



# Social Media Art: From Dada to TikTok

**Social Media Art: From Dada to TikTok - an online course by Filippo Lorenzin, available at [aos.arebyte.com](https://aos.arebyte.com)**

## Lesson three transcript

Hello everyone, thanks for joining me today. This is the third episode of Social Media Art: From Dada to TikTok, a course produced by Arebyte and hosted by me, Filippo Lorenzin.

As always, I suggest you watch the first two lessons if you missed them. Today I will cover two main subjects: an exhibition featuring works inspired by digital science opened in the 1970 and Mail Art, a practice that paved the way to the way artists interact with each other online today. Feel welcome to get in contact with me by sending an email if you have questions about any of the subjects I will cover.

### Lesson 1.5

#### **“Our bodies are hardware, our behaviour software”**

Between 16 September and 8 November 1970 the exhibition Software - Information technology took place at the Jewish Museum in New York: its new meaning for art, one of the fundamental events for the historical and artistic contextualisation of the digital art works we discuss in the next lessons.

Curated and conceived by Jack Burnham, the exhibition presented to a public who already knew the Fluxus experiments a rich selection of works chosen by some of the most interesting artists of the time, such as Hans Haacke, Robert Barry, Joseph Kosuth, Vito Acconci and John Baldessari; the peculiarity of this exhibition was represented by the presence, alongside these works, of projects realised in research laboratories, the result of the collaboration between engineers, programmers and artists.

In short, there was an attempt to build an exhibition that presented the extreme pervasiveness of the new technologies of the time in both scientific and especially artistic contexts: artists, poets and musicians shared the same space with engineers and computer scientists reflecting that feeling of collaboration that since the sixties had seen research laboratories and artists dialogue in an ever more dense way for the realisation of interdisciplinary projects. To clarify, I will not cover projects made by artists in collaboration with military and university laboratories. The theme is very interesting, especially for those who want to know the first steps of the so-called New Media Art: in this sense I suggest you to read Digital Arts: An Introduction to New Media by Cat Hope and John Ryan.

At the heart of Burnham's reflection was the question of the spectator's participation in the work, one of the most recurring themes of the reflections of the time together with the tension between the creation of objects and the creation of events potentially full of experiential charge: expert



Annamarie Chandler wrote that “when an artwork is conceived of as a set of conditions for perception, rather than as a discrete, bounded object, then the role of the participant is closer to that played in a quantum experiment. The viewer intervenes in a field of probabilities, and the work is determined in that process for that instant and situation.”

Burnham, a link between the world of traditional art and that of interdisciplinary research between art and technology, suggested a parallel between computer software and many artistic practices of the time, first of all the Happening: in both cases one or several people (artists and programmers) were the creators of programmatic situations determined by instructions decided beforehand (works and software). Artists like Les Levine and Robert Breer created projects that explicitly required the active participation of the public, who had to follow the instructions prepared for the occasion. For example Les Levine created Live Wires, an action in which the spectators were crossed by a low voltage electric discharge. Here behaviour is controlled in an aesthetic situation with no primary reference to visual circumstances. As Levine commented, “What I am after here is physical reaction, not visual concern.”

For the occasion Burnham coined the term "postformal", which defined an art that completely lost its formal aesthetic appeal and focused more on the flow, the movement and the interaction. These reflections are similar to what critic Lucy Lippard wrote three years later in Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972: she suggested that all the works belonging to conceptual research underwent a process of "dematerialisation". In the exhibition curated by Burnham this operation was studied above all by looking at Cybernetics; as he explains in the catalog, “the original purpose of Cybernetics was to produce a unified theory of the control levels and types of messages used by men and machines and processes in normal operation. [...] The history of computer technology may be interpreted as progress in making communication between men and machines more natural and complete”.

The dematerialisation of the work observed by Lippard had many aspects in common with the process of discretisation of the analog material data into binary data: a translation of data so that they can communicate with the machine. This does not mean that the works exhibited in the exhibition were technical projects for the sake of looking futuristic; on the contrary, Burnham clearly underlined in the catalog how these projects focused on the influence of digital logic on people's intellectual and behavioural processes.

“Seek” was an installation created by the Architecture Machine Group, a MIT laboratory founded a few years earlier that based its activity on the interdisciplinarity between engineering, architecture and information technology. It was a transparent case with some gerbils inside and apparently identical metal cubes. The animals were free to move within the environment and to move the cubes in order to make it more suitable for their needs: a mechanical arm, guided by a computer in which the data relating to the original position of the blocks had been inserted, replaced the cubes in their initial positions. The central theme of this work was simple, almost didactic in the way it was exhibited: it showed the machine's inability to deal with unpredictable behaviours. The architectures created with these regular cubes created a dystopian setting, in which organic action clashed with the cold aesthetics of the machine and with the logic of an order and a rhythm that does not belong to it.

