GRAFIK

#188—*featuring* Acne Paper / Irma Boom / We Made This / Linked By Air / MadeThought / Mike Perry and James Victore / Michael Robinson / Sabine Fasching / Radim Peško and Zak Kyes / Mark Porter / Ian Anderson / Jürg Lehni and Matt W. Moore in Profile / *plus* How to Get Rich in Graphic Design
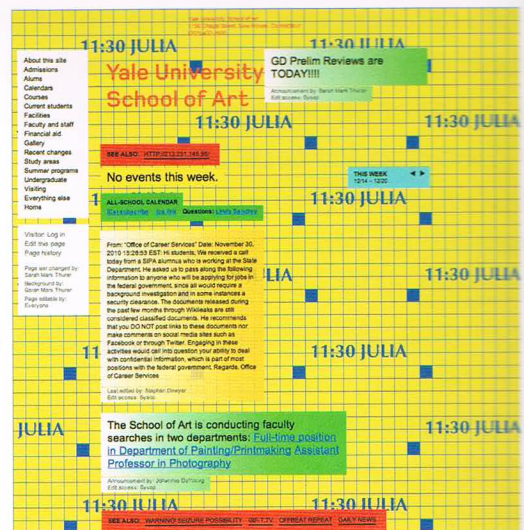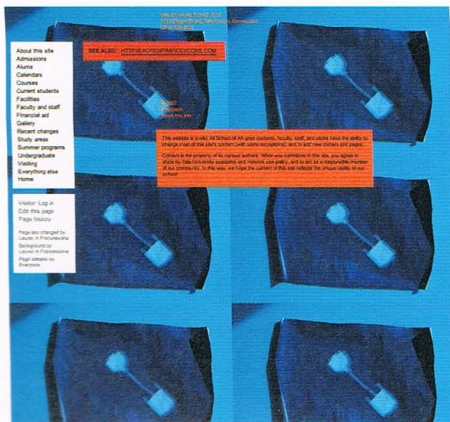
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Screen Saviours
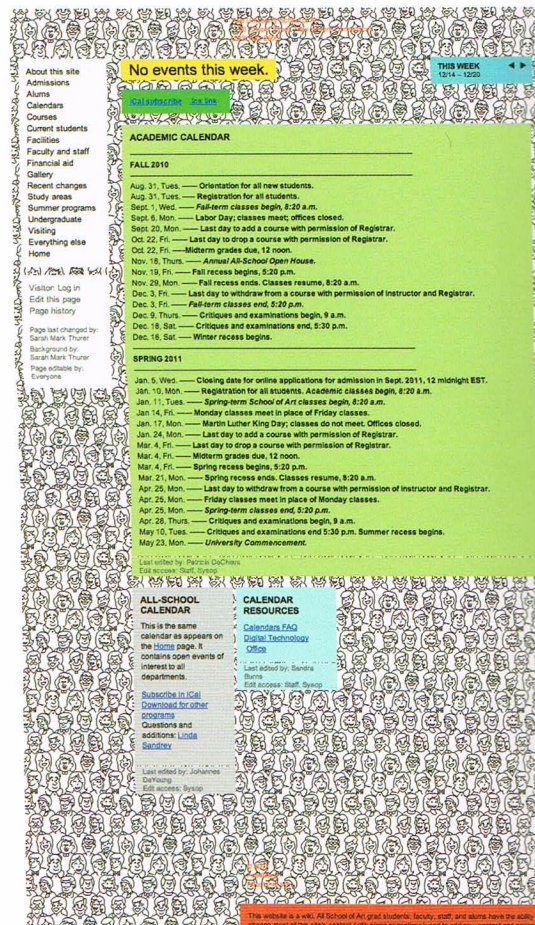

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE—
SCREEN SHOTS OF YALE SCHOOL OF ART WEBSITE
SHOWING APPEARANCE EDITED BY END-USERS

New York's *Linked By Air* is uncompromisingly innovative when it comes to design online, even—as Angharad Lewis found—if it means its sites being dubbed the 'suckiest' on the web.

