A Critical Analysis of Art in the Post-Internet Era

Mark Gens

The ability of technology to transform art, artist, and art world is not a new concept. The impact of digital technology and the Internet is yet another dynamic force. What is taking place is a redefinition of authorship, collaboration, and materiality as well as a need for new theoretical and aesthetic notions of how – and where – art is made, viewed, marketed and collected. These factors, the ever-expanding World Wide Web, and the pervasive individual ownership of networked devices by most of the privileged world, have ushered in what some refer to as the Post-Internet era. Rather than focusing on the validity of the highly-debated term “Post-Internet” this paper will focus on the developmental shift to which the term refers. This shift is an important marker in the movement of ideas and criticality, culture, and context. It is necessary to consider the digital art predecessors to the Post-Internet era. However, the exhibition Art Post-Internet, held at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, China in the spring of 2014, is vital for its well-articulated curatorial perspective. Although the significance of the Post-Internet era is still being determined and defined at this moment, Art Post-Internet has made great strides in solidifying its look, methods, context and meaning. Post-Internet is not the end of an era, but rather a poignant marker with lasting potential in the continuum of art history.

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The ability of technology to transform art, artist, and art world is not a new concept. Photography, cinema, and video have each had a profound impact on art during the past century. The impact of digital technology and the Internet is yet another dynamic force. It’s not a simple case of artists using technology as part of their practice or even the vast distribution potential of the Web, though these aspects are vital. What is taking place is a redefinition of several factors regarding how and where art is made, viewed, analyzed, and monetized. For example, authorship of a work of art may now be shared between artist and viewer. Viewers are no longer just passive lookers, instead they are participants who collaborate through interactivity and post-production. Another way in which traditional notions of authorship are challenged is in the prevalent downloading and re-purposing of images and texts from seemingly endless, and sometimes uncredited, internet sources. In addition, work that relies on specific hardware and software has presented complex problems for art institutions, the art market and collectors. Older technologies must be preserved in order to make older work viewable. And, how does one assign value to source code or virtual reality? These factors, to name only a few, plus the ever-expanding World Wide Web and the individual ownership of networked devices by most of the privileged world, have ushered in what some refer to as the “Post-Internet era”. New media artist and theorist Marisa Olson first referred to the concept Post-Internet in a 2006 interview in *Time Out* magazine:

What I make is less art ‘on’ the Internet than it is art ‘after’ the Internet. It’s the yield of my compulsive surfing and downloading. I create performances, songs, photos, texts, or installations directly derived from materials on the Internet or my activity there (Cornell, 2011).

Olson’s statement made clear a new relationship between artist and networked technology as a pervasive new societal condition. This novel and ubiquitous condition exists in the space of the World Wide Web where every day many of us get information, look at images, listen to music, watch movies and television, participate in blogs, view websites, write emails, play games, access scholarly writings, and curate and engage in art exhibits. Thus, the Post-Internet art world is not merely using technology, it is immersed in technology. The Post-Internet art world uses the network, but is also an entity in an immeasurable network. “Post-” whatever epochs seem to occur more and more frequently. Rather than focusing on the validity of the highly-debated term “Post-Internet” this paper will focus on the developmental shift to which the term refers. This shift is an important marker in the movement of ideas and criticality, culture and context.

The immediate precursor to Post-Internet art was Net Art. The only place viewers could engage Net Art was on the Internet. Net Art’s appearance reflected the technology of the time and was often viewed on an early Mac’s monochrome monitor: green glowing text on a black background. In other cases, Net Art took advantage of the glitches of the new technology to present abstract works with a very computer tech feel. Although utilizing cutting edge technology it appeared rudimentary and out of place in the art world. The work looked drastically different from what art viewers were accustomed to seeing. Nonetheless, some Net Art very successfully addresses issues of art history, politics, language, and connectivity. One notable example is wwwwwww.jodi.org (1995). Upon
opening the site, one finds what appears to be a jumble of ASCII coding. The initial image, a mix of glowing green punctuation marks and numerals blinking against a dark background, is usually interpreted as errors or a failed attempt at coding, perhaps even a glitch in the software. However, for those who knew how to access the source code, an ASCII drawing of an atomic bomb was discovered. Rhizome founder Mark Tribe writes,

