the first-person nature of the site, thus enhancing the thematic power. In this manner, the artist provokes heated debates of contemporary political and sexual issues. Since the artist-moderator behind the site remains unknown and anonymous; the author her/himself is referred to as merely Mouchette (1).



Mouchette

The incredibly complex *Mouchette.org* site relies on both the audio and visual components. One key aspect of the site is its variable nature; there are many different opening screens, and the noises that accompany the images are prone to change as well. The opening screen is always a close-up of a flower, with flies moving around it. The fly is a visual allusion to the name, "Mouchette," which literally means "fly" in French. If one clicks on the flies to the right of the screen, it leads to the "Blind Jump" section of the site. The fly in the center of the screen leads to two more pages about flies, then the viewer is confronted with a dead end. In the corner of the homepage is either a photo of a young girl, a drawing of a young girl, or a picture of an older woman. When the arrow is on the picture, a passage appears. One can click on either the picture, or the passage, and it will lead to different pages-the passage always leads to a seemingly public bulletin board about suicide, whereas the picture can lead to different pages, dependent upon which picture is displayed. The artist Mouchette claims that the young girl pictured is herself. Next to the picture, there is a checklist that lists certain "facts" about Mouchette, some of which contain links to other pages. There is also a scrolling menu at the bottom of the page, which says "browse me" and contains a number of vague links leading to different sub-sections of the site.

The confusion and profusion of links and subdivisions within the site lead the viewer to become disoriented. One cannot easily navigate the site, nor can one easily re-trace one's steps; the "back" button often leads to random new pages. There is an abundance of subsites within the site, as well as links to outside sites. One subsite is an apparently "public" bulletin board, upon which people respond to the question: "What is the best way to kill yourself when you are under thirteen?"-a question seemingly posed by the "young girl" behind the site. The respondents leave a variety of messages ranging from attempts to save Mouchette, to bitter notes pushing Mouchette (and her apparently suicidal correspondents) to actually commit the final act. Mouchette also prompts each viewer to fill in his own form and respond. Yet, it is unclear if these responses are filtered, and by whom-or, are the posted ones even written by real people? If everyone can be Mouchette, who is the driving force behind Mouchette?

Upon closer inspection of the website, the viewer can join Mouchette's fan club, which empowers the audience with



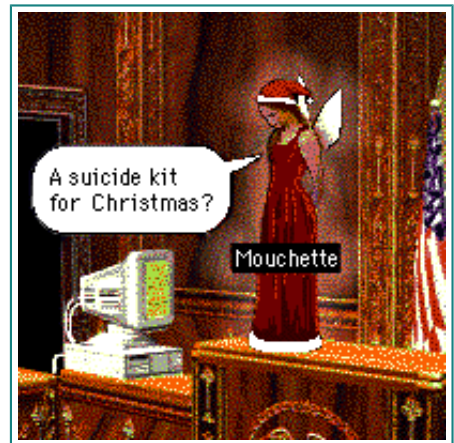
An introduction

enhanced participatory powers within the site. Uploaded user text and images become a part of the site and users can respond to Mouchette's "personal" email. Thus Mouchette's email identity remains anonymous and arbitrary in content. Who is the artist that moderates Mouchette? This remains a virtually impossible question to answer. However, even though one can "become Mouchette" according to edit.mouchette.org, this does not open up access to all parts of the site—areas are still moderated by the unknown artist.

The complexity and navigational difficulties of *Mouchette.org* challenge the audience's ability to interpret. Several of the sites portray unrelated aspects, linked only by one of the common themes. Sexuality appears as an underlying theme in the site, noticeably in images and sounds, but also in subtle colors and presentation. Obvious sexual references include the subpage of sexual pictures and sounds, and the pedophilic references of the "striped penis" subpage. More understated references include the flower imagery on the opening page and the "secret page" where the artist conveys a sexual mood with the use of such words as "softly," "feel," "touchÉ in the dark," and "penetrate." As the mouse is moved, orgasmic sounds are revealed. Sexuality plays a strong thematic role from the beginning of the first webpage. As the page loads, the site emits crying sounds punctuated by seemingly sexual noises. Similar to the Bresson's movie character, Mouchette, the site identifies the juxtaposition between sexual pleasure and anguish. Although sexual, the site does not convey the imagery on a sensual level, instead associating the sexual theme with violent overtones.

Hatred and abuse also appear as major roles in Mouchette's work. Hatred is expressed on several levels in multiple relationships. Mouchette's underlying hate for her parents proves apparent in the subpage <http://mouchette.org/flesh/pere.html> (1998). Images of "Papa" and "Maman" etched into pieces of raw meat symbolize the minimal flesh-relationship between the daughter and her respective parents. Although presented in an innocent childlike manner, "I got my parents' permission for the web portraits," the gruesome effect of the sanguine raw meat suggests the tension in Mouchette's parental relationships (2).

