

Postinternet Observations

By Karen Archey

A confusing term as it is sloganeering, “postinternet” has nothing to do with what one may assume it means: an apocalyptic moment “after” the internet, in which email and the World Wide Web no longer function. It’s much more boring than that. The “post,” here, refers not to “coming after,” but rather, “in the fashion of.” Describing a moment in which the internet is no longer a fascination or taboo, but rather a banal fact of daily living, “postinternet” should be considered a cultural condition, much in the vein of how art historian Rosalind Krauss describes postmodernism: as a condition of resistance found where modernist ideals are in place. As in Krauss’s ideas about postmodernism, there’s no specific date that would adequately signal a postinternet turn; rather, the postinternet would be a phenomenon that occurs in contradistinction to pre-digital society and Luddite ideals.

When uttered in the context of contemporary fine art, the term “postinternet” bears an extremely specified meaning, describing the efforts of a handful of artists throughout the mostly-Western world. While these artists once worked largely online, their practice comprising gifs, jpegs and HTML-embedded video, most have diversified to embrace multi-modal artistic production, and predominantly object-based work. Artists fitting into this trajectory include Oliver Laric, Aleksandra Domanovic, Harm van den Dorpel, Joel Holmberg, Martijn Hendriks, and perhaps Aids-3D (who now go by the more distinguished Keller/Kosmas). It could be argued that the shared impact of both innovations in Web technology and collectively experienced artistic maturation led to this exodus from online-only artistic production. Some observations out the way: Those associated with postinternet art are born on the cusp of digital nativity (as in one who was who was born during or after the introduction of digital technology into mass culture), their birthdates in the early to mid-1980s. Generally, all artists and writers associated with postinternet art are connected by Web 2.0 social networking technologies such as Facebook or Twitter, or earlier, via blogs such as vwork.org (and image-only assemblage of other peoples’ art) or surf clubs. A surf club is an online community that collaboratively produces images in blog format as a form of artistic production, somewhat analogous to a Web-based salon. While surf clubs such as Nasty Nets, Club Internet, and Computers Club began appearing in the mid-naughts, just before the full blossom of Web 2.0, their unique functionality was soon replaced circa 2009 by easier-to-use, democratized image sharing platforms, namely Tumblr. (As writer Brian Droitcour aptly puts it, “Is 2009 to net art what 2002 was to electroclash?”) As Tumblr became widely adopted by artists, bloggers, and youth generally interested in conveying an avatar of their self-image online, it could be argued that the online image became impoverished. No longer did it require any specialized knowledge to upload an image online, and perhaps because of this the jpeg’s gravity as a form of artistic production became lessened. Ironically, because of the success of widely accessible image sharing platforms like Tumblr, images online had been demoted to the realm of social networking.

Perhaps because of this as well as increased opportunities because of their exposure on the web, many of these artists began to work offline, heavily experimenting with the dialogue between software-based works, IRL materiality, all the while attempting to respond to the trajectory of art history and a market-driven art world. Dutch postinternet artist Martijn Hendriks writes, “This generation is characterized by a renewed confidence in the fundamental possibilities of art... There is a real and honest engagement with materiality, abstraction, signification, monumentality, expressionism, formalism and art history, all from a generation of artists who are no longer convinced by the priority given to relational aesthetics, documentary practices, and art as knowledge production. We prefer to free art of the demand to proclaim its legitimacy beforehand.”

One can gather from Hendrik’s text a sense of frustration—on one hand, those associated with being postinternet in the art world may be thought as overly deskilled nerds, and on the other, those coming from the online-only internet art world proper may think of postinternet artists as “selling out.” Although to be postinternet was once a defensive position, a pleading to the art world to consider the effects that the internet may have on artistic production as well as on culture at large, it now seems on the brink of worldwide approval, and the aesthetics and character associated with it are now seen with regularity. We now have conferences dedicated to what it means to be postinternet, and art magazines publishing issues attempting to parse out the term. And while it may relieve some to be awarded attention and consideration after the long haul of propagating the postinternet, to others it would undoubtedly feel uncanny to be so widely palatable. In the words of Harm van den Dorpel, “Should we just go find the next big thing again?”