an internet of things

RICHARD GRAYSON

Some thirty-five years after Tim Berners Lee, sitting in his office at the Cern Laboratories in France, had the notion to combine hypertext with both the Transmission Control Protocol and the Domain Name system and invent the Internet, the contemporary artworld has picked up on its operations big time. It has become excited by the ways that the World Wide Web and digital technology shape our experiences. From Warsaw to Beijing, from the *Frieze Art Fair* to forums at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Serpentine Galleries to the Whitney, galleries and gallerists, writers and curators are engaged in debating and representing the productions of what is being called ''Post-Internet Art".

Over the last few months in different exhibitions, I have come across works and projects by Hito Steyerl, Ed Atkins, Simon Denny and Ryan Trecartin, which have been talked about in terms of the "post-internet", exhibitions that have bought artists together under titles, which in one way or another echo the phrase in their titles. *Art, Post-Internet* at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing in 2014 featured works from Dara Birnbaum, Corey Arcangel and Hito Steyerl, Harm van der Dorpel, Simon Denny, Katja Novitskova and Kari Altmann, while *Art After the Internet* in Warsaw exhibited works by DIS, Harm van der Dorpel, Ed Atkins, Ryan Trecartin and others. DIS, a New York-based collective have been approached to curate the next *Berlin Biennale*. The release announcing this states;

> *The cultural interventions of DIS are manifest across a range of media and platforms, from site-specific museum and gallery exhibitions... to ongoing online projects which most notably include DIS Magazine, a virtual platform that examines art, fashion, music, and culture, constructing and supporting new creative practices. Recent ventures include*

DISimages, 2013, a fully operational stock photography agency that enlists artists to produce images available for private and commercial use, and DISown, a retail venture aimed at expanding creative economies. Across its various endeavours, DIS explores the tension between popular culture and institutional critique, while facilitating projects for the most public and democratic of all forums – the Internet.[1]

In *DISown – Not For Everyone* (2014), DIS collaborated with over thirty artists like Ryan Trecartin, Bjarne Melgaard and Amalia Ulman to create a month-long exhibition in New York where, "Collectors, consumers and viewers alike can view (and in some cases, purchase) salad bowls from Hood By Air or custom body pillows by Jon Rafman, all within a gallery environment that pretends to be a store." Or maybe it's the other way around.

"In the art market, artists' names take on the characteristics of luxury brands and artworks act as high-end retail goods", says DISown co-curator Agatha Wara. "DISown tests the current status of the art object and presents a new mode for artist production."[2] Part of the problem of getting your head around what might be meant by 'Post-Internet' is the contradiction in the term: after all we're not 'post' the internet in any discernible sense. It's still there, all around us—at least if we're anglo-phones in the West—and we're using it all the time, and one of the riffs running through the concept is internet ubiquity... The rationale for the exhibition in Beijing, curated by Karen Archey and Robin Peckham explains: "This understanding of the post-internet refers not to a time 'after' the internet, but rather to an internet state of mind—to think in the fashion of the network. In the context of artistic practice, the category of the post-internet describes an art object created with a consciousness of the networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception." They go on to say:

> *Just as twentieth-century modernism was in large part defined by the relationship between craft and the emergent technologies of manufacturing, mass media, and lens-based imagery, the most pressing condition underlying contemporary culture today —from artistic practice and social theory to our quotidian language— may well be the omnipresence of the internet... this exhibition presents a broad survey of art that is controversially defined as "post-internet," which is to say, consciously created in a milieu that assumes the centrality of the network, and that often takes everything from the physical bits to the social ramifications of the internet as fodder. From the changing nature of the image to the circulation of cultural objects, from the politics of participation to new understandings of materiality, the interventions presented under this rubric attempt nothing short of the redefinition of art for the age of the internet.*[3]

People who have been following the long engagement of artists working with and in the realms of the networked and the digital, some of which predate the birth of the internet itself—the Australian Network of Art and Technology for instance had its first iteration in 1984—may ask why is this happening now. Artists, programmers, writers and thinkers have been involved in a radical exploration and critique of new technological modes of production, understanding and dissemination for decades, to the blanket indifference of mainstream arbiters and exhibitors of contemporary art. However, rather than being articulated and (dis)embodied by shifting and novel experimental media, as happened with many of the earlier investigations by artists seeking a radical engagement with technology to allow new ways of operating outside the exchange of commodities and capital, the current wave of work is far less located in the technology itself. It tends to look pretty much like 'art', be this sculpture, manifesto-type text, autistic design or post-Pop assemblage. In those cases where the technology is in your face—in the camera-phone, YouTube aesthetic of Ryan Trecartin's installations, or the shiny CGI videos of Ed Atkins—it has a signifying function, as if to say 'look!' this art work is made using the technology that is also shaping the world out there! So this isn't just about tech, it's about the 'real'! The diverse formal outcomes may support the re-iterated thesis that technology is now seamlessly insinuated into all areas of production and embedded into the material world, which informs these art works. It also has the useful outcome that these productions can also get on with the (relatively unproblematized) functions of being cool 'art objects', which operate in the spaces of the white cube and the commercial gallery. Post-Internet is the first internet-related practice to be identified as a trend by the contemporary art world and supported by an international network of commercial galleries.

