Lesson one transcript

Hello everybody, thanks for joining me. My name is Filippo Lorenzin, I'm a critic and independent curator. I would like to know about you; please feel welcome to introduce yourselves by sending me an email to this address: hello@arebyte.com. I am curious about your background and why you will attend this course. We will explore what artists have been using social media to make and share art and how this practice is placed within a broader art history framework.

Social media seem to be the perfect platforms to make and share art. In 2019 2.95 billion people were using social media worldwide. This means that almost half of the people living on this planet communicate and read news on platforms designed in order to make their users addicted to their numbers and mechanisms.

Of course, because of the current time, social media plays an even more central role in our lives. In March, when the lockdown was just starting to be put in place in the UK, it was estimated that total internet hits had surged by 70% while the traffic on Facebook rose by 27%. This means that the number of likes, retweets and followers that would have stressed users only when they had enough time to take a look at their phones while doing something else, now are way more present in their lives. What better time to look at what artists do online then?

Artists have worked on the internet since the Nineties, more often than not developing projects that exploit the mechanisms of marketing-driven platforms to disrupt the way they were designed to be used by users. A good example of this is the Demetricator by Ben Grosser, a free plugin that removes all the metrics from Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. "29.2K Tweets" under a trending hashtag becomes, simply, "Tweets". Through changes like these, Demetricator lets us try out Twitter without the numbers, to see what happens when we can no longer judge ourselves and others in metric terms. With this work, the artist aimed to disrupt the obsession with social media metrics, to reveal how they guide our behavior, and to ask who most benefits from a system that quantifies our public interactions online.

This is a work that not only takes place online, but requires our interaction and agency. It challenges our way to experience reality in such a way that no works on display in a museum or gallery can match. This course will cover what makes a project like this a work of art by

addressing the developments in art history and theory that since Dada changed the role played by art and artists in daily life.

It'll be a long journey, so please feel free to write to me whenever you have a question or want to comment. Let's start with the basics..

WHAT IS NEW MEDIA

...let's do a game. Please, write 3 sentences including the words "media", "mediating" and "medium". You have 1 minute!

Now, I bet you noticed that in almost all of your sentences "media" is used to indicate something that is "in between". In fact, "Media" comes from the Latin plural of medium. It means something in between, not necessarily exchanging information between two agents. For example, the latin "In Media Res" means "into the middle of things". In contemporary language, "media" is broadly understood as one of the means or channels of general communication in society, as newspapers, radio, television.

Knowing this, let's step up the game and see what "new media" means. It commonly refers to content available on-demand through the Internet, accessible on any digital device, usually containing interactive user feedback and creative participation.

It's a term born in the '50s within the media studies field and should exclude any media that is not digital or algorithmical. The question then is what does "digital" actually mean? The history of New Media art is often about this need to define what "new" means and how this novelty changes the way we make and enjoy art. If conservative art history understands this field as mostly regarding *blips* and *blops*, critics, artists and outsiders challenged these limits for many years.

Labels can be helpful when we need a simple term to define many different works and practices but in this course I will look at social media art from a post-media approach. We will look at contemporary artists working on Tiktok or twitter in relation to what artists did in the past, especially when reacting to what mass media forced on society at the time. It is true that Facebook wasn't around at the time of Pop Art but the marketing rules that shape contemporary social media were pretty much the same in use in the fifties.

First section:
The work of art and daily life in the twentieth century

The development of works of art that are inserted in official communication channels and industrial production chains, using their characteristics and peculiarities, is the result of a multidisciplinary thought that has had a certain development in the modern age. The reasons

and the ways in which the works are inserted by the artists in platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are not new; indeed, we will see that they are the most recent manifestations of an artistic and intellectual research born almost a century ago, not surprisingly in conjunction with the birth of the mass culture industry.

Opposition to the official system and ready-made products: the Dada movement

In 1997, Vuk Ćosić claimed that he and all the other artists working online were sons of the Dada movement and Marcel Duchamp. How is it possible that a group of artists interested in webpages, online platforms and binary language felt such a strong connection with a movement that worked 80 years before any digital culture?

Dada was founded in Zurich in 1916 with the activities of a group of students, it was one of the most important artistic and intellectual movements of the twentieth century. Their projects and initiatives posed as a response to many conventions of the art and politics of the time. Their legacy was very important for contemporary art and internet art in particular. Net.artist

Dada was a movement of reaction and rejection towards tradition: the core group of the movement was international in a historical moment when nationalisms and regional prides were exasperated and promoted by the power.
Furthermore, one of Dada's peculiarities was the lack of a rigidly established organization, beyond the obvious importance played by the founder Tristan Tzara: the personalities who were involved in the initiatives of the movement were many, linked together by the affinity of their research and almost never placed in an inflexible framework of official representation.

Many of the initiatives carried out by the original Dada group were staged at the Cabaret Voltaire, an experimentation space founded by the theater director Hugo Ball in February 1916. The members of the movement created shows, deconstructed the conventional languages of poetry of music and art to launch attacks on their legitimacy.
Only accident played a central role in their actions: just as reality seemed to be regulated by the nonexistence of identifiable rules, art had to abandon universalistic and salvific ambitions to embrace this condition.

For example, This is "Untitled (Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance)" by Hans Arp. It is part of a series of collages based on chance, where the artist would stand above a sheet of paper, dropping squares of paper and then gluing the squares wherever they fell onto the page. This approach to composition reflected a corrosive irony that openly mocked the claimed seriousness of official art.