Jodi.org can be seen as a formalist investigation of the intrinsic characteristics of the Internet as a medium. But it operates on a conceptual level as well. In addition to experiments in glitch aesthetics, between correctly constructed HTML tags, the artists had inserted a diagram of a hydrogen bomb, as if to explode expectations about the Web as a medium (Tribe, 2007).

Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans, the artists behind wwwwww.jodi.org, reveal aspects of how the Internet is constructed – code, software, pixels, animation – show us an aesthetic and conceptual potential that comments on what the Internet is and what it will become. In regards to the art market, Net Art’s ephemeral existence posed many challenges; Net Art is no less than a radical alteration of the traditions of art practice, art viewing, art collecting, and art institutions. (Miranda, 2014).

In contrast, the evolution of Post-Internet art has sought to exist both on the Internet and in the real world. The real-world location speaks critically to the role of the digital in today’s art world and – perhaps to a fault – plays into the traditional hierarchy of art as commodity in the white cube. What was once practically impossible to commodify, market, or own (i.e. Net Art), now exists in tandem with a tangible, sought after collectibles. Beyond that, many museums and galleries no longer shy away from exhibiting digital art. Some even collect and maintain the appropriate technology to make sure the digital version can be exhibited in the future. Video artist Constant Dullart writes:

Sometimes it feels like Futurism all over again, made with Photoshop and promoted through Facebook to be shown in a white cube. These sculptures and prints will soon fill the pages of our favourite art blogs, and they will look just great. That is what they were meant to do, with and simultaneously without irony (Beginnings + Ends, 2014).

Dullart’s opinion is cynical but tame compared to Brian Droitcour’s scathing article about Post-Internet art published in Art In America. Droitcour sees Post-Internet as a poorly articulated, unsubstantiated, hipster subculture, photo-op… and not much more. “Post-Internet defaults to an art about the presentation of art,” he writes, “playing to the art-world audience’s familiarity with the gallery as a medium or environment for art, as well as with the conventions of presenting promotional materials online” (Droitcour, 2014). If we are, as Dullart and Droitcour suggest, right
back where we started in the whitewashed hierarchy of traditional art markets, I wonder what cultural, societal, political, and artistic shifts are marked by the Post-Internet era.

Although these opinions are worthy of consideration, they do not fully explore Post-Internet, they only tell part of the story. Droitcour claims that no one has been able to articulate the meaning of Post-Internet “with much precision” (Droitcour, 2014). Yet several artists and theorists alike have considered the subject. It is undeniable that we now live in an era where networks, links, sharing, access, format, and virtuality are part of our everyday experience and language. Volumes of images are routinely coded, seen, appropriated, manipulated, and redistributed. This amounts to a revolution in our experience of space, the status of the individual, the role of authorship, and our relationship to images. We live our lives in both the network and in the real world; if we can, why can’t art? Post-Internet adeptly critiques what has gone before and, at the same time, contextualizes our present state of existence. David Joselit, preferring the term “after art” to Post-Internet writes:

The work’s power lies in its staging of a performative mode of looking, through which the single image and the network are visible at the same time […] What results in the ‘era after art’ is a new kind of power that art assembles through its heterogeneous formats. Art links social elites, sophisticated philosophy, a spectrum of practical skills, a mass public, a discourse of attributing meaning to images, financial speculation and assertion of national and ethnic identity (Joselit, 2013, Pages 39, 91).

The art market and the white cube are, in the Post-Internet world, just nodes in an expansive network that reaches far beyond the contexts of traditional art and exhibition.

