Art After the End of Art

Histories, Philosophies, and Worldviews
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Preface

My arrival at this thesis topic was somewhat of a quirk of fate. The initial seed was planted in my mind during winter of sophomore year, on one of those gloomy days in New York where you glance outside and are almost certain you can feel the bitter cold seeping in through the windows. The library was crawling with students, with hardly any free space to work, but not quite busy enough for me to consider venturing outdoors, so I decided to search the corners of every floor until I found an open spot.

Up and up I went until, lo and behold, I found a perfectly agreeable little nook amongst the shelves of one of the upper, more ‘vintage’ looking floors and found myself right in the thick of the philosophy/art theory section of the library. As a sophomore who was yet unsure whether she wanted to continue down the Liberal Studies path or pursue a degree in Studio Art and Art History, I sank into the bookshelves in hopes of putting off that inevitable return out into the stinging New York air just a little bit longer. I felt like I had found Mecca. It was the first time I had encountered such a vast array of art theory and, upon delving into some of the books, I was ecstatic to have finally found a way to bridge (what I saw as) the gap between art and philosophy.

There was one book in the mix that I found particularly intriguing; it was small, black, covered in a thin layer of dust, and when I opened to the first page, the title read “The Death of Art”. Published in 1984, The Death of Art is a collection of essays decrying the state of the art world at the time and questioning the possibility of any and all artistic progress to come. It features writing from artists, theorists, and philosophers alike, from Berel Lang and Richard Kuhns to Joyce Brodsky and Anita Silvers, all of whom have interpreted the so-called “death” of art in a unique way. It is a captivating read, and though not all of the authors offer as damning of
a prophecy as the title of the book would suggest, it does start off with quite a bang with the essay, “The End of Art”, written by none other than art critic and philosopher Arthur C. Danto himself.

"Art is dead.", the text begins, “It's present movements are not at all indications of vitality; they are not even the convulsions of agony prior to death; they are the mechanical reflex actions of a corpse submitted to galvanic force.”. Jeez, I thought. I had never seen art described with such intensity and although I did not necessarily agree with all of the assertions made in The Death of Art, the book (and Danto’s text, in particular) did hugely shape the way I perceived of creative expression and historical progress from that point onward, both in the classroom and out. At the time, I was taking a Modern Art course, which was heavily immersed in the linear way that art movements progress in terms of technique and skill. Meanwhile, I was also interning at a commercial gallery in the Chelsea/West Village area, learning the ins and outs of the market-driven art scene in New York. What was most apparent to me from these experiences was actually the glaring disparity between the two; the amount of knowledge I was acquiring about the history of art in the classroom in stark contrast to the menial tasks I was undertaking in the gallery. Perhaps the emergence of intern culture is to thank for some of that, but what continued to become clear to me over time is that there is a definite lack of art in a good chunk of the art world. It is a market-driven economy just like any other, adhering to a system of supply and demand, while parading as some sort of innovative, risk-taking, and democratic space for creative thought and expression. I was stifled by it; how could an artist seeking to genuinely show his/her work to the public make it in a such a climate, as much about name-dropping and

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social climbing as it is about anything else? Could it be that Arthur Danto’s prediction had been realized? Had art really died, its remains being dragged from gallery to gallery?

In the following months, I continued to read more of Danto’s work and to incorporate his theories into the way I understood not only art movements, but the way art movements are critiqued as well. In the book, After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History, I was surprised to find that Danto had had a change of heart about the future of art. In the text, he expands upon his statements in “The End of Art”, admitting that art had not died, per se, that creativity would continue to flourish as a naturally occurring aspect of human existence, but that the relativity between time and technical progress could no longer hold true. Any artist could work in any medium, there was no longer a consistent aesthetic trend connecting contemporary art forms, and anything could be considered art, even a urinal or a box of soap. Though I found these modifications compelling, especially in reference to Marcel Duchamp’s “ready-mades” and Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes, I did not see this free and unconstrained type of art happening anywhere around me. It was only when I got to Berlin the following year that I resolved my questions and concerns and reached the conclusion that Arthur Danto’s predictions had, indeed, come true, though not for the reasons that I had initially thought.
Introduction

One need only to peek through the window of a commercial gallery to see the premeditated experiential equation of the art market at play. Too often, exhibitions are curated to reinforce the social, political, and economic interests of a very narrow audience, providing them with just the right amount of intellectual stimulation without getting too provocative, risqué, or just plain weird. This constant equilibrium is what I was used to seeing in New York gallery culture and, quite frankly, I was tired of it, tired of seeing the same type of work in the same white cube, and tired of feeling out of place in a scene that was all about being “in” or “out”. It was not until I got to Berlin that I realized the potential for what an art world could be.

In Berlin, the art scene is not made up of a couple of streets heavily concentrated with galleries that you can go to as a tourist attraction before grabbing lunch at a trendy spot nearby. Art is part and parcel of the city itself, woven into the fabric of what gives Berlin its “poor, but sexy” edge.¹ You can feel it around you as you go about your day, from the vast stretches of street art to the performances and events that seem to have no beginning and no end. There is an open-mindedness and acceptance in everyday life that is unique to the city and that was one of the most refreshing aspects of my junior year. I worked as an intern/writer for Berlin Art Link, an online publication focused on Berlin’s contemporary culture and art scene, where I was not only pleasantly surprised by the amount of respect and trust given to me as a new addition to the team, but was granted the opportunity to attend exhibitions, openings, lectures, and events throughout the city as part of the job.

Creative expression was all around and, for the first time, it felt almost entirely unhindered by external factors or a market-driven mentality. Whether it was the couple-turned-performance art duo rhythmically breathing and writhing on the floor at my boss’s birthday party or an artist teaching her audience how to bake her grandmother’s cherry almond tart as a feminist statement, Berlin’s artists are not afraid to experiment, to take physical and conceptual risks in their practice, and to continue to do so even if something does not go quite as smoothly as expected. It is a continuous process of trial and error right before the audience’s eyes, and it is absolutely inspiring to witness. The more time I spent in the city, the more I realized that Berlin’s art scene is an explicit embodiment of the ‘post-historical’ art world that Arthur Danto foresaw. It was an exciting realization to come to, not only as a personal affirmation of my own interest in art, but also as a hopeful look at the future of art to come, and it is only now that I have been able to fully put those experiences and emotions into words.

I begin my thesis by breaking down Arthur C. Danto’s critiques of “ready-made” and appropriation art, drawing from Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol as key examples. Ever since their advances in the artistic field, Danto contends that art has been suspended in a “post-historical” state of being. He predicts free artistic forms and a correspondingly liberated art world that do not adhere to the norms of technical progress or regulated gallery culture, however he cannot quite imagine what those new forms and art world will look like. I thus introduce the “Post-Internet” art movement of our current time as an example of what Danto may have been alluding to. Why this movement in particular? “Post-Internet” art’s blurring of the line between material and immaterial, real and virtual, directly mirrors the processes of de-contextualization and re-contextualization that characterized early appropriation art. I will draw this parallel through the work of Ryder Ripps, who explores the relationship between materiality and
immateriality both online and offline, and I will analyze his work through the lens of artist and critic Hito Steyerl’s theories on image. “Post-Internet” artists look to popular culture as a main source for subject matter, which is why it has continued to be a buzzing topic in Berlin and beyond, and why a lot of critics find issue with its seemingly ‘vapid’ aesthetic. Some love it, others hate it, a lot of people simply do not ‘get it’, but is it worth the hype? Is it too ‘trendy’ to last?

These are the issues and questions that I will present and subsequently respond to in the second chapter. I will take a closer look at the works of Richard Prince and Katja Novitskova, two of the most controversial and widely disputed members of the “Post-Internet” movement, and will address the claims made against them by writers and critics, such as Nate Harrison, Paddy Johnson, Peter Schjeldahl, and Brian Droitcour. Apart from the apparent ‘vapidity’ of some “Post-Internet” art, these critics find issue with its appropriation of material, its ironic and mocking tone, even the implications of the name “Post-Internet”. While every artist, critic, and viewer is entitled to his/her own opinion, I will ultimately demonstrate that these arguments are not only targeted at specific aspects of individual artists (and cannot indicate any shortcomings of the movement as a whole), but misguided in their appeal to hasty, surface level scrutiny of a movement still very much in its developmental stages.

I will counter the cases against “Post-Internet” art by demonstrating the deeper meaning behind its subject matter that many of the movement’s critics have just barely grazed. Amelia Jones’ book, *Self/Image*, was especially helpful in my exploration of the underlying meaning of images online and the representational value they carry. Using Jones’ theory, as well as Jean Baudrillard’s description of *simulacra*, as framework for my argument, I will reveal how the viewing experience has expanded from a simple exchange between artist and spectator to a
collective, collaborative network of reactions and modifications that contribute to the artwork itself. The Internet holds most of the responsibility for this experiential expansion and the “Post-Internet” movement, as an art form that speaks directly to the multifaceted role that the Internet plays in our everyday interactions, is therefore politically, socially, and culturally relevant and not to be dismissed as a matter of ‘trend’.

