Art of the Digital Natives and Predecessors of Post-Internet Art

Raivo Kelomees
Senior researcher
Estonian Academy of Arts
E-mail: offline@online.ee

Abstract

The aim of the presentation is to pay an homage to the first generation of internet-based artists and to show, how their creative contribution is partially lost and how it became part of the art history. Also, it is of interest to follow the debate around post-internet art, which representatives claim their relation to the net.art. More specifically, I would like to point to and analyse exhibition "ARS17: Hello World!" in Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki and to analyse art of the "digital natives" and how they differ from artists who invaded the digital art arena in the 1990ties.

Introduction

The aim of the presentation is to pay an homage to the first generation of internet-based artists and to show, how their creative contribution is partially lost and how it became part of the art history. Also, it is of interest to follow the debate around post-internet art, which representatives claim their relation to the net.art. More specifically, I would like to point to and analyse exhibition "ARS17: Hello World!" in Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki (31.03.2017 - 14.01.2018). Also I would like to analyse art of the "digital natives" and how they differ from artists who invaded the digital art arena in the 1990ties.

Now and then: internet art vs. post-internet art

Now that the internet has drowned in social networks and commercial channels, it makes sense to look back at the experiences of net art in the 1990s. This was an era of innocence, eagerness and heroes of a kind, when networks as art were brand new. Net art was both ironic and self-critical.

The essential difference is that the internet environment back then was something special and new, and now it is banal and everyday. In the 1990s, culture and art had to be, figuratively speaking, brought to the internet, settled there and only then was it possible to see how the environment influenced the content, whereas in the current post-digital and post-internet era, the internet environment is like nature: it surrounds us. It has become a channel through which the world reaches us, but it has also become an environment where people live their everyday lives, communicate and express themselves. It has turned into a dominating environment.

The new normal or the digital environment surrounding us has in recent years surprised us, at least in the fine arts, with the internet's content returning to its physical space. Is this due to pressure from the galleries or something else; in any case, it is clearer than ever that the audience is not separable from the habitual space; there is a huge and primal demand for physical or material art.

Christiane Paul (2017, pp. 37-41) in her article "Digital Art Now: The Evolution of the Post-Digital Age" in "ARS17: Hello World!" exhibition catalogue, is critical of the exhibition. Her main message is that all this has been done before. In itself the statement lacks originality, but in the context of the postinternet apologists declaring the birth of a new mentality, the arrival of a new "after experiencing the internet" and "post-digital" generation, it becomes clear that indeed it is rather like shooting fish in a barrel, because art that is critical of the digital and interactive has existed since the 1990s, as have works concerned with the physicalisation of the digital experience.

The background to the exhibition is the discussion over "digitally created" art and the generation related to it. The notion of "digital natives" is related to the post-digital and post-internet generation and the notion of "post-contemporary" (i.e. art is not concerned with the contemporary but with the universal human condition). Apparently for the digital natives, the internet is not a way out of the world anymore, but an original experience in which the majority of their time is spent. At the same time, however, the internet is a natural information environment for people of all ages whose work involves data collection and intellectual work. Communication, thinking, information gathering and creation – all of these realms are related to the digital environment. These new digital nomads travel from place to place and work in a "post-studio" environment.

While digital or new media was created, stored and shared via digital means, post-digital art addresses the digital without being stored using these same means. In other words, this kind of art exists more in the physical space.

"New aesthetics"

Considerable reference also exists in relation to James Bridle's (2011) new aesthetics concept. In short, this refers to the convergence and conjoinment of the virtual and physical world. It manifests itself clearly even in the "pixelated" design of consumer goods or in the oeuvre of sculptors and painters, whose work has emerged from something digital. For example, the art objects by Shawn Smith and Douglas Coupland are made using pixel-blocks (the sculpture by the latter is indeed reminiscent of a low resolution digital image). Analogous works induce confusion, not to say a surprising experience, in the minds of the audience, for they bring the virtual quality of the computerised environment into physical surroundings. This makes the artworks appear odd and surreal, like some sort of mistake, errors, images and objects out of place.

The so-called postinternet generation artists are certainly not the only ones making this kind of art. As an example of this, there is a reference to the abstract stained glass collage of 11,500 pixels by Gerhard Richter (2007) in the Cologne Cathedral. It is supposed to be a reference to his 1974 painting "4096 Farben" (4096 colours), which indeed is quite similar. It is said that Richter did not accept a fee; however, the material costs were covered by donations. And yet the cardinal did not come to the opening of the glasswork, preferring depictions of Christian martyrs over abstract windows, which instead reminded him of mosques (Welt.de 2007).

