

MICHAEL SANCHEZ ON ART AND TRANSMISSION

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AFTERMATH? The unspoken consensus seems to be that, in relation to the art of the previous decade, the early 2010s are a caesura—a waiting period at best, analogous to the early 1970s in relation to the '60s, or the early '90s in relation to the '80s. Those older historical moments were not just lulls, however, but scenes of profound discursive and technological mutation. And likewise, over the past few years, a set of technical innovations have arisen that have reconfigured conditions for the production and distribution of art. Although this phenomenon was barely noticed as it began unfolding, the start of this decade marked a point at which hardware and software came together to produce a qualitatively different kind of image.

Such changes in technology and art are often only belatedly sensed, and they cut both ways. Today, for example, modernist forms and styles are everywhere recognizable in the minimal Zen of iPhone design. But in turn, certain technologies that first appeared on the market around 2007 only had visible effects on contemporary art a couple of years later. And these effects are not isolated but systemic. Indeed, when the first person uses a technology matters less than when the number of users crosses a certain threshold. 2011 was the year in which the iPhone dramatically expanded in reach and market, including within the art world, and the proliferation of the smartphone—and then the tablet—for the first time provided consumers with the ability to view high-resolution images online nearly anytime and anywhere.

What distinguishes this particular historical moment, then, is not the emergence of the Internet (despite much recent talk about artists responding to this broad condition), but the confluence of two more specific developments: the radically increasing accessibility of the network and the permeation of portable devices on which dramatically higher levels of visual information are at hand. And although critics are entirely right to invoke contemporary art's "super-velocity," in the terminology of David Joselit, we must also pinpoint the specificity of these technical innovations in order to distinguish our present condition from other historical moments, when new infrastructures were also deeply imbricated in both the tempo and the content of art.

THE PRE-IPHONE and pre-aggregator rhythm of the art world was largely seasonal, determined by the nested cycles of the monthly exhibition, the yearly fair, and the biennial. And this cycle was interwoven with the production cycles of print media, from the daily paper to the monthly art magazine, and their extended lead

time. Within this rhythm, a critic visits an exhibition to write a review, which is then printed in a newspaper or magazine along with an image and, with luck, noticed by a dealer or curator who offers the artist another exhibition—a positive feedback loop familiar from sociological studies of the art system going back to the '60s. With the iPhone and the Web aggregator, the situation is, of course, quite different. An image of an exhibition can be posted the moment it opens, or even before. An artist, curator, or dealer receives an update containing images of the show on her phone, which she then forwards to colleagues, in a chain of events perhaps leading to another exhibition.

It may seem that one obvious consequence of this process is that consensus can now be built much faster, in a matter of hours rather than months or years. Yet this increased speed also disables the judgmental element of consensus in favor of collective attention. What had been a process of legitimation, attributable to particular institutions or critical bodies, now becomes a process of simple visibility, attributable to the media apparatus itself, largely outside the channels of print media and cumbersome zeitgeist-encapsulating exhibitions. How these media phenomena might relate to mutations in more traditional distribution structures, such as the emergence of an almost continuous succession of art fairs and the subdivision of monthly exhibitions into microdurations through performance and events programming, remains unclear. But as the 2012 Whitney Biennial demonstrated, the function of the biennial format has clearly become more mnemonic than predictive, more a retrospective than a preview. Art is no longer discovered in biennials and fairs and magazines, but on the phone.

The effects of this acceleration are spatial as well as temporal. Although it was founded in 2008, the aggregator website Contemporary Art Daily, for example, became a primary storage site for images of contemporary art around 2011. On the one hand, Contemporary Art Daily replaces the discrete pages of the print journal and the gallery website with a running scroll, optimized for the interfaces of smartphones and tablets. On the other, the design of the site itself clearly imitates the gallery space, with its clean white layout and minimum of textual interference. But Contemporary Art Daily has also, in tandem, generated physical gallery spaces. A number of galleries sprang up around the turn of the decade, especially in Italy and Germany, that present shows more or less explicitly for distribution on Contemporary Art Daily and sites like it. These galleries all employ a large number of high-wattage fluorescent-light fixtures, as opposed to more traditional spot lighting, making their walls pulsate like a white IPS screen (the now-ubiquitous LCD technology introduced by Apple in 2010).

