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# ECHOES OF THE WRONG LAUGHTER: POSTINTERNET ART AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

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This article deals with certain aspects of a relatively new trend known as post-internet art. To begin with I examine the bases of this trend and offer some examples of its procedures. However, my aim is not to question the appropriateness of the term “post-internet”, nor to look without proper orientation at how it is reflected in theories of new media and internet culture. Instead, I analyse the specific way that post-internet art avails itself of the products and strategies of the culture industry. I use the term “culture industry” primarily in its non-theoretical sense as an overarching descriptor of forms of mass entertainment and a consumer aesthetic. Nevertheless, I occasionally draw on the legacy of critical theory, which was the first to come up with the concept of the culture industry.

I begin by examining certain similarities between post-internet art and older models of the appropriation of a commodity aesthetic in modernist and postmodernist art. I describe these similarities using the categories “mimesis of reification”, “resignification” and “subversive affirmation”. However, the differences between post-internet art and these previous traditions are such that the theory of accelerationism proves to be a more useful interpretative tool. In post-internet art, the adoption of the role of artist-as-brand and self-promotion via social networks does not serve as a criticism of the existing form of capitalism, but is intended to liberate artists from the rigid institutional structures of the art world.

Critics often reproach post-internet artists for failing to live up to this expectation by using elements of internet culture in order to succeed in the gallery system, thus re-legitimising the system in question. My own reservations relate more to what it is that motivates post-internet artists to reaffirm consumerism. I attempt to show that their refusal to adopt a critical distance from internet-based business

strategies, coupled with their endeavour to break free of the tentacles of the traditional art market, culminates in the ironing out of the differences between both spheres within the framework of an overarching market logic. The parodic and self-reflective elements that characterise the art projects under examination do not incite resistance but simply evoke the “wrong laughter”. This laughter is a symptom of the hopelessness we experience when confronted by the current economic and political conditions of culture.<sup>1</sup>

## I.

That post-internet art is difficult to define has become part of its definition. We see this in the title of an article on the website *Art F City* from October of this year: “Finally, a Semi-Definitive Definition of Post-Internet Art”.<sup>2</sup> The text is devoted to the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Art Post-Internet* at the Ullens Center of Contemporary Art in Beijing.<sup>3</sup> Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, who produced the exhibition and catalogue, regard the term “post-internet” within the context of contemporary art as referring to an “art object created with a consciousness of the networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception”.<sup>4</sup> However, this definition contributes almost nothing new to the explosion of definitions that occurred as this “prematurely canonised” trend burst onto the scene, a trend which for many critics foundered precisely as a consequence of the “centralisation of the discourse around a specific term”.<sup>5</sup>

The term “post-internet” was first used in 2008 by the artist Maria Olson,<sup>6</sup> though as far back as 2006 she had spoken of “art after the

<sup>1</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to thank Ondřej Dadejík and Jakub Stejskal and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. These led me to rework the text in some detail.

<sup>2</sup> Paddy JOHNSON, “Finally, a Semi-Definitive Definition of Post-Internet Art”, *Art F City*, 14 October 2014, <http://artfcity.com/2014/10/14/finally-a-semi-definitive-definition-of-post-internet-art/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Karen ARCHEY – Robin PECKHAM (eds.), *Art Post-Internet: Information/Data*, Beijing: Ullens Center for Contemporary Art 2014; the catalogue can be downloaded free at <http://post-inter.net/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ben VICKERS, “Some Brief Notes on: How Post-Internet Got Lost”, *Pastebin*, 21 October 2013, <http://pastebin.com/bm1EKB9H> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Régine DEBATTY, “Interview with Marisa Olson”, <http://we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2008/03/how-does-one-become-marisa.php> (accessed 19 September 2014).

internet". Olson used this locution in an attempt to characterise her "performances, songs, photographs, texts and installations" created as a consequence of "compulsive surfing and downloading".<sup>7</sup> The temporal prefix "post" or "after" was not intended to indicate some new phase in culture, but simply described a concrete working method.<sup>8</sup> Further evidence of the growing importance of the internet for contemporary art is "internet aware" art, a term coined by Guthrie Lonergan around the same time.<sup>9</sup>

The expansion and popularisation of variations on the theme of "post-internet" was aided and abetted by several online publications that sprang up around the turn of the decade, and it is thanks to these that "post" no longer indicates simply a sequence of events, but a new paradigm in culture. In 2009–2010, the critic Gene McHugh ran a blog entitled *Post Internet* on which on a daily basis he published texts in various genres.<sup>10</sup> The contributions included summaries of the debate around the concept, nature and interpretation of the strategies linked with post-internet art, reflections upon the work of many artists that the authors deemed relevant to this trend,<sup>11</sup> as well as performative textual experiments, and overall one is justified in describing the blog as a work of post-internet art.<sup>12</sup> In 2010, the artist Katja Novitskova launched the project *Post Internet Survival Guide*, which takes the form of a brochure, blog and series of installations.<sup>13</sup> Novitskova attempts to catalogue seemingly unrelated cultural phenomena in which the "the internet is an invisible given, like roads or trees, and is used to navigate not just information but also matter and space".<sup>14</sup> In the

<sup>7</sup> Lauren CORNELL, "Closing the Gap between Art and Life Online", *Time Out New York*, 9 February 2006, <http://www.timeout.com/newyork/art/net-results> (accessed 19 September 2014).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, in *Abe & Mo Sing the Blogs* Olson and another artist set texts from different blogs to music and then published the resulting album in the form of a blog containing links to mp3 files with the songs and the original blogs, <http://www.linkoln.net/abeandmosingtheblogs/> (accessed 19 September 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas BEARD, "Interview with Guthrie Lonergan", *Rhizome*, 26 March 2008, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2008/mar/26/interview-with-guthrie-lonergan/> (accessed 19 September 2014).

