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Post All Internet. Three Figures

Grégory Chatonsky

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POST ALL INTERNET.

THREE FIGURES

Jon Rafman, *Mainsqueeze* (still), 2014.

The "End" of Digital Art

By way of an introduction, I would like to emphasize that this lecture responds to a request. I was asked to present "creators in Montreal's digital and media arts scene." Yet the geographical delineation seems problematic as long as it implies the existence of a Montreal "school," that is, a stylistic or thematic unity, in these times when globalization seems, at the very least, to disrupt territorial identities and when my own situation, both foreign and familiar as a French person living in Montreal, further shakes up this spectre of identity. But even more so, the notion of digital art makes me uncomfortable, although I have been classified in this category for a long time.
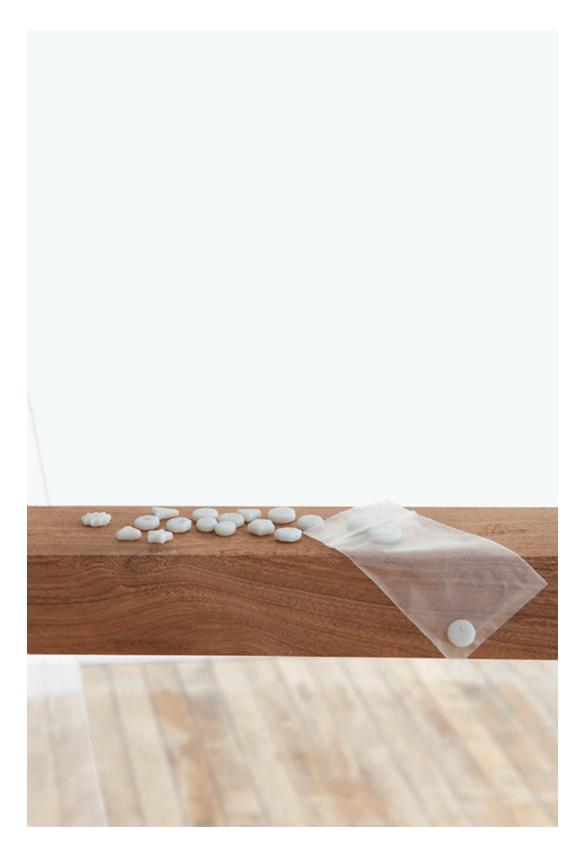
I won't go into all the various reasons that keep me at a distance from "digital art," but I will point out two, which I hope will shed light on my selection of artists. We are used to digital works causing a sensation and dazzling us (through lasers, smoke, immersion, and so on) because the technologies involved are considered to be "effective means in support of artistic expression." This instrumental characteristic is determined by the demand for technological inno-

vation in support of the fantasy of economic growth. Art becomes the pretext of a desire for "always more." This is how technologies could effectively deploy the power of an aesthetic potential. Yet my own experience is less connected to this instrumental and anthropological relationship than to a contextual one. Technologies have always interested me, on the one hand, for how they break down and, on the other hand, for how they form a context that exceeds us, in other words, a world. It seems to me that artists should not have to create new possibilities, but should work out of what is already present in their everyday environment, that is, in the prior usage of technologies. I prefer the banality of pop art and the apathy of the ready-made to the tradition of a universal artwork or an incongruent artwork made of small absurd machines. The second reason for my estrangement is that many digital artworks "function," thus they impress us: video mapping, 3D, projections on buildings. The discourse of innovation dominates.[1] Yet here again my own experience of art is one of uncertain fragility: in the museum, I look at works the way I notice others looking at them, ac-

cording to the logic of a troubling, uneven mirror. My gaze cannot lose sight of itself, since I know that I'm being observed.

This no doubt explains why I wish to slightly shift the request made, so as to try to pick certain artists in Montreal who do not make digital art, but who, to use the accepted terms, are "postdigital" or postinternet."[2] These labels, which are reductive by definition, are already outdated, as one trend drives out another in a ballet orchestrated at the rate of 140 characters on Twitter, but they have the benefit of indicating a space. Here the "post" is understood not in the chronological sense but rather in the topological one: now that the digital is part of everyone's life, configuring, through reproducibility, the attention economy and the capture of affect, what happens to art? Now that we have exceeded the magical performance of technical instrumentation, can a digital art that is defined by its medium still exist? Is technology still the means of art, or is it not the other way around, in a sense?

