



# 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 six transcript

Hello everyone, thanks for joining me today. This is the sixth episode of Social Media Art: From Dada to TikTok, a course produced by Arebyte and hosted by me, Filippo Lorenzin. This week I will talk about postinternet, one of the most influential and controversial aesthetics of the last few years. Then I will discuss the loss of authority of the artist who makes and share art online. Finally, I will frame some contemporary digital art works within the broader theoretical frame of relational art. As always, please feel welcome to send me an email or contact me on twitter.

### 2.3 From hardware to online contents: Postinternet

Critic Sarah Cook wrote that “As artists gain control over tools they move on to a dialogue with content rather than hardware”. If in the 1990s and 2000s the Network was studied by the artists for its own structure, a new research has arisen since the end of the last decade that aims to reflect more on online content, without abandoning the study of how it is generated and shared. One of the best known artists among those who developed the first reflections on these aspects was Ryan Trecartin, who made films focused on the social dynamics deriving from a hyper-industrialized context in 2001; the characters, very often played by his friends and relatives, behave in an extreme and extravagant way, wearing brightly colored clothes in environments whose appearance is indebted to a certain television aesthetic, close to that of cartoons. In 2006 he created (*Tommy-Chat Just E-mailed Me*), a short film in which the protagonists are subject to a state of alienation while exchanging e-mails and messages through digital devices; the transmission of this data is highlighted by animations that interact with the real environments they inhabit.

Those years were also the period of popularization of text blogs, and several artists began to reflect on the emotional investment with which people poured their lives on the Net.

For example, *Abe & Mo Sing the Blogs* is a 2005 project developed by Marisa Olson and Abe Lincoln consisting of a music album in the form of a blog. Each new post contained a text copied from any blog chosen by the two, the link to the original post on which it was written and another link to an MP3 file containing a song created from it; they focused on the emotional aspect of the material uploaded by other users, without criticizing the blogging platforms, as could have happened in the field of net.art of the nineties.



Another example is [www.WeFeelFine.org](http://www.WeFeelFine.org), a site active since 2006 created by the artist Jonathan Harris with the help of the programmer Sep Kamvar, in which colored dots represent as many posts written by unknown users all over the world. Kamvar has developed a code that automatically analyzes these posts every ten minutes, identifying the emotions expressed in them; the color of each point represents a different sensation, such as "Happiness", "Sadness" and "Love". As suggested by Harris himself, this is a project about people.

2008 is the year when there is a real turning point in the relationship between the public, users, artists and the Internet, as suggested by An Xiao Mina: "in November [...] Twitter finally reached the general public consciousness, as reports came in about its remarkable use in the rescue and reportage efforts. And earlier that summer, Facebook had reached its first 100 million users, and more established names in the art world were starting to notice. Lehman Bros. fell, a surge of newly unemployed went online to seek jobs and find solace, and America elected a tweeting, texting and YouTubing President". In the same years Marisa Olson coined the term "postinternet" in reference to a kind of artistic research that finds one of its cardinal points in surfing the Web: in an interview in 2006 she defined that what she was doing in that period as a research that was "less art on the Internet than it is art after the Internet. It's the yield of my compulsive surfing and downloading. I create performances, songs, photos, texts, or installations directly derived from materials on the Internet or my activity there".

Starting in 2010, thanks also to the short essay "The Image Object Postinternet" by Artie Vierkant, experts began to discuss the "Postinternet", or that artistic research which, although directly related to the mechanisms and technologies on which it is based the structure of the Network, distances itself from them by focusing more on the sensations, emotions and experiences that take place there. Two interesting positions are those supported by the artist Zach Blas, according to which the suffix "Post-" often does not mean only "after", but which also illustrates "saturation or (pseudo)totalization", and by the theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff for whom this suffix means a crisis. Very often they are works that are located between the purely digital dimension (such as those developed in the net.art season) and IRL ("In Real Life"), giving life to a dynamic of reciprocity that anticipates and comments on the relationship between online and offline social life.

To better understand this, it helps to read what Marshall McLuhan wrote about the process of fragmentation and reproduction in the context of electricity. He observed how the speed of reproduction of frames in cinema leads the audience to not notice that the images are single photographs, independent fragments that become what he calls "icons"; this observation applies to the Postinternet, since the increase in the power of the machines, the automation and the speed of the Internet connection allows the public to look at the contents on the Net without paying too close attention to the technological structure that support the message.

This phenomenon can also be observed by analyzing how online social media have changed the way they are described over the years: it is no coincidence that at the Facebook press conference in which the "Like" function was introduced, Mark Zuckerberg explained that



innovation not so much in terms of technological or market evolution, but of sociability and interpersonal relationships. On Facebook we are invited to update our status with the message "What's on your mind?", while on Twitter it is "What's happening?": The attention of the user is shifted from the platform to the communication potential it represents. The use of a colloquial language is one of the simplest and most implemented techniques to be accepted by users and invite them to trust and manifest themselves through their system. As Geert Lovink noted, "thanks to Facebook's simplicity, the online experience is a deeply human experience: the aim is to find the Other, not information".

Certain terms born online have been brought in the "offline" world by users, colonizing their lexicon; it is important to note here that this happens precisely because we use these services on a daily basis, whenever and where we wish thanks to smartphones and other handheld devices.

