

## THE ARTIST AS CURATOR IN POST-INTERNET ART

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Artist as Curator in Post-Internet Art.* The aim of this essay is an examination of the idea of the *artist as curator* in the contemporary phenomenon called post-internet art. First of all I will focus on the conditions in which post-internet art reverses the concept of creativity with that of selection, as it also alters the role of the gallery, which becomes ‘a point of departure, not a destination’ (D. Quaranta). Secondly, I will turn to a conceptual analysis and a comparative analysis of the objects of post-internet art and Duchamp’s ready mades. The idea of the artist as curator is relevant in the context of contemporary art because it causes a chasm between the traditional approaches of the artist and of the objects that fall into the category of the term art.

**Keywords:** *artist, curator, post-internet, readymade, uncreativity*

### Specific Features of Post-Internet Art

A short definition of post-internet art would be ‘art about the internet’, which began its development from what we call today *net.art*. In order to grasp the concept of post-internet art, I will begin by analyzing the starting point of this phenomenon, in other words the main requisite that allowed the phenomenon of post-internet to coagulate. *Net.art* or Internet art describes a type of art that implies a visual exposure of the digital culture of the 1990s, profoundly influenced by the internet. The outcome of the latter’s accessibility was that institutional artists became more and more interested in occupying its domains with a new type of art. On another note, *net.art* was perceived as a medium auspicious to art rather than a symptom of a contemporary cultural condition.<sup>1</sup> What I mean is that the old media

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Burke believes the internet may be the symptom, and not the cause of change.

Burke, Harry, “Uncreative Writing, Poetry and Language” in *No Internet, No Art. A Lunch Bytes Anthology*, Ed. By Melanie Buhler, Onomatopée 102, 2015, p. 36.

could have been all absorbed into one, more visually-accessible to the interested public from all over the world, and this particular aspect fascinated the internet artists from the 1990s. The internet unleashed a new interest in the “form and materiality of code”,<sup>2</sup> which led to different practices such as web collages, founding surf clubs, writing HTML code exploring aesthetics of computer errors, aestheticizing interface, glitches,<sup>3</sup> and so on.

An important factor to be considered is that “internet is simultaneously a technological and cultural factor, a productive and connective tool. Therefore, the Net Art here defined seems to be a form of artistic production, based on the connective, collective and sharable possibilities Internet offers.”<sup>4</sup>

The next phase, chronologically speaking, was characterized by a power transfer from the concept of *creation* to that of *collection*. Therefore, post-internet art evolves after the *net.art* phenomenon, not just as an extension of it, but as an upgrade, determined by the fact that artists that were interested in the internet figured out that the *selection* and *ordering* processes can be just as fascinating as developing the web.<sup>5</sup> Thus, one of the essential features of post-internet art is its curatorial character. By ‘curatorial’ I mean an artistic impulse of searching, selecting, ordering and archiving objects in a public space, submitting to a personal aesthetic logic.

Regarding the objects that can be included into the sphere of post-internet art, Marisa Olso, namely the artist that initiated this term, argues that post-internet art is working with ‘found photography’, that is, photographs found on-line that are reused with a different purpose. These photographs are often unimportant in their initial conjuncture, but through the process of recontextualization they are given new aesthetic values. However, post-internet art cannot be reduced to a series of photographs that are found somewhere on-line and then redistributed. The artistry in this case is given by the fact that “the work of pro-surfers transcends the art of found photography insofar as the act of finding is elevated to a performance in its own right, and the ways in which the images are appropriated distinguishes this practice from one of quotation by taking them out of their circulation and reinscribing them with new meaning and authority.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.slideshare.net/rhizomedotorg/net-art-anatomy-by-rhizome>, accessed 09.03.2016.

<sup>3</sup> idem

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.digicult.it/digimag/issue-064/josephine-bosma-nettitudes-lets-talk-net-art/>, accessed 09.03.2016.

<sup>5</sup> Turning point marked the moment when “early surfing clubs like Nasty Nets realized that filtering & recontextualizing is more interesting than designing the web” from Quaranta, Domenico, “Authorship, Appropriation, Surfing Clubs and Post-Internet Art” in *No Internet, No Art. A Lunch Bytes Anthology*, Ed. By Melanie Buhler, Onomatopoe 102, 2015, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Olson, Marisa, “Postinternet: Art After the Internet”, 2013, in *Art and the Internet*, Black Dog Publishing, p. 213.