Such shifts obviously track the movements of technology, it is smaller, atomized, absorbed and integrated into all sorts of objects; we're talking now about an internet of 'things', and its ubiquity means it has become integrated into artists' productive processes. A visit to an art school or an artist's studio, more often than not centres on the computer screen, the place where projects and works are not only displayed, but have been assembled in the digital space to be actualized elsewhere when needed. In media that can operate in time and space outside of the computer, as digital images, as 3D prints, or video. This mode of work has been accelerated by economic factors. In the case of art schools, the use of computers as a site of production allows institutions to allocate less real estate space to the students, sometimes going as far as 'hot-desking', so that spaces can have many users, thereby boosting the economic efficiency of the institution, an idea far from the traditional constructions of the artist's studio. Of course, the temporary clients of the studio use technologies that allow migration and do not require a lot of space—the computer rather than the canvas and stretcher, and so patterns of behaviour develop and reinforce. Once an artist leaves the academy, it is usually to work in cities where similar dynamics prevail, conurbations where physical space is an increasingly expensive and rare commodity. Such models of production also serve to subtly privilege the operations of the individuals or institutions, which have the resources to provide the physical space for the concrete manifestation of the digital labour, enmeshing the gallery (and its economic requirements) intimately as part of the delivery process of the practice.

The operations of the internet have also shifted. From its early promises of operating as a platform of open communication beyond legislation and control, a technology that offered the possibilities of a revolution of knowledge and social hierarchy, it has become an ubiquitous medium for messaging, shopping and surveillance. Images of objects and commodities are circulated and viewed, which at the click of a button and the sustraction of money from a bank account, become materialized and delivered to a doorstep as possessions and components of an international economy. Users and purchasers document and display their lives and each interaction is tracked and recorded, commodified and monetized. Their actions and social relations are articulated in the network, generating 'content' for the site, generated (for free) that has value to other parties and drives the multi-million dollar stock market-traded operations of the digital corporations. Producers become elided with consumers, and feedback loops—between the individual and the networked platforms that operate as sites where the individual communicates and which simultaneously communicate to the individual—shape the subsequent behaviour of the individual.

Some of the artists working in recent web-inflected practices work with the logics of these operations in ways that would seem startling to those pioneers of net-art inspired by post-Marxist/critical theory or anarchist tendencies. Katja Novitskova makes sculptural installations using stock images from the internet. She focuses on digital photographs of animals and landscapes—both of earth and other planets—as well as graphic forms: logos, diagrams, graphs and arrows. These are then

brought back into the physical world by being printed onto aluminium panels or turned into objects, to stand in combination in the gallery space. According to *Frieze* magazine, "Novitskova's works demonstrate and literalize a contemporary shift in which digitally circulated images come to take on lives of their own, evolving and moving forward with their own agency. No longer mere representations of nature, penguins and giraffes become representations of the image coming to life."[4] She is also the author of the *Post-Internet Survival Guide* (2010), which has become a reference point in the debates around the label. This was a book and an installation, which encouraged collaborators to believe that being online should be treated as a new terrain for habitation, and as a space that might allow a renegotiation of ways of being human. The project was collected under headings such as 'Learn Basic Skills' and 'Remember Where You Are'. She has written;

> *My own series of sculptures,* Approximations *(2012–ongoing), is an attempt to visualize new products for the economic expansion, which will inevitably follow the current global crisis. Instead of showing the formal elements of these future brands, I propose certain emotional/neurochemical reactions that they might trigger in the human psyche. My tools are both the Internet and a neurological bridge to our ancestral realities – my brain… What the history of life on Earth tells us is that climatic catastrophes and mass extinction are always followed by the expansion of new forms. What will be the forms of the post-austerity and new-prosperity world (from species to art works), and where will we locate the main sources of growth?*[5]