At once feeding back into the white walls of the gallery and rendering them more easily photographable for instantaneous distribution onto a scrolling surface, the screen brackets the gallery space from both sides. And it already has for some years now. Such fluorescent-lighting systems became ubiquitous in galleries in the mid- to late 2000s, at the same time that galleries began systematically posting images of their exhibitions on their websites. The iPhone, and the smartphones and website designs that have proliferated in its image, has also created the conditions of possibility for another spatial transformation: the dispersal of galleries away from specific neighborhoods, away even from temporary ones such as the fair, so that a

geographic sprawl that began in the '70s culminates in a truly decentralized network, the spaces getting brighter the farther they are from the exploded center.

WHILE THE CASUAL LINKS may never be precisely determined, the recent history of the IPS screen in all its manifestations is clearly inseparable from the “real-life” experience of the gallery and its contents. And these contents are surprisingly regular, a regularity located solely on the register of visual effects. In 2011, at least two trends crystallized around galleries closely linked to the iPhone-aggregator distribution system. These trends—which have, in the meantime, become strikingly pervasive—are two sides of the same coin. The first is a mania for paintings in unsaturated pastels, off-whites, and especially grays. The second, more visible in sculpture, can be encapsulated by a return to the Surrealist object, in which jarring juxtapositions are made in hues that tend toward neon. The paintings have most often been described as “antigestural” or “subtractive”; the objects are usually described, again in relatively vague terms, as “post-Net” or “meme” art. The absence of a coherent discourse around the works, particularly in print media, is fitting, since it is precisely those channels of distribution that the works are designed to bypass.

The two tropes were illustrated early on in a pair of group shows held successively at Tanya Leighton Gallery in Berlin in the summer of 2011: “The Confidence Man,” curated by Gianni Jetzer, and “Grouped Show,” curated by Robert O. Fitzpatrick. These are, admittedly, selective examples—but they are nonetheless telling, not only because the aggregative function of the group-show format seems emblematic of the moment but also because the meaning of any trend can be best understood by analyzing the aggregate rather than the isolated practice. Most important, perhaps: I have only seen these exhibitions on Contemporary Art Daily, not in person.

In “The Confidence Man,” we saw a predominance of paintings in tones of marbleized white (Pavel Büchler), pastel (Dan Rees), and gray (Fredrik Vaerslev). In late 2010, probably under the influence of the work of Sergej Jensen and Michael Krebber, Vaerslev began making a series of all-over scatter paintings that resemble terrazzo tiles or drop cloths, an early example of which was shown in the exhibition. But his work only hints at the astonishing number of gray and gray-brown paintings produced in the past few years, coming out of very different trajectories and locales.

Several features of this trend explain its prevalence within these specific media-technological conditions. First, the warm, low-contrast gray-brown tones of these paintings are an ideal foil for the cold colors and high contrast of both the iPhone IPS screen and its simulation via the fluorescent lights of the gallery. Gray actually dims the diodes on the screen, creating a zone of relief for eyes exposed to the full brightness of the white display ground. Second, the paintings generally employ an all-over distribution of marks, eliciting a form of unfocus in the eyes—an update of Jackson Pollock’s all-over “mirage.” And if such works are designed to be encountered within a vertical flow of images, passing in front of our eyes at ever faster rates through smartphone scrolling mechanisms, then such unfocus takes on a particular function. Through the vertical scroll, the eye is trained to rapidly target

relevant data in a noisy stream of images. In some sense, Vaerslev's gray paintings manifest this noise within their very frames. As an undifferentiated mixture of all other colors, gray-brown is highly entropic, providing precisely no information at all. In other words, they are "gray noise."

But such inattention also momentarily releases the eye from its pattern-seeking movements. As the eye is required ever more finely to isolate (and, of course, monetize) information, to filter signal from noise, this particular form of noise seduces through its very lack of information, the painting reprising the conditions of its distribution in a visually therapeutic form. What is particularly interesting about this trend is the affective response it induces in the viewer. Collapsing information with affect, the absence of information is, in this case, also the absence of affect. Or rather, a reduction of affect to its zero degree, inducing in the viewer a state of relaxation that counters the anxiety fed by the speed of the scroll interface, slowing the eye down and dilating the pupils.

