



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

Lesson eight transcript

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

2.8 Artist's Brand and Virality

The user registered on social media is implicitly pushed to create and develop his own brand, using his experiences as opportunities to increase his "virality": to quote Jean-Louis Comolli, "the forces of repression do not prevent people from expressing themselves. On the contrary, they force him to express himself". The user is asked to evaluate his own importance on the basis of the quantifications we have mentioned in the previous lessons: the number of Likes received by the video shared on his Facebook page, the amount of retweets with which his tweet becomes viral, the amount of people following his Instagram - they are all tricks to build a relationship of dependence between him and the online platforms. This happens at any time of the day, without real "free time".

Attention is a rare commodity in an era of endless scrolls on blogs and social media: the user has learned to reward what interests him at the expense of what bores him. A project focused on this phenomenon is *need ideasss!?! PLZ !!* (2011) by Elisa Giardina Papa, a video montage of clips taken from YouTube in which girls ask what they can do to attract attention.

The artists act in an environment designed to generate competition and their responses to this situation can be grouped into two main categories. Many of them use their social media profiles as if they were showcases of their business, while others exploit their characteristics to develop fields of action in which to act with tactics and artistic projects. Virality unites both the approaches. The majority of views artists' works get online are often not through their own websites, but through the accumulated network of reblogs, links and digital reproductions". First of all, the name, the title of the work and the date of production are lost, or the elements indicated by the more traditional captions: at that point the image competes with every other online material. In this sense, it is important for the artist/user to create a brand that is recognizable both for their business and for their person. Several artists have reflected on this state of competition which can be summed up in the words of Jennifer Chan: "this is the anxiety of Internet art: if you stop contributing, you will be forgotten". The artist has gone through the production of a series of isolated works "to a constant broadcast of one's artistic



identity as a recognizable, unique brand”, as suggested by the artist Brad Troemel. Guido Segni, for example, created Top Expiring Internet Artists, an online ranking of digital artists. Those who update their websites more frequently occupy the highest ranks, while the least active online will disappear from the list, forgotten.

In a cultural-technological context like ours, therefore, the most important artist best succeeds by attempting to reduce the psychic and technical distance between his artistic output and the productive means of society.

2.9 The Personalised Experience and the Surprise Effect

The public that comes across the works we are considering is as varied as a group of Internet users can be, including both experts on the subject and, to a very large extent, people not interested in art. On the internet the importance of an element is defined by the needs of the user, who becomes the center of the system: an example in this sense is the GPS technology that puts him at the center of the map, without providing him with qualitative information on the landscape. We have entered the phase of Me-Mapping, or rather the placing of the user at the instant center of everything. In 1995 De Kerckhove wrote that the "virtual reality machines make literal the fact that for some cultures, walking is not seen as traversing space but as pushing space under one's feet": thanks to algorithms that record, analyse and archive the movements and the user's online behaviours, he has access to a version of the Net built on the digital reconstruction of his person. This process ensures that the user finds himself both at the center and outside of everything at the same time: if on the one hand the feeling is that all the elements presented to him on the Net are familiar, on the other there is the fact that this context keeps a distance from him.

This dynamic therefore leads to the creation of a sort of blinders that exclude what is not interesting for the user, directing him, instead, towards what should potentially attract him, including the people he should interact with. If we were to trace the history of devices designed to be used only by the individual, we would identify in the walkman one of the very first cases, dated 1979 : as Eduardo Kac suggests, “in its private sensorial experience it can be seen as the epiphenomenon of a society that chooses to remove itself from public space”. The individual listens, alone with their own headphones, to the music they prefer, on a patented support produced exclusively by a large global multinational such as Sony; the next step would have been the iPod. The digital music player produced by Apple since 2001 took the peculiarities of the Sony device to the extreme: in addition to closing the user in a bubble designed by himself, it forced him to buy songs on his official digital store. The transition from these devices to smart-phones was easy: the individual had access to a tool designed to accommodate and satisfy his needs - even and above all those he does not yet know.

He is placed in a situation in which the surprise is not contemplated. All these mechanisms are manifestations of algorithms written specifically to analyse and store the interests of individual



users under labels useful for market research and product sales: Amazon invites us to buy the sequel to the book we just bought, Spotify suggests songs, Facebook invites to follow people we may want to know. The artistic projects that exploit this state of the user act in a disruptive way: in the flow of normalized materials selected so as not to disturb his navigation, unexpected actions generate curiosity, perplexity, horror, creating occasions to take a critical position regarding the tools he is using and their influence on his life. If reality is defined only as the product of a negotiation, this kind of art aims to destroy any a priori agreement on the perceived.

A way to understand the reasons why such works are epiphanic is suggested by the studies on the psychology of thought, that branch of science that reflects on the cognitive mechanisms that lead a person to reason in a certain way, based on sociological observations. An interesting parallel is that between this kind of works and supernatural concepts, as observed by Dan Sperber and Pascal Boyer; according to them all religious beliefs are tied to general presuppositions which underlie the way in which human beings categorise the world. Violations of expectations make supernatural concepts particularly salient and easy to remember, thus favouring their social transmission, cultural selection and historical persistence; in other words, the individual placed in a given situation is led to observe the patterns, to identify the most recurring and therefore most probable events, and to make these the basis of his own perception. When he comes across something that violates these expectations, such as a statue that tears blood or in our case the photo of the artist Amalia Ulman on Instagram, that event will be potentially more memorable for him than those that conventionally constitute his reality.