Arthur Danto’s premonition coincided with the growth and spread of the Internet, which may very well explain his inability to envision the next step for the future of art. By means of a thorough examination of Danto’s “The End of Art” and subsequent “After the End of Art”, I will defend the practice of appropriation in art and offer today’s “Post-Internet” art movement as a realization of the “post-historical” art form that Danto predicted, ultimately demonstrating that the controversies surrounding not only this movement, but any art movement, reveal a fundamental paradox in in the field of art criticism more so than they do about the actual art or artists themselves. The urge to react speedily and without contemplation to the things we are unaccustomed to is not only unproductive as we move forward in all fields, but something to be resisted if we hope to break the cyclical nature of critique. There is nothing interesting about predictable artwork, it is and has always been a medium through which to articulate the emotions, experiences, and tribulations that cannot fully be expressed in words, and this can only be done through unhindered and unyielding experimentation.
Chapter 1

Arthur Danto & the End of Art:
From “Post-Historical” to “Post-Internet”

“I can’t tell the difference between art and novelty anymore”, a friend of mine recently asserted in reference to a piece by Korean artist Bang Geul Han, titled Taaz, in which the artist used a “virtual makeover software application” on Taaz.com to create a large scale “wallpaper installation” made up of hundreds of small portraits of the artist trying out various “looks”. Bang Geul Han’s piece, like the software application, is playful by nature, but there is a more political intentionality behind it, a statement which, until speaking to my friend, I had assumed to be quite obvious. Whether my friend simply did not ‘get it’ or I was reading too much into it is an unproductive debate to have—variance in artistic interpretation has been a topic of controversy for ages and is, in my opinion, one of the major reasons art has remained such an influential aspect of society—but this blurred distinction between what is “art” and what is “novelty” is something that has come under a particularly large amount of scrutiny as of late, amidst the growing trend toward Internet and what many are calling “Post-Internet” art, a potentially premature name for a movement still very much in the womb. The term “Post-Internet” poses a number of complexities on its own, but we cannot begin to discuss the tension between art and novelty, art and everyday object, without first harkening back to Modern art’s “ready-made” and the art critiques that followed.
Introduced by French artist Marcel Duchamp around 1915, a “readymade” is a found object, anything from a bicycle wheel to a urinal to the Mona Lisa, that has been chosen, often slightly altered, and presented to the audience as an original work of art. What distinguishes a readymade from an everyday object is the very fact that it is indistinguishable from what has already been made, the only difference being the context in which it is presented. The artistic act in these cases is not a stylistic or technical approach, but a conceptual one, the artist extending an invitation to their audience to ponder more than the aesthetic beauty of an object, to rethink what aesthetic “beauty” really is, and to instead shift their focus to the very meaning of that object, what it represents, how we perceive it, and why. Renowned art critic and philosopher Arthur C. Danto famously attributed this shift to Andy Warhol’s 1964 installation, Brillo Boxes, in which the artist modeled a work of art after a classic supermarket item, a symbol of the common everyday lives of American consumers. The art object is, for all intents and purposes, visually indistinguishable from the consumer product, the two are one in the same, but does this imply that their meanings are conflated as well? Can a box of soap be beautiful?
“What makes the difference between a work of art and something not a work of art when there is no interesting perceptual difference between them?”, Danto asks in *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, his follow-up collection of essays to the somewhat apocalyptic *The Death of Art*, in which he declared no future for the artistic field (and was met with a huge amount of backlash as a result).\(^2\) In *After the End of Art*, however, Danto elaborates upon some of the more radical assertions he had previously made, highlighting the fact that prior to Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, our perception of art was based in a linear, historical progression of one stylistic approach after another. From mimetic oil paintings which sought to imitate reality through technique and detail to the more abstract styles of George Seurat’s Pointillism, Picasso’s Cubism, or even Mondrian’s minimalism, each generation of artists brought with them a new set of ideals for what art is and ought to be. Each movement claimed superiority over the ones before it, declaring to have uncovered the ultimate “truth” of art. Art needn’t be about imitation but about form, art needn’t be about form but about essence, and so on, and so on. It was the “Age of Manifestos”, as Danto calls it, with artistic movements and groups reflecting the changing beliefs and ideologies of their time through artwork, and Warhol—though admittedly following in the footsteps of Marcel Duchamp—very

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pointedly rejected the limitations of this art historical compartmentalization. Instead of focusing on how art should be made (what colors, methods, or tools to use), Warhol wanted to reveal what art really was. “How can you say any style is better than another?”, he asked in a 1963 interview, “You ought to be able to be an Abstract Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling that you have given up something”, thus ushering a new sort of pluralism into the art world and heralding what Arthur Danto deemed to be the “end of art”, or at least the end of art as it had hitherto been perceived of.

According to Danto, Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes unraveled the art historical canon that had been building up for hundreds of years. In posing the question, “What is art?” (i.e. can an everyday item, like the Brillo Box, really be considered art?), the distinction between art and reality had collapsed. Anything could be art now, and art thus took on what Danto describes as a “post-historical” character, “post-historical” not implying that artistic creation would cease to occur, that nothing new or good would be made in the future, but that art history could no longer be separated into technical and stylistic advances. “To use my favorite example”, Danto explains:

“nothing need mark the difference, outwardly, between Andy Warhol’s Brillo Box and the Brillo boxes in the supermarket. And conceptual art demonstrated that there need not even be a palpable visual object for something to be a work of visual art. That meant that you could no longer teach the meaning of art by example. It meant that as far as appearances were concerned, anything could be a work of art, and it meant that if you were going to find out what art was, you had to turn from sense experience to thought. You had, in brief, to turn to philosophy.”

This ‘turning to philosophy’ is what Danto characterizes as the shift from the modern to the contemporary. Duchamp, and then Warhol, had pushed art out from under the magnifying glass

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3 Danto
4 Danto
of society’s judgment, removing it from its subjectivity to tireless comparisons and impositions based on technique, medium, or artistic “genius”. The viewer could no longer judge the work based on whether it was good enough or an accurate portrayal of a person, place, or object, as the ready-made was not striving to be anything other than art. It was acutely aware of the fact that it was art, even poking fun at the audience for accepting it as thus. ‘But Duchamp’s urinal is not art!’, one might argue…but then again, why not? The very fact that the public was reacting in this way showed that art had, in essence, reached a certain self-awareness, thus allowing for the artistic field to engage in a new sort of self-critique. “Liberated from the burden of history”, Danto says, artists “were free to make art in whatever way they wished, for any purposes they wished, or for no purposes at all.”.⁵ Not only can art serve no purpose at all, but even the most seemingly basic or “novelty” art can carry an overtly political message. Just as Warhol used the aesthetic of the Brillo box as a direct stab at American capitalist culture and the market-driven mentality of the art world, artists today are using quotidian visuals to promote a more deeply polemic message about contemporary culture. I return to Bang Geul Han’s Taaz as an exemplification of the tension between art and novelty and the political potential that lies therein.

Those who have grown up with the Internet are used to seeing images and software like the ones that Han has chosen to incorporate into her work. They are the fleeting graphics that we see in advertisements and promotions in our newsfeeds, the gifs, memes, and stock images that we circulate amongst ourselves in jest. They are what German artist and essayist Hito Steyerl calls “poor images” in her collection of essays, *The Wretched of the Screen*: “Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes

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⁵ Danto
up on the digital economies’ shores.”⁶ “Poor images” are the aesthetics that we use the most, but notice the least. They are at once void of any meaning, worthless, cyber scum/trash, and manifestations of the ideals and interests of contemporary society, of what we find silly, amusing, fascinating, infuriating, or even beautiful. “They express all the contradictions of the contemporary crowd”, Steyerl continues:

“its opportunism, narcissism, desire for autonomy and creation, its inability to focus or make up its mind, its constant readiness for transgression and simultaneous submission… a snapshot of the affective condition of the crowd, its neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction.”⁷

So, while these images and software may be viewed as trivial or novelty at first glance, they hold a more profound representational value that is often overlooked, and their objectively ‘ugly’ or ‘grotesque’ appearance is no coincidence. “Poor images” are found, edited, recycled, re-appropriated online objects; they are the contemporary interpretation of Duchamp’s Fountain, of Warhol’s Brillo Boxes. The software employed in Taaz, Han writes, “reveals both a somewhat obsessive and humorous search for the best (or worst) look amid endless possibilities but also reveals a perverse nature of digital culture: the overload of choices, mind numbing freedom to undo, and the constant systemic effort to monetize taste and choices.”⁷ We see a sense of purpose in Han’s statement, a distinctly political choice to use this otherwise silly, verging on narcissistic, software to make a point about the superficial— even absurd— state of digital

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⁷ Steyerl, 41.
culture today. Bang Geul Han did not use this software ‘for fun’ or out of a genuine curiosity for what she would look like with various hairstyles, makeup, etc., but appropriated its visuals for the purpose of her artwork. There was an artistic process that went into Taaz, albeit a more conceptual one than many are accustomed to, and a deliberate set of choices that had an effect on the final outcome. Any contestations to the technical skill involved in her process are a clear example of the philosophical tensions outlined in Arthur Danto’s After the End of Art. What the mainstream does or does not define as art has always been changing and evolving to fit expanding contexts and progressing technologies, and while artists, collectives, and critics have delineated certain pivotal moments in the history of art as marking some sort of abrupt shift from the material to the conceptual, from art to philosophy, the Internet has brought these questions, disagreements and distinctions (or lack thereof) to a new extreme with its unprecedented blurring of the “real” and the “virtual”.