The neo-Surrealist objects operate in precisely the opposite way. While the gray paintings aim to counteract the physiological and informational conditions of their distribution, the neo-Surrealist objects, with their jarring colors and juxtapositions, exacerbate those conditions. If information, following Gregory Bateson's famous definition, is "a difference which makes a difference," these works combine maximally different differences in order to create a peculiarly ultrainformative image. Think of Josh Kline's digital composite based on a JPEG of Nicki Minaj wearing a purple crystalline dress, a soft-serve necklace, and leg bandages at the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards, a print that was exhibited at the gallery 47 Canal in New York in November of that year. Kline's work points to the pervasiveness of these visual phenomena beyond the sphere of contemporary art, with screen-ready neons reemerging in fashion at the same time. And the list of "ingredients" in a work by Anicka Yi, arguably the most complex of all the artists currently reviving the Surrealist object, gives a sense of how different these differences can be: Convex Dialer Double Distance of a Shining Path, an aluminum stockpot included in a group show at Bortolami Gallery in New York in April 2011, contains "recalled powdered milk, abolished math, antidepressants, palm tree essence, shaved sea lice, ground Teva rubber dust, Korean thermal clay, steeped Swatch watch . . . cell phone signal jammer, and electric burner."

Where the Surrealist object proper aimed to liberate the unconscious from bourgeois subjectivity, these neo-Surrealist works are addressed not to repressed subjects but to physiological and informatic bodies. The convergence of information and dietary or medicinal regimes in Yi's work encapsulates this shift. As we relate to information in increasingly metabolic terms, obsessing over managing our information intake at "healthy" levels, we now seek out "foods" that are pure and essential (food as signal) over entropic soups. And if Vaerslev's work aims for zero affect, depressing the viewer into a pseudomeditative state, Yi's is an "antidepressant" (to cite one of the ingredients in her stockpot). Through Yi's affective jamming, the WTF is used to provoke another form of the blank stare, the equal opposite of that dilated gaze elicited by the gray noise of Vaerslev's paintings.

Yi and Kline were not included in “Grouped Show,” but they are implicated in it through the logic of circulation that seems to define meme art (a blanket category that includes, as I have said, the neo-Surrealist object). The term meme, of course, derives from Richard Dawkins’s biologicistic account of how genetic and nongenetic data spread, like viruses, through their corporeal transmitters.¹ And corporeality and transmission are exactly what is at issue both in the circulation of meme art and in the redefinition of the group and the group show in the present. In April 2010, Kline exhibited paintings made with Axe body wash in a two-person show with Yi, who also began to work with liquids with corporeal connotations around this time. The transmission of information between this collaborative duo took place very much within a group context: the specifically social milieu of 179 Canal, the predecessor of 47 Canal. The following year, in “Grouped Show,” Berlin-based artist Timur Si-Qin exhibited *Axe Effect*, a bottle of Axe body wash, its lid open, dripping neon-green liquid down the wall.

Although Kline’s and Si-Qin’s works use the same materials, the latter marks a shift. While Kline is interested in Axe as a cultural signifier, one lifestyle brand among many, Si-Qin leverages the physiological effects of the product’s specific design. The Axe bottle was redesigned by Unilever in 2011 using an innovative method of product testing designed to bypass the verbal reports of test subjects by fitting them with glasses that tracked their retinal movements within a virtual 3-D environment.² The X shape of the new design, repeated in its central logo, effectively concentrates attention on the object at its center—crosshairs for the eye’s targeting function, using increasingly aggressive formal means to centralize the gaze. And when the Axe body wash was again taken up by Yi and Kline, first in September 2011 and then in July 2012, it was no longer through a process of collaborative osmosis in the context of a group show linked to a social circle, but through the logic of the meme. Si-Qin’s meme, which includes both the Axe bottle and its liquid contents, then replicated itself by splitting into its two component parts, taken up by Yi and Kline, respectively. In Yi’s fall 2011 exhibition “*Sous Vide*” at 47 Canal, we found drips of olive oil, a liquid whose color (at least on the screen) almost exactly matched that of the Axe body wash, running down the walls of the gallery. Kline then exhibited a row of vessels containing, among other ingredients, Axe body wash in a Haim Steinbach–like configuration along a shelving unit in a group show at Night Gallery in Los Angeles.