Furthermore, we might find problematic just being an artist in the World Wide Web, a space accessible to everyone, where objects are not really objects, but pixels. The substantial question here would be: can there be a sign of equivalence between on-line and offline curatorship, in the world of objects? By comparison, on-line galleries could be more visible and accessible in time than all the offline galleries that function according to the logic/ economy of tangible objects. This does not mean that life is moving on-line, but that more and more art amateurs that do not have capital are going to consume on-line art (be it images of offline art that are placed on-line or internet-related art).

Nonetheless, it is a certainty that post-internet art has been taken over by the art market, thus obtaining institutional acknowledgment.<sup>7</sup> This means that, whether displaced in an on-line or offline space, post-internet art becomes a commodified product of the institutions of art, and this fact, in turn, undermines the intention of internet artists to distance themselves from and to rebel against the white cube, the unique space destined for artwork exhibiting.

### **The concept of creativity, reversed**

An important moment that marks the rebaptizing of the concept of creativity in the art world with new meanings is the initiative of Duchamp of bringing profane ready-made objects into the art gallery. Therefore,

Nearly a century ago, the art world put to rest conventional notions of originality and replication with the gestures of Marcel Duchamp's ready mades, Francis Picabia's mechanical drawings, and Walter Benjamin's oft-quoted essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.<sup>8</sup>

Starting from this premise, we can infer that, in a sense, 'to create', the basis of creativity, is being substituted with 'to recontextualize', thus suggesting a change in the artist's priorities, which does not need to be 'creative' anymore in a traditional sense, but 'selective'. Thereby the transfer of power mentioned above takes place, from 'creativity' and 'originality' to 'selection' and 'ordering', in other words the artist assumes the attributions of the curator.

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<sup>7</sup> "Susanne Pfeffer's inaugural exhibition in Kassel »Speculations on Anonymous Materials« (2013) was the first in a trilogy of group shows that marked the institutional arrival of post-Internet art." <http://032c.com/2016/how-arts-post-human-turn-began-in-kassel/>, accessed 07.03.2016.

<sup>8</sup> Goldsmith, Kenneth, "From Uncreative Writing", in *No Internet, No Art – A Lunch Bytes Anthology*, Onomatopoe 102, 2015, p. 29.

In a similar manner, in post-internet art, artists such as Clement Valla (visual artist) or Kenneth Goldsmith (poet) have been using as necessary materials objects or better said digital files, jpeg or txt, already made by someone or something else. For example, saving images made by satellites from the website Google Earth or transcribing texts that have known and appreciated authors seem to be non-artistic practices, or non-creative nonetheless. In this framework, to be creative means to constitute an archive of recontextualized files found on the internet according to their subjective logic, in order to be seen on-line as free content. Nevertheless, in Harry Burke's opinion, context, although having a key role in post-internet art, cannot replace content,<sup>9</sup> and the latter must be subordinated to an aesthetic of the internet.

Because of the reification of creativity in every labour area, especially in art, Kenneth Goldsmith introduces a substitute term for it, namely 'uncreativity'. In my view, the purpose of using a negative concept in order to redefine art, was not only shredding the creativity label applied to every artist, but to change the public opinion about art, which does not remain constant in form or in content, and it does not work according to immutable recipes. Being 'uncreative' does not mean being 'unproductive' or 'inefficient' artistically, but it is the equivalent of building an archive from texts, artworks or audio-video recordings, basically selecting, collecting and ordering objects. This matter brings back into forefront the model-copy dialectic that was representative of the initial phase of postmodernity, but only to be equalized by the artist-curator.

Kenneth Goldsmith is the creator of the UbuWeb archive, a reference point for people interested in avant-garde art of the 20th century. This archive supports the practice of abstracting objects from their initial context and rendering them online as free content. At the same time, UbuWeb represents a working model for the contemporary internet artists, because it favours reproduction instead of production, pointing out to 1980s postmodern aesthetic.<sup>10</sup> In this context, Goldsmith submits the following concepts: (1) 'uncreative art', that assumes archiving, collecting, selecting and arranging objects, (2) 'uncreative genius', which rejects the traditional notion of genius, and 'uncreative genius', who proves ingenuousness concerning information management.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Burke, Harry, "Uncreative Writing, Poetry and Language" in *No Internet, No Art. A Lunch Bytes Anthology*, Ed. By Melanie Buhler, Onomatopoe 102, 2015, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> Sollfrank, Cornelia, "Nothing New Needs to Be Created: Kenneth Goldsmith's Claim to Uncreativity" (interview), *No Internet, No Art. A Lunch Bytes Anthology*, Ed. By Melanie Buhler, Onomatopoe 102, 2015, p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, p. 42.