<sup>10</sup> The blog is no longer up and running, though it was published as a book: see Gene MCHUGH, *Post Internet: Notes on the Internet and Art* 12. 29. 09 > 09. 05. 10, Brescia: LINK Editions 2011.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Kari Altmann, Cory Arcangel, Harm van den Dorpel, Martijn Hendriks, Martin Kohout, Seth Price, Ryan Trecartin, Damon Zucconi, etc.

<sup>12</sup> Domenico QUARANTA, "Editor's Note: Criticism as Performance", in: MCHUGH, *Post Internet*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Katja NOVITSKOVA, *Post Internet Survival Guide*, <http://katjanovi.net/postinternetsurvivalguide.html> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

same year, the artist Artie Vierkant published the essay “The Image Object Post-Internet”, which is both a theoretical reflection upon the post-internet condition in culture and a manifesto regarding one form of post-internet art.<sup>15</sup>

Around 2010, when the key traits of post-internet art start to take shape, the term and the debate it provoked circulated within a relatively small community of artists (based mainly in New York and Berlin) linked by social media. The concept gradually moves into the centre of attention over the following years, thanks, inter alia, to panels and publications devoted to its critical examination.<sup>16</sup> At the same time as critical voices were being raised proclaiming the failure of post-internet art to incorporate the changing cultural conditions into artistic practice,<sup>17</sup> there was a boom in this very trend in galleries. At the turn of 2013 and 2014, the ambitious exhibition *Speculations on Anonymous Materials* was organised in Kassel, which attempted to locate the work of post-internet artists within a closer relationship to the speculative realist movement in philosophy running in parallel.<sup>18</sup> Next in line is the Beijing exhibition *Art Post-Internet* referred to already.<sup>19</sup> A number of anthologies were published,<sup>20</sup> and at the end of the year a report appeared in the media to the effect that the DIS post-internet art collective had been commissioned to curate the next Berlin Biennale,<sup>21</sup> a move as confusing as it was symptomatic.

The relative ease with which we recognise post-internet art these days is surprising given the reputation it used to have for being somewhat protean. Archey and Peckham speak of artists who “employ the

<sup>15</sup> Artie VIERKANT, “The Image Object Post-Internet”, [http://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The\\_Image\\_Object\\_Post-Internet\\_us.pdf](http://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The_Image_Object_Post-Internet_us.pdf) (accessed 19 September 2014).

<sup>16</sup> The “Post-Net Aesthetics” organised by Karen Archey and *Rhizome*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 17 October 2013, <http://new.livestream.com/icalondon/events/2464307> (accessed 1 November 2014); the roundtable organised by *Frieze* and chaired by the curator Lauren CORNELL, “Beginnings + Ends”, *Frieze*, 2013, no. 159, pp. 126–131.

<sup>17</sup> VICKERS, “Some Brief Notes”; Jennifer CHAN, “Notes on Post-Internet”, in: Omar KHOLEIF (ed.), *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, London: Space – Manchester: Cornerhouse 2014, pp. 106–123; Michael CONNOR, “Post-Internet: What It Is and What It Was”, in: KHOLEIF, *You Are Here*, pp. 56–65.

<sup>18</sup> *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, curator Susanne Pfeffer, Kassel: Fridericianum, 29 September 2013 – 23 February 2014.

<sup>19</sup> *Art Post-Internet*, curators Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, Beijing: Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, 1 March 2014 – 11 May 2014.

<sup>20</sup> KHOLEIF, *You Are Here*; Joanne MCNEIL – Domenico QUARANTA – Nick LAMBERT, *Art and the Internet*, London: Black Dog 2014.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/dis-appointed-curatorial-team-of-the-9thberlin-biennale-for-contemporary-art-35986> (accessed 1 November 2014).

visual rhetoric of advertising, graphic design, stock imagery, corporate branding, visual merchandising and commercial software tools”.<sup>22</sup> Most often we are confronted by installations or objects located in aesthetically pure gallery premises, combining digital visuals, robust constructions made from prefab building materials or light, amorphous or transparent materials (plexiglass, textiles and liquids). From this it might appear that post-internet art involves simply transferring the visual forms of the web into the space of a gallery. However, much of post-internet art is presented mainly or only on the web. It may take the form of YouTube videos, art blogs, contributions to debates running on social media, or an internet magazine or shop.

## II.

The term “post-internet” tends to be used on two partially overlapping levels. There is the post-internet condition, i.e. the time we live in, and there is post-internet art, i.e. art that consciously exposes this situation, reacts to it and participates in it in various ways (the question will be whether it participates critically or affirmatively).

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The post-internet condition refers to a certain transformation in the status of the internet and a turning point in the wider social context. Gene McHugh describes it as the moment when the internet is no longer a novelty but a banality, something that has become an inherent part of our daily lives.<sup>23</sup> The availability of electronic devices with internet access means we are constantly connected and can share our real-world experiences with our “friends” in the virtual world. In this respect, along with the mass availability of smartphones, a fundamental role was played by Web 2.0, when free, user-friendly publication platforms appeared that allowed ordinary users with no experience of programming to share content on the web.

