

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. Lots of people tell me that they don't like it, either.

Whether people like it, or hate it, or feel indifferent, it seems like they all know what "post-internet" means but they can't articulate it. The vagueness of post-internet, paired with the assumption that everyone knows what it means, is one of the most aggravating things about it. "I know it when I see it"—like porn, right? And it's not a bad analogy, because post-internet art does to art what porn does to sex.

But let's try to define it anyway.

I first came across "post-internet" when it was the title of the blog that Gene McHugh kept in 2009 and 2010. The use of "post-internet" as a label wasn't common then—no one besides Marisa Olson really used it—and I misunderstood Gene's choice of a blog name as a pun about blogging (a blog entry is a post, it's on the internet). But he really did use "post-internet" as a term and he tried at length to describe what it means.

When the internet stopped being the domain of amateurs, programmers, and hackers—when it became an inseparable part of everyday life for people with no special interest in or knowledge about computers—it changed. That's why Gene thought it was worth saying "post-internet." He wrote: "What we mean when we say 'Internet' became not a thing in the world to escape into, but rather *the world one sought escape from*... sigh... It became the place where business was conducted, and bills were paid. It became the place where people tracked you down."

I'm sympathetic to Gene's approach to developing a historical framework. It seems similar to an attempt to think about how radio or television changed how people live and how art is made, or how newspapers changed things when printing and reproducing images became cheap and easy. Cultural shifts like these are impossible to quantify but they become visible in art and historians have used art to describe them.

The kneejerk negative reaction to "post-internet"—"How can we be post-internet when internet is still here? Shouldn't it be *during-internet*"—doesn't seem to hold up under scrutiny. Gene covered a response already. And yet, I have a problem with Gene's response—with his "sigh" at what the internet has become.

Think about it through analogy to post-modernism. Post-modernism doesn't mean modernism doesn't exist anymore. Modernism penetrates all aspects of life: any big new building in any city owes a debt to modernist architects. Modernism infiltrates domestic life via Ikea. Everybody loves abstract painting now—it decorates the walls of banks and hotels. Modernism's infancy was the period when it had the most potential, but that ended and now it's living a dull adult life. Post-modernism doesn't mean that modernism is gone. It means that modernism is familiar. It's complete. It's still alive but its features are recognizable, and that's precisely why it can be repeated and reused. Scholars may continue to argue about the particulars of modernism, about the facts of its infancy, but they can do so because they have a handle on its general contours, which are out in the world in plain sight.

Post-internet says the same thing about the internet that post-modernism says about modernism. But isn't that a little presumptuous? "What about what we mean when we say 'Internet' changed so drastically that we can speak of 'post Internet' with a straight face?" asked Gene on his blog. I'd agree that it changed drastically but I'd also ask: Why assume that it can't change again? The internet is always changing. The internet of five years ago was so unlike what it is now, to say nothing of the internet before social media, or the internet of twenty years ago, or the internet before the World Wide Web. Why insist that the changes are over?

Artists who begin with the proposition that the phenomena of their world are boring and banal, who begin with an exasperated sigh, are going to produce art that is boring and banal, art that produces exasperated sighs. That was the case with a lot of conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, when artists explored the aesthetics of administration, producing charts and diagrams and photocopy texts that presented viewers with the particulars of bureaucracy. Sigh.

What's the new equivalent of the aesthetics of administration?

The post-internet art object looks good in the online installation view, photographed under bright lights in the purifying white space of the gallery (which doubles the white field of the browser window supporting the documentation), filtered for high contrast and colors that pop. The post-internet art object looks good online in the way that laundry detergent looks good in a commercial. Detergent doesn't look as stunning at a laundromat, and neither does post-internet art at a gallery. It's boring to be around. It's not really sculpture. It doesn't activate space. It's frontal, designed to preen for the camera's lens. It's an assemblage of some sort, and there's little excitement in the way objects are placed together, and nothing is well made except for the mass-market products in it. It's the art of a cargo cult, made in awe at the way brands thrive and proliferate images in networks, awe at the way networks are ruled by brands. It's like a new form of landscape painting, a view of the world as it is, and that's why its visual vocabulary is hard to distinguish from that of advertising and product displays. An artist's choice to make art that way—as a plain reflection of reality and the power systems that manage it—shows a lack of imagination, when there are so many other ways of making art available. Post-internet artists know what the internet is *for*, and it's for promoting their work. Post-internet art flaunts a cheap savvy of image distribution and the role of documentation in the making of an art career. Post-internet art seems like art about the idea of art world success—the art one would make to become a well-known artist if one doesn't care about anything else.