Likewise, Michael Wetzel redefines the concept of 'meta-author', an "operator of copies (instead of originals), of quotations (instead of descriptions), and of pluralities (instead of individualities)".<sup>12</sup> Thus, the concept 'uncreativity' can easily describe post-internet art because it functions according to a logic of recycling, which in turn presumes a process of collecting, ordering and recontextualizing.

On a positive note, this "new media ecology" offers "democratic access to the digital means of production",<sup>13</sup> as contemporary art critic and curator Domenico Quaranta claims. He insists upon the fact that artists must "reframe what seems meaningless and valueless in order to bring up its meaning, and value."<sup>14</sup> But, on another, less positive note, there is a threatening side of the internet as a virtual space of sharing art. Characterized by fluidity, the internet contains an unstructured mass of images, of which some are considered works of art. Nicholas Lambert claims that Jack Burnham foresees the fact that "any art based on fallible and replaceable systems presents a threat to these economic advances [in the art market for unique objects]."<sup>15</sup> This can be seen as an attempt to undermine the museum because most of the works created under the label 'net.art' were designed just for on-line visualization. Also, "a found online image of an artwork is better than the artwork, because it's ubiquitous, free, easy to share & use, and loaded with info (tags, metadata, etc)".<sup>16</sup> Following this reasoning, "making an expensive artwork and placing it in a respected whitecube for the sole purpose of generating a good JPEG may actually be the most corrosive challenge brought by netizen artists to the artworld and its values."<sup>17</sup> This brings us to the conclusion that was mentioned above, namely that the gallery becomes 'a point of departure, not a destination'.<sup>18</sup>

### Ready-mades vs. Post-internet art

A ready-made object "designates a work, which is 'already' made by mass production, but whose readiness to be 'made' into art is delayed by its technological history and whose terms are unassimilable to an artistic terminology."<sup>19</sup> First of

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<sup>12</sup> Idem, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Quaranta, Domenico, "Authorship, Appropriation, Surfing Clubs and Post-Internet Art" in *No Internet, No Art. A Lunch Bytes Anthology*, Ed. By Melanie Buhler, Onomatopoe 102, 2015, p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> Idem, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Lambert, Nicholas, "Internet Art versus the Institutions of art" in *Art and the Internet*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Quaranta, Domenico, "Authorship, Appropriation, Surfing Clubs and Post-Internet Art" in *No Internet, No Art. A Lunch Bytes Anthology*, Ed. By Melanie Buhler, Onomatopoe 102, 2015, p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> Idem, p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> Quaranta, Domenico, "Authorship, Appropriation, Surfing Clubs and Post-Internet Art" in *No Internet, No Art. A Lunch Bytes Anthology*, Ed. By Melanie Buhler, Onomatopoe 102, 2015, idem.

<sup>19</sup> Judovitz, Dalia, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit*, University of California Press, 1998, p. 76.

all, an essential resemblance between ready-mades and post-internet art 'objects' is the rejection of traditional media of art that imply manufacturing art objects. Secondly, one must take into consideration the intellectual<sup>20</sup> nature attributed to both art categories, that implies not just redefining the status of art objects (on one side there can be ordinary objects, while on the other side reproductions that question art's function of representation),<sup>21</sup> but a reconciliation between art and technology.

For example, New York based artist Clement Valla takes the surveillance art current a bit further, investigating not just the potential creativity of the satellite, but also the image interpretation of computer algorithms. Thus, Valla offers an external perspective, given by the multitude of images provided by the satellite, and an internal perspective, given by the images that are one their way to be processed inside the GoogleEarth algorithm. These images don't have the necessary form, namely 3D, to be observed and used by humans. Between the time of the creation of these images and the moment they are being processed, there can be found the 2D versions of these images, called texture maps, that are nothing more than "flattened, fragmented and exploded photographs"<sup>22</sup> serving as texture for the 3D maps.

In *3D-maps-minus-3D* one is dealing with an interpretation of space, which is translated into code. "Spaces and urban arrangements are usually treated as collections of objects or volumes, not as actors. Yet the organization itself is active."<sup>23</sup> Further one can observe a new type of reorganization of space inside the *texture mapping* software, according to the flatness or the volume of objects, where a plane image is applied to the surface of a 3D model. Before this process, the software is parsing just these plane, flat images, also called textures. "But unlike a long list of 1s and 0s, or some other cold alien encoding, they still look like the objects they represent. They are uncannily close to photographs or human made collages",<sup>24</sup> which grants them the possibility of being aesthetically interpreted by humans.