Let’s consider Brian Droitcour’s example of Kari Altmann’s piece *Huellblauu* (2008-12). The piece is composed of a light blue (hellblau) kiddie pool filled with water (HeK, 2012). In the water and scattered outside the perimeter of the pool Altmann has placed broken chunks of concrete covered with corporate logos, film stills and photos, all of which use this shade of blue. Droitcour’s description of her installation (as exhibited at Envoy Enterprises in New York) is rife with aesthetic put downs, “dingy,” “inexpertly assembled,” “flat,” “bad,” etc. (Droitcour, 2014). But judging art on aesthetic merits alone is archaic. Nowhere does he discuss meaning or idea or text or language or context. Later in his article he mentions that he saw an image of the installation on Altmann’s website which he describes as “vibrant,” and “good” (Droitcour, 2014). But judging art on aesthetic merits alone is archaic. Nowhere does he discuss meaning or idea or text or language or context. Later in his article he mentions that he saw an image of the installation on Altmann’s website which he describes as “vibrant,” and “good” (Droitcour, 2014). Almost too conveniently this justifies his assertion that the work is merely a photo-op. Missing from his critique is vital information such as how this blue is a very particular shade of blue often used in advertising, logos and gaming; hellblau is a corporate go-to color. In Altmann’s own words it’s, “an interface for control, distance, power, fetishization, lust, and omnipresent friendliness that acts as a sweet, high-pitched mask for deeper intentions” (HeK, 2012). It appears that Droitcour’s obsessive need to
dismiss Post-Internet art has blinded him to the deeper and provocative meaning of Altmann’s *Helleblau*. 

As a counter point to Droitcour, Post-Internet artist Kevin Bewersdorf, whose work includes video, photography, objects, net art, and gallery exhibits, speaks directly to the issue of aesthetics and meaning, “I care very little about the material world, and I’m completely certain that the most profound experiences in life can’t be contained by gallery walls, so the art object in a ‘gallery space’ for me can only represent a limitation, a disappointment. I try to deal with this by presenting the object itself as pathetic and mediocre, but the information it conducts as sacred” (McHugh, 2011, Page 41). Art critic and curator Gene McHugh responds favorably to Bewersdorf: “By reducing the sculpture’s physical appearance to kitsch, but contextualizing it as the product of a ‘sacred’ Internet surf, Bewersdorf is able to say something about art that goes beyond technology: the aura of an art object is often not its phenomenological properties, but rather its testimony to a creative practice” (McHugh, 2011). McHugh’s critical insight directs us to a more enlightened path where we can look for - and hopefully find – clues to the meaningfulness of Post-Internet art. 

One of the most concerted efforts to establish what is Post-Internet art was the exhibition *Art Post-Internet* at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, China in the spring of 2014. Curators Karen Archey and Robin Peckham write in the exhibition catalog: 

this exhibition presents a broad survey of art that is 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 (Archey et al. 2014).

The catalog itself is a Post-Internet work: a comprehensive, free, downloadable PDF that includes text, images, biographies and artist interviews. Each download is individually numbered, suggesting both its specificity to the downloader and keeping count of the number of catalogs viewed. *Art Post-Internet* is a well installed exhibit of two- and three-dimensional works. Some of the artwork appears handmade while others

Kevin Bewersdorf *Mandala* 2008 Animated GIF

have a more technological look. The catalog’s authors claim that the exhibition allows for, “substantive commentary and conversation” around the issues of “internet policy, mass clandestine surveillance, data mining, the physicality of the network, the post-human body, information dispersion and the open source movement” (Archey et al., 2014). Their ability to emphasize the multiple meanings and content of Post-Internet art and place that meaning in a continuum of art history was a very conscious effort to solidify the distinctive nature of the movement, “By contextualizing post-internet art within theory and art history, we hope to elude the inevitable relegation of these new positions to a fading trend” (Archey et al., 2014). Although most of the works were made in the four years preceding the exhibition, a few date back to the early 2000s and one piece, Dara Birnbaum’s Computer Assisted Drawings: Proposal for Sony Corporation, dates back to 1992-1993. Birnbaum’s piece is comprised of four expertly machined, metal fasteners that are attached to the wall. Stacked in each fastener are four pieces of Plexiglas on which a computer assisted drawing has been printed, one in each of the CMYK palette. The Plexiglass appears to be the size and shape of the screen on a Mac of the same period. Computer Assisted Drawings uses new technology and speaks about new technology. As computers were entering our personal day-to-day lives, the new technology was sure to change the ways in which we conceive of and create everything, including art. The work is aesthetically reminiscent of a Donald Judd, but profoundly reflects the shift from industry to technology.

It is not until one begins to look more closely at the work and read the catalog descriptions that one truly begins to understand what specifically makes all of these works Post-Internet. Materiality is often the first clue as is the case for Harm van den Dorpel’s Assemblage (everything vs. anything). The piece is a large cut up plastic sphere hanging in space. The surfaces of the clear plastic are printed with imagery that reads as video stills or digital drawings. The images are illuminated by the ambient light of the gallery which seems to mimic the backlit glow of the computer monitor. Van den Dorpel says of his work, “I like the material object. I could just simulate everything with software but I think I need this materiality to make the thing. The [object] is made of printed textures from a stock footage material collection. I printed the materials on it but when you come close you can see that it’s the actual real material, but you can also see it’s still a print” (Kay, 2014). The imagery on the piece is not readily discernable but the use of appropriation and juxtaposition is clear. The curators note that van den Dorpel relies on data mining in his practice, “Pulling aesthetic referents from canonized art history, advertising and online folk art, such as the popular online website deviantART” (Archey et al. 2014). The artist’s practice, being a combination of technology as material – digitally printed plastic – and technology as a source of idea
and image, is distinctly Post-Internet. It reflects “the notion that it is not the style nor the content of the works at play here, nor even their chosen medium or mediums, but rather the interconnectivity between ideas and forms, the very practice of creativity and the process by which it is realised” (Folks, 2014).

Whereas van den Dorpel’s piece presents some obvious material and visual allusions to technology and networks, *Self-Portrait (Cat Urn)* by Bunny Rogers is more cryptic. Nonetheless, the title immediately conjures up the pervasive selfie found in social media today. As for the object, it is precisely what the title says — an urn for the remains of a cremated cat. The urn is the instantiation of the former body itself which, in turn, is a container for a body. Still the Post-Internet connections of the work remain elusive. Curator Karen Archey sheds some light on this relationship in her talk *Bodies in Space: Identity, Sexuality, and the Abstraction of the Digital and Physical*, “Bunny Rogers came of age in a time when both television and the web capitalized on programs and sites for kids. Like many digital natives, her identity formed during the blooming mass media of the early 2000s. It could be argued that those who grew up in this era experienced identification processes, via TV and computer screens, which introduce increasingly more distant content with which a child may uncannily identify with. Rogers has illustrated this phenomenon of elastic identity via her ‘self-portraits’ as inanimate and often lugubrious objects” (Archey, 2014). Perhaps then the cat urn is an avatar. It is an instantiation for the artist representing some part of her psychological being. In this way, as in the case of any avatar, we get insight into how Rogers may perceive or imagine herself. In addition, the catalog text adds, “This work also speaks to the aesthetics of kitsch on the internet, allowing it to circulate almost as if it were a form of personal identity” (Archey et al. 2014). Much in the way Internet users amass self-curated collections - images, GIFs, video, music etc. they also consume products that they feel are representative of themselves. Thus, Rogers is reflecting on the impact of the digital realm on our identity both psychologically and materially.