Should I name names? What's the point of an angry rant if I don't even call anyone out? I don't want to do that, mainly because discussing the body of work of a particular artist or critiquing certain pieces would require a level of research, attention, and thought that I'm not willing to spend on post-internet art. It also seems futile because post-internet isn't necessarily a permanent identity for any given artist; an artist can make post-internet art sometimes and another kind of art, for better or worse, at another time. Post-internet is an outfit that can be worn and discarded. So it's better to call it out as a trend, or to call out the scenes and social groupings that do the most to popularize the trend. The Jogging—the people closely associated with it and the people who want to be closely associated with it—abuse post-internet most egregiously. The scenes that have been cultivated around Berlin galleries Kraupa-Tuskany and Societe are bad, too. If it's at Higher Pictures gallery in New York I probably won't like it. If it's in a group show curated by Agatha Wara I'm sure I'll hate it. If it's on a cool Tumblr I can't be bothered.

So post-internet is bad. But if we're not post-, then where are we, when are we? What prefix can people who love labels use to situate themselves in history? Recently I've become enamored with Mikhail Epstein's writing on *proto-*, which supposes that the modern age of humanity is over, and that sweeping changes to nature and technology herald the onset of a new, still nebulous era. Epstein writes:

"The period we are entering is no longer a period after something: postcommunist, postmodernist, 'postthis,' or 'postthat.' The present era is 'proto,' but a preface to *what*, we do not know. *Proto-* is noncoercive, nonpredictive, and unaccountable: a mode of maybe. The future is a language without grammar, an unconscious without dreams, pure nothing. Inescapably the future becomes everything so as again and again to remain nothing."

Post- presupposes finitude, closure, knowing retrospection. Proto- points to multiplicity and possibility. An art that is proto- would approach the internet's ubiquity not as a boring given but as a phenomenon ripe with transformative potential for the mediation of people and art (or people and people), for the creation of new genres from the microforms of texts or tweets, or from game design, from karaoke and fan art, and so on. Proto- is okay with not knowing or not working. As Epstein says, we don't what proto- is a preface to, and so there's no way to append it to a root and complete a buzzword. Proto- sucks for promo. But as a starting point for an artist, as a disposition for art, proto- is a lot better than post-.

This entry was written by [culturetwo](#), posted on March 31, 2014 at 3:00 pm (2014-03-31T15:00:33+0000), filed under [Uncategorized](#) and tagged [Gene McHugh](#), [Mikhail Epstein](#), [post-internet](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Follow any comments here with the [RSS feed for this post](#). [Post a comment](#) or leave a [trackback](#): [Trackback URL](#).

7 Comments

1. andy j

Posted March 31, 2014 at 4:15 pm | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

are the Gene McHugh posts still available to read online?

2. Marisa Olson

Posted March 31, 2014 at 5:46 pm | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

I want to re-read this a few times, and will surely cite it in my forthcoming Rhizome article, “Postinternet is Dead, Long Live Postinternet,” but for now I am emailing you three essays in which I explicitly define and explicate Postinternet –at least from the perspective in which I coined the term. Tbh, I keep getting goosebumps every time I see someone say, “postinternet has never been defined” –which seems like the M.O. for all the articles and panels on PI... (Could it be a common fantasy that it be/remain undefined? Or is this just a visualization of the ways & woes of art historiography–the same stories being retold in nearly the same words, leaving other voices out or failing to open eyes to them?) I defined ‘Postinternet’ in 2006 and continued to define it in numerous widely-republished & translated articles, and Gene went above & beyond defining it, as you point out. Sigh...

◦ culturetwo

Posted March 31, 2014 at 8:20 pm | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

True, it has been defined. But I feel like the way people use it has drifted from the ways that you and Gene defined it, and it’s used more to market emerging art than as a historical term, and I think for that purpose it does require the mystique of non-definition. Thanks for helping me clarify this

◦ Marisa Olson

Posted March 31, 2014 at 8:24 pm | [Permalink](#)

Yep, we’re definitely on the same page. To quote myself, “Postinternet is Dead, Long Live Postinternet!” Honestly, I still think it applies to art but I’d really like to see it expanded to broader social & political aspects of life in network culture. Whereas I used to say “postinternet: art ‘after’ the internet,” I know say, “postinternet: the symptoms of network culture.” Stay tuned. (But for now, a random note: I setup a google alert for ‘postinternet’ a few months ago and have been getting the wildest variety of uses... Recently... ugg... Kanye West said he wanted to be “The Postinternet Disney”!!! I know, I’m fanning the flames....)

