

Presentism and Post Internet

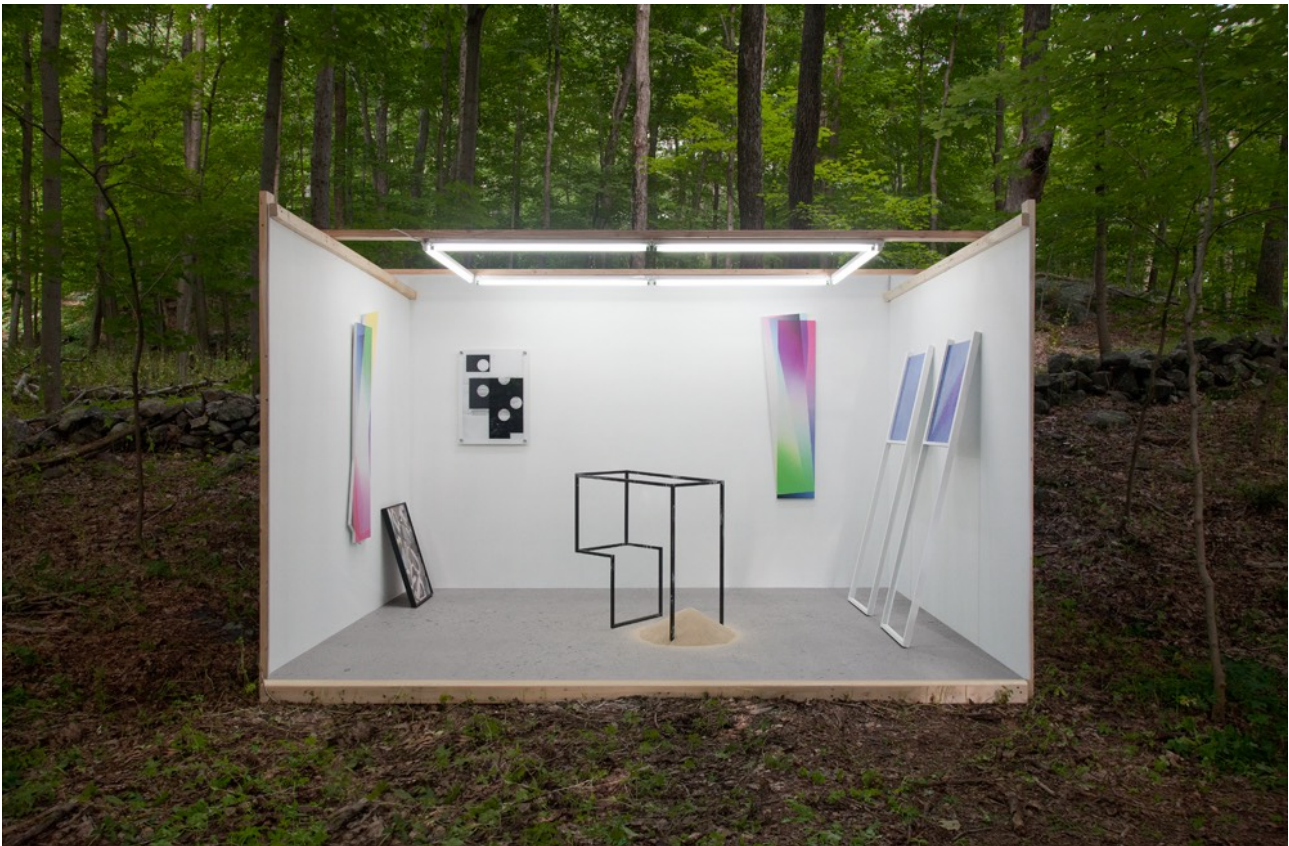
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The term Post internet started being used by artist and curator [Marisa Olson around 2008](#) to describe her art and that of her peers: a practice that was not medium specific and happening only online, but that was using the fragments of a compulsory web surfing to produce online pieces as well as performances, animations, installations, songs, photos, texts etc. Other terms used were “art after the internet” (Olson 2006) and “[Internet Aware Art](#)” (Guthrie Lonergan 2008).

At that time, the Internet had survived the collapse of the so-called new economy, and it was structurally evolving into what in 2004 started to be called [Web 2.0](#): a web “that emphasizes user-generated content, ease of use, participatory culture and interoperability (i.e., compatible with other products, systems, and devices) for end users.” Google was emerging as the main entrance door to the contents of the internet, thanks to its search algorithm; and was already evolving into a giant corporation able to control almost every aspect of our online presence, thanks to its email service, its free blogging platform, and YouTube (founded in 2005 and bought by Google in October 2006). Social networking was emerging, too.