Just as the internet was being opened up to the masses, so voices were being heard proclaiming its death.<sup>24</sup> This was a reference to the hidden forces actively shaping what form the web took, specifically the

<sup>22</sup> Karen ARCHEY – Robin PECKHAM, “Essay”, in: *idem, Art Post-Internet*, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> MCHUGH, *Post Internet*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Hito STEYERL, “Too Much World. Is the Internet Dead?”, *e-flux journal*, November 2013, no. 49, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

increase in surveillance and regulation most obvious in the case of corporate-owned social media, e.g. Facebook. Our internet activity is monitored with commercial and political objectives in mind. Hito Steyerl maintains the internet is dead in the sense that it has been transformed from an open sphere of possibilities into an environment for complete control, the promotion of monopolies, and conformism.<sup>25</sup>

The main feature of the post-internet condition is the breakdown of the border between the online and offline world. The internet influences our perceptions and thinking even when we are not connected, and this in turn has persuaded some that we have arrived at an “internet state of mind”.<sup>26</sup> The acronym “IRL” (in real life), used as a way of distinguishing between our online activities from “real life”, becomes irrelevant, since the time spent at the keyboard becomes the predominant part of our real life.<sup>27</sup> The internet is no longer somewhere we turn to in order to escape the world, but “the world one sought escape from”.<sup>28</sup>

The impacts of decisions reached in online communication or the ways that reality is represented on the internet influence even the lives of those who have never had an internet connection. The idea that these days the internet is everywhere no longer relates merely to the availability of a signal. It is everywhere because it is expanding into the offline world, in which it operates “as a mode of life, surveillance, production and organisation – a form of intense voyeurism coupled with maximum nontransparency”.<sup>29</sup>

When Steyerl speaks of a world saturated by the internet, she is describing a reality consisting of images that have spilled out of monitors and acquired new material form. And yet these are “edited” images, e.g. photos touched up in Photoshop. Steyerl maintains that not only the form of these images is being transferred into the physical world, but the functions used in postproduction too. As she puts it, “the tools of postproduction: editing, colour correction, filtering, cutting [...] have become means of creation, not only of images but also of the world in their wake”.<sup>30</sup> She compares the resulting effect to

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> ARCHEY-PECKHAM, “Essay”, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Domenico QUARANTA, “Umění a internet 1994–2014. Poznámky a komentáře k postinternetovému umění”, *A2*, vol. 10, 19 November 2014, no. 24, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> MCHUGH, *Post Internet*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> STEYERL, “Too Much World”.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

a Borgesian map, not only covering the world but exceeding it by far. The vast quantity of images altered by postproduction has given rise to “too much world”.<sup>31</sup>

Steyerl’s reflections on the preponderance of postproduction images over reality fit nicely into a long line of thinking reaching back across Baudrillard’s hyperreality and Debord’s spectacle, and all the way to the analysis of the culture industry conducted by Adorno and Horkheimer. The authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* describe – with due account taken of the state of the mass media when they were writing – the model of a cinemagoer who, at the end of a film, perceives the street he enters as a continuation of the film he has just seen.<sup>32</sup> According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the purpose of the culture industry is to immobilise the imagination of its consumers and thus impose “on the sense of human beings, from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock on in the morning, the imprint of the work routine which they must sustain throughout the day”.<sup>33</sup>

An important difference in respect of the culture industry model is the fact that, in the world after the internet, the relationship between the originator and recipient of information or cultural phenomenon is not one-way. The individual is not a passive viewer of images substituting for reality, but herself participates in their creation and dissemination.<sup>34</sup> Hito Steyerl points out that, with the mass availability of digital photo-editing tools and the possibility of sharing these photos on the internet, the production of images ceases to be a specialised activity and becomes “mass postproduction in an age of crowd creativity”.<sup>35</sup> Steyerl is here paraphrasing, not without a certain sarcasm, the avant-garde cliché that everyone would become an artist. Simply climb onto the whirling roundabout of transmission and postproduction, publish tweets, write status updates on Facebook and display photographs on Instagram, add likes to social media content, select, modify and forward memes...<sup>36</sup> Within the

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Theodor W. ADORNO – Max HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2002, p. 99.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>34</sup> VIERKANT, “Image Object”, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> STEYERL, “Too Much World”.

<sup>36</sup> A meme in this context refers to an image circulating on the internet between different users undergoing formal and semantic transformations without its being possible or even desirable to track down its original form.

framework of the debate surrounding the post-internet, this explosion in the number of ways of participating in the creation of content is called ubiquitous authorship.<sup>37</sup>

However, if we return to possible parallels with the analysis conducted by Adorno and Horkheimer of the culture industry, we see that a certain scepticism is in order regarding the oft-expressed optimism regarding mass participation in the creation of web content. Is there anything in the horizontal space of the mutual exchange between users that would transcend the standards of taste imposed from above? Does not ubiquitous authorship for the most part result in the simple articulation of consumer preferences?<sup>38</sup> Are we not operating in “a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need”,<sup>39</sup> in which industry “bows to the vote it has itself rigged”?<sup>40</sup>