The internet has been part of daily life for over a decade but at times it still feels like we don't know how to use it properly, let alone design for it.
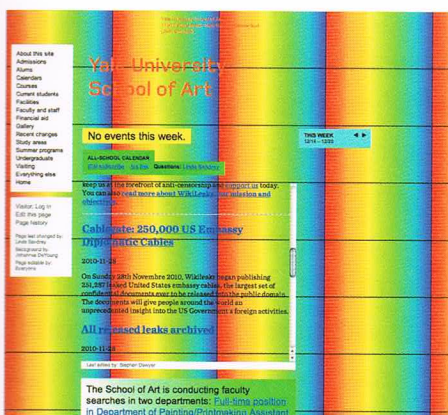

There are exceptions of course—people who have a vision for the web that puts the user first —but a lot of websites feel like they were designed to bamboozle you rather than connect with you. Websitesthatsuck has been on a mission to purge the web of "sucky" design for fifteen years. In 2010 it gave the dubious accolade of No. 1 Worst Website to *Yale School of Art*, for its website designed by **Linked By Air**. The huffy accusations flung at the Yale site ("You can't design crap like this in the real world… college is a place to experiment with booze and drugs and same sex type of stuff… but you don't experiment with design like this") suggest they were made by someone who completely missed the concept behind the site's design. You might say any website based on a concept that needs explaining falls at the first hurdle, but I would argue that Linked By Air's approach to web design is forging a path that other web designers should sit up and pay attention to. Linked By Air, a New York graphic design practice founded by Tamara Maletic and Dan Michaelson, has worked on websites for several high-profile cultural clients including the *Whitney Museum* and Yale, and various smaller arts clients such as fashion designer *Mary Ping*, artist *Ryan Gander*, Calgary arts festival *Artcity*, the *Center for Urban Pedagogy* and architecture partnership *Solid Objects*. It is also in the process of devising a Whitney Museum Kids' website and a new online presence for landmark New York design bookstore *Printed Matter*. Both are being built using Linked By Air's bespoke content-management system, *Economy*, which was originally created for the Yale School of Art website.

What so flummoxed the people at Websitesthatsuck about the Yale School of Art's website is that all students, faculty members and alumni of Yale School of Art are able to edit elements of it, such as the backgrounds of pages. Thus, consecutive visits to *art.yale.edu* might yield completely different results—at the time of writing, the background of the homepage is plastered
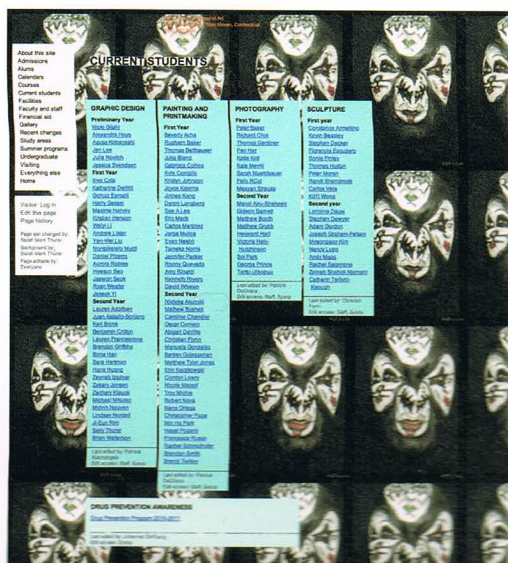
with posters for a student charity bake sale. "Over the last couple of years, student contributions to the site have more often been graphically aggressive," ▶