If, in the late Nineties, the internet was perceived by artists as a free communication space to colonize and shape, where you could invent your own language and design your own place, now it was gradually evolving into a mainstream mass medium open to everybody, and a plain mirror of the real world. Artists started gathering in “surfing clubs,” group blogs where they collected, remixed and shared the results of their daily surfing experience; instead of learning to hack and inventing their own language, they preferred to use commercial, offthe-shelves softwares [in their default settings](#); instead of seeing their practice as a way to escape the art world and get in touch with audiences without mediation and outside of the existing power structures, they were naturally translating their online experience into forms that would easily fit in an exhibition space.

If early net.art was a futurist Avantgarde, post internet was a presentist art movement, as art writer [Gene McHugh](#) acutely noticed already in 2011: “On some general level, the rise of social networking and the professionalization of web design reduced the technical nature of network computing, shifting the Internet from a specialized world for nerds and the technologically-minded, to a mainstream world for nerds, the technologically-minded and grandmas and sports fans and business people and painters and everyone else. Here comes everybody. Furthermore, any hope for the Internet to make things easier, to reduce the anxiety of my existence, was simply over—it failed—and it was just another thing to deal with. What we mean when we say ‘Internet’ became not a thing in the world to escape into, but rather the world one sought escape from... sigh... It became the place where business was conducted, and bills were paid. It became the place where people tracked you down.”



Joshua Citarella, *Compression Artifacts*, 2013. Built in an undisclosed location. Featuring works by Wyatt Niehaus, Kate Steciw, Brad Troemel, Artie Vierkant and Joshua Citarella. Image courtesy the artist.

Young post internet artists were not the only ones realizing that Web 2.0, social media, wi-fi connections and, since 2007, smartphones were changing our relationship with technology on a mass scale and on a global level. Artists like Cory Arcangel, a bridge between the early net.art and the post internet generation, and Ryan Trecartin were starting getting recognized in the art world; artists—and later on, critics and curators—with an art world reputation, like Seth Price, David Joselit, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, were getting interested in topics such as the online circulation of images and artworks and the generational shift.

In September 2012, on an issue of *Artforum* focused on “Art’s new media,” art critic Claire Bishop published an article called *Digital Divide*, in which she wondered: “So why do I have a sense that the appearance and content of contemporary art have been curiously unresponsive to the total upheaval in our labor and leisure inaugurated by the digital revolution? While many artists use digital technology, how many really confront the question of what it means to think, see, and filter affect through the digital? How many thematize this, or reflect deeply on how we experience, and are altered by, [the digitization of our existence?](#)”

At the time, it wasn't easy to understand that she was not simply speaking for herself, but giving voice to an urgent need of the whole art world: to see more art responding to a shift that was finally perceived by everybody as part of their daily life.

Post internet was there, ready to answer these urgent questions. What happened along the following years, mostly between 2013 and 2016, was something unprecedented in recent art history: a movement originated in the relatively small niche of media art became an art world trend with support from both the institutions and the art market. In a few years, artists like Oliver Laric, Jon Rafman, Aleksandra Domanovic, Petra Cortright, Parker Ito, Constant Dullaart, Katja Novitskova, Cécile B. Evans, Artie Vierkant, to name only a few, got the attention of the mainstream art world, together with other artists not connected to the “surfing clubs” generation but still very close to them for topics, formal solutions and personal networks, such as Simon Denny, Trevor Paglen, Ed Atkins and Hito Steyerl.

While coming to prominence, Post internet started to suffer some commercial dynamics of the mainstream art world. What was easy to repeat and imitate, in Post internet—the use of painterly effects mediated by software, the reference to interface aesthetics and online subcultures such as vaporwave, the research around online circulation of images, from memes to stock imagery—became a style and got imitated by anybody who wanted to look fashionable and up to date. On a parallel path, some Post internet artists—like Petra Cortright and Parker Ito started being sold on auctions, and were included in the wave of the so-called Zombie Formalism. The term, coined by critic Walter Robinson in 2014, refers to a wave of abstract formalist paintings, made by a bunch of young artists supported by collectors known as art flippers for their investment strategies—they buy artworks from the artists at relatively low prices and put them back at auctions soon afterward. [Robinson explained the label this way](#): “‘Formalism’ because this art involves a straightforward, reductive, essentialist method of making a painting (yes, I admit it, I’m hung up on painting), and ‘Zombie’ because it brings back to life the discarded aesthetics of Clement Greenberg, the man who championed Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis, and Frank Stella’s ‘black paintings’ among other things.”