Finally, the expression “post-internet condition” also describes the means by which our experience of artworks has been completely transformed by the internet. These days, the reception of art is overwhelmingly by means of the digital documentation of exhibitions, usually in JPG format. While this presentational model deprives the work of its material character, it enriches it with new meanings by placing it within the context of other information and images on the website on which it appears.<sup>41</sup> So far, the situation might appear to be simply another level of the technical reproducibility of the work. However, what is new is that, at a time of ubiquitous authorship, everyone has the possibility to participate in the creation, manipulation and dissemination of the reproduced images. Within this ongoing process of circulation and re-contextualisation, it makes no sense to credit a particular individual with the creation of a work or to take account of the author’s intentions when interpreting it. According to several writers, instead of a sharp boundary between production and reception, what

<sup>37</sup> VIERKANT, “Image Object”, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> “They insist unwaveringly on the ideology by which they are enslaved.” ADORNO–HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 106.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>41</sup> Louis Doulas says of art objects presented in galleries that are digitally documented that this is art that has been “converted” into digital form in order to distinguish it from art that is digital from inception, such as websites, digital images, sound pieces, etc. LOUIS DOULAS, “Within Post-Internet. Part One”, p. 4, <http://louisdoulas.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Within-Post-Internet-Part-One.pdf> (accessed 15 November 2014).

we are witnessing is a network of viewer-authors who are sharing constantly changing digital images with each other.<sup>42</sup>

### III.

Post-internet art can be seen as an attempt to answer the question of what an artistic practice should look like that seeks to reflect the conditions and possibilities of culture in accordance with the avant-garde model, but in a period after the internet. Steyerl suggests that an analogy of productivism (i.e. the late phase of Soviet constructivism based on a collaborative relationship between artists and industry) might be found today in an approach she calls “circulationism”.<sup>43</sup> This would involve artistic interventions that seek to recode existing networks, create short-circuits and find ways of circumventing corporate restrictions. However, as happened in the case of productivism, circulationism would be in danger of merely gilding the lily of the means of production associated in this case with the internet.

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This would be a good point to compare Steyerl’s suggestion with the following challenge that was addressed to adepts of productivism by the editors of the magazine *LEF*: “In teaching the workers, learn from the worker. In dictating aesthetic orders to the factory from your studios, you become simply customers.”<sup>44</sup> Artists who are at present attempting to get closer to the dominant form of production no longer wish to learn from the workers but from the customers. What they invest in the artwork is not labour but a brand, and this of course is related to the fact that the construction of one’s own brand can be perceived in the current economic system as the central form of work. The perfect illustration of this is the exhibition *Brand Innovations for Ubiquitous Authorship*,<sup>45</sup> at which artists created computer designs of objects such as a coffee mug, credit card, etc., which they then had

<sup>42</sup> Brad TROEMEL, “Art after Social Media”, in: KHOLEIF, *You Are Here*, p. 40.

<sup>43</sup> Steyerl herself is reluctant to use the term post-internet because of its commercialisation, see STEYERL, “Too Much World”, footnote 1.

<sup>44</sup> *LEF*, “Whom is *LEF* Alerting?” (1923), in: Charles HARRISON – Paul WOOD, *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Malden, MA: Blackwell 1992, p. 322.

<sup>45</sup> *Brand Innovations for Ubiquitous Authorship*, curator Artie Vierkant, New York: Higher Pictures, 19 July – 17 August 2012.

printed or manufactured by companies such as CafePress, Zazzle and Walmart. Packages containing these objects were transported direct from the producers to the gallery, where they remained sealed until the exhibition opening. During the preview the artists unwrapped these packages while recording themselves in the style known as unboxing (an internet trend in which people share the pleasure they experience in unpacking newly acquired consumer goods).<sup>46</sup> These short videos, which were uploaded to YouTube, show the artist as customer, who does not have to have participated in the actual realisation of the design, and as an ordinary consumer uploading the pleasure they experience upon first seeing the goods they have purchased.

The approach taken by post-internet artists must be distinguished from that of the first generation of artists working with the internet (the net.art generation). During the second half of the nineties, net.art pioneers such as Olia Lialina and JODI focused on the possibilities and pitfalls of web creation technology. In a kind of parallel with modernist media self-reflection, new web pages were created as artworks intended to attract attention to the very tools of the web.<sup>47</sup> Members of the JODI collective were among the first to apply the glitch aesthetic (using digital errors that result in the random appearance of images reminiscent of geometrical abstraction) or simulate the “madness” of a computer on which windows kept opening at a frantic tempo. Olia Lialina experimented with URL (uniform resource locator or website address) as though with an autonomous literary structure. In *Agatha Appears* from 1997, she includes a series of links to different websites containing an identical image of a woman whose URLs feature fragments of narrative information.<sup>48</sup>

In contrast, and in response to the turning point represented by Web 2.0, post-internet art is more interested in non-specific media production reflecting the broader social significance of the internet and the relationship of the digital image to the contemporary art presented in galleries. The situation could be summarised as follows:

<sup>46</sup> Michael CONNOR, “Post-Internet. What It Is and What It Was”, in: KHOLEIF, *You Are Here*, pp. 61–62.

