



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 seven transcript

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

2.6 The Postmodern Artwork between immateriality and Transmediality

The moment when we witnessed the transition from conceptual art to artistic research on the Net in the 1990s is identified by many critics in a historical exhibition, held in 1985 at the Center Pompidou in Paris. The exhibition was titled Les Immatériaux and was curated by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, considered the father of the concept of postmodernity in philosophy thanks to his 1979 book *La Condition Postmoderne*.

In this essay he suggested that this condition stemmed from the crisis of the great metanarratives on which the authorities relied to develop their businesses and legitimise their actions; this basic incredulity gave rise to a perennially uncertain context, supported on unsafe foundations. The exhibition touched on various themes, moving from automation to computerisation, from telecommunication to microelectronics, recontextualising the research of artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Kosuth and Giovanni Anselmo in the digitised postmodernist context.

One of the central points was the reflection on the disappearance of the body and the object developed during the twentieth century with works that Lucy Lippard would have defined as "dematerialized". Many of the works presented reflected on communication, such as the N.E. Thing (pronounced "anything") Company, Ltd., a fictional company founded in 1969 by the artists Iain and Ingrid Baxter that offered "art services" to other companies, also thanks to the use of cutting-edge technologies such as telex; the practice of copying the mechanisms, methods of communication and aesthetics of large corporations had begun in the 1960s and would have found a great following in the following years under what some critics called "business art". The central point of the exhibition was not the use of new technologies, but the phenomenon of dematerialisation of the constitutive elements of reality; this approach avoided positivist or Luddite drifts, shifting the focus from the tool as a technological object to the logic with which it was built.



In *Simulacres et Simulation* (1981), Jean Baudrillard reflected on the concept of simulacrum in the postmodern context outlined by Lyotard in the just preceding years; according to him, simulation is the fundamental dynamic to understand an era like ours, without real referents and belonging to the realm of the hyperreal. This phenomenon is generated by virtue of a mechanism that we have already treated in the previous lessons, namely the discretisation of the elements in minimal modular cells and their potential reproducibility.

When any element can be broken down and reassembled countless times without a real loss of information, any particular quality of it is lost. This step is important to understand our investigation: in a context in which everything is built from minimum common elements, there are no real qualitative differences and therefore there are no sure references.

A further passage is the one suggested by reading the works of William Gibson: "cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts ... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system ". It is in these prophetic terms that the writer described an experience, even before a technology, which would take shape only several years later. The Internet has gone from a "web of addresses, nodes, places" to what Derrick De Kerckhove would have defined in 1997, as "a network of contents".

In other words, starting from those years there has been an ever-growing trend to digitise materials, that is to translate them into data. This is not a completely new phenomenon and, indeed, it can be interpreted as a new step in the path that originated with the invention of alphabetic writing, which cuts reality into signs that have no meaning if taken independently of each other: as Steven Roger Fischer explains about the great changes introduced by the Greek alphabetic system, "a sign's sound was important, not its meaning". A further example of this dynamic is movable type printing: "the printed text was petrified, immutable, final [...] For a printed text no longer held that personal invitation of the handwritten mediaeval manuscript, but carried the impersonal challenge instead . In this altered perception of the written word in the second half of the fifteenth century, modern reading was born ".

This leads to an intermediate loss of specificity: the file of an image is composed of the same "material" as that of an audio file - the fact that they are defined in these terms is indeed a convention, determined by their purpose of use. Lyotard wrote that "the idea of interdisciplinarity properly belongs to the era of delegitimation and its pushed empiricism". In this case, Rosalind Krauss's reflection on the project on which Marcel Broodthaers worked from 1968 to 1972, Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, is very interesting for us, that is "a huge collection of everything that has the eagle as its subject , from everyday objects to works of art (even in reproduction), to historical documents, to advertising, to real stuffed eagles ".