"Postdigital"

I wish to focus on the artworks rather than on the

Vincent Charlebois, *BOCA*, 2012.
Installation, variable dimensions; Drugs and 3D prints.

artists. I wish to forget their names and draw figures with these works that should not have happened but which did happen. These works are superfluous; no one expects them, and if they don't happen, they are not missed. I wish to speak with you on impulse, based on my own experience of the Internet and, somewhat akin to the double gaze experienced in the museum (visible and seeing), to remain within this experiential epidermis, since this involves a world and not an instrumental means. Thus, I will not be able to separate the works from the emotions experienced at a given time.

Mainsqueeze (2014), by Jon Rafman, is composed of images collected on the web, as though, in our current era, it is unnecessary to add yet more images to other images (this would make one look somewhat ridiculous); rather one has to select from the ever-growing digital stock, as Lev Manovich (2002) has already suggested. This is where an artistic style emerges, in the choice itself, in this act of deciding, which has exemplified modernity since the era of the dandy. In *Mainsqueeze*, we focus on the "losers" on the web, the post-genital sexuality of disguised bodies, autophagous machines self-destructing as though the feedback loop, dear to the first wave of cybernetics, has become a veritable anthropophagy (Georges Bataille). We focus somewhat longer on a woman caressing a crayfish (a pet, perhaps?), then crushing its oozing carcass with a mix of excitement and emptiness. Undoubtedly, we are being shown something here we could analyze hermeneutically, but it does not matter, since the meaning is no longer subject to signification. We detect in *Mainsqueeze* something monstrous and nameless that affects the entire world, including bodies, desires, and places. Nothing escapes; that which connects everything changes the structure. Hundreds of people float in a swimming pool. Pressed together, their bodies flail in place. It is the image of our times, beyond any moral judgement: we are alone without being solitary, each flocking to the web, we are overrun with the murmur of others, multiplicities, our own murmur—a voice we no longer recognize that might come from a machine or from deep in our throat. The voice is also the result of a collage of fragments found here and there. Internet has become a world we can explore, just as the Impressionists set out to encounter the world, light, water. The world is only its excess relative to us: we will never go all the way around it—this is its overflowing definition. By growing faster than we can absorb it according to a transfinite logic, Internet has become a world. I imagine that *Mainsqueeze* is the synopsis of the breakdown of subjectivity on

the web: what happens to our most anonymous and indeterminate role?

I went to a concert by chance. I no longer remember the name of the venue. A man banged on drums he clearly didn't know how to play, as a young woman screamed into a mic, bending low to the floor. The room had the good energy of the rock narrative, taken up again and again by every generation: the violent thrashing of instruments. Something moved me in this entropic exertion, whose limit seemed to be the participants' exhaustion. Intrigued, I begun to follow the man from afar. He went tree-planting out West. I picked up his trail on one of the Cyclades islands, as part of *The Eternal Internet Brotherhood* project. I didn't really know what he did exactly. I followed him closer. He had shown a small fragile installation, barely held up with bits of wood and transparent acrylic. Then, with *digital drugs in the age of data objects*,[3] Vincent Charlebois intersected two cultures that actually coexist: synthetic psychedelic drugs and 3D-printed objects. This coexistence is above all else cultural, since they both arose out of the American counterculture of the 1960s, whose contradictions have been described by Fred Turner (2008). Yet this coexistence is also material, as it is connected to the apparatus of production: isn't there some resemblance between a *fab lab* and an illegal drugs lab? Don't they both involve the skills of amateurs? Here, the drugs are made though 3D printing. Anyone can freely download their models from the Internet to produce and reproduce them. The artist encourages participants to modify them to create new renditions. Yet these are flavourless artifacts that have lost all psychotropic properties. They only look like drugs. Are they still punishable by law? Does Vincent create his models based on personal use? Isn't there an initial illegal version that could define the figure of the artist in its singularity? What is this game of reproducing and modifying drugs? By being computationally modifiable aren't they subject to hallucinogenic transformations? Doesn't 3D printing open up the possibility of a mutability of matter?[4] Isn't this hallucinatory materialism? By making the drugs ineffective, from a neurological point of view, while copying their appearance, the artist raises issues of copyright, sharing, and reproducibility. He recovers the chemical and psychotropic underpinnings of open source utopias, which, in recent years, have adopted a neo-liberal discourse, trying to conceal their troubled origins.