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.jodi.org/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>48</sup> CONNOR, “Post-Internet”, p. 62; examples: [http://www.johannes-p-osterhoff.com/agatha/makes\\_stupid\\_things.html](http://www.johannes-p-osterhoff.com/agatha/makes_stupid_things.html) (accessed 1 November 2014); [https://www.tommoody.us/agatha/already\\_tired.html](https://www.tommoody.us/agatha/already_tired.html) (accessed 1 November 2014); [http://www.tema.ru/agatha/has\\_no\\_idea.html](http://www.tema.ru/agatha/has_no_idea.html) (accessed 1 November 2014).

while net.art was the art of programmers and was about programming, post-internet art is the art of users and is about using. As a hybrid practice channelling web impulses into a gallery environment, the post-internet is “the bastard child of net.art and contemporary art”.<sup>49</sup>

The woke approach of these artists to the internet is most apparent in their interest in what the images flooding the internet are concealing from us, i.e. in the technological processes (and their political and economic backdrop) upon which these images are contingent. James Bridle, who has been examining this issue in his long-standing project “new aesthetic”, writes that “each image is a link, hardcoded or imaginative, to other aspects of a far greater system”.<sup>50</sup>

A frequent objective of post-internet projects is to highlight the ways by which the current economic and political system exploits and restricts the possibilities of the democratic dissemination of information and participation offered by the internet. The heroes of this generation are Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange and Aaron Swartz. The Metahaven activist art group collaborates with WikiLeaks by creating “merchandise” for it, i.e. designing and distributing clothes and other products and thus opening up another income stream.<sup>51</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith printed out and exhibited in a gallery all 18,592 scientific publications from the JSTOR database (33 GiB of data), which had been released via a torrent by the user Greg Maxwell on Pirate Bay. The 230,000 A4 pages spread out on tables in the gallery challenge us to try – in vain of course – to imagine the wealth of information contained therein, access to which is restricted by copyright.<sup>52</sup>

The environment of a gallery enables artists to draw attention to the concealed levels of images offered by different internet applications (e.g. Google Images and Google Street View) as aids to orientation, which thus function as an anonymous and irrational offshoot of technology itself. John Rafman tracks down shots in Google Street View in which dramatic situations or other remarkable scenes appear

<sup>49</sup> CHAN, “Notes on Post-Internet”, p. 110. The quote is a paraphrase of the title of the discussion held as part of the project *Reading Club*, <http://readingclub.fr/events/522ee3d89ce713e879000003/0/text> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>50</sup> James BRIDLE, “The New Aesthetics and Its Politics”, in: KHOLEIF, *You Are Here*, p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> Lumír NYKL – Martina POLIAČKOVÁ, “LOL, nebo SOS? Spekulace o kritickém designu s Metahaven”, A2, vol. 10, 19 November 2014, no. 24, p. 20–21.

<sup>52</sup> Kenneth GOLDSMITH, *Papers from Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 2014, installation, 5 tables, 5 printers, 10 lamps, 233,000 sheets of paper.

and exhibits them in the form of large printouts.<sup>53</sup> In so doing he reincorporates them into the tradition of the Western image as *tableau*: the scenes captured (or subversively inserted by photographers) as part of the routine cataloguing of street images now seem like the result of a sophisticated process of composition and dramatisation, as though Ed Ruscha had got together with Jeff Wall. Taryn Simon uses the gallery space to display a web application that allows the user to find a picture in Google Images using key words in several languages simultaneously. The outcome is different sets of images lined up side by side that express the different keys to the interlinking of image and text in different countries. This in turn disrupts the apparent objectivity of search tools and pushes to the forefront the character of the internet as the interface of diverse local perspectives.<sup>54</sup>

Stock images are a much favoured resource amongst post-internet artists. Aleksandra Domanović created a feature length film using stock images, in which she combined the soundtrack of Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* with sequences of images from Getty Images.<sup>55</sup> Katja Novitskova takes stock images of animals and scenes of nature, blows them up, prints them out and creates gallery installations that function as monstrous planar objects. The digital watermarks that are plastered over the stock images so as to protect against unauthorised use are also popular with post-internet artists and are particularly associated with artists working with the DIS collective, of which more later.

Post-internet artists have an ambiguous relationship with ubiquitous authorship situated somewhere on the boundary between participation and appropriation. This often involves a kind of parasitism on mass creativity, with blogs serving artists as reservoirs of material assigned new value upon being transplanted into the art world. This does not always involve images. Cory Arcangel's *Working On My Novel* is a book based on a twitter feed that retweets the best posts featuring the phrase "working on my novel".<sup>56</sup> The haughty authorial subject that trumpets its status from the summit of individual creativity ("working on my novel") is cruelly undermined by the proliferation of what is at heart a cliché. The artist takes part in the horizontal chain

<sup>53</sup> Jon RAFMAN, *The Nine Eyes of Google Street View*, <http://9-eyes.com/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>54</sup> Taryn SIMON, *Image Atlas*, 2012, website, video, installation.

<sup>55</sup> Aleksandra DOMANOVIĆ, *Anhedonia*, 2007, video.

<sup>56</sup> Cory ARCANGEL, *Working on My Novel*, New York: Penguin Global 2014.

of transformations of the message while at the same time elevating himself above it as an agent of the art world.

As well as appropriating the outcomes of amateur creative efforts, post-internet artists often use their methods. Examples of this would be Petra Cortright's webcam performances or the use of selfies published on Instagram by Amalia Ulman.

Ryan Trecartin, often in collaboration with Lizzie Fitch, incorporates the aesthetic of amateur videos published on social media into his gallery installations. His films, which feature a riot of frenzied visual and audio impulses, often depict delirious young people during strange rituals. In the gallery they are presented as sophisticated installations operating on the boundary of chill-out rooms, the back-drop to orgies, and prison cells, but above all as shrines to commodity fetishism.