However, these unexpected events must not be too strange, otherwise the observer won't pay attention to them; as well as the supernatural elements, they must represent small slips with respect to what is admitted in the respective domains. For example, Petra Cortright's videos "resemble" many other videos published online and the virtual character played by Angela Washko in the online video game World of Warcraft looks like the others played by other gamers. A work that does not blend into the habits and expectations generally accepted by a community of people is not accepted by them. On the contrary it creates reactions of embarrassment - that is, it does not generate participation.

The question of expectations and of the context within which the work is presented is fundamental especially in the case of what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière defines as critical art, the aim of which is to awaken the consciences of the public by highlighting the mechanisms of domination of the structures of power; this practice should lead to the transformation of the spectator into a critically conscious agent of changes in the world. This approach is criticised by the French, who emphasises how, on the one hand, the mere act of discovering can be of little use if one wants to directly influence consciences and contexts: "the exploited have rarely had the need to have the laws of exploitation explained to them". On the other hand, according to him, this kind of work of art completely eliminates the potential for the appearance of this resistance in the praxis of life; in other words, if presented to the public



as a “work that must make people change their minds” it does not offer itself to the surprise of the viewer, who raises a psychological barrier between him and the work.

This didactic approach is often used to present works that deal with particularly complex topics that require conscious participation from the public. This is the case of *Loophole for All* (2013) by Paolo Cirio, which focuses on the international economic system: through the official website of the project, anyone can buy the real identity of over 200,000 anonymous companies registered in the Cayman Islands, a well-known paradise, for a few dollars. tax. The simplicity of this operation is suggested to the user starting from the design of the site which incorporates that of any other commercial site. The project logo is playful, and the claim itself is presented with an informal character; Cirio uses the language and the communication method of large companies to disturb their own activities.

Conclusions

If you followed the whole course, you noticed how the artists who deal with situations contemporary to them have developed tactics and artistic methods of expression that respond more or less directly to the mechanisms and problems underlying these contexts. This dynamic and its very theoretical formulation stems from the idea that we live in a historical period characterised by change, both "positive" and "negative". In the drafting of this course I observed that almost all of the texts consulted identify the industrial revolution as the period in which a decisive break with respect to the customs of the past is generated; modularity, mechanical measurement and the consequential ability to determine human activities in numbers are just some of the most evident manifestations of the logic behind the first factories and automated machines for industrial production. These dynamics are easily identifiable on the Internet, precisely because it represents one of the most shining manifestations of the logic of quantifying and controlling the daily life of individuals. It seems, in short, that since the first automated machines were introduced, an acceleration of history has been perceived by virtue of technological innovations that have made it possible to speed up the exchange of information and materials around the world; this dynamic has led to the awareness of living in a world that is much faster and more eventful than that of the past.

This acceleration has led to a perennial state of crisis for the individual who looks with suspicion and cynicism at companies that provide and promote the services he uses; this disillusionment was observed, with the logical peculiarities and differences of the case, in the totality of the movements included in this course, from the Dada to the Postinternet, passing through Situationists, Fluxus and net.art.

The development of tactics and artistic activities aimed at disrupting the individual's daily practice as promoted by the system is the central point of their research, each time declined according to different prerogatives and purposes. These practices are interesting for us for many reasons. Mail Art, for example, is certainly worthy of being studied as an aesthetic and social manifestation of great importance, but what fascinates me to observe is also how it



reflects the problems and arguments of the era to which it belongs. Other works I examined have been observed paying particular attention to the reasons for which they were developed. These works will accumulate a patina of dust within a few years, the same that already covers the works created in the nineties; technological research and industry promote the obsolescence of products and software, ensuring that even the works created with them are affected by the same centrifugal and flattening dynamic that leads, for example, the websites created by Jodi in 1995 to appear as manifestations of an aesthetic taste as far from contemporary as that of Allan Kaprow's happenings.

The postmodern is born and nourished at the speed with which the rubble of the past accumulates and the differences between different eras are reduced by the individual in order to identify common thread and causality that can allow him to connect them to contemporary situations, justifying their existence.

The research undertaken by these and many other artists mentioned in these lessons is the grey area that divides the general public from art perceived as awkward, distant from real life such as that of galleries, biennials. If this public looks at official art with suspicion the works featured in the course are presented by the artists in a non-invasive way, using the same tactics adopted by other online users. This means that the artistic projects are genuinely enjoyed by the public, without preconceptions; the auratic status of art is more radically displaced than the operations implemented in the past because the Internet was developed from the beginning to give equal opportunities for manifestation to any person, from the computer engineer to the artist, from the village shop to the millionaire multinational. This did not happen, for example, in the case of Happenings because the artists who organised them needed to cut out in their daily practice a moment regulated by otherwise meaningless laws; The interaction with the public on the Web is less traumatic for artists because it is itself a space governed by flattening rules that push individuals to manifest themselves with an uninterrupted flow of actions and reactions.

The user's daily practice is marked by online interaction and it is here that the artist reaches him, surgically inserting himself between the spaces prepared to be filled by the platform.

This is all. I want to thank all of you for joining me every week and Arebyte for this opportunity. If you got interested in art and digital culture, I suggest you to follow the amazing exhibitions and other activities of Arebyte. Feel always welcome to get in contact with me if you wish to ask anything about the subjects I covered in the last eight weeks, I will be at your disposal. Until then, take care, ciao ciao.