

Art and the Internet 1994 - 2014

Notes and Comments

I. Post Internet

Just as modernism concerned itself with the relationship between craft and the emergent technologies of its era, the most pressing condition underlying contemporary culture may be the omnipresence of the internet [...] this exhibition presents a broad survey of art created with a consciousness of the technological and human networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception. This work, primarily produced by artists living in New York, London, and Berlin, has been controversially defined as “post-internet.” [1]

8 This quote from the press release of the exhibition “Art Post-Internet”, curated by Karen Archey and Robin Peckham for the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing, says a lot about what internet related art has become in 2014, and how the discussion about it has developed during the last twenty years. The text might best be read by an early enthusiast for net art who perhaps retired to a Tibetan monastery or fell into a cryogenic sleep at the end of the twentieth century and would now like to catch up with the current conversation.

The first thing that such a reader would notice is the authoritative nature of the first sentence. Even the most conservative art critic is unlikely to question this stance today: in 2014, the internet is everywhere, can be accessed by massive numbers of people all over the world, and is affecting everything, from global economics to politics, from cultural production and dissemination to our private and public life. About 3 billion people have

yet to use the internet, but the internet population is growing fast in developing economies, and internet penetration nears saturation in developed countries. Baidu, a Chinese search engine, is today the fifth most visited site, according to the Alexa rank. [2] This may also explain why China is interested in an art “primarily produced by artists living in New York, London, and Berlin”, where the world of contemporary art has paid attention to this shift: Nicolas Bourriaud, Claire Bishop, David Joselit, Jennifer Allen, Boris Groys have written pages about it, Hans Ulrich Obrist has organised panels to discuss it, Massimiliano Gioni and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev have considered it while curating exhibitions. [3] The curatorial team for the “Art Post-Internet” exhibition underlines this change. Archey regularly writes for *Spike*, *Art-Agenda*, *Frieze*, *Art Review*, *Kaleidoscope*, even *Modern Painters*, and organised panels at the ICA, London and Tate Britain; Peckam has also written for *Arforum*, and for two years he ran a gallery in Hong Kong. Nerdy new media art curators have been replaced by contemporary art globetrotters. The second sentence is quite telling, too. When our time traveller left, there was little or no “internet awareness” in contemporary art: there was net art, and there was art that existed as though the internet was not there. Period. Today, an awareness of the internet seems to be so important that it becomes the main focus of the discourse, instead of the use of the internet as a medium.

The term “post-internet” needs some explanation, though. We can agree with most definitions of this controversial term that the internet is not over, of course, [4] but it is now a given for

many, and artists interested in it are not forced to do art that “functions only on the net and picks out the net or the ‘netmyth’ as a theme”, [5] but can do physical work and bring this discourse back to the gallery. Although most of the featured artists maintain an online presence, and do internet based works, there are no websites – and, more importantly, no technologies on show: most of the works are physical (objects, prints, installations, sculptures, even paintings) and, to use another label more successful in new media circuits, “post-digital”, i.e. re-materialised from the digital. [6]

This is a relatively recent move: since the early 2000s, an increasing number of artists with a focus on desktop-based practices decided, where possible, to leave the technologies at home when they were invited to exhibitions. Software was converted into prints, videos, installations; performative media hacks were documented and presented in set-ups inspired by the ways in which conceptual and performance art manifest themselves in physical space; and the early adopters of the “post-internet” label, [7] whose practice mainly consisted in appropriating and reframing internet content and playing with the defaults of desktop-based tools, naturally looked at video, print and installation as media to operate in physical space.

This was not primarily a market driven process, but the result of an attempt to adapt internet content and processes to the logics of physical space. We should not forget that the first “post internet” exhibition was done in 1997, by the net art collective etoy, when they decided to present the *Digital Hijack* at Ars Electronica as a huge installation of orange tubes

and a performance which restaged the way the online performance was orchestrated, instead of presenting its online traces. [8] When net artist and hacktivist Paolo Cirio, the winner of the Golden Nika in 2014 Ars Electronica Prix for the “Interactive Art” category, presents his net-based works as video documentation, printed ephemera and wall printed or projected infographics, he does it not to suit the market, but to adapt his storytelling to the peculiar language of the white cube. [9]

It would not be hard for our time traveller to see that this shift put internet-based art in close proximity to contemporary art. Although most of the artists featured in “Art Post-Internet” have been previously discussed as internet artists, some (Bernadette Corporation, Dara Birnbaum, Seth Price, Hito Steyerl) never were; and we should not ignore the fact that Post-Internet is the first internet related practice to be identified as a trend by the contemporary art world, to be supported by (and sometimes identified with) an international network of commercial galleries, [10] and to be discussed by art fair directors. [11] The war between digital culture and contemporary art has now reached the stage of the trojan horse.