In other words, "Postinternet" is a term to which we refer to define two changes in particular: the abandonment of a skeptical approach towards the Internet and the shifting of attention to what happens through and thanks to it, even outside the screen.

## **2.4 The work without author**

The works at the center of this course share the fact that they require active participation by the viewer who interacts and becomes an actor. This happened from the Dada events to Allan Kaprow's Happenings, from situationist actions to Mail Art or net.art's projects on the Net; in all these cases the focus was on experience and participation, rather than on the creation of finished objects. This dynamic often leads to the consequence that there is no real author.

The work is designed in order to be studied, composed and recomposed by those who use it, making it an open work. It is a project that must be performed, starting from instructions - which can be the ones drafted by Allan Kaprow as much as the software code written by the artist who works on the Net in the nineties.

The text is a fundamental element because it eliminates both the qualitative differences between words and those between people involved in the work; you do not have to belong to an elite to participate in the Situationist action, just as you do not need to be an expert to access the works belonging to the so-called Postinternet scene.

According to critic David Joselit, the contemporary context no longer allows any image to be anchored to a specific site; mechanical reproduction and ever more efficient distribution channels would have led to a reversal of Walter Benjamin's premonitions: if according to him the object copied infinite times loses its original aura, for Joselit "it is saturation through mass circulation - that of being everywhere at once rather than belonging to a single place - that now produces value for and through images". Aura is replaced by the buzz then, the result of the coordinated and often involuntary action of multiple actors who interact with this image.



The audience in an interactive system is by definition participant: in such a context, meaning is not created by the artist, distributed through the network and received by the observer, but it is the product of the interaction between the user and the system, the content of which is in a state of flux.

In other words, this method of communication makes explicit with its technology and its protocols what is implicit in all aesthetic experience, both when it is intended as a creative moment and when it is intended as an artist's productive act. A description of the situation in which the works examined are entered and promoted can be that of the actor-network developed by Bruno Latour, according to which "a good actor-network theory (ANT) account is a narrative or a description or a proposition where all the actors do something and don't just sit there ", where " each of points in the text may become a bifurcation, an event, or the origin of a new translation ". In a context like this, content is created rather than received.

Consumption of works and other materials on the Net takes places above all because the meeting between product and customer, entertainer and entertaineer, creation and connoisseur happens as if directly and individually, one-to-one, with each side demanding immediate interface and feedback: the public knows the tools with which those materials are created.

Bourriaud wrote that "artists today program forms more than they compose them, they remix available forms and make use of data [...] [they] surf on a network of signs":in other words, the public becomes prosumers, no longer feels hostage to standardized goods and changes their characteristics and appearance. "The market today", as Douglas B. Holt observed, "thrives on [...] unruly *bricoleurs* who engage in nonconformist producerly consumption practices". As Bourriaud further explains, the artist who inserts his work into that of others, "contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work".

## 2.5 The social and relational artwork

In *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974), critic Peter Bürger divided the phenomenology of the work of art into three specific moments: its function, its production and its reception. According to him, the individual production that characterises art in a bourgeois society has its origins in court patronage, even if the two typologies are distinguished by a fundamental characteristic: the work created in the context of the court is an object intended for a very specific use - to represent the context in which it was conceived and implemented by integrating it into daily life. In bourgeois art, however, the process of representing the system in which the work arose takes place in a sphere far from everyday action.

This separation is, according to Bürger, the peculiar characteristic of autonomy in bourgeois art, an autonomy developed by Aestheticism and in some ways still present today. The aesthetes placed the element that defines art as an institution at the center of their own works, as content; consequently, this overlap meant that the distance from the practice of life became



the true content of their works: this practice was for them the utilitarian rationality of bourgeois logic, a custom that tended to assign a purpose to each element of daily life. Bürger suggested a parallel between this denial of any use of the art of aesthetes and the planned rejection of avant-garde movements such as the Dada: the difference between the two practices lay in the way they are used. The bourgeois work of art was created by a single individual for another individual and had to be enjoyed privately, without the involvement of third parties; for aesthetes this was a fundamental condition to make it independent from everyday life, to make it an element that distanced itself from the bourgeois logic. In short, art became an isolated and solipsistic moment of escape from reality.

The work of the avant-garde was instead created so as to become part of daily life and enjoyed by a collective public: it was a "social" art more for the approach with which it was created and presented, than for the actual contents. Bürger wrote that "when the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical one again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content".

Bürger warned that this absorption in daily practices leads to a risk: art totally indistinct from life loses the ability to distance itself and criticise it, a contradiction that any artists working within social media platforms must take in account in their practices.

An answer to this is the conception of relational aesthetics coined by Nicolas Bourriaud. According to him, the development of urban areas since the end of the Second World War has led to an increase in social exchanges and the mobility of individuals - both physical, with roads and infrastructures, and psychic, with greater opportunities for traditionally isolated areas. This dynamic has allowed the work to free itself from the state of "space to travel" to adopt that of "duration to be experienced, as an opening towards unlimited discussion" - or, in other words, of "social interstice". With this Bourriaud meant the interstice as a space of human relations that potentially offers exchanges other than those already present in the system.