This obscuring is particularly true when we consider the Internet not only as a space to exhibit art, but as an artistic medium in itself. In the past five or so years, a new “movement”, if you will, has emerged using the aesthetics of the Internet as its main catalyst. Though the name itself is still a matter of debate, “Post-Internet” is a term that has been floating around the art world for quite some time now, the key misconception about it being that it implies the “end” of the Internet in some way. While historical movements have set themselves apart by breaking from the past, “Post-Internet” seeks to break from the present, giving it a distinctly Danto-esque
quality. Just as “post-historical” indicates art’s awareness of itself within the schema of history, “Post-Internet” art draws its significance from an awareness and critique of the current state of the Internet and how social norms are played out online. Danto’s prediction for the future of contemporary art finds form in “Post-Internet” art, whose fundamental characteristic is its temporal and intergenerational quality, the fact that it is and can be whatever people want it to be and is not limited to any historical time frame. Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, curators of an online exhibition titled “Art Post-Internet”, describe the movement as follows:

“This understanding of the post-internet refers not to a time “after” the internet, but rather to an internet state of mind — to think in the fashion of the network. In the context of artistic practice, the category of the post-internet describes an art object created with a consciousness of the networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception.”

“Post-Internet” art does not, in that sense, insinuate the end of the Internet, but merely views the Internet from a different angle. It is an awareness of the way the Internet functions in society and the way we interact with new modes of technology, communication, and distribution. It is a critique surrounding technological innovations and how we employ them via social media, networking, image sharing and the like, using the aesthetics of the Internet as means to communicate that very critique. Archey and Peckham explore this ideology further in their analysis of the way the distribution of art has altered and multiplied exponentially throughout the years.

Similar to the way Warhol’s Pop Art creates a commentary on the modes of production and reproduction in the 1950s and 60s, “Post-Internet” art has taken the secondary experience of art as a basis for its critique of the Internet, “secondary experience” being the indirect and often

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impersonal methods we employ in the viewing and spreading of images and artwork.\textsuperscript{9} “The aura” of art, Hito Steyerl argues, “is no longer based on the permanence of the ‘original’, but on the transience of the copy.”\textsuperscript{10} Through the sharing and exchange of “poor images”, gifs, memes, edits, copies, we form visual bonds with one another, collective online experiences comprised of “simultaneous private experiences”, Seth Price explains in his 2008 conceptual art project, \textit{Dispersion}. These online experiences are “distributed across the field of media culture, knit together by ongoing debate, publicity, promotion, and discussion” and that ongoing opposition between collectivity and privacy is what gives “Post-Internet” art its self-critical and “post-historical” quality.\textsuperscript{11} “It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation”, Hito Steyerl writes, and in decontextualizing the aesthetics of the Internet for the purpose of art, “Post-Internet” artists engage in a unique form of cultural critique.\textsuperscript{12} Not only that, but “Post-Internet” art defies the conventional art museum/gallery model that has dominated the art world for so long, echoing another aspect of Danto’s premonition in \textit{After the End of Art}.

The new pluralism taking place in the field of contemporary art needed to be paralleled in the infrastructure of museums and gallery culture as well. “Post-historical” art, Danto contends, could no longer be exhibited in a “single dimension”, hung on the walls of a white cube gallery; it was intrinsically incompatible with the existing modes of display.\textsuperscript{13} Thus “an entirely different breed of curator is required”, he argues, “one who bypasses museum structures altogether”, and we have seen this new “breed” of curator emerge onto the scene of “Post-Internet” art in the past few years. From online projects and exhibitions, like Seth Price’s \textit{Dispersion} and Leah Schrager

\textsuperscript{9} Archey and Peckham, 11.
\textsuperscript{10} Steyerl, 42-44.
\textsuperscript{12} Steyerl, 42-44.
\textsuperscript{13} Danto, 17.
and Jennifer Chan’s _Body Anxiety_, to artists using social media platforms like Instagram or Tumblr as their own, personally curated, online galleries, there seems to be a growing desire for a more publicly accessible art form, and art that “engages directly with the lives of persons who have seen no reason to use the museum either as tresorium of beauty or sanctum of spiritual form.”  

The modern museum, for Danto, had become entirely esoteric, and in order to keep up with the paradigm shift toward contemporary art, it had to “surrender much of the structure and theory that define the museum…The artist, the gallery, the practices of art history, and the discipline of philosophical aesthetics must all, in one or another way, give way and become…vastly different, from what they have so far been.” Artists and audience alike had lost interest in the glorification of technical skill and treating works of art like religious relics to be placed on a pedestal and gazed at in awe; the paradigm shift from physical art to philosophy had to be reflected in the artistic space as well, and “Post-Internet” art has done just that.

The Internet has completely transformed the way the audience sees and reacts to art. “In the past 15 years”, Archey and Peckham assert,  

“systems for the production, dissemination, circulation, and reception of new art have experienced seismic shifts and radical re-imaginings. The mainstreaming of art blogs, gallery websites, online image clearinghouses, and other vehicles for digital imagery have made screens like computers and smartphones the primary mode by which contemporary art is seen.”

With the ever-growing and ever-changing platforms for social media and online networking, the distribution of images, artwork, reviews, etc., has drastically affected the way we view and value artwork. Even the definition of what a gallery is and how art should be exhibited is constantly being modified and interpreted in new ways. According to Hito Steyerl, the Internet has provided

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14 Danto, 17.  
15 Danto, 17.  
16 Archey and Peckham, 11.
us with a means to escape the “elitist cordon sanitaire” of the art world. As opposed to the traditional museum where “visibility is policed” and the viewer’s reaction is still fairly constrained (for instance, we are told to not take photos or step too close to the paintings), the online art space grants its audience a newfound freedom. Online viewers have the ability to close their browsers, swipe away from an image, to edit, alter, and delete works of art. Leaving mid-performance—“what would be considered an act of betrayal in cinema”, Steyerl asserts—is becoming the norm for online users, and this restless Internet culture is what “Post-Internet” art draws inspiration from. Artists who have been linked to the “Post-Internet” movement, like Ryder Ripps, Richard Prince, Oliver Laric, and Lindsay Lawson, explore the relationship between the circulation of images, accessibility of artwork, and how we value or devalue not only art, but ourselves, on the Internet. These artists have taken the process of the ready-made to the next level, not just decontextualizing and re-contextualizing found objects, but dematerializing and rematerializing them, using the Internet as a mediating device.

Take Ryder Ripps’ Ho, for instance, a controversial project for which the artist appropriated photos from model Adrianne Ho’s Instagram account and turned them into large-scale, manipulated and obscured oil paintings. The project is comprised of a number of layers, starting with Adrianne Ho’s translation of her own physical (material) body into online (immaterial) images, followed by Ryder Ripps’

17 Steyerl, 70.
appropriation of those personal (yet public, released on social media) images, which he then interpreted, altered, and rematerialized into physical paintings. As with most “Post-Internet” art, there is an interplay going on here between the material and immaterial worlds, between the real and the virtual, the offline and the online. “Post-Internet” art seeks to investigate the effects that this interplay has on “the status of the work of art, particularly in the tension between object and documentation, the social realities of remote participation, and the possibility of artistic practice as a network”. Ryder Ripps’ appropriation and manipulation of Adrianne Ho’s Instagram photos sparked a considerable amount of debate surrounding the authorship of the artwork and left many feeling slightly perturbed by his decision to warp and deform her face and body. “To me, my renderings of her images are more real than her photos”, Ripps said in a recent interview for Vice, questioning the discrepancy between reality and how we portray ourselves through social media. “We've chosen how to mediate our own realities”, he explains, “Life now is a constant reflexive feedback loop of ego.”. Those offended by Ripps’ “objectification” of Adrianne Ho in his paintings are, therefore, missing the point, writer Zach Sokol clarifies: “Ripps chose Ho as his muse because her internet presence occupies a complicated space between exposition and documentation,”. In the Age of the Internet, where our online personas can no longer be distinguished from our “real” ones, where our material, physical actions in everyday life are constantly translated, documented, and streamed into the immaterial online

