Juan Martín Prada (Ed.)

Art, Images and Network Culture

McGraw Hill | **AULAMAGNA**
PROYECTO CLAVE

GOBIERNO
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO
DE CIENCIA
E INNOVACIÓN

AGENCIA
ESTATAL DE
INVESTIGACIÓN

Art, Images and Network Culture

Contents

Image-World

Preface

Juan Martín Prada

The texts featured in this book have been written by members of the R&D project *Internet como campo temático y de investigación en las nuevas prácticas artísticas* ('The Internet as a thematic area and field of research in new artistic practices'), coordinated from the University of Cadiz (2018-2020).

One of the main objectives of this project has been to analyse the impact that the Internet and new connective technologies have had on the development of contemporary art over the last two decades. The aim, above all, was to determine the inherent critical potential of these new creative manifestations, including works both 'on' and 'about' the Internet, by discussing their contributions within an analysis of how subjectivity and experience are produced, i.e. processes that so define Internet culture. A focal point of this study has been to look into artistic practices that have used the Internet as their specific context for action, or rather, simply, as their main area or topic for reflection. The creative manifestations in question are all based on a view of digital connectivity as a key element in the articulation of the social, communicative and emotional interactions that arise in the present era. We thus continued with previous lines

of research into how the allegorical, subjectivising and interpretive aspects of artistic activity are always shown to have great potential for the development of alternative forms of experience, as well as encouraging critical reflection about the habits that the network system has brought about.

Bearing in mind these aims, included here are different texts that address a wide range of themes: the emergence and fundamental aspects of 'social media art', the issue of online identity as a specific theme within artistic practice, the links between digital connectivity and the physical space (telepresence/teleproxemics, augmented reality, geolocation, and so on). There is also a focus on the connections between new artistic practices and digital activism, concentrating on two of the areas that have thus far proven to be particularly active and fertile: on the one hand, an examination of the forms of property and the digital commons, and on the other hand, the critical thematisations developed by cyberfeminist creativity.

A second focal point of this research project, as addressed in the final part of the book, has been to analyse the effects of the Internet in general, and particularly social media, in terms of how images are created, circulated and received. We believed it was important to look into the transformations of the gaze and of the images' modes of existence, in a context articulated by social media. This was an attempt to at least sketch out a theory about the visual, in a context increasingly conditioned by digital connectivity – such a theory is essential for developing an aesthetic, art-based theory in the post-digital era. This line of work, in any case, shares with the aforementioned one an ever-critical stance regarding the ways in which the economic colonisation of the network system's communicative interactions take place, which today are almost always mediated or sustained by images.

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the members of the research team for their work on this R&D project over the last three years, and particularly those who have participated in this publication. Likewise, I would also like to thank George Hutton

Towards a Theory
of Social Media Art

Juan Martín Prada

The bursting of the dotcom bubble at the start of the century, along with the phasing-in of the so-called Web 2.0 and its standard business model, gave rise to a context that was quite unlike the one which had previously served as a testing ground for the earliest iterations of Internet art.

If the shift from the information society to the means-of-access-to-information society had been particularly fruitful for the development of multiple lines of media art, then the changes that were bringing about a personal-means-of-access-to-and-broadcasting-of-information society were proving to be even more promising. Before long, blogs, microblogging platforms, metaverses, social networks and the emerging collective archives for photography and video had all become new contexts for artists to carry out critical action and exploration. This was the beginning of social media art, the range of artistic practices that would use the emerging participative platforms of Web 2.0 as their own particular field of action. The new, online forms of socialisation, as well as the logics themselves of

the communication model centred on 'user-generated content' and, more specifically, on the 'broadcast yourself' notion, would form the basis of these new offshoots of contemporary art.

We would witness, therefore, and particularly from 2004 onwards, a prolific evolution of a range of artistic practices that, having emerged as 'net.art' in the early nineties, would now find new routes for their growth and development, based on the cutting-edge social and participatory dynamics of the social web and the technologies behind it. In any case, the fiercely critical and ironic quality that permeated the early works of Internet art would continue to be their defining trait.

In order to speak of a second era of Internet art, or 'social media art', means looking into a period when online artistic creation had reached a level of sophistication that only ever seemed possible once the late-90s 'net lag' had been overcome. This was a new phase, in which the frenzied hype around the early net.art had cooled down, and there was a certain air of despondency caused by the fact that so many of net.art's founding critical principles had since been institutionalised and neutralised.

1. Artistic practices and new online participatory platforms

One of the key catalysts in the surge of social media art was the rise of the blogging phenomenon at the end of the last century, at a time when services such as Blogger, MSN Spaces, AOL Journals and LiveJournal all started to make it possible for anybody, even those without any technical expertise, to set up, in a matter of minutes, their own personal logbook. In the mid-2000s, there were estimated to be around 71.7 million active blogs around the world, and this number was increasing at an astonishing rate (some statistics from 2006 indicate that over 175,000 blogs were being created per day).

The surge of the blogging phenomenon brought with it a vast collection of new forms of social critique and political debate, and active channels for opinion-forming and collective action. Blogs were soon shown to be the ideal place for cultivating and establishing critical voices of dissent, based on self-expression and personal and creative subjectivity, as a springboard for social transformation and change. All of this seemed to prove that the slogan 'We, the Media' was gradually coming true.

It was around 2005 when the blog was beginning to be explored as a specific medium for artistic creation. We recall, for example, the works included in the blog called 'blog art', by Marisa Olson and Abe Linkoln [http://blog-art.blogspot.com/], the pieces selected for exhibitions such as 'art + blog = blogart?' (2007) curated by Wilfried Agricola de Cologne for his JavaMuseum, or in 'BlogArt/ Blogumentary', curated by Annette Finnsdottir in 2007.

Generally speaking, in the early works of blog-art there appeared to be a fascination with reclaiming the self within the media landscape, hence the turn towards what we might call a certain 'egology'. At the start of the century, as opposed to the old *cyberpunk* dystopias that were based on simulation, avatars and post-human bodies, the development of Web 2.0-style participatory platforms instead imposed a radical return to *reality*, to specific people and lives, to the individuality of a person, with a first name and a last name, with a life story, someone who shares, who openly talks about their life. Many artists were enthusiastic about this new central role of the self, who engages in self-expression, carries out self-research, and who publicly shares their thoughts, ideas, opinions and confessions. In fact, one of the fundamental aspects of blog-art is the critical consideration of how the world has become a direct reflection of what I perceive, what I feel, what I believe. Many of these new artistic proposals focused on the fine line between the possible effects of the emotional reduction of the common social reality (a typical formalisation of egotistical narcissism 2.0) and these new technologies' potential for democratising the exercising of opinion, in the context of the Internet.

The most interesting cases of social media art, and blog-art in particular, tend to show that artistic thinking can help playfully and poetically reshape some of the more common models of online communicative practice and social interrelation. The sense of irony that runs through most of these proposals actively negates (or even subverts) some of the most unshakeable assumptions about supposedly normal or useful online communicative exchanges, which themselves are almost always determined by the interests of the major Internet corporations. This was made patently clear, for example, in the project by Jodi called *<$BlogTitle$>* (2006-07), on the Blogger platform. It was a chaotic blog which called into question the *conventional* systems of signs and symbols on the Internet, those which are deemed entirely acceptable by the incorporated systems that manage the Internet's flows of communication. In fact, most social media art tends to follow in the footsteps of early net.art, which, rather than complying with the Internet's prevailing linguistic regimes that aimed for efficiency, instead opted for illegibility, haphazard layouts and the same glitch aesthetics as the computer error ('error' understood as something within the system, but that does not follow its rules, etc.). These proposals remind us that the pragmatic aspects of online art have always been closely linked to the idea of *destinerrance*, or the unsayable: they hope to inject a certain degree of disorder into the act of communication. It was about seeing what happens when you merge what is given and expected within a certain medium, even the medium itself, with other elements that work against it or disable it. These projects sought to radically prevent any *constructive* interaction by the visiting user-spectator, and they would find support from critical voices who denounced the fact that blogging's central ideology of commenting and participating was in fact too similar to that which, a decade beforehand, had been the great promise of electronic interaction, also long-heralded as being supposedly full of democratising potential. All of this explains why works of blog-art were often pitched somewhere between psychedelia and the subversion of code, producing (as seen in *Screenfull.net*

(2005) by Jimpunk and Abe Linkoln, for example) extreme exercises in creating chaotic and unfathomable informative material, made up of elements gathered from countless sources within the Internet culture. These proposals wanted the Internet to be understood as something more like a particular mental state rather than a context designed for communication and socialising, and they formed a motley patchwork of informational discharge, as well as a takedown of the blog as a means of communication in the most conventional sense. In many of these creations, the technological infrastructure itself is in the spotlight, revealed to be a machinic system which thus prevents any possibility of debate.

Another prominent theme in the early days of blog-art was social media's dependence on constant growth and continuous updates. It might be useful to compare blogs/social network accounts with certain aquatic animals that just drown and die if they ever stop moving. This works as a metaphor for a communication system in which the numbers of visitors and followers are, to a large extent, determined by how often new content is uploaded. It might well be the case that more and more people now regard their public and constant self-expression as a fundamental need, so no wonder this often goes hand-in-hand with a certain sense of anxiety: this is the so-called 'blog depression' or 'blog life crisis' as alluded to (with tongue firmly in cheek) in works such as *Sorry I Haven't Posted* (2010) by Cory Arcangel or, in the field of video installation more specifically concerned with social media, *Boys Who Havn't Posted In A While* (2009) by Nia Burks.