In this case, the main purpose of the artist is "to not just make art that looks like art as an end in itself, but art that looks like art in a way that shifts the viewers perspective or to open up some alternative reality."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "art is primarily the record of an intellectual process rather than a visual experience" – Marcel Duchamp, "A Complete Reversal of Art Opinions by Marcel Duchamp, Iconoclast" in Judovitz, Dalia, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit*, University of California Press, 1998, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Idem, p. 77.

<sup>22</sup> Valla, Clement, <http://www.3d-maps-minus-3d.com/#info>

<sup>23</sup> Easterling, Keller, "An Internet of Things" in *The Internet does not exist*, Sternberg Press, 2015, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> Valla, Clement, <http://www.3d-maps-minus-3d.com/#info>

<sup>25</sup> *No Internet, No art*, 75–76.

### Artist-Curator power struggles

The manner in which an exhibition is curated is problematic because it establishes power-relations between all the actors that are taking part to that exhibition.

Artists aimed to restrict the mediating function of art institutions, organizers, and curators alike. In this way, the exhibition space came to function as the main context of, and the primary medium for, the realization of the artwork and, at the same time, as the site in which the work of art was adapted and modified in response to each specific exhibition context.<sup>26</sup>

My interpretation of this quote is that artists found a way of claiming not just the material space of the gallery, but the manner in which this space is occupied; and they achieved this state of things through installations, which, in turn, have provided the public with the opportunity to participate and to interact directly with the work of art, without the mediation of the curator. As a result, through installations, artists have regained their sovereignty in the gallery, becoming, in a way, the curators of their chosen objects. This point of view is also sustained by Boris Groys' theory regarding the politics of installation. In his article with the same name, he points out that "contemporary art can be understood primarily as an exhibition practice. This means, among other things, that it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between two main figures of the contemporary art world: the artist and the curator."<sup>27</sup> In this case, one can acknowledge a distinction between the *exhibition-as-medium* and the *exhibition-as-form*,<sup>28</sup> as two sides of the same coin or as two practices with potentially different authors: while the *exhibition-as-medium* represents, in my view, the manner in which the artist occupies the space of an exhibition following his own reasoning, thus refusing a mediator between the work of art and the spectator-participant, the *exhibition-as-form* is what appears to be the result of a process, what has already been made, ready-to-be-discovered,

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<sup>26</sup> O'Neill, Paul, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012, p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Groys, Boris, "Politics of Installation", <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/e-flux-journal-redux-boris-groys-politics-of-installation/3065>

<sup>28</sup> „This suggests that the curatorial act is equivalent to artistic practice, with the distinction between what and who constitutes the exhibition-as-medium and the exhibition-as-form being central to these debates.” in O'Neill, Paul, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012, p. 87.

something that requires further clarifications from a negotiator of meanings between the artwork and the spectator-participant, namely the curator. Nevertheless, the roles of all the actors involved have not been reversed, nor did they dissolve one in favor of the other, but a convergence<sup>29</sup> between the artist's work and that of the curator's has been produced.

## Conclusions

The objects that are included in the category of post-internet art are not limited to be interpreted as such (as text or as image), yet they refer to, on one side, millions of people that are posting photographs every day, and on the other side, to the softwares that are in charge of reading and parsing images, that are functioning according to their own logic. Thus, the resemblance to the ready-mades is not random, but they both have, to some extent, the same purposes: to bring up the intellectual character of art and to reconcile art and science. The viewer-receptor is accordingly constrain to ask him/herself certain questions, such as: what objects fall under the art category? What is the sole purpose behind a work of art? What is the process of parsing and distributing images?, and so on.

In this context, the 'artist as curator' of post-internet art represents, the same as Duchamp, a collector and a re-distributor of profane objects that are incorporated with new meaning and social functions. But, unlike Duchamp, the post-internet 'artist-curator' operates with digital images and not with palpable objects, and the distribution takes place in a virtual environment, available for relatively low prices (here the viewer comes in contact with art not by paying for a ticket at a museum, but by paying for an internet subscription, devices, and so on); this fact can be seen as a beginning of making the artworld more democratic at a global scale.

Although post-internet art is aesthetic, to the extent that it is a discourse about the internet as a space that is visible through computers or other devices that followed, it can be considered a restart that had to be given to art, in the same manner Duchamp had done in 1920.

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<sup>29</sup> O'Neill, Paul, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012, p. 87.



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