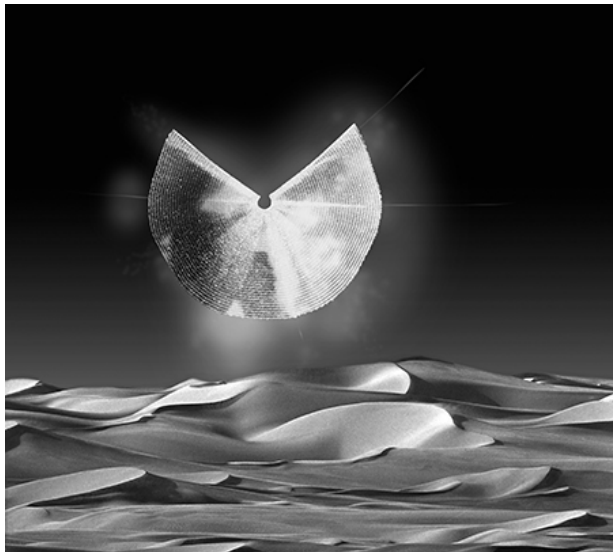


Issue 159

## Beginnings + Ends

SURVEY

What are the histories of artists engaging with emergent technologies? How has Post-Internet art come to be defined? And what happens next? *frieze* asks eight artists, writers and curators to reflect



Heinz Mack (ZERO co-founder), *Sahara Project, Tunisia*, 1968. Courtesy: ZERO Foundation

**Chris Wiley**

If art can be said to reflect the conditions of the world in which it is made, art that engages with the vanguard technology of an era can perhaps be said to have a particular purchase on contemporaneous visions of the arc of the future. Looking backwards across this variegated artistic tack might, then, provide a glimpse into our evolving speculation about our destinies.

Interestingly, the current crop of artists who have been lumped into the 'Post-Internet' category have largely evaded this type of analysis. Instead, there have been somewhat facile comparisons to Surrealism and post-Minimalism, movements which jive with post-net aesthetics more readily than with its content. As a provisional corrective, I'd like to posit that this new work is best contextualized in relation to the technologically forward-thinking artists, collectives and projects of the 1960s and '70s, such as Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), Maurice Tuchman's

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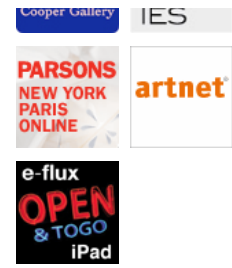
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'Art and Technology' programme at lacma and the German group ZERO.

On the whole, these postwar artistic engagements with technology were reflective of the cautious optimism of their time. They presented a sanguine view of both the glittering, space-age future and the large corporations that would propel us there, many of which, like the Bell Telephone Company, were directly involved in facilitating ambitious artistic projects. Of course, this is not to say that artists of the period were in the business of repressing the very real threat of the atomic bomb – one of the numerous explanations of zero's name, for instance, claimed that it was connected to nuclear annihilation – but that they were envisioning a future that might transcend it.

In contradistinction to this 20th-century vision, prognosticating artists of the 21st century would seem to have foreclosed any optimistic vision for the future. Both technology and corporate culture are almost universally represented in the work of artists and collectives such as Alisa Baremboym, DIS, Josh Kline, Ryan Trecartin, among innumerable others, as handmaidens of a post-human future in which our lives will become increasingly artificial, monetized and controlled. It is work that raises the question: are we living, both artistically and otherwise, in a post-Utopian, or even post-optimistic world?

*Chris Wiley is a writer, curator and artist who lives between New York and Los Angeles, USA.*



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Katja Novitskova / DIS, *Future Growth Approximations VI*, 2013, from a series of digital stock images. Courtesy: the artists.

#### **Katja Novitskova**

The world today presents itself as highly complex – to the point of being unpredictable, profoundly interconnected and non-linear. Perhaps paradoxically, the rise of the Internet has made it easier to recognize that every species, product and art work embodies a very material history. Digital images need our attention to exist, but they also require carbon-based fuel: a palette of rare minerals has to be mined in order to assemble the simplest of smart phones. This gives us what we might call an ecological view of the world, in which human beings are strangely evolving social predators, driven by neurochemical intensities and resource opportunities.

Due to its roots in online visual cultures, a certain new type of practice acknowledges attention as one of the materials in any art work. Many artists – those mentioned by Chris, as well as Timur

Si-Qin, Pamela Rosenkranz, Jaakko Pallasvuo, Jogging, Anne de Vries and Energy Pangea (Iain Ball and Emily Jones), to name just a few – incorporate the existing pool of attention-grabbing stuff disseminated online as if it were paint or clay: trends, brands, technologies, products, images of animals, etc. They explore spaces and possibilities provided by the properties of contemporary things, creating new forms and thus approximating future realities.

My own series of sculptures, 'Approximations' (2012–ongoing), is an attempt to visualize new products for the economic expansion that 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.

Something about the expressivity of other animals triggers my forecasting mind when I look at a penguin couple symmetrically arching their backs, a mother giraffe bonding with her baby, a beluga whale smiling at the camera ... I then isolate these visual signals, printing them on aluminium and presenting them as commercial cut-out displays.

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?

*Katja Novitskova is an artist based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.*



Constant Dullaart, *Jennifer\_in\_Paradise* (detail), 2013, performance, installation and redistributed image using the first Photoshopped photograph, installation view at IMPORT Projects, Berlin. Courtesy: the artist, XPO Gallery, Paris, and Future Gallery, Berlin

### Constant Dullaart

Recent improvements in the accessibility of information were brought about by neocolonialist tendencies to standardize global communication, mixed with the ideals of scientists who believed that the accessibility of knowledge – and, above all, platforms for publication – would revolutionize social hierarchies. As we now know, this all muddled together into a grand scheme of cultural imperialism, doubling as a tool for harvesting information from private communications. Consider the minor (but crucial) differences in online social platforms such as Orkut, Weibo or Facebook, and this cultural imperialism becomes quite apparent. Try being openly gay on the Russian platform Vkontakte, for example.

The attention economy on the web, as commodified extensively by these networks, has become an influence on contemporary artists, to the point where the web's abundance has been confused for ubiquity, 'after' confused with 'post-'. Most of the artists mentioned by Novitskova have ignored the idealist tendencies of the web, aiming to break with age-old social hierarchies. But they have started to translate the (culturally local) commercialization of the web into art works fit to be shown in the most hierarchical and conservative medium the art world has to offer: the gallery white cube. Needless to say, the somewhat facile comparisons to

Surrealism and post-Minimalism are, as Wiley points out, abundant.

If not facile, these strategies tend to be on the culturally imperialist bandwagon, gentrifying attention-commodification schemes sans criticality, by way of conventional art forms in a new (networked) social context. 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, made to be documented in a gallery setting, 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.

Identities are managed by commercially driven algorithms; the URL has died; SLL is broken; most communications are recorded and analyzed for reasons beyond our access. Can art still play an active role in finding new visions, of locating hope and beauty to deal with the Internet in times of Prism? (As I write, the UK Prime Minister is suspected of having ordered the destruction of a journalist's hard drives.) Or should we leave these subjects for activists to deal with, and just enjoy the images on our Google Glasses™, perhaps even printed on aluminium?

*Constant Dullaart is an artist based in Berlin, Germany, and Amsterdam, the Netherlands.*



Alisa Barenboym, *Invisible Sausages*, 2012, archival pigment inks on cotton and silk, 32 × 51 cm. Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York

