Lesson five transcript

Hello everyone, thanks for joining me today. This is the FIFTH episode of Social Media Art: From Dada to TikTok, a course produced by Arebyte and hosted by me, Filippo Lorenzin.
The previous lessons will serve as a basis for investigating the most recent research in the field of social media. In the next lessons I will explain different aspects and phenomena related to the activity of artists who implement their practices within the Network, with particular attention to the systems designed to host the exchange of materials between users. We will start from Marshall McLuhan's reflections on the influence of a new technology on how to think and conceive the worlds and will finish with what it actually means to create and share digital art on social platforms. As always, feel welcome to get in contact with me if you have questions by sending an email to me.

Lesson 2.1
Mediating Art: Marshall McLuhan

In Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, media theorist Marshall McLuhan was concerned with the influence exerted by the use of technological tools on behaviours and ways of thinking of individuals. At the center of his theories there was the need to establish how technology alters the perceptual modalities of the individual, influencing their opinions in a reflected, mediated way.
The psychological shock caused by the introduction of a new technology in the individual's life is directly proportional to the novelties it brings: McLuhan suggested that the movable type printing played an important causal role in the process that led to the origin of Protestantism which eliminated qualitative hierarchies in society in the same way as Gutenberg's invention. According to McLuhan, it is necessary that an interval of time passes between the introduction of the new technology and the psychological absorption of the innovations it brings with it by the individuals who use it. This absorption, defined in these terms, recalls Carl Gustav Jung's reflections on the psychic process of apperception, "by which a new content is aggregated (and articulated) with similar existing content in such a way that it is understood, conceived or clearly defined ". In short, it is an internal work that aims to reconfigure the pre-existing psychic patterns so that the novelty is absorbed with the least possible expenditure of energy. The greater the novelty, the greater the effort and time required to absorb it: a rapid succession of major changes therefore requires a corresponding consumption of energy in an adequate time interval.

The speed with which technological innovations have been introduced in recent centuries has meant that the individual has found himself in a permanent condition of alienation, from himself and from the tools he uses. If it is true, therefore, that technology has failed to bring harmony to humanity's collective consciousness and that the result is a widespread sense of frustration

particularly painful precisely because today most human activity is geared to the technological, it is McLuhan himself who indicates who can help other individuals overcome this shock: the artists. According to McLuhan, they are the only capable of playing a mediating role between the innovations introduced by the new technology and the sensitive psyche of the individual who uses it. This occurs because they have a particularly receptive sensitivity that allows them to feel the changes that are taking place in the context in which they live in a distinct way. Their role, as today as ever, "is to recover for the general public the larger context that has been lost by science's exclusive investigation of text": the aim of the artist is not to provide a celebration or condemnation of new technology; on the contrary, it must uncritically fill the gap between it and the psyche, mediate the shock and change taking place so as to make it less traumatic for the rest of society.

This position is the cornerstone of our investigation: the artists who operate in the same context in which more and more activities are carried out by other individuals create tools and opportunities to be critical while psychologically absorbing the alterations of behaviours and ways of reasoning. To quote artist Eduardo Kac, "it is not with sheer enthusiasm for new tools that the artist will work with communication technologies, but with a critical, skeptical approach concerning the logic of mediation they entail".

Lesson 2.2
The Art Work in the Social Media Fluxus

Social media platforms generate in the users the urgency to express themselves in order to give order to their experience and create a sort of montage of their existence which, at the same time, flows into a collective storytelling that involves other users. The ways in which these services invite people to manifest themselves are very often anesthetizing, placing any kind of event in a framework that is the same for everyone; what does not fall within the parameters established by the person who created the system is excluded from circulation. To quote Guy Debord, "in societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" and therefore users' manifestations can only be configured as "spectacular" elements, not so much as particular images, but as "a social relation among people, mediated by images".

The typification that each individual generates of their own person becomes a way to be framed within recognisable categories, both by other users and by the algorithm that controls their manifestations.

A work that explores this dynamic is Lee Walton's "Fbook, What My Friends Are Doing On Facebook" (2009), in which the artist staged the status updates of his contacts on the social network documenting them with videos, critically decoding the ways in which the narration of one's experiences is created and developed in a community that shares the same communication tools. Nicolas Bourriaud wrote that the function of these disclosure processes "is to make these structures function in order to reveal their coercive logic and then to make them available to an audience likely to reappropriate them". In the case of Walton's work, there is an additional level of interpretation that links it to the research of artist Pierre Huyghe. In "The Third Memory" (2000) he reconstructed the events of the famous bank robbery of 1972 that inspired the director Sidney Lumet for the film Dog Day Afternoon. This story was a famous case of crime news and when Lumet decided to work on it, it was a story already mediated by the journalistic and television

language. "The Third Memory" is a work that highlights the translation process, putting itself first in play: from the real fact to the journalistic story and from that to the cinematographic dramatisation. Each passage excludes or adds elements. Huyghe asked John Wojtowicz, the real author of the robbery played by Al Pacino in the film, to tell and stage those situations based on his memory, creating a further version of that story that was not necessarily more real than the movie. In the light of these reflections, we return to Lee Walton's project, to note how his reenactments assume a dignity equal to that of the status updates published by users: both are spectacular representations of a real fact.

The works that enter the flow of materials published online tend to meet the public in a way generated by two dynamics: on the one hand they are distributed to a larger audience in new ways, by improved marketing techniques and by mass media and therefore directed towards a predetermined audience; on the other hand they are experienced by the public in a random way, in the sense that they do not have to go to a specific physical or virtual space to observe them, but rather, they often come across accidentally.

