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Ideas

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Ideas online

In "Party of one," David Greenberg argues that if Joe Lieberman loses his Connecticut primary race on Aug. 8, it will have less to do with the Democratic senator's position on Iraq than with the growing polarization of both political parties. Should Democrats and Republicans make room for those in their ranks whose principles are at odds with party orthodoxy? Or should mavericks like Lieberman run as independents? How much ideological diversity can a party contain? Share your views on a message board by visiting www.boston.com/ideas

Party of one

After three terms in the Senate, Joe Lieberman may be headed for defeat — and a possible independent run. But it's not Joe Lieberman who has changed. It's partisan politics.

BY DAVID GREENBERG

IN NORMAL TIMES, this wouldn't be happening. Three-term senators and former vice presidential nominees aren't supposed to find themselves in coin-toss primary races for reelection. But Joseph I. Lieberman is fighting for his political life. On Aug. 8, Connecticut Democrats will choose between Lieberman and an upstart challenger, Ned Lamont — a J.P. Morgan heir, cable TV executive, and virtual novice in politics. Lieberman has vowed to run as an independent should Lamont prevail.

Standard-issue punditry blames Lieberman's dire state on his enthusiasm for the Iraq War — and a grass-roots push from bloggers fed up with what they consider the Democrats' politics of accommodation.

David Greenberg, a professor at Rutgers University, is the author of "Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image" and the forthcoming "Presidential Doctees."

But the disillusionment with President Bush's Mideast policy can't fully explain the senator's woes. After all, mainstream liberals, many of whom don't necessarily favor an Iraq pullout, are also eager to see Lieberman chastened, if not ousted. Although some prominent Democrats — most notably Bill Clinton — have lately come to his aid, many others, including those who would "stay the course" in Iraq, are responding coolly to his troubles, and declining to support him if he makes an independent run. And in New York, Senator Hillary Clinton — whom left-wing bloggers vilify almost as much as they do Lieberman — is facing a primary challenge from an antiwar leftist, Jonathan Tasini, yet her reelection seems assured.

Far from the cause of Lieberman's difficulty, Iraq is a catalyst that has triggered a



Big Dig state of mind

Local psychiatrists put Boston on the couch

BY CAROLYN Y. JOHNSON

LAST WEEKEND, David Lieberoff, executive director of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, attended a party in Philadelphia. Relatives from New Hampshire, New Jersey, and North Carolina had gathered to celebrate a cousin's 95th birthday. But all anyone Lieberoff's table wanted to talk about: the Big Dig.

"I felt like I was at a press conference for 45 minutes," he said. "Some questions were technical, some were managerial. One cousin wanted to know whether Boston would have been better off without the project at all. While he formulated an answer, the festivities began. 'I got sa by the bell,' he said.

Boston drivers are used to hearing people carp about the highway project that has snarled traffic for over a decade — and they aren't hesitant to complain themselves, though often with a touch of pride at having mastered its twists and turns. But making sense of Big Dig now, as investigators continue to unravel the cause of the ceiling collapse that killed 38-year-old Milena Del Val is a taller order — one experts say may carry a psychological burden.

In the short term, mental health experts say, tempers may flare as the public deals with the logistical inconvenience of detours, lingering uncertainty about the safety of the tunnels, and mounting cynicism about the project. "The grim sense is that people do feel very angry and frightened at the same time," says James Recht, a clinical instructor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

BIG DIG

Carolyn Y. Johnson is a Globe staff reporter. E-mail: cjohnson@globe.com.

(Open-source digital art software)

+

(fake currency)

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(dealers, galleries, critics)

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the Media Lab's subversive experiment on the art market

TECH FOR ART'S SAKE

BY THERESA EVERLINE

RECENTLY THE 4-YEAR-OLD daughter of John Maeda, a professor at MIT's Media Lab, bought an expensive piece of art. "When I wasn't looking she bought something," sighs Maeda. "It cost 30 buraks!"

The girl's extravagant purchase took place on a website called OpenStudio (openstudio.media.mit.edu), developed by students and professors, including Maeda, at MIT's Physical Language Workshop, a design research group at the Media Lab. A collaborative experiment probing the relationship between art and commerce, OpenStudio allows its members to create digital art using Draw, an open-source software tool developed by the Media Lab students, and then to buy and sell the works within the OpenStudio community by means of a made-up currency called a burak (named after Burak Arkan, who just received his master's from the Media Lab and is one of the site's developers). Most pieces, it should be noted, cost significantly less than 30 buraks.

There's a whiff of mischief, and of the manifesto, about the site. In addition to the mundane purpose of providing a space for test-

Theresa Everline writes about art and cultural issues. She lives in Austin, Texas.

ing the software (and a database for storing the members' creations), the site is intended as a playfully subversive model of the real art world's financial transactions.

"It started because of a basic problem: What's the future economic survival for art?" explains Maeda, himself an artist and thinker praised by both the academic elite and technology enthusiasts. In other words, what if artists could easily and directly sell their works to earn money, without having to negotiate formal, hierarchical institutions?

For now, while the site is still in its development phase, one can join only by invitation from a current member. The core group of MIT students and faculty has invited family members, friends, and art-world associates, so that OpenStudio's 300 or so participants range from children to professionals. Members are given 50 buraks at the start, which can be used to buy or commission pieces. It's possible to act like an art dealer, focusing on buying and reselling, or like a starving artist, creating works without giving much thought to what the market wants.

The OpenStudio digital community thus mimics the "real" economic system. As art critic Dave Hickey and others have noted, the monetary value of art in the physical realm of

art dealers, galleries, and curators is arbitrary, determined by what people agree upon, based on exposure, exhibitions' buzz, and money paid by collectors. In OpenStudio, says Maeda, "If you're savvy, you can sell well. To us good business practices and good financial planning, it's just like the free market. People learn gradually why their work isn't selling."

New members sometimes assume they can get exorbitant amounts for their artwork, when the going rate is just a handful of buraks. "They say, 'It's not real money, so I can put whatever price on it I want,'" explains Arkan. "Usually after a few tries they realize it doesn't make sense to the community, and they adapt to the community. People start to set regular prices."

Currently up for sale are works that run the gamut from the funny and cartoonish, such as a piece titled "Penguin Shops for Melons," to the abstract and impressionistic. Members give their creations explanatory "tags," which can be concrete ("mountain") or abstract ("precarious"). "A tag creates discourse around the art piece and adds to the value," explains Arkan. For example, one member was collecting various works tagged "bloody," and for a time those were selling briskly. Arkan says he's attracted to pieces that use the Draw software's tools in

unusual ways. Maeda, for his part, just buys images that charm him.

Barbara Bloemink, the curatorial director of the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum and an OpenStudio member, is impressed primarily by the way the site allows people to use the technology to collaborate with and learn from each other. "In most cases museums and collectors will collect a new form of technology," she says. "But they're not using the technology itself." In contrast, OpenStudio's developers are "creating tools for the technology and also a world for it to live in. It allows people to be creators, collectors, and even I suppose entrepreneurs, all at the same time."

Of course, OpenStudio isn't likely to change the way physical objects such as sculptures and paintings are bought and sold. But as the experiment plays out—with plans to introduce other software tools for making photo-based work and videos—it could suggest that an alternate, if perhaps idealistic, economic model is possible—at least in the digital realm.

"The hope," says Maeda, "is that OpenStudio can create a notion that art can be freely traded in this digital medium, in a different way—without all the galleries and curators and boards of directors orchestrating the business of art."