In this strange, neo-liberal Darwinism we might feel as if the internal logics of the web —as currently constituted—are internalized and introjected and then returned into the world. It is becoming a given that these platforms and exchanges represent not only new forms of economic activity but new constructions of individual and social identity, a rupture in human relations, which is both essential and generational. Massimiliano Gioni, Artistic Director of Fondazione Nicola Trussardi in Milan and the curator of the 2013 *Venice Biennale,* said that Ryan Trecartin's 2007 video *I-Be Area* opened up a world he knew nothing about. "It was like a cultural watershed... I felt this was the voice of a different age and a different time, a different sexuality, a different kind of behaviour. There's this idea that a character can be many people at the same time. And the act of communication becomes the subject of his videos. We're all trying to communicate, and what we communicate about is less and less relevant. When I watch his videos, I feel a speeded-up version of what we're all doing."[6]

In the Venice exhibition, Trecartin —in collaboration with Lizzie Fitch—built an installation combining different video works shown on a number of screens. Although shot at different times, they shared locations and actors and featured groups of young people partying, shrieking out, doing the sort of weird shit that young people do, and which they now video and post on social-media. The works develop and script these actions to take on shifting properties, from being engaging and cute to being utterly feral, quotidian and other-worldly, malicious and knowingly erotic. Alliances are generated, identities shift, there's an orgiastic energy and things keep on getting broken, smashed and hit with hammers by characters chugging energy drinks. The footage is choreographed and re-articulated in the editing with a head-spinning energy and a knowing kinetic edge. Voices have a Minnie-Mouse edge, texts flash, images glitch and stutter and windows within windows generate and swipe. In its native state (i.e. the sort of footage that this footage draws on/echoes/maybe to a degree *is,)* these images weren't primarily intended to be screened in a public space with the Prada-hipsters of the international contemporary art world swishing by; they were to be displayed on a computer, to be 'shared' either with friends in peer-to-peer communities, or to friends that are as yet un-met on other arenas of other social media. Trecartin reframes the material into the spaces of contemporary art and art practice. He refers to the works as movies and foregrounds the extent to which they are written, scripted and designed to work in ways that draw on other high art practices, poetry as much as film. In the commentary around the work much significance is given to the posting of the footage on YouTube and Vimeo in addition to its incorporation into large sculptural installations. As far as Trecatin is concerned, this is to demonstrate that there is more than one way to approach and experience the practice. It also usefully signals that he is using contemporary platforms, which operate outside the constraints of the traditional operations of the art-market and galleries, thereby reinforcing the work's identity as an artefact of a new cultural space, which adds lustre and particularity, especially for buyers and curators still *in* the traditional operations of the art-market and galleries and for whom these platforms are still to some degree exotic. So despite such innovations, this practice gets represented by a blue chip American dealer and proudly shown by millionaire arms dealer collectors, such as the Zabludowicz collection in London.

In contrast Ed Atkin's installations focus on the individual, or in the case of his recent vast, multi-screen work *Ribbons* at the Serpentine Gallery in London, an avatar of an individual, called Dave. Dave is a computer generated and 3D modelled, naked figure of a young man who apparently looks quite a lot like Ed. We see Dave drink, as he sits at tables stubbing out cigarettes in overflowing ashtrays. Dave soliloquizes in a woozy reflective stream of consciousness way and sings, a varied repertoire, varying from Purcell to Randy Newman. Sometimes in the background music plays, Richard and Linda Thompson's *Down Where the Drunkards Roll*. It's a sort of boho-garret world through which Dave moves; he's moody, he's getting drunk and smoking lots of cigs and he's sort of deep in a sort of incoherent way. At the end Dave lays his head on the ashy stained table and the shiny, skinhead volume of his cranium deflates, as if this moody monologue has finally voided his brain. It's an enclosed solipsistic universe and were it not digital, you feel that you might be able to smell the socks and the self-pity. And here of course lies the trick, the hinge around which the work rotates. All this subjectivity, all this searching, all this expression of self is a simulacrum, as Dave is an avatar, which to some people is tremendously exciting.