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18 Archey and Peckham, 10-11.
20 Sokol.
21 Sokol.
world, “your reality is your online presence”, and it is the conflation of these two worlds that
“Post-Internet” art deconstructs and analyzes.²²

As opposed to the way the classical avant-garde “tended to shun social communication,
excommunicating itself through incomprehensibility”, Seth Price explains, “Post-Internet” art
makes use of the historical context in which it exists.²³ It utilizes the aesthetics of the Internet,
but forces the audience to rethink those aesthetics and what they represent through processes of
dematerialization and re-materialization, thus distancing itself from not only the past, but the
present and acting as what Archey and Peckham call “consciousness-raising conduits between art
and society”.²⁴ “This tie to the outside world”, they argue, “and consequent shift against the
hermeticism of the art world, is among the most revelatory aspects of Post-Internet art”.²⁵
Detached from the historical structures that have constrained the practice of art hitherto, “Post-
Internet” art moves beyond plainly technical resemblances. It does not simply reject pre-existing
styles and trends, but takes those practices and uses them to its own benefit. By manipulating its
own context, the “Post-Internet” sets itself apart as more than just an artistic movement; it carries
the potential to stir just the type of “post-historical” and philosophical discourse that Danto had
hoped for, claiming power through its ambiguity. Of course, as with any avant-garde group, the
“Post-Internet” art movement has been met with a great deal of opposition from artists, critics,
and viewers alike, and I will take a closer look at these counter-arguments in the chapters to
come.

²² Sokol.
²³ Price.
²⁴ Archey and Peckham, 9.
²⁵ Archey and Peckham, 9.
Chapter 2

The Paradox of the Post-Internet

Around the same time that Ryder Ripps debuted of his painted interpretations of Adrienne Ho’s Instagram persona, artist Richard Prince stepped out with a solo exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in New York and London, titled “New Portraits”. The works were anything but new, however. Prince, known for blurring the distinctions between “authorship, ownership, and aura”, had essentially stolen images from other people’s Instagram accounts, enlarged them, and displayed them in a gallery as his own works of art. The one subtle difference between the Instagram posts and his images was that he had added his own comments beneath each of the posts.26 “Enjoyed the ride today. Let’s do it again. Richard”, reads one of Prince’s comments on singer Sky Ferreira’s Instagram photo, “Your braver than you believe. Stronger than you seem and smarter than you think. Winnie The Pooh”, reads another on a photo posted by creative Young Duckit. Some of the individuals expressed gratitude to Prince for having been included, while others decried themselves as victims of intrusion and cynical appropriation and their reactions were, no doubt, exacerbated by the fact that Prince walked away with over $100,000 for his works, while the “original” artists were left with nothing more than a taste of public recognition and perhaps a few more social media followers. Whether they were indifferent to the ordeal or helpless to fight back, the question on everyone’s minds remained, “Does this really count as art?” Could Richard Prince really get away with something like this? Not only that, but could he be acclaimed for it? Objections to so-called “Post-Internet” art have been manifold,

especially with the growing presence of artists, like Richard Prince, who seem to use
provocation, and not just appropriation, as an artistic medium in itself. Technology has sparked
an exponential escalation in the forms of appropriation and re-appropriation that Arthur Danto
once blamed for the end of art, and a closer look at this escalation will reveal the new set of
complications that artists, critics, and viewers alike are struggling to sift through in the
contemporary art world and beyond.

Nate Harrison, who writes for the photography website American Suburb X, is one critic
who was particularly dismayed by Prince’s “New Portraits”. It is not even the act of
appropriating and recycling material that he finds issue with- censoring artistic expression thusly
would be unjust- but rather the lackluster way in which it has been executed. “The problem with
appropriation in art isn’t that the law is unduly restricting it”, Harrison explains:

“On the contrary, it’s everywhere. In part because of technological advances, in
part because artistic avant-gardism in the ‘80s normalized appropriation as a
technique, and in part because copyright jurisprudence itself has shifted,
appropriation art enjoys a vitality it has never before had. But its freedom has
given many of its practitioners a head rush, and because of it they’ve lost their
The sheer span and scope of the Internet, in other words, has caused appropriation art to lose sight of its original goal, to lose its philosophical significance and potential for a more profound cultural critique. It has become *normalized*, Harrison argues, causing many artists to rely far too heavily on cynicism and to conflate tongue-in-cheek mockery with actual meaning. In order for appropriation to continue to be a compelling artistic act, artists (and viewers) must be careful not to fall into that trap. “Artists should be encouraged to explore the possibilities that copying provides,” Harrison clarifies, "But that doesn't absolve them from taking responsibility for their actions.”. What this acknowledgment of artistic “responsibility” would look like remains unclear in Harrison’s argument, but he does seem to highlight a certain moral tension at play here. “Artists are obligated to the images they re-use”, Harrison continues, “It's important that they do critical things with them, and not merely reproduce cultural and economic capital for the one percent while feigning comradeship with the social media masses.”.  

Is Prince really identifying with the “social media masses” though? Or is he simply making fun of them? This seems to be a major point of contention among fans and critics alike and Artnet’s Paddy Johnson is not as pragmatic as Harrison in her review of the exhibition, which she unashamedly named “Richard Prince Sucks”.

Though Johnson ultimately contends that there is “virtually nothing” to say about Prince’s exhibition, she does provide quite a scathing review of the artist before reaching that

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28 Harrison
conclusion. She seems insulted by it all; “The most remarkable feature of the show is that the printouts are reflected perfectly in Gagosian's shiny floor”, Johnson begins, “Thin offerings for anyone who is in possession of a brain,”. Johnson is less concerned with the copycat nature of Prince’s work, admitting that “copy-paste culture is so ubiquitous now that appropriation remains relevant only to those who have piles of money invested in appropriation artists”, than she is with the apparently blatant sexism that he has cashed in on. Prince’s added commentary may be humorous by nature, verging on absurd, what the artist describes as “Gobbledygook. Jokes. Oxymorons. ‘Psychic Jiu-Jitsu,’” in the Gagosian press release, but he offers the subjects zero opportunity to defend themselves and that, for Johnson, is the real problem here. “Like a true troll”, she writes, “Prince always gives himself the last word” and, in doing so, silences his subjects, ‘neuters’ them “of their ability to respond actively”, ‘disempowers them’. Like any other cyberbully, Prince has absolved himself of the repercussions that his actions may have, has rejected any care or compassion for the subjects he mocks. While it may be possible that Prince is attempting to spark some sort of dialogue surrounding the vulture-like, voyeuristic aspect of Internet culture, Johnson is doubtful of any such depth in the work, at least not intentionally. For her, “New Portraits” is no more than a glorification of sexism and the cowardice of online trolling, except in this case the provocateur walks away with “$100,000 a pop”. But who is buying this work? If we are to learn anything from Duchamp’s urinal or Warhol’s Brillo Boxes, is it not that we, as viewers, are just as responsible for recognizing such works as reputable art? If the pieces have been exhibited as works of art in a gallery or museum and the audience goes to see them as such, are we not taking part in the madness, fueling the fire, supplying it by our
demand? Another critic, writer Peter Schjeldahl of the New Yorker, is less enraged by Richard Prince, even going as far as to say that such an exhibition was “fated” from the moment Warhol made appropriation an acceptable artistic act.

The cult of personality that Andy Warhol exuded (and continues to exude) played a key role in the way his work was received. He himself was a walking work of art and a piece like Brillo Boxes was simply proof of the fact that he had viewers eating out of the palm of his hand. It was a narcissistic act, Schjeldahl explains, and what better way to continue Warhol’s self-indulging legacy than to use the very platforms that have taken our narcissistic tendencies to unimaginable levels? Selfies, images uploaded on Instagram, practically beg to be appropriated, Schjeldahl explains, and “the logic of artifying non-art images that Andy Warhol inaugurated half a century ago could hardly skip a burgeoning mass medium of individual self-exposure.”. In that sense, Schjeldahl contends, we cannot really be angry with Prince for being the first to take note of this perfect convergence: “Had Prince uncharacteristically dozed, some other artist was going to notice that Instagram recasts Andy’s proverbial fifteen minutes by urging everybody to be famous fifteen times a day,”. Instagram is the very realization of Warhol’s ‘fifteen minutes’, providing its users with the illusion of recognition and fame, self-affirmation and that afforded by others, through ‘likes’ and commentaries. We should not be shocked and appalled by Prince’s seizing the opportunity to capitalize on this, Schjeldahl continues, but we should also not view it as some intellectually extraordinary feat.