Yet another approach is found in Ben Schumacher’s installation *A Seasonal Hunt for Morels*. The piece is an architectural arrangement of glass held together with what appears to be custom stainless steel hardware. A semi-transparent image of two women sitting at a desk is mounted on the
Lastly, I would like to focus once again on the work of Kari Altmann. *R-U-In*S is perhaps the exhibit's most direct work of Post-Internet art in the exhibition. The subject matter, a collaborative website, covers topics from technological innovation to ewaste to corporate branding. There are images and videos, archeological ruins and piles of trash, participant comments and philosophical quotes all arranged in a banal, seemingly disorganized website collage. It feels like the ultimate self-curated collection of images and objects speaking poignantly to the excess of data mining. In an issue of *Art Lies* Altmann's work is succinctly described, “From these continuous postings new frameworks and codes emerge, ones that trace products and images through paths of desire, exportation, and propagation. Critical memes are created and abandoned, as new directory architectures sprout up, disappear overnight, to be revisited later. The gaze of the database is below eye level, and the subterranean exchange routes between the participants remains intact, working their way through a geography of underground economies of content” (*R-U-In*S Flexible Display, 2014). The piece traces a path that moves stealthily between the real and virtual worlds. Corporate branding mixed with ecological glass. From most perspectives, the image of the women lines up with an actual speaker/microphone, suspended from wires above, making it appear that they are engaged in an interview. An actual interview about auxiliary language emanates from the installation. The materiality is an easy connect to digital experience not only because of the digital processes needed to make the work, but also because of the reference to the computer screen. The conversation about auxiliary language is, however, a more potent nod to the complexities of language in the digital realm. Code, a basic structure of the web, is in English; code uses words and symbols, that if unfamiliar, make coding exceptionally difficult. Thus, language is a key factor in establishing a hierarchy of digital computation with English speakers at the top. In *Art in America*, David Markus describes Schumacher’s work as, “digital-era bricolage. Among the seemingly incongruous materials used by the artist are Internet-sourced photographic images, readymade industrial items, pieces of vinyl, textual fragments, video screens and hair harvested from the artist’s shower drain. These materials and many more are integrated into an installation that, taken together, presents a vision of the analog and ordinary acceding to the digital” (Markus, 2013). I find it fascinating how adept the artist is at integrating the real and digital worlds down to the smallest detail as even human hair is used. The exhibition catalog extends the reading of the work: “His training as an architect allows him to position installation projects in relation to the labor conditions of the knowledge economy. The sculptural use of glass panes [is] grounded in the technical language of engineering and structure and juxtaposed against the similarly engineered vocabulary of constructed language” (Archey et al., 2014).
activism creates confusion. But somehow the juxtaposition ekes out some meaning as it comments on our world’s current state of existence. The piece reveals through its own banal presentation the insidiousness of the invisibility of technology and the effect it has on society. The World Wide Web is so much an extension of ourselves, the work suggests, that perhaps we no longer see it for what it is. The job of the Post-Internet artist is to remind us.

The Post-Internet era is still young and evolving and many factors delimit the validity and impact of this moniker. The development of digital technology and the Web has happened and continues to happen at a very fast pace. The use of individual devices has multiplied exponentially in the past decade affecting us personally and culturally. The nature of the beast confounds what’s public and what’s private, confuses what is an original and what is a copy, conflates production and consumption, and nearly deconstructs the boundary between the real and the virtual. New Museum curator and former editor of Rhizome Lauren Cornell reminds us, “Earlier notions of distinct virtual and analogue spaces have collapsed. Art is now not online only in medium-specific occasions – it is online all the time, no matter what form it takes. The art world, like the rest of the world, is only just beginning to parse the consequences of this shift” (Beginnings + Ends, 2014). Although the significance of the Post-Internet era is still being determined and defined in this moment, the exhibition Art Post-Internet made great strides in solidifying its look, methods, context, and meaning. Post-Internet is not the end of an era but, rather, a poignant marker in the continuum of art history with lasting potential.
References