Post-internet artists are in favour of work possessing multiple, shifting identities and showcase this by creating pieces that exist in several media and on diverse levels at the same time. An art project may simultaneously take the form of a text available online in PDF and an artefact exhibited in a gallery. Yet these two components are not in a hierarchical relationship as original and reproduction, but enact a complex process of mutual exchange, by virtue of which they draw attention to the differences in their individual embodiments. Artie Vierkant calls this type of work, represented for instance by pieces by Oliver Laric and Seth Price, "emblematic post-internet gestures".<sup>57</sup>

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The ceaseless movement between the virtual environment of the web and the physical space of the gallery is associated with an intense interest in the nature of the diverse objects we encounter in both spheres and the materials from which these objects are fashioned. This important aspect of post-internet art formed the kernel of the exhibition *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*<sup>58</sup> at the turn of 2013 and 2014. The speculative play with the production and perception of material objects ranged from the hyper-realist depiction of the body in the immaterial medium of computer animation in the case of Ed Atkins, via work with the forms, colours and aromas of consumer generated masculinity in the case of Timur Si-Qin (installations formed from Axe shower gels impaled on Samurai swords), to the permeation

<sup>57</sup> VIERKANT, "Image Object", p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> See footnote 18.

of heterogeneous qualities in the installation by Yngve Hollen, which included fragments of marble resembling chunks of meat. The curator Susanne Pfeffer attempted to place the works on show within an overarching framework by referencing speculative realism and new materialism, i.e. philosophical trends that emerged around the same time as post-internet art and, in a similar spirit, adopted several of the strategies of popular culture.<sup>59</sup> However, even in the wake of a symposium held as part of the exhibition and participated in by important representatives of this intellectual movement,<sup>60</sup> the relationship between the art on show and the speculative turn in philosophy remained unclear.<sup>61</sup>

## IV.

I would now like to venture an interpretation of the relationship of post-internet art to the products and procedures of the culture industry. By using the term culture industry, formulated by Adorno and Horkheimer, I do not wish to imply that I accept without reservation everything they have to say about it. Although various declarations being heard at present regarding the ubiquity of the internet provoke associations with several motifs of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,<sup>62</sup> this theoretical model, more than half a century old, cannot be simply transferred to the present. I shall instead use the term culture industry

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<sup>59</sup> For more details see the thematic issue of *Texte zur Kunst*, March 2014, no. 93. In contrast to the “critical” and “linguistic” turns that represented the main tendencies of continental philosophy over the last two centuries, thinkers associated with modern forms of materialism and realism want to transcend the limits of philosophy that only investigates the world of objects as a correlate of human thinking and promote a “speculative turn” to reality itself as it exists independently of our cognitive abilities. See Levi BRYANT – Nick SRNICEK – Graham HARMAN, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy”, in: *idem* (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, Melbourne: re.press 2011, p. 3. This intellectual trend became better known thanks to the symposium “Speculative Realism” at Goldsmiths College in London in April 2007, at which the public was introduced to the boyband comprising Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux, [http://roundtable.kein.org/sites/newtable.kein.org/files/C3\\_Spec\\_Real.pdf](http://roundtable.kein.org/sites/newtable.kein.org/files/C3_Spec_Real.pdf) (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>60</sup> The participants included Iain Hamilton Grant, Robin Mackay and Reza Negarestani and the symposium was chaired by Armen Avanessian, instigator of the project “speculative poetics”: <http://www.spekulative-poetik.de/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>61</sup> A video of the symposium is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLr1SVkvRZnnOmSph-oYyg8lDddNHcdov9> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>62</sup> See section II above.

in its broader sense as an umbrella term for mass culture and commodity aesthetics (advertising, product design and packaging, brand logos, etc.). I shall refer to elements of Adorno and Horkheimer only in my conclusion in connection with the question of the critical distance between art and the cultural expressions of the dominant modes of production.

In the post-internet condition, artworks published on the web find themselves in a fundamentally new and highly contradictory relationship to the market. As the artist and critic Brad Troemel says, art after social media “is paradoxically the simultaneous rejection and reflection of art’s market-driven history”.<sup>63</sup> However, this statement has a completely different meaning from similar sounding statements by Adorno.<sup>64</sup> Troemel claims on the one hand that art’s utopian possibilities are opening up thanks to a sharing process in which the work becomes generally accessible property, the value of which resides in its potential “to be remade or reblogged<sup>65</sup> for whatever purposes its network of viewer-authors find significant”.<sup>66</sup> When shared on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, the work quickly loses contextual information such as the name of the artist, the title, and the date it was created,<sup>67</sup> and thus, Troemel claims, becomes not a commodity so much as a recyclable material.<sup>68</sup>

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The obverse of this is the way artists active on the web turn to marketing strategies in order to turn themselves into a kind of brand.<sup>69</sup> At the very instant they lose control of their images by relinquishing them to the internet, a new method arises of retaining at least some authorial privilege, namely by redirecting the attention of the public to the source of these images, i.e. to their own virtual persona. Accordingly, the primary task of an artist working under post-internet conditions is the careful construction of self-presentations on platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.<sup>70</sup> The attention that an artist

<sup>63</sup> TROEMEL, “Art after Social Media”, p. 42

<sup>64</sup> See section VI.

<sup>65</sup> “Reblogging” is an operation that allows users to share other user content. See “Glossary” in: KHOLEIM, *You Are Here*, p. 243.

<sup>66</sup> TROEMEL, “Art after Social Media”, p. 40.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40.

acquires by means of social media is analogous with market success and operates as a form of capital. Artworks are not only sold over the internet but are created as part of a business strategy.<sup>71</sup>

The names of the artists who have adopted the utopian vision of art as sharing must of necessity be lost in the anonymity of the endless circulation of images, texts and music. And so those post-internet artists who are well known inevitably belong to the other side of the opposition proposed by Troemel, i.e. those who create a brand out of their internet persona.

