HTWW, concerning art in post-internet times

Web as casual, casual web in art > *Immateriality as a condition of reality.*

By associating the tools, experiments, and ethics of early conceptual artists, with those of the participative web's new knowledge communities, *held together with water* attempts to link together similar developments from different times in history. It shows a family resemblance rather than actual similarity, a sort of undeclared filiation presented here to prompt reflection, rather than engaging with truth or classification.

"Post internet"… Once the initial thrill was gone, a hysterical enthusiasm gave way to assertive scepticism. And thus the contemporary art world—where being a "young artist" is a quality per se—has found itself faced with the problem of sifting through different products whose sole commonality is an aesthetic likeness which, in turn, has more to do with the generation that produces it than with any (pre)defined intent.

This aesthetics conveys, in works by artists such as Kari Altmann, Yoan Mudry, and Mélanie Gilligan, an interest that goes beyond liquid immateriality—made up of pretext references to the online universe—, to encompass new types of knowledge and data processing, community processes or else new economic and creative structures at work on the internet.

Complex productions, such as those of Yoan Mudry, with different levels of address and references; the multiplicity of positions exemplified by Kari Altmann's claim to be artist, producer, director, curator, author, performer, photographer, filmmaker, and musician; a questioning of given systems, be they hierarchical, economic, or organizational, through storytelling in the works of Mélanie Gilligan, or by way of setting up a publishing house for Steve Roggenbuck; all these characteristics can be interpreted as a response to the twofold contemporary tendency to transform art into a digest cultural product and to reduce the internet to a new popular TV channel.

Although these current issues have appeared at different times in history, and taken different forms, they are particularly close to the experiments conducted by early conceptual artists. In the sixties, Lawrence Weiner, Art & Language, John Cage, and many others, reassessed the world around them. They stood up against the quite commercial functioning of art and against the fetishised art object. They rejected artistic and pedagogical academism, and by producing texts they reclaimed the discourses around their productions. In 1969 Lawrence Weiner, in a conversation with Ursula Meyer, made the following statement: *People buying my stuff, can take it wherever they go and can rebuild it if they choose. If they keep it in their head, that's fine too. They don't have to buy it to have it – they can have it just by knowing it. Anyone making a reproduction of my art is making art just as valid as if I had made it.*
A radical assertion that still, today, appears on his galleries' webpages, it shows both Weiner's ongoing relevance and, to some extent, a paradox that prompts reflection.

In 1976, after his exhibition *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art*, Tom Marioni created *Café Society*, a work that consisted in a kind of social club held every Wednesday afternoon. Artists and friends met in a café to drink beer and talk about art: by questioning itself, art questioned its context.

Although the work of art attempted to dematerialize in order to escape from its purpose as an object, today it is clear that neither its commodification, nor its participation in a system of mass cultural consumption, were prevented. The world changes and the thwarted hopes of some become useful precedents to those who come next.
Thus the question is:

In what way has this dematerialization [and the questions pertaining to it] been transformed?

Is there a link to be made, between that first, conceptual dematerialization, and the physical demate-rialization inherent in the internet and the productions related to it?

Whereas the first generation of web artists such as Lynn Herschman Leeson—a pioneer of NetArt—and those of the second wave, including Ubermorgen and Anne de Boer, could be likened to geeks[1], artists such as Sarah Ancelle-Schönfeld, Lizzie Fitch, and Ceel Mogami de Haas rather tend to be "average users." They are not necessarily interested in cables and hardware, and they are no "early adopters." Simply they were born in an interconnected world, they put no capital I to the internet be-cause, to them, it is not out of the ordinary, the mundane. What has been called for the past 10 years "new technology" is there in all of the works these artists produce, just as it is in every fragment of our lives -> from our connected pockets, to the car that self-drives in reverse gear, to high-tech chan-ging rooms. Rather than just a specific interest, their omnipresence in artworks bears testimony to the intrinsic relationship between technology and contemporary life, the thinning of the gap between network and reality. A generation, according to Domenico Quaranta, who tends to say AFK rather than IRL.[2]

With great power comes great responsibility > *said Spiderman or, depending, Voltaire.*

Early users of the internet were also its co-developers. They formed a global and decentralized com-munity, with a majority of members coding the network, thereby inventing its rules and organizational architecture. Most of them viewed the mega network as a potential Eldoraldo for autonomy. On it they projected their hopes of a different world hierarchy that would observe its own rules, a TAZ able to fight against a physical world dominated by multinationals and useless politics.
Today, while GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon) are buying a private island to turn it into a state where international law does not apply, and while algorithms—fed by data amassed through that same GAFA network—threaten to be the next totalitarian power, everyone realizes that the future is to be more complicated than that.
This reversal simply indicates that the internet is but a tool, and that we (will) make of it what we do with the rest of our lives. Nothing more, nothing less. The possibility that digital engineers may in their turn emerge as the new face of a corrupt economy[3] does not change anything to the possibility of envisioning the internet as a potential space for emancipation and experimentation.

What happens online has a major impact on our lives at multiple levels; from ideas themselves, to the sorting of ideas, as well as the values that inform them.

The everyday nature of digital media and their virtual omnipresence make them one of the most influential vehicles for transforming modes of living, thinking, and acting. These transformations concern such fundamental fields as knowledge (what is considered a part of knowledge and what is not, but also how a body of knowledge is acquired and passed on); economic structures (open source software and free information are no longer solely claimed by the programmers minority); the ways in which we cooperate and socialize (participatory culture, knowledge communities, collective intelligence); as well as our languages, our sense of time and space, and so on.

Network theoreticians [Castells, Jenkins, O'neil, Terranova][4] agree that the internet can be defined as an organizational structure that is open, horizontal and devoid of an established purpose, a structure able to integrate and manage interactive and direct communication:

an ideal breeding ground for the development of so-called knowledge communities. These virtual communities are formed when several internet users spontaneously come together around a common interest; Batman, knitting, Pierre Bourdieu's latest book, medieval philosophy, Ancient Aliens, or the influence of wormholes on the quantum theory of space travel. Using tools such as forums, wikis, building websites or mailing lists, these communities have at their core the discussing and sharing of individual interests.[5] Whereas some will succeed, by dint of investigations, in finding the name of the next contestants on *Survivor*, ahead of the producers' official announcement, others will develop a

more advanced version of an open source computer program, collaboratively solve enigmas in a giant virtual treasure hunt, or organize support and media coverage for the Arab Spring.

The society that is self-organizing within these communities would have been Mikhail Bakunin's paradise. It functions according to a segmented and decentralized structure based on a model of heterogeneous and independent relations and associations—not only among individuals but also with other communities and institutions. One can belong to several groups simultaneously, on the basis of principles of free association and free disassociation.

These principles empower communities to become fertile ground for the development of collective intelligence. Going beyond the sole sharing of information, collective intelligence references various individual bodies of knowledge that are made available to all members of the group. Pierre Lévy, who studies this phenomenon both in the physical world and online, describes it as intelligence that is *distributed everywhere, incessantly valued, coordinated in real time, [which] results in the effective mobilisation of competences. Far from merging individual intelligence into some indistinguishable magma, collective intelligence is a process of growth, differentiation, and the mutual revival of singularities.*[6] Collective intelligence multiplies the community's production capacities, all the while aiming at the mutual enrichment of individuals.

Far from the (hippie) cult of a fetishised or hypostasised community, these emerging virtual associations allow one to envision a new relationship between groups and individuals. A relationship which is not fixed, which adapts to every circumstance, constantly reconfigures itself, neither makes individuals guilty, nor allows a community-less individualism. During an interview published in *A Brief History of Curating*, Seth Siegelaub spoke of communities from his time and of the way in which artists evolved with, around, and through them. He recounts an art that *was not necessarily work made for a general public, but more like a gang of friends*.[7] Although this description has not become the norm in today's art world, it nonetheless approximates to the knowledge communities one encounters online.

John Cage, when he composed, was especially mindful of the relationships his performers would build with each other during their execution, for he considered them to be of an ethical and political nature. He used to say that when one composes a score, one must always consider it as *a representation of a society in which you would be willing to live*.[8]

Community has often been theorised using anthropological or sociological case studies that concerned themselves with observing either tribes (such as an exotic, primitive tribe, a geographically isolated people, a voluntarily secluded society, an underground minority in the city, alliances formed in prisons, and so on) or temporary experiments such as LIIP and the Spanish revolutionary movement. The internet is enabling, and even prompting, for the first time in the history of mankind, an incommensurable increase in community experiences; thereby increasing occasions to exchange on, and experiment with their internal organisation and external relations. In this sense, the network is worth considering not as a specific medium but as a sort of active implementation, a technical design capable of integrating, and negotiating with, the opening up of systems.

"Complex" in the Latin sense of the term > that which is interwoven

As we know, our reality is anything but simple. It is even developing in such ways that it can only be grasped by means of increasingly articulate thinking and discursive stunts. Today's complex world requires new tools for analysing and explaining it. But above all, it requires new ways of thinking. It needs a plural understanding of the world, one that is capable of seeing and comprehending, simultaneously, global structural intents and complex links between the smallest elements. It calls for a holistic approach to the system.

It is the French philosopher Edgar Morin who has defined our world as being not *complicated* but *complex*—complex in the sense of the Latin term complexus, that is to say "interwoven". He encourages us to conceive of our reality as being composed of many interconnected and inter-influential

elements that must be taken into account as such for one to appreciate the nature of things. He invites us to step back and see the whole, like before a tapestry—a thought experiment which requires a thinking that is *less disjunctive, allowing one to simultaneously think about singularity and multiplicity, the individual and the group.* Morin emphasises that seemingly opposite notions such as autonomy and dependance are born in relation to one another, and he proposes a dialogic form of thinking in which notions or elements can be, all at once, *complementary, antagonistic, and opposed.*[9]

As a result of research conducted, among others, at Ars Industrialis, Bernard Stiegler has remarked that web browsing develops more complex ways of thinking in an individual. Knowledge and autonomy then become a matter of surfing these information flows. At first, one is made dizzy by the incommensurable nature of the "meshwork", the sum of all information, connections and layers. It is by following links—and creating new ones—by going against the tide—deconstructing schemas—by analysing circuits—rearranging elements —> in the end it is by immersing oneself completely that one can begin to understand. The restructuring of complex information allows one to create a context, the possibility of a specific reading.

Whether art or Hollywood television series are concerned, this complexity is found again at the level of cultural production. Twenty years after the early stages of the web, sitcom in its classic form (three cameras and taped laughter) has given way to the dense narratives, composed of several layers, which we know today. Complexity even affects advertisement, with some companies having replaced the inane imagery, meant to sell products in 35-second clips, by "treasure hunt"-style campaigns that blend together reality and virtuality, and make the audience intervene in the unfolding of the narrative.[10] This development is obvious when we compare a television series of the *Step by Step* type, filled with superfluousness and actors replaced as seasons went by, with a series of the *Sense8* type, which has developed a global, rich, and nonetheless coherent universe, notably by collaborating with manga artists, Bollywood choreographers, or Lucha Libre wrestlers.

This transformation is linked to the democratization of the internet, which has enabled the public to meet online in large numbers and in real time on forums where they share references and opinions, discussing producers' scripts and their incoherences. Together, the spectators have gained the ability to analyze a large amount of relevant information and bring together different skill sets. Today audience members, until now considered to be simple consumers, are able to express themselves outside the family circle and elsewhere than around the water cooler at work. Faced with this phenomenon, producers—whether they direct series, films, or video games—are compelled to propose universes with more complexity and more elaborate narratives, to maintain the public's interest.