If the post-internet debate helps us to understand how the relationship between internet based practices and the art world evolved along the last twenty years, what about the relationship between internet based art and its main environment, the internet? In what follows, we will briefly consider a few stories that may help us to delineate this change.

II. Hacktivism

At the turn of the millennium, when our time traveller left, the internet was perceived as a battlefield for an army of fighters struggling to keep the level of autonomy they first experienced online in the late nineties rather than an art world for a new avant garde. While the dotcom bubble and the increasing institutionalisation of online public space were mining this sense of freedom, artists with good technical skills, who had grown up on activist mailing lists such as *Nettime*, [12] used their hacking, networking and communication skills to attack companies and institutions, perform fake identities, make online protests, squat websites, spread viruses, violate copyright and privacy laws or simply make some noise. Keywords such as hacktivism (hacking + activism), artivism (art + activism) and media hacking were widely used in media circles. Then social networking came about, rising web giants like Google devised a way to not look evil, and while we were mass-distracted by YouTube videos and fancy MySpace accounts, the web became an increasingly regulated space. Artists started claiming that hacktivism was a performance and didn't need to be effective, apparently forgetting how much they enjoyed it when they were able to bring down government websites, hijack thousands of users, make people believe they were the Vatican or the WTO, and force the CIA to investigate them.

A comparison between *Vote-Auction* (2000) and *Google Will Eat Itself* (2005), by UBERMORGEN (the latter in collaboration with Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio), is telling. In 2000, a simple html website, some tactical skills and two brave guys were enough to persuade the US political authorities, media outlets

as large as CNN, investigation agencies and the public opinion that an immoral European company was selling the votes of American citizens, with the risk of compromising the US presidential elections, for months. [13] In 2005, an effective hack into the Google advertising system could only be delivered after the fact and with a well constructed narrative via press releases and installations, because as soon as Google and the audience became aware of it, it was blocked and rendered ineffective. [14]

Hactivism in art didn't cease to exist, but mostly became a test ground for imaginary solutions, rarely able to have an impact on the collective imagination. The time when an individual or a small group of people could use the internet as a tool to subvert existing structures was over. The term itself became unfashionable in art circuits, only to resurface, years later, in the subtitle of the documentary *We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists*, by Brian Knappenberger. [15] The movie tells the story of Anonymous, a massive movement of hackers which emerged on image sharing platforms such as 4chan [16] and gradually developed a political consciousness in order to preserve spaces for anonymity and freedom of speech on the internet. Famous for its fight against the church of Scientology and its support of Wikileaks and the Arab Spring, Anonymous effectively refreshes strategies first tested in artistic hacktivism, such as DDOS attacks, cybersquatting, information leaks and massive propaganda. But to do this, you need legions now.

III. Broadcast Yourself

The crisis of artistic hacktivism was related to two parallel processes that unrolled with the rise of social networking: the subsumption – and consequent weakening of the political potential – of the rhetorics of independent tactical media into online sharing platforms, and the development of an increasingly controlled online media space. In the late nineties, the bottom-up, many-to-many structure of the internet, and the increasing availability of personal media such as digital cameras and mobile phones, was perceived as a game-changing development by activists, capable of restructuring the former relationship between media and power. This optimism is well summarised in punk rock musician and activist Jello Biafra’s sentence “Don’t hate the media, become the media”, adopted by the international network Indymedia [17] as one of its slogans. Having a digital camera and an internet connection to hand was seen as a new way to fight against the establishment’s control over mass media, put to effective use by street activists during the anti-globalisation movements.

The rise of YouTube and social networking saw the gradual decline of independent media channels, mailing lists and forums. Even for an activist, YouTube is clearly a more powerful tool than Indymedia for the delivery of content to a broader audience; and, as Ethan Zuckerman explained in his famous “cute cat theory” talk in 2008, [18] general content platforms are harder to censor than activist media platforms: you can easily persuade people that you had to shut down a particular Indymedia node because it was delivering dangerous content, but you can’t shut

down YouTube, because you will cause a wider uprising when people realise that they can no longer publish and view cute cat videos. What happened with Wikileaks [19] proves that Zuckerberg was right; but there is a price to pay. In the process of moving from “become the media” to YouTube’s “broadcast yourself”, political agency gets watered down, and finally fades behind waves of selfishness and entertainment; cute cats and camwhores prevail, and everybody becomes the product of the services to which they have subscribed: a bunch of data and a record of attention to be sold for peanuts to an advertising agency that will place its ad over your successful political video. Autonomy has to be pursued within this framework, by interpreting and subtly subverting the stereotypes that the channels force onto you – as female artists like Petra Cortright, Ann Hirsch and Amalia Ulman do in their social media work with the trope of the camwhore; or outside of it, creating your own independent channels or using the few that still allow some degree of anonymity and freedom of expression, such as 4chan.