Though these considerations might sound exaggerated or be viewed as metaphors, in the work of the DIS collective we find a literal realisation of the model of artist-as-brand.<sup>72</sup> The group promotes itself via the online *DIS Magazine*, a “post-internet lifestyle publication about art, fashion and commerce”<sup>73</sup> set up in 2010.<sup>74</sup> It collaborates with other post-internet artists (including many whose names have appeared in this article), and apart from its own artistic practice is also involved in curatorship of the post-internet art community and the buying and selling of its products. For this reason the strategy pursued by DIS can be seen as emblematic of the desires and aspirations of this circle of artists.

The declared aim of *DIS Magazine* is “to construct and support new creative practices”.<sup>75</sup> That these practices are heavily inspired by forms of internet commerce is evinced by another long-standing project, *DISimages*.<sup>76</sup> This is a photobank by means of which artists offer visual material for commercial utilisation, including its possible inclusion in other art projects. Photographed scenes accompanied by the inevitable watermark combine the seductiveness of advertising posters and fashion magazines with absurd elements (a gymnast training in a burning forest, a young man sniffing rubber sandals, a mermaid taking shots with a smartphone...) that have seen some critics hastily discern a link with surrealism.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

<sup>72</sup> Jennifer CHAN, “Notes on Post-Internet”, in: KHOLEIF, *You Are Here*, p. 116.

<sup>73</sup> <http://disimages.com/FAQ> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>74</sup> <http://dismagazine.com/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>75</sup> <http://dismagazine.com/about/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>76</sup> <http://disimages.com/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>77</sup> Jacob KING, “#Convulsivebeauty”, *Mousse*, February – March 2014, no. 42, pp. 112–117.

The project DISown, which the group describes as “an ongoing retail platform and laboratory to test the current status of the art object”,<sup>78</sup> can be viewed as a manifesto of the artist-as-brand. It is a functioning online store where products can be purchased (clothing, interior design accessories, etc.) designed by leading post-internet artists.<sup>79</sup> In March 2014, with the support of Red Bull Studios, the project acquired physical space in West 18th St. in New York.<sup>80</sup> According to an eye witness, the rooms where the exhibition took place were painted in a glowing white, as in Apple shops, while other details (direction indicators by Lizzie Fitch and large plastic bags featuring the DIS logo) were more reminiscent of IKEA.<sup>81</sup> The “consumer products” on offer were items made by the participating artists, duly furnished with price tag. This often involved off-the-peg clothing or interior design accessories primped up with links to the artist’s works or political agenda. For instance, Ryan Trecartin and Coracrit spiced up their clothes with prints of their work. The Jogging group exhibited coloured caps used as flower pots and described using the names of individuals associated with the leaking of classified information, such as Manning, Snowden and Assange. Though many of the objects were one-off, handmade items, they were intended to look like production line, industrial goods in order to enhance the aura of the commercial brand.<sup>82</sup>

These examples of the work of DIS are located on the boundary between satire and participation. They can be interpreted as criticism of the hypocrisy of artists who hike the market value of their works by presenting them as examples of non-market-oriented “art for art’s sake”.<sup>83</sup> However, DIS itself is not in the business of rejecting the market: on the contrary, it promotes a concept of the artist who creates their own market. How should we understand this ambivalent approach, which seems typical of the relationship of post-internet artists to the culture industry? Are they critiquing the culture industry by mimicking it? Or are they simply capitulating to consumer society?

<sup>78</sup> <http://dismagazine.com/about/>.

<sup>79</sup> <http://disown.myshopify.com/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>80</sup> <http://www.redbullstudios.com/newyork/events/disown> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>81</sup> Christopher GLAZEK, “Shopkeepers of the World Unite”, *Artforum*, 12 June 2014, <http://artforum.com/slant/id=47107> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

## V.

The first stage in understanding new art is to compare it with older art, not in order to minimise the differences so much as to accentuate them.<sup>84</sup> The adoption of elements of a commodity aesthetic and mass culture has a long tradition in modern and contemporary art. One thinks of cubist and Dadaist collage, readymades, pop art, situationist *détournements*, postmodern appropriation, remix and post-production in the work of artists associated with relational aesthetics, etc. In the case of all of these examples the mimicry involved is predicated on a critical distance from that being imitated. One is therefore justified in concluding that post-internet art is but another form of that ambivalent strategy by which art subordinates itself to the principles of the culture industry in order to resist it.

Adorno regarded this ambivalence as a fundamental part of the modern artwork. He describes modern art as the abstract negation of the entire artistic tradition up till then. In this way art reacts to the abstraction of the market, which converts everything into the same calculable unit. The birth of modern art is accompanied by anxiety regarding this all-embracing abstraction, which turns even artworks into commodities. Adorno sees anxiety as a mimetic approach. The archaic subject confronts forces that evoke fear in it by imitating / mimicking them. Adorno regards art as a haven for the mimetic approach in modern times. By means of mimesis, the artwork resists reification from within. The artwork is a commodity that renders apparent its own commodity character by identifying with it in its abstract form. “Only by immersing its autonomy in society’s *imagerie* can art surmount the heteronomous market. Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated [...]”<sup>85</sup>

Adorno bases his concept of modern art as something that resists reification by means of the *mimesis* of reification on an interpretation of Baudelaire. At the same time, he emphasises that this resistance is played out on the level of experience mediated by form. “Baudelaire neither railed against nor portrayed reification; he protested against it in the experience of its archetypes, and the medium of this experience

<sup>84</sup> Theodor W. ADORNO, *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Continuum 2002, p. 19.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

is the poetic form.”<sup>86</sup> Mimesis therefore does not consist of the depiction of concrete examples of commercial goods, but the manner by which the work is constructed, during which the art subject strives to attain the same degree of objectivity as that which characterises goods.