Ian Cheng, Hito Steyerl, and Mark Z. Danielewski are some of the artists who, too, embody contemporary complexity. Freed—if not from economic constraints—at least from the need to be approved of by as many people as possible, they can push reflection and experimentation even further. With its 350 pages, Danielewski's *House of Leaves* can be read as any other novel, from cover to cover. And yet, to an attentive reader, the book shows a deeply complex world, a universe composed of multiple layers, entry points, enigmas, and hidden meanings. In this book, what can be seen and what can be read are inseparable from one another. Far from a simple matter of aesthetics, the way the text and blanks are laid out, the number of words per page, and the fonts that distinguish different narrators, reflect events within the story.
On their own, most readers would likely not have gone into half the amount of concealed passageways. But soon after the book came out, they initiated an internet platform. There these readers meet, share their discoveries and own knowledge, to try and grasp all the implications of that written work.

At the same time, a large part of the culture that is widely distributed is itself content with being a kind of ersatz of this world and this reality. Using contemporary aesthetic codes, some artists propose an immateriality emptied out of all complexity, easily consumed and digested. If the quality of art is correlated to the mastery of one's positioning, it is regarding that lack of precision that a different art becomes urgent.

Putting a drone in every installation does not suffice to speak about control society, and without any distancing (or exaggerating, or irony or anything that would be no mere copy) the direct reusing of codes cannot lead to critique. To the contrary, it transforms analytical practices into formulas and it is

only testimony to short-term strategies that prefer the artistic product to its process. *The appropriation artists who allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by their own material had given up and joined the enemy camp.*

It is left to each of us, then, to find the means to translate in our own language, what we seek to invent for some, to learn for others; practices directly informed by this complexity.

Roxane Bovet, december 2016
Translated from the French by Lucile Dupraz

1. See David Peyron, *Culture Geek* (Limoges: Fyp, 2013)

2. Domenico Quaranta, "Art & the internet 1994-2014," in *Megarave-Metarave*, p. 38: "The term "post-internet" needs some explanation. […] the internet is not over […] but it is now a given for many, and artists interested in are not forced to do art that "functions only on the net and picks out the net or the "net myth» as a theme," but can do physical work & bring this discourse back to the gallery. Although most of the 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", ie. Re-materialized from the digital.»

3. Pacôme Thiellement, *L'Age des techniciens*, ed. Clinamen, to be published in March 2017.

4. Henry Jenkins, Fans, Bloggers & Gamers, exploring participatory culture for a fan based politics (New York: NYU press, 2006)
   Manuel Castells, The Internet Galaxy, Reflexions on the Internet, Business, and Society (Oxford: UOP, 2003)
   Mathieu O'neil, Cyberchiefs, Autonomy and Authority in Online Tribes, (London: Pluto Press, 2009)
   Tiziana Terranova, Network Culture, Politics for the Information Age, (London: Pluto Press, 2004)

5. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture, Where Old and New Media Collide* (NYU press, 2008)

6. Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1997), p.29

7. "at that time, art was not necessarily work made for a general public, but more like a gang of friends. It was a much more limited framework, in any case, a much smaller group of people; even just in terms of numbers, even before one speaks in terms of money or power or anything like that. The artist – I could say most other people in the art world too– had an entirely different relationship with the world around them."
   Seth Siegelaub in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2009), p.118-119

8. Marjorie Perloff, Charles Junkerman, ed., *John Cage: Composed in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 260

9. Edgar Morin, *Introduction à la pensée complexe* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990), p.73. [our translation]

10. See for example the campaigns by 42 entertainment "I Love Bees," created in 2004 for the video game *Halo*, and "Why So Serious?" in 2008 for Christopher Nolan's film *The Dark Knight*.