“Labyrinth”, created by Ned Woodman and Theodor H. Nelson, is the exhibition catalog created in the form of hypertext: the public could sit, interact with the computer and read the texts prepared



for the occasion. Like "Seek", it was not created by artists, but by a computer engineer and philosopher who had coined the terms "hypertext" and "hypermedia" a few years earlier. With this rhizomatic system the way in which the individual uses a material totally changed: it was no longer something that started and ended within a certain set of rules such as, for example, the traditional paper book that can be read without skipping parts. On the contrary, it was a set of texts linked together in a non-hierarchical way, all invested with the same importance and dignity. In other words, the user chose their own path, instead of being guided through a series of proposals created by third parties.

## **Lesson 1.6**

### **The Eternal Network: Mail Art**

We have seen in the previous lessons how projects falling within the category of conceptual art very often renounced the exclusive work-object made with special materials. This attitude was also central in the context of the so-called Mail Art, a trend based on the sending, by post, of envelopes, papers, rolled sheets with a participation of both the sender and recipient: it was not important to create objects, but to develop a network of contacts to circulate concepts and ideas, with the aim of developing a lively community. The very fact that the works were made so that they could be transported very easily and therefore disconnected from physical contexts was to highlight how the whole operation was more focused on the process.

Critic Rosalind Krauss wrote that "abandoning the claim of artistic autonomy and voluntarily presenting themselves in different forms and places, [...] conceptual art thought of safeguarding a greater purity of Art, so that by navigating through the channels of distribution of consumer goods not only could have adopted whatever form it wished, but could have escaped, thanks to a sort of homeopathic defense, the effects of the market itself."

The use of the postal service for the development of a network to exchange works of art was not an absolute novelty in art history: in the early twentieth century the Italian futurists sent metal tickets to each other and Dada artists such as Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp developed experiments using rubber stamps.

In the 1960s, this practice found new vigour by virtue of the disillusioned attitude towards the traditional methods of distributing the works of which we discussed in the previous episodes. It was at that time that the artist Robert Filliou coined the term "Eternal Network", a network developed through the postal service that defined the practice of the founding father of Mail Art Ray Johnson. The artist drew up a list of over two hundred postal addresses belonging to important personalities from the world of culture and art and sent them, starting from 1943, messages, drawings and postcards created for the occasion. This phenomenon, which took the name of "The New York Correspondence School" in 1962 in reference to the "New York School" of Abstract Expressionism, was successful for practical reasons: letters could be sent anywhere with little money. A central role in this operation was played by the intimacy between the participants: being involved in this network of actions made them feel part of a community of friends. The fact that a limited number of people was involved led to a strong social aggregation: the abandonment of the mass media and the use of marginal media were the effects of the need to invent new media that could accommodate during the twentieth century the testimonies of communities that found no place in traditional media.



A project that exemplifies the approach with which these artists exploited the official systems is Douglas Huebler's "Duration Piece No. 13". In the summer of 1969, the artist circulated a thousand dollar bills accompanied by notes bearing the promise to deliver 1000 dollars to anyone who managed to bring back even one. The aspect that most interests us about this operation is the way in which distribution channels and circulation controlled by an authority, in this case the United States government, have been used; the banknotes chosen by the artist were used as viral means of transport, used to insinuate the message into potentially non-artistic contexts. In recent years, artist Joseph DeLappe developed "Rubber Stamp Currency Interventions", a series of projects that exploit the same transmission channels in ways similar to that implemented by Huebler. He shared three rubber stamps across the USA and abroad to allow participants to imprint politically oriented imagery upon their money. These projects began first with the "In Drones We Trust", wherein close to 1000 stamps are in the hands of volunteers who have been stamping a tiny image of an MQ1 Predator Drone on their cash. The second stamp, "Hands Up Don't Shoot!" was inspired by the protests and unrest surrounding the illegal killings of African American by US police. The third, "Sea Level Rising" involves stamping a rising sea level line to represent the threat of climate change and rising seas. In both the works, art remains in the background as a would-be strategy, as a way of describing and justifying.

Over the years, the figures involved in these practices adopted cutting-edge technologies for their practices, such as fax and other very early electronic communication devices offered for sale to the public. This attitude towards new media stemmed from the attention placed by the artists on the distribution and aesthetics of communication, rather than on the postal service as such. "The Eternal Network" has continued to expand by finding new platforms to lean on: the Internet and computers, by virtue of their ease of use, low management costs and higher speed of message transmission, have become the spiritual heirs of the postal service and paper envelopes. International newsletters, artist communities, critics and simple users continued the dialogue started fifty years earlier by Ray Johnson on digital platforms.

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.