34 Schjeldahl
“Is it art?”, he asks, “Of course it’s art, though by a well-worn Warholian formula: the subjective objectified and the ephemeral iconized, in forms that appear to insult but actually conserve conventions of fine art.”. The images that Richard Prince has chosen to highlight are, in many ways, reflections of our current day and age. They are popular, trending, fleeting snapshots into various people’s lives and he has eternalized them by giving them a more physical form. Though critics like Harrison and Johnson might take offense to the cynical, almost condescending characteristic of Prince’s work, he is, by no means, the first appropriation artist. Appropriation art is attention-seeking by nature and Schjeldahl urges us to keep that in mind when viewing an exhibition like “New Portraits”. The gallery’s curation of a controversial (yet palatable) exhibition and the public’s mixed reactions to it are all part of the age-old formula that has allowed contemporary art to thrive. “Why and for whom is contemporary art so attractive?”, Hito Steyerl asks in her chapter on the “Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy”; contemporary art seems “unpredictable, unaccountable, brilliant, mercurial, moody, guided by.

35 Schjeldahl
inspiration and genius” and that is precisely what keeps viewers coming back for more. Though
the provocative characteristic of a lot of contemporary art may cause the audience to doubt its
status, the question of whether or not appropriation art is, in fact, art has never truly been a
productive one to ask, Schjeldahl explains. The problem, for him, is when the viewing
experience is no longer necessary for that provocation to occur. In the case of Prince’s “New
Portraits”, Schjeldahl finds it redundant to actually go and view the work in person in order to
understand the ideas that Prince is presenting. According to Schjeldahl, it is the type of spectacle
that can be viewed from afar:

“You needn’t visit the show to absorb its lessons about the contagion of social
networks. But there’s a bonus to viewing the images as material stock in trade,
destined for collections in which they will afford chic shocks amid somewhat
subtler embodiments of the human spirit. They add a layer of commercial potency
to the insatiable itch—to know oneself as known—that has made Instagram a stupefying success.”

In terms of unraveling the ‘meaning’ behind Prince’s work, one need not even attend the
exhibition. The art objects on display have nothing novel to reveal, they rest solely on concept,
would even be better viewed online. Unlike the interplay between material and immaterial
presence that we see in Ryder Ripps’ work, Prince’s so-called “portraits” do not require a
physical form, and yet they have been deliberately exhibited as if they do. Richard Prince is, of
course, only one example of a Post-Internet artist, but the controversy he has caused is indicative
of the questions and concerns raised by the movement as a whole, namely its simultaneous
adherence to and incompatibility with art world standards. Brian Droitcour of Art in America is
one critic who has delved into the inconsistencies of “Post-Internet” art as a whole in an attempt
to pinpoint where exactly he feels the movement has gone wrong.

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36 Steyerl, 94.
37 Schjeldahl
Droitcour seems conflicted about each of the various aspects that have come together to form “Post-Internet” art (or at least what he defines as “Post-Internet” art), from the term itself and the work it encompasses to the crowd that it attracts; he hates it, but cannot fully articulate why. “Most people I know think ‘Post-Internet’ is embarrassing to say out loud”, Droitcour starts off in his opinion piece, “The Perils of Post-Internet Art”. Though he explores what the term means to artists on a personal level, drawing from artist Marisa Olson as an example of someone who situates “the ‘Post-’ not so much in social history as in her own process as an artist: simply enough, after using the Internet, she makes art”, Droitcour is not so convinced that “participation in Internet culture…yields distinctive approaches to art-making”.

“‘Post-Internet’ avoids anything resembling a formal description of the work it refers to”, Droitcour counters, “alluding only to a hazy contemporary condition and the idea of art being made in the context of digital technology”. While “Post-Internet” artists may employ certain aesthetics of the Internet, it is not to the same extent as Net art; while “Post-Internet” artists may use the Internet as a medium, they do not necessarily use it as an exhibition space and, for Droitcour, this ambiguity renders the movement virtually inexplicable in the grand scheme of things. “Whether people like it, hate it or feel indifferent toward it, they all seem to know what ‘Post-Internet’ means today but are unable to articulate it with much precision”, and we can see Droitcour struggling to do the very same. The movement seeks recognition from a certain “I know it when I see it” mentality, he explains, “like porn, right? It's not a bad analogy, because Post-Internet art does to art what porn does to sex—renders it lurid”. The term “Post-Internet” attempts to cover all too much and all

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39 Droitcour
40 Droitcour
41 Droitcour
too little at once and, lacking any real cohesive links, Droitcour argues, the movement is ultimately nothing more than a grandiose parody of art, created and consumed in a nearly pornographic manner. Returning to Hito Steyerl’s analysis, “Post-Internet” art, like any other contemporary art movement, “is produced as spectacle”, as something sensational, geared towards an impatient, flighty, technologized audience; and in Droitcour’s opinion, it is not spectacular for the right reasons.42

For many critics, the actual work released under the genre of “Post-Internet” art simply cannot live up to its name. It is all fluff and no substance, perpetuating the market-driven ideologies that the artists claim to reject, except that in this case, it is not the art dealers’, galleries’ or the market’s fault, but the fault of the artists themselves. “Post-Internet” artists are, to put it simply, sell-outs, Droitcour boldly asserts, and “Post-Internet art preserves the white cube to leech off its prestige”.43 How so? It caters to the interests of a very specific audience, to the trends of the market, without contributing any new or innovative artistic material. As we saw in Richard Prince’s case, there need not be any difference between the physical, sold work and an online, free version of it. Sure, the works may resemble some sort of political statement or cultural critique, “but unless the artist does something to make the documentation strange and emphasize the difference between the work's presence online and its presence in the gallery”, Droitcour writes, “it's hard for me to believe that anything close to a critique is happening”.44 Too many artists are skirting the line between appropriation art and simply being lazy, trading in politics and thoughtful provocation for what’s on trend at the moment. The whole thing, for Droitcour, is a hypocritical display of how far the art world has fallen. Contrary to Marisa

42 Steyerl
43 Droitcour
44 Droitcour
Olson’s vision of “Post-Internet” as the artistic interpretation of “participation in Internet culture”, Droitcour is yet to see any work that shows such promise. “Here's a self-styled avant-garde that's all about putting art back in the rarefied space of the gallery”, he writes, “even as it purports to offer profound insights about how a vast, non-hierarchical communications network is altering our lives”. These “profound insights” fall flat, for Droitcour, serving as nothing more than an “appeal to hipness”, as shown by the movement’s “instant adoption by the cool kids”.

Is the movement really so empty? Or has Droitcour perhaps fallen victim to a certain intergenerational bitterness?

While Droitcour admits to the potential of “Post-Internet” art to circulate commentary and critique, he sees too many artists resorting to nostalgic visuals and cynicism to spark the interest of a narrow group of viewers, while remaining within the four walls of a white cube gallery. These artists are, he claims, taking an easy route with their so-called social or political statements, while continuing to feed all of the conventions of the contemporary art world. The ideals that seem to drive the movement, namely its commentary on the uniformity of the Internet, the vapid standards of beauty that it upholds, and its cyclical relationship to advertising, all seem to coincide with the reality of “Post-Internet” art. The artworks are still exhibited in traditional gallery spaces, they are still only accessible to an elite group of viewers, and they are still sold into the same art market. If the movement were as groundbreaking as it purported to be, then this would not be the case, Droitcour contends:

“There's a promise of broad social commentary in the term ‘Post-Internet’, but…it takes real people to bring this implicit commentary to life. Without an external impurity like the human body, Post-Internet defaults to an art about the presentation of art, playing to the art-world audience's familiarity with the gallery

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45 Droitcour
46 Droitcour
as a medium or environment for art, as well as with the conventions of presenting promotional materials online.”

Appropriation art has always been taunting of the art world; what was Duchamp’s *Fountain*, Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, if not evidence of the triviality of gallery culture? But there was something particularly provocative about the objects themselves, about the fact that Marcel Duchamp was able to put his signature on a urinal and exhibit it as art, that “Post-Internet” art is lacking. It is simply too sleek, Droitcour argues, and one of the artists who has been widely accused of this vacant aesthetic is Berlin-based Katja Novitskova.