THE WAY IN WHICH this meme migrated—from gallery to screen to gallery, between artists on different continents, continuing into more recent exhibitions such as “*New Pictures of Common Objects*” at MoMA PS1—was a consequence of the specific technical apparatus that hit critical mass around 2011. But not all of its effects are as transparent. This cycle, still slow in many respects, is only increasing in speed, and its quickening produces other categorical shifts: Nicolas Ceccaldi’s cyberpunk surveillance-camera feeds, installed at group exhibitions such as “*Grouped Show*” and featured on *Contemporary Art Daily*, for example, emblemize the global art system’s unprecedented ability to monitor itself in near real time. This acceleration has already produced a new intensity of self-observation on both the systemic and the individual levels. The near-instantaneous feedback of visual trends creates an efficient system in which all information about

art is almost immediately incorporated into the production of future work. The art system, in an expanded sense, becomes a kind of self-monitoring security apparatus—autopoietically regulating images and affects into precisely the categories described above. The circulation of the meme through these bodies and works arises out of a condition of constant observation and feedback. Since this feedback is beyond both verbal discourse and context, with image begetting image, the art mirrors the very Web formats that support or produce it, just as they transitioned from a text-based blog format (Blogspot) to an image-based one (Contemporary Art Daily and Tumblr) around the end of the past decade.

The press release for “Grouped Show” described the exhibition as a hive mind, concretizing a “near-instantaneous peer-to-peer sharing of image, text, media and knowledge content between artists.” But while it might seem that the constitution of such a network through the circulation of informational units is comparable to the way that the circulation of artistic references has historically defined and circumscribed social groups of artists, the actors in this contemporary form of network do not constitute their artistic subjectivities through the traditional form of sociological positioning described by Pierre Bourdieu, in which the artist uses references to position herself discursively and differentially in relation to her peers.

In fact, artists today do almost the opposite. A quantitative acceleration produces qualitative effects. If Contemporary Art Daily, for instance, can be understood as a meta-group show, the groupings it generates are based not on the individual practices of specific artists in specific contexts, but on the site’s own operations as a self-generating system that is, in turn, linked to a larger system of phones and sites. Whereas Bourdieu’s analysis was centered on the nineteenth century, contingent on the ways in which the rhythms of print media defined the operations of the dealer-critic system, the rapid feedback of art trends today is actually eliminating the lag time necessary for the artist to constitute herself as an artistic subject. As media historian Bernhard Siegert has demonstrated, the individual subject is a dependent variable in the development of communications infrastructure, contingent on delays in transmission.³ Without such delays, or lags, there can be no subject. And the subject’s asymptotic disappearance amid the effects of acceleration can be linked to the diagnosis made by Giorgio Agamben in the mid-2000s, that contemporary capitalism does not produce subjects so much as non-subjects, through what he calls the “desubjectifying” effects of apparatuses.⁴

What would such a non-subject look like? In the wide-ranging reception of Agamben’s work in the art context during the past decade, such depletion of subjectivity was still understood via fairly traditional models of alienation. And his notion of biological life was curiously marginalized in favor of a definition of life in social terms. The networks implicated in the concept of “life” were seen above all as social networks, shifting the concept of biopolitics into a form of post-Marxism that simply extended the concept of the institution to encompass every aspect of the social life of the subject.


But at this point, it has become impossible to ignore that these networks are technical before they are social, and that the life in question is both biological and

informatic, as Foucault and others predicted long before Agamben. Instead of institutions producing subjects, we have apparatuses capturing organisms. Both the informational form and the affective content of contemporary art are optimized for an apparatus that is increasingly dominated by feedback between the iPhone interface, the feed, and the aggregator, not the institutional structures of the gallery and museum. This shift is part of the long history of aesthetics as applied physiology—a history in relation to which the physiological-technical systems of contemporary art today have only begun to be understood.

Michael Sanchez is an art historian and critic based in New York.

NOTES

1. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1976).
2. Emily Glazer, "The Eyes Have It: Marketers Now Track Shoppers' Retinas," *Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2012.
3. For Siegert, this supersession of the subject occurred with real-time signal processing after World War II. See Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, trans. Kevin Repp (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 12 et passim.
4. Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 20.

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