The polymorphous, perverse activities of Trecatin's actors, and the angry and sensitive adolescent musings of Dave echo previous representations of the young in the twentieth century avant-garde and the wider culture. Trecartin's gurning painted faces, the intertwinings and enclosed exchanges, recall the films of Harmony Korine—*Gummo* (1997) and *Trash Humpers* (2009), or Larry Clark, or the Warhol factory films or *Flaming Creatures* (1963) by Jack Smith, or the airless, incestuous eroticisms of Bataille's *Story of The Eye* (1928) or distantly the queer, ecstatic demimonde of Jean Genet. Ed Atkins draws on romantic iterations of doomed youth, the *poète maudit*, the eternal misunderstood, a dying digital Chatterton but

this time with punk attitude. The earlier texts and films worked as bulletins from enclosed hermetic zones, an underground of social, erotic, pharmaceutical and psychological actions enacted by those other than the bourgeois adult. Even in their representation they (seemingly) resisted or denied the mainstream gaze and operated as some sort of a reproach—for lost innocence, wildness, sexuality. Freedom, impulsiveness, whatever—and as a threat and a challenge to the constructions and conventions of adulthood. These readings were animated by the ghosts of Rousseau and his noble savage and given charge by the investigations of Freud and his constructions of the Unconscious and the id.

Trecatin and Atkins draw on these historic constructions, but articulate them at a time when all such activity is made immediately visible, in fact in many ways only exists because it is made visible. The internet though, means that contemporary identity increasingly is an amalgam of data tags. In a cybernetic relationship with a public that constantly reaffirms them, the actions and their representations become part of the exchanges of a sort of atomized celebrity, rather than a social or political force.

Over the last century, the demographic shifts of the post-war baby boom meant that youth cultures became significant forces in the West, first as models of identity, culture and social possibility and latterly as markets and groups of consumers. Now the West is witnessing another shift in its demographic, as the baby boomer generation, now outnumbering the young, moves into old age, having amassed wealth and property and the (new) young are increasingly excluded from political debate and the operations of capital. Youth unemployment in the West has soared since the 'Global Financial Crisis', access to money and property and education is increasingly rationed and youth participation in traditional political mechanisms, such as voting, is reduced. Public policy is directed at the interests of an affluent grey vote and above this, is shaped by the interests of a generation of international rich, who have concentrated and expanded their wealth and power. It is from this small class that the important consumers of contemporary art are drawn and whose needs increasingly determine its operations. Given these exclusions from the physical or political world, the digital arena becomes a mechanism where the cultures of the young are articulated and a stage where they are enacted and seen.

Despite this wide-spectrum erosion of political agency and economic marginalisation, the *idea* of 'youth' remains a valued commodity. Perhaps this is owing to the power that the foundation myths of the baby boomers exert. It is at this intersection of political powerlessness and psychic/social resonance that much of the post-internet work operates. The arenas of technology seem to operate in contradiction to the wider economic and social depredations. The people working in start-up companies, designing apps, generating content etc, are young (even if their shareholders and financial backers are not), they are affluent, and the arena in which they work is seen as the primary site for future economic expansion. Their values and attitudes become the gods and goddesses, the graces and virtues of late capitalism.

Over the period of the emergence of 'post-internet', the phrase "digital native" has gained currency. First coined by Marc Prensky in 2001, it denominates a person who, since gaining awareness has known no other world than that which is digital and networked. This is in contrast to a "digital settler"; a person who grew up in the analogue world, but who has driven developments in the digital sphere and the "digital immigrant"—someone, who may use email or social networks, but remains insecure and foreign in these strange new realms. Given the inevitable fact that the non-natives are going to die sooner than the rest, it is perhaps the last moment that such a neat generational divide, with all its exciting romantic resonances, can be constructed in the art market place.

No matter what else the Post-Internet may be doing, it is working as a branding device. It allows the art world to act out much of the rhetoric of an avant-garde at a time that no avant-garde can operate, allowing earlier models of youth, of rebellion, otherness, innovation, on-the-edgeness and revolution to be re-launched and re-articulated through the prism of the operations of the digital universes. And in doing so, they seem to be following the strange logics of commodification that play in the digital economy. The (post-internet) art arena becomes a place where these ideas are represented and aestheticized, as affectless signifiers, becoming representations of themselves that become commodities.

Notes

[1] http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/dis-appointed-curatorial-team-of-the-9th-berlin-biennale-for-contemporary-art-35986

[2] http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/19049/1/disown-reveals-the-new-normal-in-this-infomercial-video

[3] http://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/art-post-internet/

[4] http://frieze-magazin.de/archiv/kritik/katja-novitskova/?lang=en

[5] http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/beginnings-ends/

[6] http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/03/24/experimental-people

Page 75
Katja Novitskova
Patterns of Activation (installation view), 2014
Photo courtesy the artist and Gallery Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin

Above
Hito Steyerl
Is the Museum a Battlefield (video still), 2013
Photo courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps, New York and Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam