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Exploring the Potentials and Challenges of Virtual Distribution of Contemporary Art

Jonas Blume

Art made by using and reflecting upon new media and new technologies helps us understand how our lives are being transformed by these very media and technologies
-Charlie Gere, "New Media Art and the Gallery in the Digital Age."

This paper explores the potentials and perils of the distribution of visual art in the virtual realm. Beginning with a mapping of the interplay between artistic practice and computer technology, I attempt to trace the levels upon which art and the Web have been integrated. After examining early instances of virtual exhibitions of physical art and the potentials that the internet bears as a medium of art experience, I will cover digitally nascent art's structural address of the internet and its medium-specificity. In the light of the recent ubiquity of the participatory internet, there is a move toward developing an understanding of the integrative post-medium practices of post-internet art. Exploring the new role that the artist, artistic practice, and the artwork occupy in relation to the internet serves to trace how the Web affects the distribution of contemporary visual art on an individual and commercial level. Also revealed is the degree to which post-internet and new media practices are not autonomous from conventional art institutions, but actively strive to integrate themselves into the existing economic structures of the art market.

ART AND COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

With the recent developments of the participatory internet, the so-called Web 2.0, much effort has been made to grasp the effects it has on the production and distribution of visual art. Much of this discussion treats digital art as a new phenomenon. On the contrary, artistic practices using the computer as a production method precede the existence of the internet, dating back to the 1970s. This being said, the osmosis between artwork and computer technology is hardly

a recent phenomenon, but it was not until the advent of computer networks that this connection became interesting as a site for widespread artistic engagement with the medium. In 1993, the browser *Mosaic* popularized the World Wide Web due to its capability of efficiently displaying images (Dziekan 1993: 19).

Artistic Web practices of the 1990s became known as “Net art” (alternatively written: net.art). It capitalized foremost on exploring, manipulating, and subverting the internet’s technological infrastructure. Net art was made on the Web, existed on the Web, and was experienced on the Web. The non-atomic nature of the work lacked a physical manifestation in “real life.” This seems to be acknowledged as less of a problem just recently, in that collectors are starting to purchase digital art. While Net art is a historically demarcated term, Web art and internet art have successively been used. Technologies such as *Flash* further allowed integration of time-based media into websites, resulting in the synaesthetic cacophony of text, image, video, and audio (Carreras/Mancini 2014: 89). Art, whose site of production and primary experience is cyberspace, is today broadly referred to as digital art.

Generally, we would describe Web 2.0 as the current state of evolution of the internet, its main characteristics being participation and user-generated content. In the arts sphere, the term “post-internet” has been suggested. The term does not claim that the internet is over, but rather that it has attained ubiquity and permeated every aspect of our lives. To put it bluntly, it refers to everything that happened after the internet had “happened.” “Digital art” and “post-internet art” are terms used to distinguish two separate streams of current artistic practice that are rooted in online culture. I will discuss their defining and distinguishing features further below.

VIRTUAL EXHIBITIONS

Similarly to artistic engagement with computer technology, virtual exhibitions predated the Web as well. The earliest instances were attempts by museum institutions to make their collections accessible to a wider audience by distributing them via CD-ROM (Silver 1997: 825).

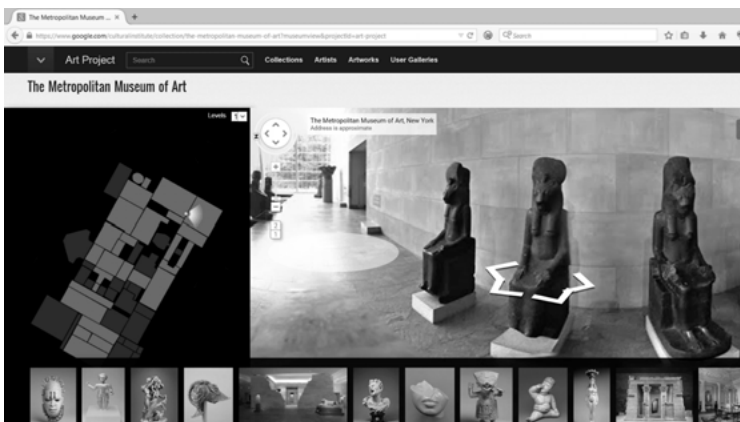
David Silver (1997) gives a very concise definition of early virtual exhibitions in his essay “Interfacing American Cultures: The Perils and Potentials of Virtual Exhibitions,” involving four essential characteristics:

First, virtual exhibitions are online and exist as part of and within the global computer network called the internet. Second, they are Web-based, which means that they are designed, mounted, presented, and viewed on the World Wide Web, a networked system whose graphical interface makes possible the inclusion of various forms of media. Third, virtual exhibitions are hyper-textual, an aspect which collects and connects various,

hyperlinked texts and can produce elements of non-linearity, de-centeredness, and intertextuality. Finally, they are dynamic, a feature which renders them more perpetual works-in-progress than static collections. (Silver 1997: 829)

Silver makes references to the 1995 exhibition *Remembering Nagasaki*, which serves as an illustration of the respective dimensions of his definition. The virtual exhibition—*Nagasaki Journey: The Photographs of Yosuke Yamahata*—followed three shows in physical locations running simultaneously: the Ansel Adams Center for Photography, San Francisco¹; the International Center of Photography, New York; and Chitose Pia Hall, Nagasaki. The exhibitions consisted of photographs as well as text panels detailing excerpts of diary entries by the photographer who had been assigned to document the aftermath of the nuclear bombing. Upon the closing of the exhibitions, the Exploratorium in San Francisco created the online exhibition to make the content accessible beyond the duration of the physical display in the galleries.² However, it was also enhanced by participatory elements, such as message-board style forum, where visitors could share their memories, emotions, and opinions on the Nagasaki bombing (Silver 1997:836; Carerras/Mancini 2014:90). This aspect relates to the hypertextuality that Silver ascribes to virtual exhibitions—a non-linear narrative in the sense that navigating the exhibition follows no linear structure in which the pieces are experienced. Furthermore, the forum added an element of dynamism and flux through the accumulation of global voices on the matter.

Image 1



Google Art Project. Metropolitan Museum, New York. Museum view. <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/project/art-project>

1 | Closed in 2001.

2 | <http://www.exploratorium.edu/nagasaki/>

With this example in mind, Silver differentiates between three types of virtual exhibitions, which will prove useful in order to follow the delineation of their shape and effect on art distribution. The “virtual version” is the first of such. It means a virtual exhibition that is an online replica of a show in a physical location. During the apex of *Second Life*, art and educational institutions rushed to create digital counterparts of their sites in virtual reality. Museums spent money to have their architectural spaces reproduced very precisely, thus allowing users to get a good idea of movement through the museum space. However, the image quality of the artworks within the galleries was generally too low for facilitating an art experience that could outperform printed, or even digital reproductions. In addition, the focus was so much on the spatial experience that little effort went into providing contextualizing materials and information about the exhibits. A contemporary example of the virtual version would be the *Google Art Project*,³ a database that collaborates with (mostly high profile) art institutions to make their shows experienceable online. The graphic interface has dramatically evolved from the click-and-slide HTML gallery. Unlike *Second Life*, *Google* abandoned the need for specialized software (that is, the *Second Life Viewer*) and instead utilizes *Flash* in combination with its 360-degree photo capturing technology, which is mostly known through its application in *Google Street View*, to present the exhibitions within the browser window. In fact, navigating the virtual exhibition space is very intuitive for users familiar with *Google Street View*. The experience is enhanced through the interactivity of artworks. Upon clicking on a piece, the user is directed to a zoomable high-resolution reproduction floating on a white background. There is also the digital equivalent of a wall text, providing an art historical and biographical context for the work. As Silver points out, the virtual version is predicated on increasing the accessibility of exhibitions. In most instances, these shows are compiled of objects from public art collections and presented online for educational purposes, rather than commercial ones.

Silver calls the second type of virtual exhibitions “the missing wing”. In contrast to *Second Life* museum sites, the *Art Project* contains some elements associated with this type. The “missing wing” is more than a replica of a physical exhibition. It is an extended version, providing additional material and exhibits that enhance the scope of the real-life exhibition, but could not be featured due to financial, logistical or spatial constraints.

The third type is the “hyper-real site”, which has no physical original but exists only online (Silver 1997: 829f). This type of exhibition is most relevant to current modes of art production and distribution that are impacted by the Web 2.0 and social media, and will be the main focus of this paper.

3 | <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/project/art-project>

ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN THE POST-INTERNET ERA

Above, I suggested a distinction between Digital art and Post internet art. Practices that are today subsumed under the term Digital art, have a shared heritage with Net art. Even though the terms have evolved from the 1990s Net art or Internet art, to Web art and presently Digital art, the defining feature that bonds these terms is their exclusive existence in a hyper-real site. Early Net art was primarily experimenting with the internet's structural underpinnings, such as coding protocols and the rhizomatic network structure (Gens 2014; Cornell 2011). Through the focus of Net art on its constituting technology, a strong sense of medium-specificity has been attributed to it in the McLuhanesque sense of the medium always being an integral part of the message (Silver 1997: 830).

The kind of work, which exists and is being experienced exclusively on the Web, bears also medium-specific advantages. Jon Ippolito sees its greatest potential in the non-linear viewing experience. He uses the 1963 installation *Random Access* by Nam June Paik to illustrate how the artist attempts to circumvent the restraints of temporal media's linearity before the advent of the Web (Ippolito 2000: 25). Paik constructed a web of audiotape on a wall that could be played by moving a handheld playback head over the tape, without any constraints as to directionality, speed, and entry/exit points. Ippolito sees the Web as the technological solution for breaking down the linear experience of audio and video, which he makes clear by using a quote from Paik:

The only reason why videotape is so boring and television is so bad is that they are time-based information. Human beings have not really learned how to structure time-based information in recording and retrieval very well, because it is new. No one says the Encyclopedia Britannica is boring although it has lots of information, because you can go to any page of the encyclopedia, to A or B or C or M or X, whereas when you watch videotapes or television, you have to go A, B, C, D, E, F, G. (ibid.)

Because of this medium-specific trait, along with its aforementioned hyper-textual and participatory dimensions, the site of experience for Net art and its descendants is the Web itself. Contemporary Digital art practices are inevitably indebted to these medium-specific traits, yet the liberation brought about by the new medium was—and still is—juxtaposed to the struggle for integration into the existing structures of how art is institutionally presented (Cornell/Varnelis 2011). Before I assess the implications for distribution of Digital art, I would like to bring to the fore the other contemporary internet-informed practice of post-internet art in order to make clear the distinctions in how the works are produced, distributed, experienced and sold.

Post-internet art is a rather recent term that has been much debated because it is being used very broadly to describe both, an aesthetic derived from online culture (e.g. stock photos, watermarked images, green screens), as well as practices that are a result of online activity. In a wider sense, the term Post internet describes a cultural shift at large, delineating itself from post-modernism, yet without the closure that the prefix *post* implies. Unlike the idea of Digital art, Post internet acknowledges the profound socio-cultural effects that resulted from the conflation of everyday life and the internet. In the post-internet era the distinctions between online and offline have disappeared. Even artists working in “traditional” fine arts media are in no way working outside the force field of the internet. Artist Marisa Olson is widely credited with the invention of the term, which she explains in an interview with curator Lauren Cornell:

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 2006)

In the light of this statement, Post internet has been approximated as a term describing a state of mind characterized by the ubiquity of internet culture (Storfner 2014). Artworks produced in this category are “created with a consciousness of the networks within which it exists.” (Archev 2014). This awareness has altered the ontological stance on what constitutes art. Nicholas Bourriaud gives two definitions: one pertaining to the postmodern conception; the second taking into account what is now called the post-internet condition.

Art. 1) General term describing a set of objects presented as part of a narrative known as art history. This narrative draws up the critical genealogy and discusses the issues raised by these objects by way of three sub-sets: painting, sculpture, architecture. 2) [...] Art is an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions, and objects. (Bourriaud 2002 cited in: Dziekan 2012: 21)

While the understanding of art has seen a break from postmodernism, the activities that constitute Post internet artistic practice are essentially descended from postmodern techniques. In the 1980s artists of the “Pictures Generation,” such as Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, built their careers on appropriation of culturally circulated images. With infinite amounts of images circulated through the Web together with the ease of such appropriation by digital means, this practice has become ubiquitous. Among the generation dubbed “digital natives”—referring to artists born into the internet era—intellectual property circulated on the Web often lacks attribution and is thus regarded as commons

(Vickers 2013b; Storfner 2014: 15). This stance towards appropriation has to be distinguished from the context of its postmodern predecessors, in which appropriation was a radical gesture in itself. These days, many artists have internalized appropriation as an integral part of artistic practice; be it through reframing and de-contextualization, documenting and archiving, reiterating and altering, or documenting content through research (Joselit 2013: 35-37).

Appropriation as such often operates within the postmodern framework of situationist subversion. Guy Debord, masthead of the Situationist International group, formulated the concepts of *dérivé* and *détournement* as methods of resisting the forces of spectacle brought about by mass media's invasion of public and social life. The former is based on Walter Benjamin's notion of the *flâneur*, who drifts through the city according to his own impulses and is thus able to circumnavigate the prescribed channels of movement that control urban behavior. The latter describes a subversive action that uses elements of mass culture to turn them around and use them contrary to their intended purpose (Debord 1967). *Détournement* persists in the practice of decontextualizing and reframing appropriated content. The contemporary equivalent of *dérivé* is not to be found in the urban setting, but can instead be seen in browsing cyberspace.

With the postmodern turn, artworks became dismantled as objects of aesthetic unity. Rosalind Krauss described this change in the context of site specificity. With pluralistic sculptural practices in the 1960s, site became recognized as material support and thus amounted to an integral part of the artwork's meaning. This also meant that the reading of an artwork was no longer contingent on its medium only (Dziekan 2012: 191). In contemporary practice, medium-specificity has largely been abandoned altogether.

Art practice is now largely characterized by a collapse of distinction between online and offline identity, author and viewer, art and everyday activity. As these lines are blurred, the artist increasingly functions as an arranger who curates, comments, researches and archives pop-visual culture circulated on the Web (Storfner 2014: 4). This practice regards all output to be part of a larger artwork (Vickers 2013b; Troemel 2010), amounting to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that relies on an epistemology of rhizomatic referentiality, in which artworks are not considered a discrete aesthetic unity, but an activity that produces relationships in an infinite network of referents with full awareness of its own existence within it (Archey 2014).

CONTEMPORARY MODES OF VIRTUAL DISTRIBUTION

The post-internet practice I have outlined above relies heavily on the participatory Web and social media. Karen Archey (2013) holds the artist as arranger, to be acting as a “consciousness-raising conduit between art and society”. Since many artists do not differentiate between online and offline worlds, nor between art and everyday practice, social media holds great potential for leveraging one’s audience reach through mediating online activity.

According to most artists I have interviewed, this sort of self-branding is an empowering tendency. In the conventional modes of art distribution, access to a wider audience was limited through authority figures, such as curators and critics, who acted as gatekeepers. Now, access to an audience has thus been largely democratized. Artists are able to bypass curators and reach their audience directly through various means. The cost-effectiveness of creating a blog or website, in contrast to organizing a physical exhibition, allows for diverse ways of increasing visibility. It is common among undergraduate students to create blogs on which they curate shows from their peers’ work or from solicited submissions.

Similarly, many young artists founded collectives—not necessarily bound by medium, style, or geographical proximity—that are increasingly utilized as multipliers of networking clout. Networking has always been a determining factor in artists’ careers. Commercial success seldom depends on the quality of the work alone, but rather on a set of fortunate circumstances in which acquaintance with the so-called gatekeepers is a decisive factor.

Social media now serves to build an extensively networked audience base that functions in two ways. First, artist websites—but even more so, recent networked applications like *Instagram*—have allowed some artists to bypass the gallery system. It appears to be an increasingly common experience for artists to be contacted directly by buyers who noticed their work on *Instagram*, so that they are able to sell directly from their studio without expending a gallerist’s commission. Some artists have acquired such a large following that they are able to sell exclusively through *Instagram*, making a living in doing so. Second, for many artists, *Instagram* leads to access to the gallery system. Many of them report that curators and writers became aware of their work, not by seeing it on the artist’s website, but by seeing it on *Instagram* (Fleming 2013).

The effectiveness of such online promotion lies in its multiplying factors. For many contemporary artists having only a website is not enough. Even though it remains the central outlet for professionally presenting one’s work, it is often complemented with an active *Facebook* presence, quirky *Twitter* feeds, *Instagram* profiles and *Tumblr* blogs. Promoting one’s work on these multiple tracks leads to an audience crossover from one platform to the other.

While *Instagram* reach depends on an individual initiative, the contemporary equivalent of virtual exhibitions may be seen in curated blogs such as *DIS Magazine*⁴ and *Contemporary Art Daily*.⁵ Such blogs feature coverage of physical exhibitions, as well as artist profiles. Due to the immense number of subscribers, blogs can reach many more readers than any critical review in a printed arts magazine.

On the other hand, the Web also bears potential to realize exhibitions that would be considered unfit or too radical to be presented in an institutional context. Inequality in gallery representation and museum shows persists until today (Wexler 2007). Women artists and artists of color are still underrepresented in the institutional circuit. Virtual exhibitions—such as the recent show *Body Anxiety*⁶ that featured female artists with a Web-based practice, organized by artists Jennifer Chan and Leah Schrager—capitalize on the democracy of the Web, which enables marginalized groups of artists to realize shows that are not subjected to the internal power dynamics and restraints of institutional programming and curation, which made shows like this very hard to realize in an institutional space (Fateman 2015).

Websites such as *DeviantArt*⁷ have been around for quite some time. The initial appeal lay in the possibility to present one's work online—before personal websites could be programmed with little knowledge of coding—on sites such as *Cargo Collective* or *Square Space*. On the other hand, *DeviantArt* also served as a sort of database that invites users to browse art across mediums, styles, and subject matter. While the promotional function of this website has largely been replaced by the integration of social media into personal websites, it still serves as a platform for amateurs, students, and hobby artists to “get their work out there.”

However, the idea of having a website that combines such a diverse array of art in one place has been utilized commercially. Ventures like *Artsicle*,⁸ *Art.sy*,⁹ *U Gallery*,¹⁰ *Art Space*,¹¹ or *Saatchi Art*,¹² are proliferating. They rely on a wider or narrower margin of selectivity in their curation that is often synonymous with their credibility. Contrary to *DeviantArt*, their focus is primarily on selling work. Portfolios exclusively consist of object-based art, ranging in prices from