The art that investigates this relentless regime of updates, of having to keep churning out new content, which blogs and social media brought into the Internet experience, has often been taken to extremes. A good example is how life is subjected to this regime in *Psych|OS-hansbernhardblog* (2005) by UBERMORGEN, part of *The Psych/ Os Cycle*, an extreme take on the public exposure of a human being's life over time, and how the community-observing-a-representation in fact turns out to be a community-observing-a-

life. Such proposals can only be understood from the perspective of the tradition of the 1970s conceptual practices that focused on and analysed the experience of time (such as those by On Kawara and Sam Hsieh, for example). The issue at hand is how life becomes subjugated by the time-based protocols of a shared system of records. In fact, many manifestations of social media art are not really about testing a new medium, but rather about the artist's own experience on these platforms (under the watchful gaze of many others). These works almost always assert that we are, fundamentally, shared time, and today, as is pretty clear, this time is exhibited and documented all over social media.

Another important line of action in blog-art is that of 'group blogging', which emerged around the year 2002 as an attempt at turning the blog into a kind of system for the collective accumulation of different material found online. These artistic manifestations have since been the object of interesting curatorial projects, among which we must certainly highlight *Surfing Club* by Raffael Dörig at |plug. in| in 2010, which included pieces by Aids-3D, John Michael Boling, Petra Cortright, Aleksandra Domanovic, Harm van den Dorpel, Joel Holmberg, Oliver Laric, Guthrie Lonergan, Paul Slocum and Nasty Nets, Spirit Surfers and Loshadka.

Halfway between parody and decidedly ironic naivety, these types of collaborative blogs are presented as surprising catalogues of stuff, following thousands of hours of online surfing by their creators. They are the result of an impulse for building an archive, for collecting weird images, for compiling reactions to certain sensations and lived experiences, in this process of wandering around the Internet. They are collage-blogs, collections of bizarre digital objects, genuine contemporary versions of the cabinets of curiosities from centuries past.

By navigating around this memory-being, this memory-world made up of networks of infinite interconnected memories, the participants of the 'Internet Surfing Clubs' propose, as a guiding principle for their creative action, a new compulsive and transformative kind

of archiving, which is ironic and highly inventive. In this creative activity, which works as a form of specific and critical visual consumption, the artwork is but the expression of a movement, a creative and profoundly ironic trip around a whole universe of visual data and references which the artist (redefined as a kind of 'professional surfer') refuses to consume passively and complacently. Instead, they recontextualise, resituate or recreate and transform these elements, showing us different possible ways of *metabolising* the digital items that make up the visual imaginary of our times.

In the early 2010s, the evolution of the blog phenomenon would now shift, principally, towards microblogging, particularly by means of services such as Twitter (which had launched in 2006). This change was driven by the widespread uptake of new Internet-connected smartphones and tablets, which diverted the new online communicational model towards something more like social networking. Many individual blogs, characterised by their long and pensive posts, were soon replaced by accounts on Twitter and other platforms, heading towards a purely conversational model. The move from blogging to microblogging was, in any case, entirely logical and predictable, part of the inexorable trend for increasingly rapid and instantaneous communication, closer to a form of real-time communication. Ultimately, all of this was proof of the theoretical foundations upon which the emerging Web 2.0 business model was based. It is now clear that this model was never really about turning us into broadcasters of information or content providers – instead, we have become the information that is sent and shared, communicating what we are doing, how we feel, where we are, what's on our mind, etc. This development changed the conventions of online communication, and many artists would soon begin to address it critically. Early 2008 saw the appearance of the first artistic proposals to pay close attention to the multitude of social dynamics that take place on and around these new communicative services. The term 'Twitter art' became more and more prevalent. Furthermore, there was renewed interest in research that looked into the aforementioned issue of the

regimes of relentless updating, typical of blogging. A good example is the series *'working on my novel' – Great Twitter searches Volume #1* (2009) or *Follow my other Twitter – Great Twitter searches Volume #2* (2011) by Cory Arcangel, in which he studies patterns of repetition, not only in the forms of communicative expression, but also in the states and life situations experienced by the connected multitude. These issues were taken to the limit in Vanesa Linden's project *Me* (2018), which focused on the processes of constructing identity on Twitter. Also worth highlighting, with regards to the idea of the real time of online interpersonal communication, is *L'attente* (2007) by Gregory Chatonsky, a good example of a flow aesthetic that generates an automatised fiction without a scripted narrative, endlessly in progress. In fact, the continuous stream of Twitter posts is the central theme of many Internet-based installations (part of a category of online/offline hybrids that is ever full of potential, so much so that it could even be considered as a specific genre of Internet art in its own right). Along these lines, we must also single out *Murmur Study* (2009), an installation by Christopher Baker in collaboration with Márton András Juhász.

2. Social Network Art

It was 2002 when the social networks started to gain traction, and they truly took off in 2003 (let us not forget, though, that some networks had already existed for some time, such as Classmates.com, which was launched in 1995). These massive new networks would soon form a context for collective participation, one which would prove to be hugely appealing to many artists. Works such as those included in the exhibition 'My Own Private Reality – Growing Up Online in the 90s and 00s' (2007), curated by Sabine Himmelsbach and Sarah Cook, or the collection of projects selected on the website 'Antisocial Networking' (2008) are good examples of these early artistic manifestations, many of which looked into why there was