An interesting project that indicates the method of appropriation and reworking of certain production and sharing processes, is the collective exhibition of 2012 "Brand Innovations for Ubiquitous Authorship" that took place at the Higher Pictures Gallery in New York. The project, curated by Artie Vierkant, consisted in asking a group of artists to produce an object using personalised printing or manufacturing services such as CafePress, Zazzle and Walmart; once produced, these objects were sent packaged directly to the gallery and discovered and installed there. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this project is the way in which the so-called "customisation" process was emphasised - a kind of interaction that can be found in many forms on the Internet : from Tumblr that asks us to choose a preset graphic for our blog, to Facebook that suggests us to insert a profile image, we could extend this dynamic to the entire experience on the Web, defining it as an uninterrupted sequence of choices among options already set. Let's compare this project with a work done 90 years earlier by László Moholy-Nagy: in 1922 the Hungarian artist lifted the telephone receiver to contact a billboard factory and order five porcelain enamel paintings. This is what he wrote about that experience: "I had the factory's color chart before me and I sketched my paintings on graph paper. At the other end of the telephone the factory supervisor had the same kind of paper, divided into squares. He took down the dictated shapes in the correct position". The instructions he gave on the phone were interpreted in three different ways, which generated as many paintings that undermined the notion of originality: as Moholy-Nagy wrote, "the three similar telephone pictures are not a series, they are copies without an original". The same reflection applies to the "Brand Innovations for Ubiquitous Authorship" exhibition, because in this case the works created by the company are only some of the potentially achievable versions of an original idea as well.

A phenomenon linked to these issues is that of artistic projects created with the involvement of other people through crowdsourcing, the business model for which a user entrusts others with the realisation of a project in exchange for a fee. As Jeff Howe wrote, the development of these dynamics arose thanks to the fact that "technological advances in everything from product design software to digital video cameras are breaking down the cost barriers that once separated amateurs from professionals"; thanks to this leveling, a minimum distance is perceived between the result produced by professionals and that produced by amateurs, creating an interesting economic situation: hobbyists, part-timers, and dabblers suddenly have a market for their efforts, as smart companies in industries as disparate as pharmaceuticals and television discover ways to tap the

latent talent of the crowd. The labor isn't always free, but it costs a lot less than paying traditional employees.

Many artists have developed projects that directly reflect and exploit these mechanisms: the collective IOCOSE, for example, created "A Contemporary Portrait of the Internet Artist" in 2014, a series of canvases painted by anonymous Chinese workers, contacted through the Amazon crowdsourcing platform, who have been asked to reproduce stock images depicting artists at work. Another project that reflects on crowdsourcing is Guido Segni's "The middle finger response" (2013); the artist paid crowdsourced workers to send him a picture of them on the computer while they show the middle finger to the webcam. The user rebels against an invisible, unnamed Master, following the instructions of his employer (Segni himself) creating a crisis; if at a first glance this series seems to protest the processes and dynamics of the Net, one can see in the workers' eyes an alienation distant from the anger of the proletariat who rebels against the System. Segni adds a level of interpretation that leads to question active participation in the times of social artistic projects on the Net.

A further starting point offered by the exhibition at Higher Pictures comes from the way in which the delivery of each of the works created for the occasion has been documented: on YouTube you can find the videos of the employees who open the boxes, remove the packaging and find the works. The videos are entitled, for example, "Unboxing Marisa Olson" and "Unboxing Jon Rafman", clearly tracing a parallel between the branding of artists and the recognisability of commercial brands. This is a specific reference to a very popular genre of videos on YouTube which consists in documenting the first time you open a box containing a newly purchased product. The success of these videos, with millions of views and emulations all over the world with the most diverse products, testifies to the urgency of finding a personal dimension and not mediated with respect to the object that came off the assembly line, equal to all those made before and after it.

It is useful to mention artist Gottfried Bechtold's "Media Suitcases" project. In 1972, he inserted documents of his works in the form of photographs, video films and slides in boxes; these collections were on sale and also contained blank ribbons that were to be used by the buyers to complete the procedure conceived and started by Bechtold himself. In other words, the user, who became an economic entity as owner of the work, was asked to actively participate in the implementation of the operation, completing the production cycle. Far from exhausting its strength in this process, the Media Suitcases project, as suggested by Reinhard Braun, "was first and foremost a collection of cultural technologies", or a reflection on how we are driven to use the technology and the ways in which this influences our willingness to use it.

As observed by Marshall McLuhan, the medium modifies the way of thinking and experiencing the world of the individual who uses it: the camera is a tool for documentation and therefore for representation that pre-builds the world that we perceive and shapes the ways in which we observe it. In short, the devices used by the individual, whether they are GoPro cameras, smart-phones or video cameras, are the product of a culture that wants to represent the object in precise ways that are internalised by the user thanks to the effort of those who promote them. Thanks to this reflection we can look at Vierkant's and Bechtold's projects in a different way: the documentation of unboxing is a practice that creates an unprecedented relationship of forces between buyer and industry, in which the former seems to regain possession of his faculty of choice at the expense of what the latter suggests; the virgin ribbons inside the Media Suitcases refer directly to the uses that can be made of them.

To finally go back back to our investigation, these two projects highlight how the work of art produced with the same tools used by a very large audience is forced on pre-built tracks that, consequently, pre-build the world we perceive; in other words, the webcam of the artist Petra Cortright and the smart-phone of Amalia Ulman, two of the artists that we will cover in the next lessons, are tools created with the aim of recording and showing audiovisual materials in a culturally connoted way, linked to logic surveillance. It is up to the artist to decide whether to make this dynamic clear or whether to go further, albeit critically, and focus on the potential of these means.

This is all for today, thanks for joining me. You are very welcome to get in contact if you have any questions or comments! See you next week, ciao ciao.