◦ Sterling Crispin (@sterlingcrispin)

Posted March 31, 2014 at 9:22 pm | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

I’d be interested in hearing what you two have to say about this essay I wrote sometime last year <http://www.sterlingcrispin.com/wading.html>,

I’m going to take the liberty of pasting in the most relevant points below:

“The societal expectation for an artist in the post-internet era often lies in a constant stream fragmented gestures, constructed to be quickly digested and ‘shareable’. One is no longer expected to maintain a sustained, deep focused attention toward a single purpose nor “help the world by revealing mystic truths” (Nauman) as truth itself has been deemed subjective and abandoned. The ubiquity of an online audience within the multiplicity of a post-internet art practice breeds over-communication and heavily documented minute gestures, creating a hyper-scrutiny of the ephemeral. Yet this

scrutiny can only occupy a narrow region of time as defined by the collective attention span of society, which exponentially dwindles in direct correlation to the increasing speed and ease of communication. Such an artist in the post-internet era is a product, by and for themselves and their audience. This sentiment is embodied in many art practices existing primarily as online presence and persona-as-product.”

“(the ironic) makes fun of its own format, and attempts to lure its target market to laugh at and with it. It preemptively acknowledges its own failure to accomplish anything meaningful. No attack can be set against it, as it has already conquered itself. The ironic frame functions as a shield against criticism....Irony is the most self-defensive mode, as it allows a person to dodge responsibility for his or her choices, which means etymologically to “secretly flee” (subter + fuge). Somehow, directness has become unbearable to us.” (L)”

“This kind of activity is machine-based (or aided /informed) production, but it’s the production of alienation, it’s a product of the spectacle not of the real. Perhaps it’s an attempt to create the real through the inversion of mere representation into the real, but this practice immediately, willingly, and happily sacrifices this real back into the Spectacle. This model of working is a continual abandonment of truth. It generates and embraces alienation itself as a product, rather than producing an investigation into the understanding of ones own existence. Of course one could define ones existence by and through the Spectacle, but to completely deny the real and fail to see that which is outside of the Spectacle is truly the negation of life.”

3. kimberly

Posted March 31, 2014 at 7:35 pm | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

Well said but please drop names!

DROP THE NAMES OF THESE eager-dollar marxists, ass licking art-world opportunists.

BURN THIS UGLY ART AND IT WILL BE MUCH BETTER.

(sorry for the caps)

4. [Sean Hogan \(@Seagaia2\)](#)

Posted April 1, 2014 at 1:38 am | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

I’m waffling on how I feel about Jogging. On one hand it turns me off: it’s really advertising focused and seems to be leaning towards its submissions being catchy (money incentives for submitters, based on how popular they can make Jogging). I don’t see any sort of mission statement by Jogging. Why are they curating these images and paying people money.

Using your nice landscape painting comparison, I think that Jogging (or post-internet art in general as banal observations on present-day life) could be beneficial because we associate particular thoughts with particular sorts of advertisements, in the way that a landscape painting can be inspiring when we want to express something in a different medium: it gives

us a view of the world as is, but of a particular part of it, and is immediately accessible (I want to see a volcano: look up painting of volcano, or I want to see a butter ad – look at some post-internet thing about butter, idk.)

Using your nice landscape painting comparison: what landscape paintings can do are serve as nice reference material for remembering how we feel when experiencing something familiar. In the case of landscape, say this is some generic painting of a meadow. It's generic and not that interesting, but can still serve a function for an artist of remembering what that landscape of a meadow is like, and the artist can then use those memories/feelings in conjunction with other ideas. As an example, you could use landscape-ish paintings/photos as one tool in exploring an idea through the creation of an area in a video game, through music/game mechanics/art.

Presumably, the same could be done with using the landscape-ness/familiarity you talk about with post-internet art. And I think that plays nicely into your comment on “proto-” and the possibilities that mindset has. I think I agree the intention by the artists maybe isn't great, but there seems like there is something salvageable, at least.

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