Novitskova creates installation pieces using online stock photos as her main subject matter. The photos are ones that most millennial viewers would recognize, from hyper-real images of animals to arrows and logos; they are images that show up everywhere, but often go unnoticed. If you type “zebra” into a search engine, a set of standard photos of zebras will come up. If you type “economy” or “growth”, you will likely see some arrows, money signs, and the like. These homogenous visuals are the ones that Novitskova has chosen to appropriate, enlarge, and re-contextualize into the physical space of a gallery to display as her own works of art. The interplay between material and immaterial objects seems to be more poignant here than in Prince’s pieces, harkening back to the conceptual changes we saw in Ryder

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47 Droitcour
Ripps’ paintings, but many fail to see the significance of these changes in Novitskova’s art. While Ripps feels that the artistic changes he made in his portraits of Adrienne Ho somehow give us a “truer” sense of who she is than even her own Instagram photos do, Novitskova does not seem to be suggesting an analogous conceptual revelation in her work. The only visible difference between her stock images and the ones found online are the context they are viewed in and the images they are viewed alongside. Her installations are, as Droitcour describes, “art about the presentation of art” and while they may function under the intellectual guise of de-contextualization and “appropriation art”, Droitcour thinks they would be better be off viewed in their natural habit, online.\footnote{Droitcour} Droitcour is not only irritated by the hypocritical presentation of this self-proclaimed “appropriation art” that still seamlessly fits into the space of a gallery, but finds it wholly uninteresting. “The Post-Internet art object looks good in a browser”, he writes, “just as laundry detergent looks good in a commercial. Detergent isn’t as stunning at a laundromat, and neither does Post-Internet art shine in the gallery. It’s boring to be around. It’s not really sculpture. It doesn’t activate space,” \footnote{Droitcour} Novitskova’s imagery may carry meaning as stock images, may look quite glamorous in the online sphere, but Droitcour sees no reason for them to be placed in a gallery. The only claim

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Katja Novitskova – “Innate Disposition” (2012)}
\end{figure}
that “Post-Internet” art can make as a movement, Droitcour argues, is its redefined interpretation of appropriation art and its physical re-contextualization of objects that normally exist in the immaterial realm of the Internet, but it fails at even that, thus remaining utterly useless as an art form. But is art really meant to “shine”? Does it need to be as false and flashy as a laundry commercial? What I cannot help but take note of in Droitcour’s damning assertion is the comparison to laundry detergent; surely it is more than a matter of coincidence that he has chosen to evoke the subject matter of Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* with this parallel and, in doing so, has highlighted the major flaw in his argument.

Andy Warhol’s appropriation art was a glamorization of the ordinary, everyday object. It was an exemplification of the beauty and aesthetic valor that can be found just about anywhere, which is precisely what led Arthur Danto to assert that art had reached a point where anything could be art. Sure, laundry detergent, a urinal, stock images of parrots and zebras, may not “shine” in a gallery, in so much as they do not “shine” anywhere in the conventional sense, but are we not past the point of critiquing art historical movements and artists based on traditional standards of beauty and technique? It takes one look at the emotional progression of Droitcour’s writing to see what exactly is going on here; an older member of the art world witnessing something new in the workings and working himself into a huff about it. Before “The Perils of Post-Internet Art”, Droitcour released a more infuriated review, titled “Why I Hate Post-Internet Art”. “I really don’t like “post-internet art.” I don’t like the term and I don’t like the art that’s presented under its banner”, Droitcour complains, and proceeds to highlight many of the same points that he later addresses in “The Perils of Post-Internet Art”, but there is a certain hysterical
aspect to this first review that cannot be overlooked.\textsuperscript{50} The fact that his first piece was so angry, and the second a bit indifferent, if not patronizing, is enough to discount most of the arguments he presents. Just as Arthur Danto initially declared the “death” of art with Warhol’s \textit{Brillo Boxes} and then began to warm up to the change in “After the End of Art”, Droitcour seems to be growing more and more calm as time passes and more artists prove the worth of “Post-Internet” art. As with any art historical movement, we have our favorites and our not-so-favorites, artistic expression can really only be disputed on an individual level, and that is ultimately the point I will seek to highlight in the final chapter to come.

Chapter 3
A New Simulacra

Each viewer, critic, and artist is entitled to his/her own opinion of any given work of art, but it is important to remember precisely that, that these are personal opinions, and thus cannot indicate the worth of an artistic movement or time period as a whole. When it comes down to it, the scathing remarks made by Nate Harrison, Paddy Johnson, Peter Schjerdahl, Brian Droitcour, and anyone else for that matter, are all individually based critiques and judgments that have been used as blanket statements for a movement that is still in its developing stage. It is not the naming of “Post-Internet” art as a movement that is premature, but rather the hasty way in which critics have jumped to conclusions about what the artists and their work stand for and in working themselves into a frenzy over one particularly inflammatory artist or work or art, these critics have missed the point completely. They have refused to explore the deeper dialogue that (a lot of) “Post-Internet” art offers, blinded by the initial shock of something new and different. In order to prove that the contestations made against the movement are, in fact, based on individual opinion and subjective experience, I will respond to each argument and exhibit that these counter-arguments share no resemblance, have no common thread, and thus cannot be used against “Post-Internet” art in its entirety. Instead, the continued malaise with newer conceptual/appropriation art only serves to reinforce the future of contemporary art that Arthur Danto envisioned. The apparent indescribability of the “Post-Internet” movement does not indicate its downfall, but is a modified, contemporary form of philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s “simulacra”, the certain ‘je ne sais quoi’ in art that keeps viewers intrigued time and time again.
Let us return to the example of Richard Prince. Paddy Johnson is deeply perturbed by the way in which Prince has “silenced” the subjects of his appropriated Instagram posts, by the way he has contributed his own two sense without giving them a chance to respond, but is this not what happens on the Internet everyday? While the Internet may be a space for uninhibited self expression, participation, and creativity, it is also a space for malicious thoughts and hateful beliefs to run amuck. Returning to Hito Steyerl’s analysis of the relationship between technology and image, the Internet “enables participation...but not only used for progressive ends”.\textsuperscript{51} It not only makes “hate speech, spam, and other rubbish” all the more possible, but it allows these types of online response to breed and multiply on an unprecedented level.\textsuperscript{52} “The networks in which poor images circulate”, Steyerl writes, “thus constitute both a platform for a fragile new common interest and a battleground for commercial and national agendas,”.\textsuperscript{53} The Internet is a paradox of sensitivity, one big conflict of interest, at once the worst nightmare of the hypersensitive and the perfect place for those very people to react to anything that looks or sounds out of place, and the public’s response to Prince’s “New Portraits” is entirely reflective of that conundrum. In a way, all images lose their autonomy and their owners lose their agency once they have been posted on the Internet. Once released, these images automatically enter the public forum, coming into contact with anything and anyone who has access to them and subjecting themselves to comparison and critique. It is an inevitable result of their existing in the online arena, so can we really blame Richard Prince for putting that on display in a gallery?

As early as 1996, postmodern philosopher and theorist Jean Baudrillard remarked on the new form of participation and the societal shift ushered in by the emergence of the virtual world.

\textsuperscript{51} Steyerl, 40.  
\textsuperscript{52} Steyerl, 40.  
\textsuperscript{53} Steyerl, 40.
“We are no longer in a society of spectacle, which itself has become a spectacular concept”, Baudrillard writes, “It is no longer the contagion of spectacle that alters reality, but rather the contagion of virtuality that erases the spectacle”, the virtual world thus introducing a new era of participatory experience. Where in the past, the “spectacle” was an artistic space in which the audience could channel and release their emotions through collective catharsis and then continue on with their lives, today’s viewer is not quite so independent of the artwork. “We are no longer alienated and passive spectators”, Baudrillard explains, “but interactive extras [figurants interactifs]”.\(^{54}\) Thanks to technological advancement, we are now able to not only view artwork, images, representations, and symbols, but to alter, edit, and modify them, to become a part of them. Our experience, participation, and reactions make up the very fibers of representational value; they give images their meaning. Without our contributions, it is as if those images did not even exist, what writer Amelia Jones describes as a “new model of signification” in her book *Self/Image*, in which she breaks down the ways we perform our individual selves through image. Quoting Guy Debord and Baudrillard, she writes, “The scene and the mirror no longer exist; instead, there is a screen and network.”\(^{55}\) Where society once saw their reflection in the spectacle of theater, once projected their own thoughts, desires, and emotions onto works of art, contemporary society now views themselves through the communicative lens of the Internet. “In place of the nonreflecting surface”, Jones continues, there now exists “an immanent surface where operations unfold—the smooth operational surface of communication,”\(^{56}\) The computer screen now acts as a blank canvas for any and all users to create, perform, and express

\(^{55}\) Jones, 17.  
\(^{56}\) Jones, 17.
themselves, as well as to interact with and build off of other people. Just like Hito Steyerl’s
description of “poor images” as manifestations of the “contradictions of the contemporary
crowd”, Amelia Jones discusses the underlying importance of connectivity through image, where
no angle, interaction, or modification is arbitrary, pointless, or without calculation at all.