#### **Karen Archey**

If you've ever tried to introduce someone to the term 'Post-Internet', you've invariably been met with this rejoinder: 'Post ... what? But the Internet hasn't ended!' The slipperiness of the term, which has been milling around for more than five years, concerns a crisis in definition. Despite the neologism's popularity (cf. the Hans-Ulrich Obrist-convened 'Ways Beyond the Internet' panel last year or Susanne Pfeffer's current exhibition 'Speculations on Anonymous Materials' at the Fridericianum in Kassel), we've yet to reach consensus on its meaning. Even the previous respondents hesitate to directly identify any artist as being 'Post-Internet', referring only to work that has been 'lumped' together. So how do we define Post-Internet art? By proximity to a social circle (dominated by artists in Berlin represented by Societ  and Tanya Leighton Gallery, and those in New York affiliated with 47 Canal and Real Fine Arts), a shared aesthetic (corporate branding, commercial visual merchandising, stock photography) or, better yet, a conceptual framework?

Chris duly points out that our dear leaders in major art

institutions have conflated Post-Internet practices with art-historical movements such as Surrealism, confusing irrational assemblages evocative of Internet-age speech with a Surrealist dip into the unconscious. Take, for instance, SculptureCenter's 2012 exhibition 'A Disagreeable Object', which perplexingly contextualized young artists including Ian Cheng, Anicka Yi and Alisa Barenboym – whose works 'posit the object in relation to capitalist culture and technology', according to curator Ruba Katrib – with the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti. This hungry reach toward historicization epitomizes the academy's most common and ham-fisted flaw: rather than understand a burgeoning art movement vis-à-vis artists, art historians often chain the future to the nearest-fitting moment of the past – no matter whether Post-Internet art and the egalitarianism of the Internet might be allergic to the canon's endemic hierarchies. (Hear hear, Dullaart!) We should instead rejoice that the category 'Post-Internet' challenges contemporary art's hermeticism via its built-in connection to the outside world, one that describes a cultural condition permeating Western society as a whole.

These comments aren't intended to denigrate the efforts of art historians (I'll forgive Artforum for letting Michael Sanchez publish an article this summer that confused Post-Internet art with the seemingly made-up phrase 'meme art'). Rather, they should evince that the formulae through which we presently understand new art forms might be defunct in the digital age. Post-Internet art must be contextualized by both the societal conditions it reacts against as well as art history, specifically an art history tied to Post-Internet's politically active forebears who often work through the screen: Dara Birnbaum, Ant Farm, Jodi and, later, Cory Arcangel and Seth Price. If Post-Internet art is produced with a consciousness of the networks that enable its production, dissemination and reception, then critics, curators and art historians should wake up to the presence of the network.

*Karen Archey is a critic and curator based in New York, USA. She is co-curating a survey of Post-Internet art at UCCA Beijing, China, which will open in January.*

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Zach Blas, *Fag Face Mask* – October 20, 2012 Los Angeles, CA, from the 'Facial Weaponization Suite', 2011–ongoing, mask generated from the biometric data of queer men's faces, undetectable by facial recognition technologies. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Christopher O'Leary.

### **Tyler Coburn**

There is no question that we live in an age of seismic transformations in the production, distribution and social organization of art, nor that an emergent cultural plurality offers fresh challenges to our working definitions. We should be careful, however, in assuming that the 'Post-Internet' artist's ontological connection to the 'outside world' carries de facto critical freight. This risks lapsing into well-worn debates about art and life, rehashing arguments of a discipline seemingly ill-equipped to keep pace with the youth. Karen's mention of our generation's 'politically active forebears' is thus crucial, both in drafting a more considered art history and in begging the question of how 'Post-Internet' art works entail politics or, following Constant, whether certain topics have been tacitly delegated to activism, clearing room for the prosumerist satires of the wired few. Looking beyond expressly market-orientated practices, however, we can identify a number of interlocutors who debate the relational terms of art and politics whilst sharing a belief in their imbrication. Recent projects such as Marysia Lewandowska and Laurel Ptak's *Undoing Property?* and, in London, Auto Italia South East's *'Immaterial Labour Isn't Working'* (both 2013), as well as scholarship by Hito Steyerl and Metahaven, are among the many.

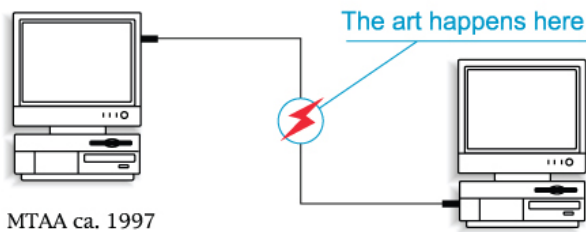
In treating attention as a commodifiable material, Katja

anticipates what some theorize will be a full-on attention economy, monetizing one portion of the extensive free work we perform for our virtual service providers. Attention is fast becoming our scarcest resource. Whatever else unfolds on the cognitive trading floor, we may consequently benefit from new property rights conducive to rebuilding the 'long circuits' that, as Bernard Stiegler writes, facilitate cultural memory and generational transmission. Chris's response helps move us in this direction, as did his writing for the New Museum's 2012 exhibition 'Ghosts in the Machine', which demonstrated that any preamble to 'Post-Internet' art should be promiscuous and non-deterministic in like measure. This year, Anselm Franke and Diedrich Diederichsen's survey 'The Whole Earth', at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, was also commendable.

Post-human placeholders and neo-cultural avatars increasingly command our gallery space, and we could be forgiven for sometimes mistaking diagnosis for prognostication, personalization for individuality, and techno-fetishes for 'whatever singularities'. Karen has rightly called for new critical methodologies. These should begin not only with the presupposed genericity of contemporary capitalist subjects, but also from the margins of their constitution. Artists and theorists including Zach Blas, Lisa Nakamura, Gaëlle Krikorian and Amy Kapczynski are doing important work tacticalizing queerness, race and intellectual property rights in our highly stratified network. Our becoming, they imply, entwines individual and collective responsibilities. Let's see how the digital natives follow.

*Tyler Coburn is an artist and writer based in New York, USA.*

### Simple Net Art Diagram



MTAA, *Simple Net Art Diagram*, 1997, digital image. Courtesy: M. River and T. Whid Art Associates (MTAA)

#### Hanne Mugaas

While it's important to look to projects such as e.a.t. to remind ourselves that there's a rich history of artists engaging with technology, let's not forget those long-ignored histories of media art and net.art. After all, 1990s net.art taught us about the possibility of having meaningful art experiences through our browsers – the artist duo mtaa's *Simple Net Art Diagram* (1997) is a perfect illustration. In 2013, the audience is exponentially larger, more diverse and visually literate. If a photograph of a print of a photograph is posted online, this mind-melt has a pretty good chance of being read accurately; it's not a substitute of seeing the print irl so much as an equally valuable parallel experience. Remember when the movie industry thought that video would kill cinema? It didn't, but it did create a new kind of cinematic experience.

Today's art institutions need to be as fluid as the art works they exhibit. The Internet is a semi-public space, where artists and art institutions have become operators who need to communicate and compete within the world at large (moma has a Facebook



page, but so does Burger King). As the director of the new Kunsthall Stavanger, I chose to open the institution with a series of online exhibitions and projects. A new online show is launched every month. The offline space will open in November, though few distinctions will be made between online and offline content. Most people who visit will come through our web 'sites' rather than our front doors.

In contrast to some of the more theoretical points already discussed, setting up a website, social media accounts and asking artists to make work for these venues might seem a little unglamorous. But contained in these routine exercises are real-life proposals for the place of the institution in today's attention economy, branding landscape and mess of technology – not to mention the history of the white cube. We live our lives through the screen, so why not visit our favourite institutions that way as well?

*Hanne Mugaas is director of Kunsthall Stavanger, Norway.*



Auto Italia South East (Kate Cooper, Marianne Forrest, Andrew Kerton and Jess Wiesner), *My Skin is at War with a World of Data*, 2012, DVD still. Courtesy: the artists.

#### **Steven Cairns**

While Constant is quick to point out the influence of the Internet on the artist, I'd suggest going further to examine the numerous aspects of the art world that the Internet has propagated: not least the seamless condition of internationalism, with the exponential rise of the art fair and the biennial. Our conversation rarely considers its impact on curating or the professionalization of the curator – much of a curator's work is now done onscreen and online – or the circulation of the jpeg as a means of preview or display with the curator as primary consumer.

The events that led up to the Arab Spring were a clear example of horizontal information distribution (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) usurping the vertical hierarchy of 'official media channels'. Closer to home, social media had related effects for both Occupy and, in 2010, the student protests against higher education fees in the UK. Similar shifts ripple through our daily lives. The art institution and its traditions are, of course, far from immune. As a new currency based on visibility emerges through the multiplicity of 'the digital', the institution's position as an arbiter of value becomes less clear; the prospect of unregulated horizontal distribution of culture poses a significant loss of its authority.

While I use the term 'Post-Internet' with great reluctance, it seems that the label has entered into circulation through these same, non-hierarchical channels. Certainly, its use coincided with a period of financial crisis during which many institutions faltered. Coupled with the scramble to keep up with the rapid rhythms of technological change, institutional recognition of the term ultimately questions its own ability to adapt at a pace regulated by the world at large without preaching only to the converted. Rather than canonizing a generation of artists whose concerns are embedded in a networked society, the term 'Post-Internet' is most likely to become a facet of the canon, rather than the canon itself.

*Steven Cairns is a writer and Associate Curator of Artists' Film and Moving Image at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK.*



Tyler Coburn, *I'm that angel*, 2012–13, performance documentation from reading at Bahnhof's Pionen data centre, Stockholm, 27 May 2012. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Bahnhof.

#### **Lauren Cornell**

The term 'Post-Internet' is still relatively young, having begun to circulate among a small group of artists sometime between 2007 and 2009. Like so many meta-labels, the term is both utterly insufficient and unavoidably useful. It emerged in a moment when there was a dearth of criticism to describe art that acknowledged the effects of the Internet in its process or realization but which didn't exist online or within technological form. This was a time when many artists and curators were trying to think past terms like 'new media art' that didn't feel wholly reflective of the current moment, and whose perceived time-specificities and reductions artists were chafing against. 'Post-Internet' emerged as a bridge term, one that came to signify a discursive shift from thinking through the Internet as an emergent system to focusing on the broader absorption of its

widespread entanglements. Its critical value is in the pivot it suggests not a movement it describes.

A problem with the term, however, is that its prefix suggests a radical break, while the work it signifies actually shares many aims with Internet art (the artists who emerged in the 1990s were also tracking the deeper consequences of this new medium, not just its technical possibilities). But the work then and now looks and acts quite differently. Much net.art took place online, though not all of it: the database-driven work of Kevin and Jennifer McCoy, for instance, or the software work of John F. Simon, Jr. 'Post-Internet', on the other hand, seems to demarcate work that exists within a gallery but which has a relationship to a broader set of cultural conditions influenced by the web.

However lacking in specifics, the term is part of a larger attempt to articulate changes in culture. Over the last decade, earlier notions of distinct virtual and analogue spaces have collapsed. Our hopes for a new realm for culture have been engulfed by our old habits, and art is now not online only in medium-specific occasions – it is online all the time, no matter what form it takes. The way we access and circulate information has changed profoundly, as have our behaviours and, arguably, even the way we think. The art world, like the rest of the world, is only just beginning to parse the consequences of this shift.

Moving forward, the term 'Post-Internet' needs to be broken down, since it encompasses so many diverse practices, which, in its summary nature, it threatens to misconstrue. I'll end with questions I ask myself, as a curator: if you took away this term, what are the individual works it addresses more specifically dealing with? What are the distinguishing formal qualities of art works that get grouped under this term? What are the ancillary concerns that could make it more specific, more meaningful? How does the market interact with or influence it? What are the next terms we will arrive at from here?

*Lauren Cornell is based at the New Museum in New York, USA, where she is co-curator (with Ryan Trecartin) of the 2015 Triennial, Digital Projects and Museum as Hub.*

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