IV. Life Sharing

But places like this are now the exception rather than the rule. Most of us already went under the Caudin forks of the social web, willingly sharing our personal content with supposed friends – more or less aware of our privacy settings – and inadvertently sharing a huge amount of data that we are not even fully aware of producing – shopping records, surfing traces, etc. – with the companies that provide the service and, through them, with a wide range of advertising companies. Recently, the Digi-

tal Advertising Alliance's (DAA) launched a Self-Regulatory Program for Online Behavioral Advertising, [20] that allows people to opt out from online behavioural or interest-based advertising. Testing it, I realised that 76 among the 116 companies that participate in the program customise their ads for my browser. Sharing is no longer an option, and the attempt to protect one's privacy is mostly perceived as a move in a chess game one is destined to lose.

Back in 2000, during the golden age of net art, the Italian duo Eva and Franco Mattes - at the time still mostly known as 0100101110101101.org - started a three year long performance project called *Life Sharing*. Claiming - in what became a masterpiece of subversive affirmation - that "privacy is stupid", they allowed web visitors full access to the content of their computer - included their email traffic - through their website. Later on, in 2002, they added a new layer to the project by manually posting their coordinates to a map on the website through a GPS device. The statement currently available on their website reads:

"Working with a computer on a daily basis, over the years you will share most of your time, your culture, your relationships, your memories, ideas and future projects. With the passing of time a computer starts resembling its owner's brain. So we felt that sharing our computer was more than sharing a desktop or a book, more than File Sharing, something we called Life Sharing." [21]

The project was discussed as "data nudism" (Matthew Fuller) [22] and "abstract pornography" (Hito Steyerl) because at the time digital cameras were still not widely used, and what was exposed was mainly data. Fourteen years later, we all live in the

same glass cage. Mobile devices have to be carefully customised to prevent content being shared on some cloud service, or GPS locations being attached to every picture we post online. Meanwhile, maybe not everybody, but at least Obama, is checking our emails. [23]

V. The Death of the URL

With the massive move to social networking services, the utopian ideal of the web as a frontier to conquer, or a virgin land to colonise, faded out. Setting up a homepage had been like setting up a home place: you had to choose the land, buy it, design it carefully or build it from scratch; whatever you made in the end belonged to you, and was the result of a conscious decision, starting from the domain name. It was on this basis that *Name.Space* – to date, one of the few community attempts to participate in the evolution of the web by proposing new top level domains – started as an artistic project in 1996. Founded by Paul Garrin at a time when “many were spreading misinformation that large numbers of top-level domain names were either unfeasible or could cause harm and “break” the Internet, in order to maintain their market dominance and thwart competition from potential newcomers”, [24] *Name.Space* evolved into a company, facilitating some important innovations in internet history.

Websites, of course, still exist, but for new netizens,

setting up your own website is much less common than registering a social networking account. Why do I need a website (and an email) when I have Facebook? If the content management systems popularised by blogging services marked the “ikea-isation” of home pages, an account can be compared to an hotel room, or to an apartment in a gated community. Nothing belongs to you any more – you accept that you live in a place designed by somebody else, with little control over the choice of the furniture and few or no rights to change or customise it; you subscribe – often without reading them – to the service “terms and conditions” and you align your behaviour to them.

Unable to interfere with this new ecology of the web, recent net-based art often comments on it, in an attempt to raise our awareness about this shift in the public environment of the internet. *The Death of the URL* (2013) by Dutch artist Constant Dullaart is a static webpage presented in a 38 characters domain made only of “x” characters. [25] An algorithm makes the website constantly refresh itself, filling up the browser cache – which is the truly dynamic part of the work – to the point of a browser crash. As Louisa Elderton wrote in *Frieze* magazine, “the URL is powerfully presented as a sentimental cipher, suggesting a freer Internet from the past, where software companies were less involved in mediating our search habits.” [26]

VI. AFK

“We don’t use the expression IRL [...] We don’t like that expression. We say AFK - Away From Keyboard. We think that the internet is for real.” [27]

Against the backdrop of this evolution, a broader shift in the perception of the relationship between the internet and reality, and between mediated and actual reality, has taken place. The internet is no longer perceived as an outer space, the cyberspace imagined in the eighties and nineties as the new frontier that led so many people, in the early days, to add starry backgrounds to their homepages, as Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied pointed out in their book *Digital Folklore* [28] and beautifully portrayed in works such as *Some Universe* (2002). [29] As Peter Sunde, one of the funders of The Pirate Bay, noticed, the expression IRL (“in real life”, as opposed to online), which emerged on internet chat rooms, became rapidly obsolete as we realised that we spend more time on keyboards (or touch screens) than away from them. Or, in the words of Gene McHugh:

“What we mean when we say ‘Internet’ became not a thing in the world to escape into, but rather the world one sought escape from... sigh... It became the place where business was conducted, and bills were paid. It became the place where people tracked you down.”