The process of viewing, reacting to, altering, and circulating an image is an inherently
collaborative one. A decision to crop a photo a certain way or to add a specific filter/effect is
intrinsically revelatory of our ideals and models, of what we find attractive or ugly, interesting or
boring, personal or public. Not only that, but the way we perceive of images/representations of
others is always clouded by our own standards, morals, beliefs, etc. The viewing experience
never occurs from some external, objective standpoint, but is an exercise of “anamorphosis”,
what Amelia Jones describes as “that which the spectator contributes to what she sees”. 57 We
come into contact with hundreds, thousands, of images and visuals each day; we see them, react
to them both internally, forming opinions and passing judgments, and externally, ‘liking’ and
commenting on photos or not ‘liking’ or commenting on them and instead choosing to ignore
them. The same can be said for artwork; we view and interpret subjectively, applying our own
experiences and knowledge to that which we are viewing. As Jones explains, the way we interact
with image is never objective, neutral, or even entirely fair, for that matter, so why are we so
upset with Prince’s actions in “New Portraits”? Not only are his comments not particularly rude
or malicious, but these are photos that the subjects have chosen to share with the public. While
Prince’s appropriation may be an extreme example, anyone that shares an image on a social
platform should, to some extent, expect an equally social reaction, with both positive and
negative implications. Where Paddy Johnson goes astray here is in conflating a simple reaction

57 Jones, 9.
to a public image with some sort of judgment upon that subject’s personhood. In running to the defense of the Instagram users targeted by Prince, Johnson herself is confusing the people with their images, the subjects with their simulacra, her contestations carrying the seeds of their own demise.

Simulacra is simply defined as a representation of someone or something, as an imitation or substitute, and though an image is a representational medium, Amelia Jones explains, it can never fully embody all the complexities of its subject. “This simulacral world always leaks”, Jones writes, “Something always escapes the image (the image is, again, never enough to contain the bodies it renders)”.

More and more, we have begun to equate individuals with the way they are portrayed online, as projections of their online personas. Of course, someone’s Instagram account, a simplified series of photos, is not enough to understand that person on a deeper level. There will always be intricacies, details, interests, that remain hidden, but the way these social media platforms are formatted and presented to us makes it very difficult to not lose sight of that inadequacy. Spaces like Instagram thrive on an air of intimacy and personal touch, as though these heavily edited, censored, and curated photos somehow provide an insight into a user’s “real” life. They are contemporary simulacra, imitative to the core, playing off an illusion of candidness and privacy, while remaining completely insufficient in terms of representation and depth. At the same time, Jones explains, these images are full of “excess meaning”, the image always “conveys more than it intends” and we, as viewers, always read more deeply into an image than, perhaps, was intended.

This coinciding inadequacy and excess is, in fact, precisely what Ryder Ripps explores through his work, is it not?

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58 Jones, 23.
59 Jones, 33.
Ripps’ morphed paintings of Adrienne Ho reveal an aspect of her online persona that he feels is missing from her photos, namely the smeared, seductive motion of swiping through her Instagram feed, the gluttonous way that we, as viewers, consume an online caricature of who she is, the greasy residue from our fingers on a touch screen reflected in the oily brush strokes of his paintings. Critics of his work may take offense to his appropriation of her photos, but what we have here is yet another case of an artist creating a physical manifestation of the often unpleasant way we interact with images online. Why should it be acceptable, even entertaining, to be so invasive in the online realm, yet when it is brought into the “real” world, into the room of a gallery, we are suddenly uncomfortable, offended, and outraged? The subtleties and uncertainty of visual representation are what make multiple interpretations possible, they allow for continuously interesting dialogue and debate, with no right or wrong answer, and Ryder Ripps is placing himself at the very heart of that dialogue. Though lacking in many aspects, simulacra facilitate productive conversation in the artistic field and beyond because of that inadequacy. Images, especially those on the Internet, have not been private or immune to appropriation for quite some time now, and that is okay, as long as we resist the urge to reduce people (and ourselves) to the symbols used to represent them.

“We must resist thinking of the body as an object”, Jones urges, “We must avoid seeing the body as… objectively posited and perceived from the vantage of an “other” [and shift] to also feeling what it is to be “my” body as it is lived and perceived by me from my side of it,“.60 Though Jones is writing this from a distinctly feminist perspective, as an advocate for the power to reclaim the feminine self and body through image and online performance, she sheds light on an important aspect of Paddy Johnson’s argument. In following Amelia Jones’ train of thought, it

60 Jones, 20.
would appear that Johnson herself is taking part in the objectification of the same women that she claims to defend. Johnson believes Richard Prince’s subjects have been silenced in a misogynistic way, but is ignorant of the possibility that they may want to be portrayed this way, that they are aware of the potential for undesirable commentary, and that Prince’s comments are of hardly any consequence at all. Johnson thus perpetuates the very mentality that she is attempting to decry, and that self-contradiction is fundamentally detrimental to her critique. The radical power of “Post-Internet” art lies in this embrace of a society that is connected through image, visual experience, and simulacra. It is an art form that uses the chaos of the Internet to its advantage, rejecting any and all boundaries between artist and viewer. Though Prince’s “New Portraits” may not be the most engaging or thoughtful example of a “Post-Internet” artist, Jones applauds the “new ways of thinking and making”, a newer type of simulacra, that the Internet fosters:

“The digital era’s unhinging of the signifier/signified dichotomy, linked to its unhinging of the subject/object dichotomy subtending aesthetics, can make us rethink who we are and why, rather than precipitate…an attempt to secure a transcendental signifier…at the core of signification.”

While Baudrillard’s idea of simulacra defined a stark divide between signifier and signified, between subject and object, the Internet has opened the doors of our perception to a type of simulacra that is not so black and white. The significance of an image is no longer limited to the perceptions of one artist and one viewer, and the interpretive exchange that occurs therein, but is an ever-growing, ever-changing feedback loop of online experience, interpretation, modification, and circulation, with images accumulating more and more meaning as they travel through cyber space.

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61 Jones, 21.
While the visuals used by “Post-Internet” artists may come off as trivial, phony, often invasive, they are far more immersed in contemporary culture than they initially appear. In addressing the arguments made against Katja Novitskova, I harken back to Hito Steyerl’s exploration of “cyber trash” and why it is relevant in contemporary art making. Novitskova’s use of stock images goes beyond a tongue-in-cheek aesthetic; these images have social, cultural, and political ramifications and her tendency to focus mainly on animals has a distinct purpose behind it. Novitskova engages in a conceptual displacement, of sorts, with these visuals, taking images of a zebra, giraffe, or couple of penguins out of their online ‘habitat’ and relocating them into the sleek, sterile space of a gallery. She is, as Sara Stern of Frieze Magazine writes, “replacing their ‘natural’ environment with that of the white cube”. It is no surprise that the images do not, as Droitcour calls it, “shine” in the gallery, as that is not what they are intended to do. They are meant to look and feel uncomfortable, out of place, even a bit whimsical. More than a political allusion to the supplanting of animals from their habitats around the world, Novitskova’s installations suggest a life behind these cut-outs, an existence that these images have taken on as a result of their online circulation. “Novitskova’s works demonstrate and literalize a

Katja Novitskova – “Approximation I” (2012), Macro Expansion, digital prints on aluminum

contemporary shift”, Stern explains, “in which digitally circulated images come to take on lives of their own, evolving and moving forward with their own agency.” ⁶³ The virtual world exists somewhere between the real and the make-believe; just as animals have evolved throughout history, images grow, change, and evolve as they pass through cyber space.

The animals depicted by Novitskova were once real, living, breathing organisms, but now, in their online presence, they act only as representations of that reality, as archetypes of their old selves, as simulacra. Sure, we can take one glance at the installation’s aesthetic and conclude that it is ‘empty’ or ‘vacant’, that it does not “shine” in a gallery, but we would only be skimming the surface of what Novitskova has put forth here. These are more than images of animals, more than art objects, they are realizations of a new form of simulacra, one that is open to change and takes on more and more meaning over time. “No longer mere representations of nature”, Stern continues, “penguins and giraffes become representations of the image coming to life.” ⁶⁴ What happens after we look at and engage with images online? Do they remain frozen in time or do they wander away into the cyber abyss, waiting to interact with something or someone else? These questions of an image’s agency and the relationship between humans and simulacra are what Novitskova investigates in a lot of her work. “How do we participate in cycles of creation that continue without our involvement?”, Stern asks, “What becomes of the byproducts of those cycles? And what kinds of lives do they go on to have; what new structures do they create?” ⁶⁵ The fact that these particular images of animals, people, and objects have come to represent the very ideas behind them, to stand for entire species, groups, and concepts, is arguably more telling about society’s standards and ideals than it is about the subjects.

⁶³ Stern
⁶⁴ Stern
⁶⁵ Stern
themselves. They are *popular* images, after all; they did not become stock images by accident. They are at once visually perfect and entirely bland, a condition which, Steyerl argues, “speaks not only of countless transfers and reformattings, but also of the countless people who cared enough about them to convert them over and over again, to add subtitles, reedit, or upload them”, and the fact that the public has reacted so fervently to “Post-Internet” art is all the more proof of that underlying meaning.66 I look, finally, to a “Post-Internet” exhibition that actually received a great deal of praise in the international art world, as a demonstration of the movement’s moving away from mere provocation or controversy toward a more positive outlook.