4 | <http://dismagazine.com/blog/>

5 | <http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com/>

6 | <http://bodyanxiety.com/>

7 | <http://www.deviantart.com/>

8 | <http://www.artsicle.com/>

9 | <http://www.artsy.net/>

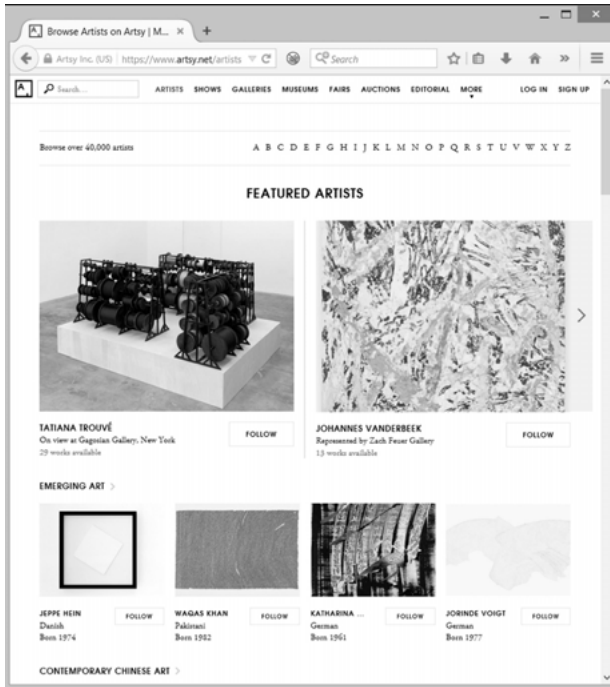
10 | <http://www.ugallery.com/>

11 | <http://www.artspace.com/>

12 | <http://www.saatchiart.com/>

a couple of hundred dollars to tens and hundreds of thousands, depending on the individual online gallery. This business model bears its own advantages and problems. Few artists exclusively sell their work here, but rather do so sporadically to make money. In a similar way to how, for example, in the past, print-makers used to make an edition of small prints that would sell easily in order to raise funds to cover the material costs for the creation of a larger work. This wariness of fully committing to online trade is most likely rooted in the fact that online galleries attract a different audience than “real-life” galleries. Many of the online galleries see it as their mission to make art more accessible and affordable to a wider audience. Granted that the price range is vast, it allows people with a limited budget to start collecting art (Hurst 2012). Also, the horizontal hierarchy of the Web—as opposed to the vertical one in the art world—together with the evident financial transparency, make them a much less intimidating place to be purchasing art (Fleming 2013; Rao et al. 2014). People for whom those are deciding factors in buying work are probably less acquainted with the art world, and likely have different motives for acquisition. On these sites, the art presented seems to be selected according to visual appeal, since the image (as represented on-screen via the Web) is all the prospective buyer has to base his opinion on. If visual appeal is the primary criterion for online buyers, this differs from conventional art collectors. High-profile collectors usually operate within their own programmatic framework that restricts them to a time period, style, medium, or school. Purchases thus are considered in the context of an existing collection—in terms of their demonstrativeness of a practice or time period, in relation to what other collectors of the same standing are purchasing, and also in their potential to yield financial gains through resale at a later point. In the light of the intricate network of factors that influence a high-profile collector’s decision for a purchase, it is still rather uncommon for them to be hunting art on these platforms. However, these sites are building a much wider base for the distribution of affordable pieces by little known artists, attracting first-time buyers to the market. This strategy is embraced by the majority of newly established online galleries. Notably, established brick-and-mortar galleries are increasingly taking advantage of virtual distribution methods for their artists through some online outlets. Online galleries operating with a rigorous selection of artists, such as *Art.sy*, enjoy more credibility than their more “democratized” competitors and offer works for sale on behalf of the artists’ galleries. In effect, they are able to attract collectors that are already established within the art scene.