This quote, from the introduction to McHugh’s book *Post Internet*, [30] bring us back to our point of departure. It’s 2014, and all art is post-internet to some degree. Which doesn’t mean, of course, that net based art is over, quite

the contrary – because the internet has not ceased to be a public place full of conflicts, and is still to be shaped. This is a mission that cannot be outsourced to companies and institutions.

This text has been commissioned for and first published in *Megarave - Metarave*, exhibition catalogue, Kunsthaus Langenthal / WallRiss Friburg 2014, pp. 37 - 46.

[1] The press release is available on *E-flux*: www.e-flux.com/announcements/art-post-internet/.

[2] For some detailed statistics, check out this presentation, made by the British consulting firm yibu in April 2014: www.slideshare.net/yibu/the-emerging-global-web.

[3] A comprehensive list of references would be impossible here; cf. at least: Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Relational Aesthetics*, Lukas and Sternberg, New York 2009; David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton University Press 2012; Boris Groys, *Art Power*, The MIT Press, London - Cambridge 2008; Claire Bishop, "Digital Divide. Contemporary Art and New Media", in *Artforum*, September 2012; and Massimiliano Gioni, "The Encyclopedic Palace", in VVAA, *The Encyclopedic Palace. 55th International Art Exhibition: La Biennale di Venezia*, Marsilio, Venice 2013.

[4] Cf. at least Gene McHugh, *Post Internet*, Link Editions, Brescia 2011, p. 5.

[5] Joachim Blank, "What is netart ;-)?", 1996, online at www.irational.org/cern/netart.txt.

[6] Cf. "A Peer-Reviewed Journal About Post-Digital Research", online at www.aprja.net.

[7] The term post-internet was used by Marisa Olson around 2006 in reference to her work and that of her peers. Cf. Michael Connor, "What's Postinternet Got to do with Net Art?", in *Rhizome*, November 1, 2013, online at <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/nov/1/postinternet/> for an extensive bibliography.

[8] The *Digital Hijack* was a massive online performance in which web users were hijacked from search engines to the etoy website by manipulating search results for specific popular keywords. For more information and references, cf. www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/the-digital-hijack/.

[9] Cf. <http://paolocirio.net>.

[10] Cf. Brian Droitcour, "Why I Hate Post-Internet Art", in *Culture Two*, March 31, 2014, online at <http://culturetwo.wordpress.com/2014/03/31/why-i-hate-post-internet-art/>: "The scenes that have been cultivated around Berlin galleries Kraupa-Tuskany and Societe are bad, too. If it's at Higher Pictures gallery in New York I probably won't like it. If it's in a group show curated by

Agatha Wara I'm sure I'll hate it. If it's on a cool Tumblr I can't be bothered."

[11] Cf. Andrew M. Goldstein, "Frieze London Co-Director Matthew Slotover on the Rise of the Art Fair", in *Artspace*, October 15, 2013, online at www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/frieze_art_fair_mattthew_slotover_interview.

[12] Founded in 1995 by Geert Lovink and Pit Schultz as a space for a new form of critical discourse on and with the net. Nettime is still an active mailing list, and its archives are available online at www.nettime.org.

[13] *Vote Auction* is still documented online at <http://vote-auction.net/>.

[14] *GWEI (Google Will Eat Itself)* is still documented online at www.gwei.org.

[15] *We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists*. Documentary, director: Brian Knappenberger; US/UK 2012.

[16] 4chan is an online imageboard founded in 2003, originally used for the posting of pictures and discussion of manga and anime; users don't need to register and mostly post anonymously, and contents are not archived. For more info, visit www.4chan.org and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4chan>.

[17] Founded in 1999, the Independent Media Center (also known as Indymedia) is a global participatory network of journalists reporting on political and social issues. Cf. www.indymedia.org.

[18] Cf. Ethan Zuckerman, "The Cute Cat Theory Talk at ETech", in *My Heart's In Accra*, March 8, 2008, www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/03/08/the-cute-cat-theory-talk-at-etech/.

[19] Wikileaks' website was closed in 2008 after a Californian judge's injunction, and in 2010 Mastercard and Paypal froze the organisation's account to boycott donations. For more info, cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WikiLeaks>.

[20] Cf. www.aboutads.info/choices/.

[21] Cf. <http://0100101101010101.org/life-sharing/>.