Last year, entrepreneur, curator, and all around influential figure in the Berlin art world, Tina Sauerländer, organized an exhibition that seemed to tie up all the lose ends of the emerging “Post-Internet” movement. Titled *Porn to Pizza*, the exhibition explores the “domestic clichés” created and perpetuated online and how those gendered stereotypes transfer into our lives offline as well. The exhibition includes works by some of the hottest “Post-Internet” artists of the moment—Lindsay Lawson, Claudia Hart, Emilie Gervais, to name a few—who use the aesthetics of the Internet as a means to make a statement about the complicated, ‘real life’ repercussions of our online existences. *Porn to Pizza* brings to light how increasingly difficult it is to differentiate our online, ‘virtual’ lives from our offline, ‘real’ lives, and how this can be problematic when it comes to identity and representation. “The concept of the surface as a

66 Steyerl, 41.
construct that can protect, obscure, or even sell what is hidden beneath is evident in a number of the works”, Hyperallergic’s Gretta Louw writes of the exhibition. Like Bang Geul Han, Ryder Ripps, Richard Prince, and Katja Novitskova, the artists in Porn to Pizza refer to everyday online objects, to Steyerl’s “cyber trash” aesthetic, as their subject matter. However, “what seems to have been overlooked”, Gretta Louw continues, “is that this ironic superficiality is just a veneer.”. Like Novitskova’s work, these appropriated visuals have been displayed in a gallery, not because they are obeying the pre-existing norms of gallery culture, but because they are mocking their very surroundings. The silly, superficial, often hidden, aspects of our virtual lives have now entered the ‘real’ world, put on show for everyone to see, a physical manifestation of the convergence between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ that has been building up for quite some time. A piece by Emilie Gervais called “Pizza Sexual”, Louw describes,

“literally allows materiality to ooze into the digital: The artist embeds a smartphone screen showing stills of real porn actresses that have been digitally sanitized to CGI perfection and then smothered in digital pizza within an actual, physical pizza. On opening night, the oil greased visitors’ fingers, clothes, and the screen of the phone as people swiped between the digital images on display.”. Gervais has taken many layers of gendered clichés that are found online and has given them material form with her work, the same way certain stigmas, stereotypes, and expectations seep into the real world from heavily edited spaces, like pornography. What if our actions online were visible offline, if our consumption in the cyber world somehow carried on into the real world? Why do some clichés and stereotypes find their way into reality, while others are allowed to remain solely in virtuality? Why is it okay to be voyeuristic online but not so much offline?

These are the questions and inconsistencies that Porn to Pizza addresses head on, allowing our

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68 Louw
consumption of images online to literally ooze into the physical world in the form of pizza
grease. The exhibition is a whimsical, experimental, almost dystopian, view of a world in which
the line between reality and virtuality has completely collapsed, and it has achieved this vision
by means of appropriation. The subject matter are more than just memes, gifs, and “cyber trash”,
they are symbols of the “existential, philosophical questions about life in a reality that blends the
digital with the more conventionally experiential”, Louw writes, and the empty, sleek aesthetic
of “Post-Internet” art carries more depth than meets the eye.69 “Like the internet itself”, Louw
continues, “the skein of darker, deeper, more troubling concepts addressed in the exhibition are
packaged within a slickly branded, often amusing, and readily accessible layer of mass appeal
and good design,”.70 The viewing of “Post-Internet” art is, thus, a matter of taking it upon
ourselves to dig a little deeper, instead of succumbing to the first layer of our visual reactions.
“Those who choose to stay on the surface—of the internet, or of the works in this exhibition—
are willingly buckling on their own blinders, refusing to acknowledge the reality… of the age we
live in”, an age in which online trolling, indulgent voyeurism, and appropriation of material are
an unfortunate reality that must be acknowledged.71

Critics of “Post-Internet” art may find issue with its appropriation of other material, with
its blurring of authorship and ownership of subject matter, or with its seemingly vacant aesthetic,
but not only are these arguments made on an entirely individual basis, they are pointed at small
aspects of a much bigger movement. One of the key factors in understanding the ‘lives’ that
objects, and particularly images, take on through circulation is that they have no control over
what happens to them, they are swept through the world, passed from owner to owner, user to

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69 Louw
70 Louw
71 Louw
user, becoming vessels of collaborative cultural signification, and we can see this process being explored and questioned in a lot of appropriation art. By that same token, appropriation is only one feature of “Post-Internet” art, though some may place more emphasis on it than others. A century has passed since Marcel Duchamp first created the “ready-made”, so why are critics reacting to appropriation art as though it were completely unprecedented? One could argue that any idea or art form is, in some way or another, appropriated from something else. What we have today is a much different form of appropriation art and we must treat it as such. “Post-Internet” artists have taken the initial thinking behind decontextualizing and re-contextualizing objects and expanded it to transgress the boundary between reality and virtuality, between material and immaterial, and that is a pretty extraordinary achievement. “Post-Internet” art can never be wholly intended to be confined within a gallery, to look ‘at its best’ in a white cube, as its existence alludes to spaces far beyond those walls, and that is something that we, as viewers, must keep in mind when viewing such work.

Though it may be difficult to grasp this new form of art in a way that we are not accustomed to, “Post-Internet” works require us to leave all pre-existing notions and knowledge of preceding art history at the door. Such thinking would limit both artist and viewer to a correspondingly calculated and uniform interaction with art. “The construction of linear perspective”, Steyerl writes, “declares the view of a one-eyed and immobile spectator as a norm—and this view is itself assumed to be natural, scientific, and objective.” Continuing to critique creative expression based on technique, skill, and the ever-present question of whether something ‘counts’ as art or not is a means of perpetuating the linear perspective that Steyerl speaks of. It not only limits creative thinking and how we perceive of progress, but constricts the

\[72\] Steyerl, 18.
relationships and interactions we have with art. It designates a clear division between artist and viewer, fantasy and reality, and hardly allows us to straddle that line. It is “based on an abstraction”, Steyerl continues, “and does not correspond to any subjective perception. Instead, it computes a mathematical, flattened, infinite, continuous, and homogenous space, and declares it to be reality”, and that is where “Post-Internet” art steps in. The very point of the movement is that it lies outside of that linear, hierarchical scope of how art has progressed, both technically and conceptually, throughout history. It takes that homogenous space, that assumedly objective “reality” and turns it on its head. It is, as Arthur Danto predicted, an art after the end of art.

\[73\] Steyerl, 18.
Conclusion

New forms of art require new ways of thinking; it is as simple as that. “Post-Internet” art, and the impending art movements that it motions toward, makes us uncomfortable for the very same reason that Arthur Danto was unable to see a future for art in the 1980s. The thing about the ‘future’ of conceptual art, however, is that it is next to impossible to imagine, to conceptualize, something that is yet to happen, an art form that is yet to be thought of. While this uncertainty may make some critics uneasy, just as it made Arthur Danto uneasy in the 1980s, it is what makes art history and creative expression such a compelling topic.

Coincidentally, the opening quotation in Danto’s “The End of Art” was taken from an essay written by Marius de Zayas in 1912, titled “The Sun Has Set”. Marius de Zayas was artist, writer, art collector, and an influential figure in the New York art scene in the 1910s and 1920s. Why is this important? Because even at that time, at the very start of Modernism, before so many groups and movements had been formed, when Modernist manifestos were still just murmurings in art schools around the world, there were critics declaring that art was dead. Our reactions to foreign ideas and concepts (and increasing comfort with them over time) seem trapped in some sort of cyclical flow. In New York, I saw this cycle hindering the creation and reception of art itself, while in Berlin, the conscious effort to push the boundaries further and further, to resist that cycle, allowed the art world to flourish beyond the walls of a white cube gallery. It is a difficult achievement for both artists and viewers, but it has wholly beneficial consequences.

74 Lang, Berel, and Arthur C. Danto
Instead of allowing the ambiguity of art to obstruct a movement’s ability to be potentially radical, the audience should take new art forms, like “Post-Internet” art as a challenge to approach the viewing experience with a new way of thinking, a new openness to visual experience and how we engage with people and objects both online and off. If we do not like that “Post-Internet” art fits seamlessly into a white cube gallery, then we should stop viewing it as if it were meant to be in a white cube gallery. Artists, viewers, and critics should be conscious of the spaces in which they conduct their practice, not just be swept in and out of the cycle like everyone else. With increased audience participation in artwork, the question becomes, how do we ethically navigate and respond to the things we observe and interact with online? If anything can be art and anyone can be an artist, then how do we differentiate the good from the bad, how do we decide what has social, political, economic, or cultural value and what does not? Can these questions even be answered? I would say that being an active viewer and critic, not allowing certain markets or individuals to have a monopoly over something as subjective as artistic taste, would be a good start.
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