The interest in making up some rules and letting the chance play with it influenced also the first figures interested in digital art. This is "Four computer-generated random patterns" (1965) by Michael Noll. Noll was a researcher with no prior education in art that experimented with what computers could produce in terms of pictures and patterns. His works will be mentioned and

discussed in the next lessons, but please take the time to find out more info about him in advance.

If in the early 20th century traditional art was nationialist and had to be sought in academies and museums, the new dadaist art no longer had a place to be observed ecstatically. If there was no longer a context intended to frame and legitimize art, what resulted was a loss of its specificity and its consequent liberation in the world, returning to inhabit reality.

According to critic Claire Bishop it was Dada that represented the most important precursors of the so-called "participatory art", a practice that would have known an important development only a few decades later. Dada artists active in Paris created in April 1921 the "Grande saison Dada" that involved the inhabitants of the capital in various events, including an excursion to the church of Saint Juliene le Pauvre of over a hundred people despite the heavy rain and the fake trial of the ex-anarchist Maurice Barrès, in which the public was called to participate as a jury. André Breton coined the term "enfers artificiels" to describe the initiatives that the Dada groups transferred from the halls of the cafes and cabarets to the streets.

It was the Dada movement that coined the category of the so-called "anti-art" to define the works they created in those years. Many of their initiatives were born as oppositions: if the bourgeois work of art was intended to be purchased by collectors and patrons, the anti-Dada artwork was created in such a way as to escape the laws of the capitalist market; if the work of art was to be the distillate of a universal message, the anti-work of art was regulated by entropic dynamics not controlled by the artist; if the bourgeois artist was the genius who expressed himself, the anti-artist refused authorship and embraced the collectivization of intellectual activity.

A non-work of art could not be created with refined materials, as precious as symbols of values proper to traditional power and artistic institutions.

Artist Kurt Schwitters described the mood at the time: "In the war, things were in terrible turmoil. What I had learned at the academy was of no use to me.... Everything had broken down and new things had to be made out of the fragments". He made works like "Merzpicture 46A. The Skittle Picture". The word "Merz," which Schwitters used to describe his art practice as well as his individual pieces, is a nonsensical word that he took from the word "commerz". In his Merzpictures he arranged found objects in simple compositions that transformed trash into works of art.

Similar to these, the first ready-made works were cultural works created with objects selected and modified by the artist: this action tended then as nowadays to destabilize almost all the parameters that defined the work of art as such in official circles, such as the fetish for the artist's craftsmanship. Dada's research emphasized that the artist had to work within a context

in which industry-made products created without qualitative differences were becoming more and more common - in this context the manufactured object is a good for the few.

Marcel Duchamp was the first artist to use a readymade and his urinal is one of the most important works of art history. There is little manipulation of the urinal by the artist other than to turn it upside-down and to sign it with a fictitious name. With the title, Fountain, Duchamp referenced both the purpose of the urinal as well as fountains designed by Renaissance and Baroque artists.

As you see, the author of the ready-made almost completely abandons the artisan's ambitions to become a sort of director, a driving force that fits into the industrial assembly line to use material produced specifically to not have identifying qualities. This is also a rehabilitation: the object rejected by the art world is touched by the artist's aura and becomes significant. The artist hides his craftsmanship and underlines what remains of the creative practice: he conceives the work, selects the material with which to make it and finally manipulates it. This zero degree of the creative process invites us to pay more attention to the concept rather than its formalization.

This is an important step for the history of new media in art; industrial objects started to be used to make high art and the artist is the one who chooses the materials he wants. This is something we'll find even a century later, when we'll talk about artists using social media. For example, Cory Archangel edited and shared a video of cats playing the piano on youtube in 2009. Is it art? Absolutely yes, but wait for the next lessons to find out why.

To go back to Dada, Bicycle Wheel by Marcel Duchamp consists of a bicycle fork with a wheel mounted upside-down on a wooden stool.

Now, it is clear that this work cannot exist without its materiality, its forms, but it is also true that that specific stool, that particular fork and that same wheel are not fundamental for the manifestation of the work. That is, they could be replaced by any other stool, fork and wheel without the work force being affected. The interchangeability of the materials used in the work of art is another great novelty introduced with ready-made, which follows parallel what was already happening in the industrial sector: serial production, which we will discuss in greater detail in the next lesson dedicated to Walter Benjamin, ensures that each element, as in an assembly line, can be replaced by another equal without losing specific qualities. In short, when the object remains without its own qualitative connotation, what remains is the idea, the concept that defines it as a work of art.

The ready-mades by Duchamp are not only about the world of art, but also how mass production affected the daily life of everyone, art critics or not. The loss of specific qualities of the objects certainly concerns art and its market but it extends to touch the very structure of society based on this kind of production. The interchangeability of the objects that make up the

ready-made reflects that of the individual who lives in a bourgeois context: he is the same as many others, educated so that he can be replaced without perceiving any quality losses.

Duchamp's choice to use neutral objects highlights this dynamic: if bourgeois art aspires to uniqueness for both historical-cultural and economic reasons, seriality represents its perfect antagonist. The use of these materials in the context of art is therefore very provocative and coherent: Duchamp brings industrial logic to its most extreme consequences in a context, that of bourgeois art, which is the antithesis and which at the same time could not exist without it, as a producer of uniqueness.

This is all for today, thanks for joining me. You are very welcome to get in contact if you have any questions or comments! Please remember to share some info about yourself and why you attend this course so I can ensure the contents I will cover in the following weeks will be relevant to you as much as possible. Ciao ciao