I wish to tell you about a third and final artist: Andres Manniste. We have never met. Sometimes, I cross his path on social media. As his website[5] indicates, his activity is twofold: studio work and Internet projects. At first glance, few formal links can be discerned

between the two. One side displays paintings in the pointillist tradition and the other, microsites recycling GIFs and banks of images in the readily recognizable aesthetic of digital folklore, as discussed by Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied. What is the link, therefore, between the paintings and the sites? What is their time scale in terms of mediums? The first anachronism belongs to the paintings: recovering and applying a 19th century painting tradition to images found on the Internet, on television, or elsewhere. In the profusion of contemporary images, Manniste's choice is not motivated by the images' formal qualities, but only by the work to be done on them. Faced with this profusion, he reproduces the images through a slow painting method by creating them point-by-point, colour-by-colour. Pointillism is a process of breaking down that could be considered the aesthetic trace of the binary breakdown of 0 and 1. How does the arrangement of distinct and simple elements produce complexity? By painting, he reflects on the images that surround and engulf us, imposing a different rhythm on them, the rhythm of making paintings, of the particular attentive slowness that painters experience day after day. He doesn't take up pointillism because of aesthetic taste but, it seems to me, through an existential procedure, in the manner of Roman Opalka, reappropriating that which seems to be imposed on him. Picking from the existing stock, like Rafman, is the last decision that saves the honour of our era. The same thing applies to the sites Manniste makes, and this is why their formal incoherence does not matter: in each of his sites, he creates a new landscape out of impersonal images collected here and there. The notion of the landscape takes on a new importance: the artist appropriates medias and rearranges them so as to produce something not contained in the original images. Here once again, it is a matter of reappropriating through the artistic work that which is imposed on us, of re-singularizing that which has no singularity—the ordinary, the insignificant, the zero-level of sensation—by diving even deeper into the web to test its transcendental limit, rather than by contesting its anonymity. This is undoubtedly the secret affinity between Manniste's paintings and websites.

Digitanalog
By way of a provisional conclusion, I wish to highlight a few salient points about these works that no longer seem to be using technology as a means to artistic ends, but as a general context, in other words, as a world. Here, the emphasis is on the *digital materialism and existence* that destabilize the concepts of immateriality or dematerialization so commonly used in the 1990s and 2000s. These artists are interested in

Andres Manniste.

new materialities resulting from *the scission between ideology and things*. While the story of the Internet may be one of interhuman communication, there also exist new underlying practices (caressing and crushing a shell), hidden links (the counterculture, cyberculture, and drug culture), or ways of using the images imposed on us to make new images that are (re)produced through the work and its inherent duration. Whereas classical digital art tried to amaze audiences through the mechanical performance, these three artists stage a *deterioration*: nothing functions anymore, sense and signification separate, human behaviour is incomprehensible, drugs have no effect, mass media becomes singular. This deterioration beyond meaning valorises the contingency and challenges the determinism of digital systems. Lastly, I offer one final point, which I have developed elsewhere: *disnovation*[6] does not approach the digital from the perspective of novelty and the promise of a glorious or dangerous future, but as something already old, outdated, in an atmosphere tinged with nostalgia. The digital is the story of a generation who has come to power. We resolutely position ourselves after this power as it leans over the edge of its own precipice.

Grégory Chatonsky
Translation: Oana Avasilichioaei

Grégory Chatonsky is part of the first generation of Internet artists who made the web into a context for both production and dissemination. While his work has a digital inspiration, it is not confined to the computer and takes various forms: photographs, drawings, engravings, sculptures, and performances. Since 1998, he has created numerous interactive and generative fictions online and elsewhere by reconfiguring already existing web feeds or by producing original medias.

1 See "Symposium on the Crossovers between Culture and Technology." *European Commission*. 7 May 2015. Web. 1 September 2015. <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/news/symposium-crossovers-between-culture-and-technology>
2 See Connor, Michael. "What's Postinternet Got to Do with Net Art?" *Rhizome*. 1 Nov 2013. Web. 1 September 2015. <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/nov/1/postinternet/>
3 Charlebois, Vincent. http://vincentcharlebois.net/digitaldrugs. 2012. Web. 3 September 2015.
4 See *The 3D Additivist Manifesto*. Web. 3 September 2015. <http://additivism.org/manifesto>
5 Manniste, Andres. http://andresmanniste.rsight.net/. Web. 3 September 2015.
6 Chatonsky, Grégory. *Disnovation*. Web. 3 September 2015. <http://chatonsky.net/flux/disnovation/>