One could name other such examples inspired by the digital world or schisms of the digital and physical world: Helmut Smits' "Dead Pixel in Google Earth" (2008); Aram Barholl's "Map" (2006); the projects by Eva and Franco Mattes, especially the printouts of Second Life avatars from 2006; Achim Mohné's and Uta Koppi's project "Remotewords" (2007–2011), computer-based instructions printed on rooftops to be seen from Google Maps or satellites or planes (Mohné and Koppi 2007-11). There are countless examples where it is hard to discern whether the artist is deliberately and critically minded towards digital art or rather a representative of the post-digital generation who is not aware and wishes not to be part of the history of digital art.

From the point of view of researchers of digital culture, the so-called media-archaeological direction could be added to this as an inspirational source for artists today. Media archaeology or the examination of previous art and cultural experience signifies, in relation to contemporary media machines and practices, the exploration of previous non-digital cultural devices, equipment, means of communication, and so on, that could be regarded as the pre-history of today's digital culture and digital devices. With this point of view, the "media-archaeological" artworks of Toshio Iwai or Bernie Lubell coalesce. They have taken an earlier "media machine" or a scientific or technical device and created a modern creation on the basis of it.

Then there was the "Ars Electronica" festival (2006) that focused on the umbrella topic "Simplicity", which in a way turned its back on the "complexity" of digital art and returned to the physical space.

Therefore, in the context of digital media based art trends, the last couple of decades have seen many expressions – works, events and exhibitions – of "turning away" from the digital environment that would outwardly qualify as post-digital and postinternet art.

The most significant mistake that is made regarding new media-based art is to see it as a medium in the sense of a mediator, that it conveys some kind of other reality, translated through a digital code, information of analogous reality, and is then re-mediated. A certain context arises from the characteristics of the phenomenon itself: such as its materialism and technical qualities. The digital environment is not just the transfer medium, the mediator medium, the re-mediator. Various art forms emerging on these platform (interactive art, net art, software art, telecommunicative art, bioart

and other hybrid formats) also possess their own set of rules, which understandably rely on the character of the digital environment and technology, but are essentially innovative. This is not merely technology as a tool, a medium and a means with which to differently package existing reality; it has created a different kind of playing field where the previous conventions of physical art and reality are no longer valid. At the same time, this field requires some technical knowledge.

The 1990s could be characterised as an era of establishing new media centres, with media labs of all kinds, and university new media subunits. However it seems the enthusiasm has waned for artists to acquire the necessary technical knowledge and skills for digital work. This may be because the attraction, edginess and 'sexiness' of new media have decreased, partly because digital technology is everywhere, and partly because purely technical education does not really suit art academies: the cognitive abilities of creative people are limited and they require more intuitive creative practices than technical training involving discrete intellectual abilities. This all constitutes fertile ground for the decisive backlash known as 'post-internet'.

References

1. Paul, C. (2017). Digital Art Now: The Evolution of the Post-Digital Age, in *ARS17: Hello World! Art After Internet*, catalogue, A Museum of Contemporary Art Publication, Kiasma, pp. 37-41.
2. Bridle, J. (2011). *The New Aesthetic: Waving at the Machines, 5. dets 2011.* Retrieved from http://booktwo.org/notebook/waving-at-machines/.
3. Smith, S. Retrieved from http://shawnsmithart.com/images.htm.
4. Coupland, D. Retrieved from http://www.yaean.com/en/blog/2010/07/28/douglas-coupland-orca-sculpture/.
5. Richter, G. (2007). Cologne Cathedral Window. Retrieved from https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/other/glass-and-mirrors-105/cologne-cathedral-window-14890/?p=1.
6. Richter, G. (1974). 4096 Colours. Retrieved from https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/abstracts/colour-charts-12/4096-colours-6089.
7. Welt.de (2007). Gerhard Richter weist Meisners Kritik zurück. Retrieved from https://www.welt.de/politik/article1148224/Gerhard-Richter-weist-Meisners-Kritik-zurueck.html.
8. Smits, H. (2008). Dead pixel in Google Earth. Retrieved from http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/mar/30/dead-pixel-in-google-earth-2008-helmut-smits/.
9. Barholl, A. (2006) "Map". Retrieved from http://www.datenform.de/mapeng.html.
10. Mohné, A. and Koppi, U. (2007–2011). "Remotewords". Retrieved from http://www.achimmohne.de/content/remotewords33.html.

Biography

Raivo Kelomees, *PhD (art history)*, artist, critic and new media researcher. Studied psychology, art history, and design in Tartu University and the Academy of Arts in Tallinn. Has published in main cultural and art magazines and newspapers of Estonia since 1985. Book author, "Surrealism" (Kunst Publishers, 1993) and an article collections "Screen as a Membrane" (Tartu Art College proceedings, 2007), "Social Games in Art Space" (Estonian Academy of Arts, 2013). Doctoral thesis „Postmateriality in Art. Indeterministic Art Practices and Non-Material Art" (Dissertationes Academiae Artium Estoniae 3, 2009).