Image 2

Artsy. Featured artist page. <http://www.artsy.net>

Other commercial players like Christie's are also pushing into the virtual realm. In addition to their postwar and contemporary art auction in May 2014 the auction house's expert for contemporary art, Louic Gouzer, initiated a separate auction: *If I Live I'll See You Tuesday*, intending to draw a younger audience. The auction included 30 works of "young" contemporary art by established and emerging artists, which in auction house jargon broadly refers to work created since the 1980s. Gouzer sought to underline the contemporary nature of the pieces, in order to attract younger buyers, by posting them on his personal *Instagram* before they could be seen in a printed catalog (Vogel 2014). The auction results totaled \$134.6 million.¹³ What impact this promotion via social media really had on the sales results, however, remains obscure.

This rudimentary use of social media, for what is essentially advertisement, is somewhat symptomatic of the slow-turning wheels of auction houses that generally cater to a less internet-savvy audience. Phillips de Pury took a leap of faith by putting on their first auction of digitally produced art in October

2013, in partnership with the blogging platform *Tumblr* (Fei 2013). The lots included GIF animations, videos, websites, and inkjet prints. As the auction house declared on their website, the auction was intended to “bring together artists who are using digital technology to establish the next generation of contemporary art.” (Phillips de Pury). The 20 pieces included in the auction sold for prices between \$800 and \$16,000, totaling \$90,600. The auction may be considered groundbreaking for the fact that digital art has been notoriously hard to sell, even in the primary market. Introducing virtual works to a secondary market audience thus marks an important step towards dissolving the prevailing emphasis on object-hood and scarcity as factors in determining an artwork’s value.

Tumblr seems intent on forging a permanent connection with the art world, manifest in its partnership with established performance artist, Marina Abramović. Her 2014 installation, *Generator*, at Sean Kelly Gallery turned the exhibition space into an empty arena through which viewers would move while being deprived of hearing and vision by way of blindfolds and noise-canceling headphones. The installation was documented on a dedicated *Tumblr* post that displayed snapshots of the space and its occupants in regular intervals.¹⁴ However, the virtual documentation and the ensuing circulation of the images by the visitors, is not regarded as integral to the piece. Rather, it seems, lifting the work into virtual space is a promotional move aiming to increase audience reach. There have been rumors that Abramović had permanently partnered with *Tumblr*, which would actually constitute a new way in which artists team up with tech companies and so gain more autonomy from the institutional communication outlets that currently document exhibitions. How exactly the suggested exchange of content and compensation works in this particular partnership has not been publicly disclosed. However, a noticeable result was that most major galleries can now be found, liked, and followed on *Tumblr*.

14 | <http://generatorskny.tumblr.com/>

Image 3



Overview of works commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art for Artport. <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/Artport>

Beyond the individual and commercial engagements with virtual distribution, art institutions have been very reluctant to integrate new media and digital art into their exhibitions and collections. The tradition of the museum as the site of art experience has led to much discourse of how to integrate the virtual experience into the physical exhibition site. Some efforts are being made to integrate digital interfaces such as PC-stations and video goggles into exhibition spaces to enable browsing of virtual art. More salient approaches have been made by a handful of institutions that acknowledge that the primary site for virtual experience does not have to be located in the physical museum, but may very well be made accessible online. The Whitney Museum of American Art has been commissioning digital art for more than ten years, most of which is viewable on their dedicated internet art portal, *Artport*.¹⁵ Similar long-standing efforts to systematically showcase virtual works online have been made by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis with projects like *Gallery 9*¹⁶ and *Adaweb*.¹⁷

15 | <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/Artport/>
 16 | <http://gallery9.walkerart.org/>
 17 | <http://adaweb.walkerart.org/home.shtml>

as well as the digital art archive created by the New Museum in New York, *Rhizome Artbase*.¹⁸

CHALLENGES OF THE VIRTUAL

During interviews I conducted with artists and curators as part of my research on virtual exhibitions, I encountered a much-echoed critical observation: the tendency in post-internet art production to create work for the camera. Brian Droitcour, the associate editor of *Art in America*, discusses this phenomenon at the example of Kari Altmann's installation *Hhellblauu*¹⁹ (2008-2012) in an article, stating that the artists' websites may actually be the most suited space for encountering the work:

In the gallery, it looked like nothing—a dingy wading pool filled with water, where some prints of the Paramount logo and other found images on chunky foamcore floated about and piled up at the periphery. [...] But when I saw the documentation I did a double take. The colors in the image—especially the sky blue named in the title—were intensely vibrant in comparison to the dull ones I remembered. [...] In short, this bad installation had suddenly looked like a good one, thanks to the way the lens of the camera and the lights worked on the materials when Altmann took the photo. (Droitcour 2013)

In a similar vein, New York based artist and curator Dakota Sica told me about the practice of documenting physical exhibitions for virtual circulation, and how documentation complicates the process of reviewing artists' work:

We've gotten so used to documenting shows for the internet. We're using the wide-angle lens in the gallery, we're perfectly tuning the photo to white balance. So—and this is kind of creepy—a lot of artists are actually making art shows for Instagram, or for being photographed. That does it amazing justice online, but when you come to see the actual work, it has nothing to do with what is being presented [online]. [...] I find when I look at the documentation of work, and when I see the works in person, the works are less impressive most of the time, than they are online.

This tendency of creating work for sharing through images is understandable considering the potentials of online self-promotion. However, most artists treat the virtual presentation of their work as the preliminary way of finding an audience. In this sense, individual and commercial virtual exhibitions and online galleries are regarded as mere stepping-stones to gain access to

18 | <http://rhizome.org/artbase/>

19 | <http://karialtmann.com/work/2008/hellblau/>

the “real” art world. Ben Vickers, Curator of Digital at the Serpentine Gallery, voiced his concern about this during his talk at the 2013 SWIM Conference in Copenhagen:

[...] Many artists don't opt for building their own foundations. Instead, it's been rather seen as a stepping-stone or a short-cut into existing institutions. One of the reasons why existing institutions, collections, and museums maintain power in the face of these new abilities is fundamentally because they still have the money that pays for the art and the property that displays it. And I think nothing can be said to have radically changed in the age of the network society until we see a radical shift in this dynamic. (Vickers 2013b)

However, existing institutions—and their limited capability for facilitating digital art—are a rather bleak prospect for digital artists. Most of today's museums are still rooted in their 19th century heritage, having been founded to provide for the conditions of art production and reception at that time, and are presently not equipped to appropriately present new media work (Gere 2008b: 24). In addition, institutions tend to marginalize non-object-based practices because their funding is tied to conventional exhibitions (Cornell/Varnelis 2011).

For this reason, many artists take to materializing their essentially digital work specifically to make it accessible and possible to be experienced in a conventional white cube gallery setting. Critic Droitcour (2013) sees this paradox as the epitome of post-internet art. “Here is a self-styled avant-garde that's all about putting art back in the rarefied space of the gallery, even as it purports to offer profound insights about how a vast, non-hierarchical communications network is altering our lives.” Although Droitcour is correct in identifying this dynamic, he criticizes it as an opportunist compromise to cater to the existing market. While post-internet art does often have a peculiar appearance, likening it to sloppily executed sculpture, this might be less a result of laziness, and rather one of being forced to choose among inadequate ways of translating a virtual piece into a physical one. Lauren Cornell, currently curator at the *New Museum*, New York describes the notion in her experience with new media art:

I find it constantly disheartening to speak with young artists who feel compelled to translate performance, video, Web-based projects or sound works into something gallery-ready, because physical exhibitions still remain the dominant way that art is named, seen, reviewed and converted into a saleable asset. (Cornell/Varnelis 2011)

Digital art is inherently medium-specific, yet the market has not been able to accommodate this change, and continues to depend on object-hood, scarcity and conferring value by authority figures. As long as these values remain

untouched, there will be little appeal to commercial galleries and institutions in fully integrating Digital art into existing structures of physical art exhibition.

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