This process causes the eagle figure to be dispersed in a great variety of materials, a phenomenon that Krauss derives from the homogenising logic of commodification: "every



material support, including the site itself - be it an art magazine, a booth in a fair , a museum gallery - will now be leveled, reduced to a system of pure equivalence ”. This reduction is generated above all by the care with which the artist has labeled random objects with the words "Figure", a procedure that eliminates the particular differences and brings them back to a single level.

This action can be compared to the ways in which digital elements are named and stored: the tag is a fundamental tool for defining both the identity of a file and the potential links that can lead to it. What we notice is that these terms, the tags, are cultural constructs that take on a meaning only for the individual who knows how to decipher their references and that, in fact, they are objects that act like Broodthaers' labels: they create equivalence between objects to which they refer. Mediation, whether digital or commodifying, leads to the flattening of the qualitative differences of objects, transforming them into pure semantic elements; the material uploaded online by the user is broken down and reassembled into data through algorithms that eliminate the characteristics and qualities that are their own. In other words, we pass from the medium to the format.

The sharing of cyberspace by billions of users was born and developed precisely because the inputs and outputs are allowed by this leveling system: just as the audio file is basically made up of the same elements as that of an image, so on social media a person's private profile is potentially the same as that of a large multinational. Everything becomes information, even analogue materials that have nothing directly to do with the digital context: as De Kerckhove writes, “information becomes the definition of nature: there is no longer the earth but information on the earth. Information becomes the basis of everything ”.

2.7 The Algorithmic Social Space

In these lessons we discussed how many different ways of understanding the Web as a space in which to act have developed in the last 30 years. If on the one hand there is who promotes it as a free and democratic environment, on the other hand we have a very large group intent to warn users of the risks involved in using the Internet.

What I intend to make clear in this last part of the lesson is the difference between the street and the internet. The first is the result of a design implemented from above, but it does not find its own determination in this origin. In the 1960s, the Austrian architect Christopher Alexander criticised what he perceived as the dominant model used by the urban planners of the time, namely the Tree. This structure is a branched system whose different parts do not communicate with each other.

Instead, according to him, the urban areas of "traditional societies" developed, thanks to the behaviour of the inhabitants, interconnections and shared spaces that do not at all resemble an arboreal structure. The authorities who build a tree-like structure start from the assumption that



they can control the actions of the inhabitants who will inhabit it, but then the system organises itself in an entropic way, not predictable in its totality.

The Internet is a binary-based controlled environment. The artist who creates a Happening in a street takes advantage of the characteristics impressed by the system that created it, but can go unnoticed by vigilance and almost certainly his action will not be a source of income for those who created this place.

The Internet, on the contrary, makes it almost impossible for the artist to carry out an action without it being indexed, archived and standardised with the rest of the interactions that take place within it.

The extreme transversality of digital technology means that there cannot be a real escape route, a window from which one can exit when he doesn't want to participate in the Internet game. The all-out Internet condition is not an interface but an environment and as such it is difficult to evade; the system promotes the idea of the digital square, a democratic space where everyone can say what they want in complete freedom.

What has become increasingly evident is the situation described by Constant Dullaart: "the World Wide Web is, in essence, a collection of privately maintained environments linked together and acting as a public space".

The algorithm allows collecting information that share certain details; based on instructions, tweets, blogs, images and videos are automatically analysed and archived. Cory Arcangel is one of the artists who has implemented this practice, with projects such as Working On My Novel (2009-), in which tweets posted by users are collected who report the fact that they are working on their own story, Sorry I Haven 't Posted (2010), a blog containing posts written in other blogs in which users apologise for not posting anything new in recent times, and Follow My Other Twitter (2011-), a Twitter account retweeting messages posted by users to invite their followers to follow them on their new profiles. In these cases we see how the artist's attention is directed towards a particular theme, the anxiety of online publication and recognition; in a context where everyone has potentially the same chances of becoming influencers, the user feels the need to create and maintain their own image. We will discuss this important question next week for the last lesson of the course.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoyed this episode and wish you a lovely week. Don't forget to follow the other amazing activities produced by Arebyte and write to me for any comments and suggestions. Take care, ciao ciao.