The prices reached on auction by these artworks, together with their visual qualities—a pleasant, recognizable abstraction easy to like on social networks made Zombie Formalism a successful movement in the art world... at least for some years. As many outcomes of financial speculations and inflated expectations, Zombie Formalism collapsed upon itself, and only a few artists were able to keep up and survive “the Zombie Formalism Apocalypse,” [as a 2018 Artnet News article put it](#).

Between 2014 and 2015, Post internet was everywhere, and many in the art world started being fed up with it. In October 2014, art critic Brian Droitcour published on Art in America an article which, under the headline [The Perils of Post Internet Art](#), offered this critical definition: “Post-Internet art does to art what porn does to sex —renders it lurid. The definition I’d like to propose underscores this transactional sensibility: I know Post-Internet art when I see art made for its own installation shots, or installation shots presented as art. Post-Internet art is about creating objects that look good online: photographed under bright lights in the gallery’s purifying white cube (a double for the white field of the browser window that supports the documentation), filtered for high contrast and colors that pop.”

Artists started dissociating themselves from the label—Droitcour himself opens his article saying “Most people I know think ‘Post-Internet’ is embarrassing to say out loud.” Other critics, curators and art professionals joined him in proudly declaring their hate or intolerance against Post internet; and when, in 2016, New York based collective DIS—working on the edge between curating, art making and fashion—curated the Berlin Biennale, the event—called [The Present in Drag](#) – was both perceived as the ultimate celebration of post internet, and its swan song.

The story of Post internet is interesting because it shows the evolution of an art movement in the present shock. After the first years of community and research (the years of surfing clubs, circa 2006–2012), Post internet met the expectations and the demands of an art world that wanted more art reacting to the digital shift; this made it vulnerable to the market dynamics of the art world, which caused an inflated attention and an oversimplification of its aesthetic and cultural instances, that turned it into a trend. In a bunch of years (2013–2016) people got tired of it, and the celebrated trend became the subject of hate and refusal.

The speed of this process is, of course, related to the speed at which information travels today, and to its abundance. If, in the past, it took years or even decades to a style to become a global language—through traveling exhibitions and catalogues, articles on printed magazines, oral reports of the few real globetrotters etc.—today information and things travel faster, and in order to know what’s happening right now in New York, Berlin or Beijing, one just needs to turn her favorite social network on. As an art practice that relied consistently on online circulation and mediated experience, Post internet became widely visible very fast; but—turned into a fashion—it oversaturated our gaze even faster.

The shift, in its perception, from something new to a fashionable trend requires some consideration, too. As Yves Michaud explained: “When novelty becomes tradition and routine, its utopian sides disappear, and what is left is just the process of renewal [...] When permanent renewal takes command, fashion becomes the only way to beat time.” Fisher’s words about the “precorporation” of what’s new and alternative also come to mind: when novelty is accepted by the system it immediately turns into the “new normal.” This process may seem alien to an art world that since postmodernism namely doesn’t believe in a linear, progressive evolution of art anymore, but it isn’t. As Boris Groys explains in his essay [“On the New,”](#) contemporary art is the result of a dialectic between the museum, that recognizes art as such, and artistic practice: which needs to prove to be new, lively and different from what’s already collected to be recognized as art, but turns into the new tradition at the very moment in which this recognition happens, and it enters the museum. This way, the dialectic between the museum and the new turns into an infinite loop, and paradoxically, the museum becomes the space that produces “today” as such, “the only place for possible innovation.”

The problem is: if innovation is immediately incorporated, emptied and turned into fashion, what’s for? What chance has an original, new development to evolve slowly, to reach maturity, and to last in time? It’s hard to say. Looking at Post internet from the point of view of this moment in time, one thing that we may notice is that the “Post internet” label

may have become unfashionable and outdated, and what was recognizable and trendy in its visual aesthetics and addressed topics may have been dropped out; but many artists that started their career under this tagline seem to be here to stay; and more importantly, Post internet seems to have completely changed the relationship between mainstream contemporary art and digital media and culture. Its topics and languages are now perceived as relevant to understand the time we are living in, and some of the artists that are dealing with them are recognized among the major artists of our time. How all this might be vulnerable to the present shock, it's what we will discuss in the final chapters of this text.

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