Mouchette's own hatred for life exists as the climactic moment of the site. The artist presents the notion of a "suicide kit," innocently questioning the audience on a "way for children to play suicide—(as) a new kind of toy" in order to find "best way to kill yourself if you're under thirteen." Using this shocking method of inquiry, Mouchette forces the audience to confront the issue of suicide and respond. She then posts the responses in several categories: recent posts, posts seeking help, offering help, real life experiences, cruel jokes, posts that treat suicide as a child's game, and people that blame the artist (Mouchette). Despite the differences in the responses, most user posts appear strongly emotional, compelling the viewer to consider the veracity behind the messages while making a moral decision, first, whether or not to respond, and second, the content of the response. Mouchette posts her favorite answers, and these are not judged according to morality, but on passion. Passionate answers range from posts celebrating the beauty in life, celebrating the romantic notion of death, and everything in between.



"Help me"

Mouchette.org also explores hatred on the personal level between the viewer and the artist. He dedicates an entire section of the site under "hate," for the audience to voice their loathing for the site and the artist (3). Placed upon a unsettling backdrop—a crowd of people covered in crushed tomatoes that resemble bloody flesh—Mouchette incites an honest response from the viewer. The "hate" responses vary from hatred for Mouchette's seemingly apathetic attitude towards life, to disgust for the audacious manner in which taboo subjects are presented, to personal hatred of the artist.

Hatred is also expressed in its most climactic form, violence. *Mouchette.org*'s "Kill the Cat," first unnerves the viewer with the gaping jaws of a cat, accompanied by periodic bloodcurdling screams (4). The screen shakes violently as it becomes apparent that no peaceful ending is achievable and the only escapable solution is to close the browser or use the back command. Thus this page challenges the viewer's notion of a predictable internet with its abrupt display of violence. Also under the "paintings" subpage, clicking the mouse launches two hands, which violently grab for a pig which is drowning in a spilled bowl of soup. In and of themselves, the images are not blatantly violent; however the juxtaposition of a seemingly monstrous hand looming over the defenseless plastic pig seems to be a threatening imbalance of power. The sanguine color of the soup appears as a blood-like substance violently spilled in all directions.

Mouchette also provides a film quiz in which she highlights the important scenes from the movie. Although this quiz was recently banned from the site due to legal warnings from Robert Bresson's estate, an online mirror site still carries the questions (5). Each question reflects the abusive and depressive nature of Mouchette's short life. In one question, Mouchette provides the following answers: "the hut of the poacher who raped me," "home, where my mother just died," "at the cafÉ, to fetch my drunken father," "the pond where I shall be drowning myself." Mouchette uses each film answer to relate the

themes of her website. Sexual abuse, domestic problems of abuse and neglect, and suicide commonly arise throughout the quiz. The backdrop of these quotes is composed of forlorn images of Mouchette, further emphasizing her pitiful state to the reader.

Identity is a central theme in Mouchette's website. Although it is never explicitly explored, it is alluded to indirectly through the user forum. Each post requests the specific name and email address of the author, but uncertain identity is the inherent nature of internet interaction. While browsing the site, the viewer is constantly badgered to post his name and email address, in a sense threatening judgment for any response. This imparts a sense of viewer responsibility for actions taken. The viewer does not know to whom his emails are directed nor does he know who will read them. Messages on each user forum are often disconcerting and upsetting; one does not know whether to take them seriously or not. This emotional distance is essential to the artwork. Though Mouchette presents many upsetting, taboo subjects, she does so dispassionately, in an almost apathetic manner. However, after reading the plethora of charged material from Mouchette and the posted respondents it is easy to become desensitized to the unsettling subject matter. This leads to a moral dilemma as the viewer is confronted repeatedly with the possibility of intervention with potentially suicidal individuals.

Mouchette.org operates on many levels expanding upon the overt themes of sexuality, violence, hatred and isolation, using shocking images and sounds, interactive user forums, and morally ambiguous subject matter to highlight her intended themes. This is layered over a fundamental identity question about the authorship of the site and the responses posted on it. Throughout the site, the viewer is constantly confronted with moral decisions. By challenging the viewer with these decisions, *Mouchette.org* does not allow the user to remain inactive-the viewer is forced to contemplate and take a position on these taboo subjects.

- Sarah Stein '05 & Edward Yip '04

Endnotes

- (1) <http://www.franklinfurnace.org/tfotp03/mouchette.html>, 2003.
- (2) <http://mouchette.org/flesh/pere.html>
- (3) <http://www.ihatemouchette.org/read.php>
- (4) <http://mouchette.org/cat/index.html>
- (5) <http://www.constantvzw.com/copy.cult/mirror/filmxx/click.html>

Sources:

- Franklin Furnace, "Mouchette Press Release", <http://www.franklinfurnace.org/tfotp03/mouchette.html>, accessed 11 November 2003.
- "Mouchette: Rhizome Splash Art", <http://people.ucsc.edu/~jgliddon/week%204.html>, accessed 12 Nov 2003.
- "Mouchette: Wattle", http://www.ciac.ca/magazine/archives/no_13/en/oeuvres.html, accessed 11 Nov 2003.
- "New Media, New Sources", <http://turbulence.org/curators/media/>, accessed 10 Nov 2003.