says Michaelson, "sometimes featuring fluorescent colors and flashing animations, or visually disturbing political imagery."
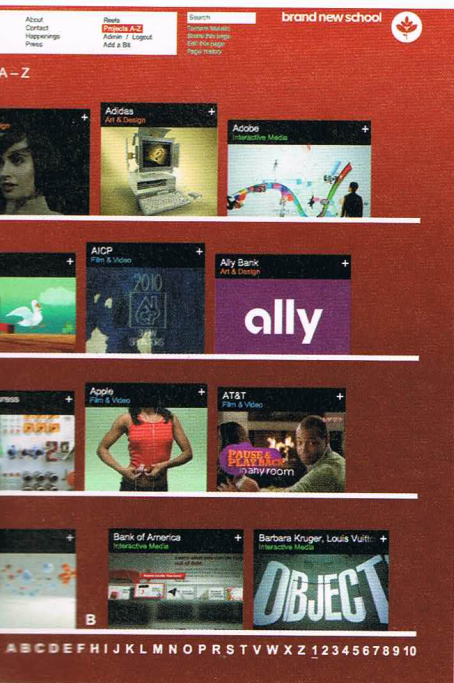
This evolving visual manifestation of student projects and activities does, Michaelson points out, sometimes come at the expense of usability or accessibility by visually impaired users. This was what Websitesthatsuck picked up on, apparently failing to understand that the background they saw on one visit was not a permanent fixture, and missing the point that it is a truly evolutionary website. Dynamism is key to Linked By Air's web design ethos. "Websites should change," says Michaelson, "and they are primarily about change, not stasis. In print, stasis is the natural, normative condition. But online (and, we'd argue, in many aspects of the real world too) stasis should be seen as an equally intentioned choice as change, and maybe a less natural one."
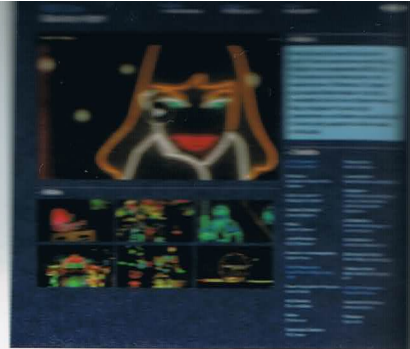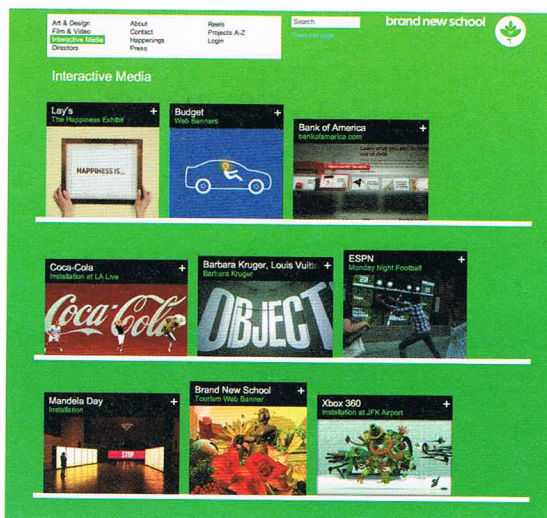
Despite the open-armed policy of allowing such a big group of people to edit aspects of the Yale School of Art website, there are restrictions, and Economy is built around an ideal of creating freedom within boundaries. "Inclusivity may work best when it has limits," observes Michaelson. "We created a sophisticated system of locks engineered, in this case, as a modular and very granular structure. Students can edit the admissions page, but they can't change the tuition or the application requirements. This is an important, dynamic balance: ideas about openness become much more feasible and enduring if you build the systems to ensure their safety."

As you read this, the Economy system is being used—or will soon be used—by a diverse range of Linked By Air's web clients, from artists in the Whitney Biennial, to ten-year-old kids making their own pages on the upcoming Whitney Kids site, to producers at the motion-graphics company *Brand New School*.

Linked By Air made an interesting analysis of the relationship between a website's content programming and end-user activity during its redesign of the Whitney Museum's website. The graph

SCREENSHOT OF NEW WHITNEY   → EPI.YALE.EDU
FOR KIDS WEBSITE DESIGNED   → MARYPING.COM
BY LINKED BY AIR   → LINKEDBYAIR.NET/ARTCITY

shows Whitney staff working on the new site both before and after the launch, alongside page views by end-users, both of the old site and then of the new site. After the relaunch, the lines on the graph suddenly start moving roughly in parallel, showing that, in Michaelson's words, "two networks (page producers and page consumers) have become a coupled system, as a result of them now mostly working toward the same goals, and reinforcing one another".

Web users and creators working in harmony sounds like a holy grail but Linked By Air has proven it can work by adopting a policy of openness and inclusion in the very fabric of a website, making it not only a part of a site's functionality but also its design. On the Whitney site an ongoing artists' project called Sunrise/Sunset dictates the appearance of the background. Whatever time zone the user is located in, they will see a visual representation of the time of day or night at the Whitney's location in New York, in the form of daylight, darkness or a sunrise or sunset. Different artists are commissioned to create a repre-sentation of real-time sunrise and sunset, so it not only changes hour-by-hour, but also on the longer time scale of commission-to-commission.

Michaelson and Maletic admit to being fascinated by the users of the websites they design and advocate for the user in the design process, but they recognise that the category of 'user' can be fluid and often take in the clients—their customers—as well as the general internet public. "We may prefer to see [clients] as commissioners and as content producers," they say, "but institutions must also be considered holistically… it's important that our products help our clients raise funds, obtain grants, and succeed in other secondary ways that may fall outside the bottom-up economies of use that we're the most naturally interested in."

Anyone interested in forward-thinking web design will get a lot out of perusing Linked By Air's various online credits (see links above). It's difficult to explore them without becoming an engrossed user, whether it's curating your own collection of images from the Whitney's archive, exploring your country's rating on the Environmental Performance Index website or just keeping an eye on the New York sunrise—the experience is never static.