We encounter the mimesis of commodities in a far more literal form in Dadaist readymades, cubist collages, and in the post-war, neo-avant-garde and postmodern directions these approaches followed. However, the more the artwork mimics consumer products, the less willing are thinkers following in Adorno’s footsteps to accord it a critical function. Writing of Andy Warhol, Peter Bürger claims that the instant it is no longer possible to distinguish between the consumer product and its artistic representation is the moment we are hard pushed to find a resistance to consumer society in art.<sup>87</sup> It is in a similar spirit that Fredric Jameson formulates his critique of postmodern culture as a manifestation of late capitalism. Jameson states that the universal practice of this culture is pastiche, which represents an empty form of parody. “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language.”<sup>88</sup> However, unlike parody, in the case of pastiche, imitation lacks a satirical impulse. Pastiche can no longer base itself on the idea of some kind of normal language that it would oppose to the abnormality it mocks.

A pessimistic tone resonates in these reflections that was characteristic of such founding texts of the critique of the culture industry as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Minima Moralia*.<sup>89</sup> On the one hand, the possibility of negating the capitalist system is linked to the continued existence of spheres of life that remain unaffected by its instrumental rationality. The refuge of this radical “exterior” is deemed to be art, the primary use value of which resides in its “liberation from the principle of utility”.<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, the culture industry is able to absorb each and every such manifestation of resistance and subordinate it to the criterion of efficiency, with the result that no such

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Peter BÜRGER, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1974, p. 85.

<sup>88</sup> Fredric JAMESON, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, *New Left Review*, July - August 1984, no. 1/146, p. 65.

<sup>89</sup> Theodor W. ADORNO, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, London: Verso 2005.

<sup>90</sup> ADORNO–HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 128.

exterior exists. “Even the aesthetic manifestations of political opposites proclaim the same inflexible rhythm.”<sup>91</sup> The art market or radio programmes broadcasting classical music deprive art of its autonomy and make of it another consumer good. Instead of deriving pleasure from artworks, we wander around galleries acquiring factual information with the aim of increasing our social standing. Jameson’s description of postmodernism as a condition in which aesthetic production “has become integrated into commodity production generally”<sup>92</sup> serves simply to deepen the already gloomy mood contained in the description of the culture industry offered by Adorno and Horkheimer.

However, from the perspective of postmodernists the very concept of the culture industry is problematic. The idea of a monolithic mechanism that grasps every thought and bends it to its will loses legitimacy and becomes one of the “grand narratives” of modernity that subordinate the diversity of cultural expression to a single paradigm.<sup>93</sup> Postmodern forms of resistance are no longer directed at a single “arch enemy”, e.g. capitalist reification, but are linked with discrete transversal struggles against the immediate effects of power.<sup>94</sup> From this perspective the operations of the culture industry no longer appear purely one-way, as claimed by Adorno and Horkheimer. There is a counterbalance to the power of the culture industry to recuperate and thus render harmless attempts at transgression in the form of the appropriation of its resources and the utilisation thereof with a critical or emancipatory objective in mind.

The politically engaged artists of the 1980s did not seek an autonomous space beyond the reach of the mass media and popular culture, but on the contrary strove to find “unexpected ways to use technologies of the culture industry” to their own ends.<sup>95</sup> This applies to the feminist artist Jenny Holzer, who placed her subversive *Truisms* on illuminated panels in public space, or Barbara Kruger, who exhibited gallery prints (which were often appropriated publicity materials) on

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>92</sup> JAMESON, “Postmodernism”, p. 56.

<sup>93</sup> Susan Rubin SULEIMAN, *Subversive Intent: Gender Politics and the Avant-Garde*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1990, p.184

<sup>94</sup> Michel FOUCAULT, “Subjekt a moc”, in: *Myslení vnějšku*, Praha: Herrmann & synové 2003, pp. 200–201.

<sup>95</sup> SULEIMAN, *Subversive Intent: Gender Politics and the Avant-Garde*, p. 199.

billboards. Susan Rubin Suleiman cites a remark of Jenny Holzer to the effect that buying a few seconds of exposure on television does not cost that much, and so television, despite its predominantly alienating influence, can become for a moment a place where stereotypes are subverted.<sup>96</sup>

This method of redirecting the dominant discourse could be called resignification, which is how Judith Butler describes the parodic practices of sexual representation that imitate and amplify the essentialist stereotypes of gender roles, thus revealing the discursive contingencies of gender. It is a subversive strategy that takes place “in accordance with the rhythm of that which it attempts to undermine”.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, the resignification of the meaning of an expression retains its previous connotations, but by means of hyperbole and theatricality destabilises the discursive conventions from within. Butler distinguishes her approach from Jameson’s critique of pastiche when she writes that “the loss of the sense of ‘the normal’, however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when ‘the normal’, ‘the original’ is revealed to be a copy”.<sup>98</sup> She thus shows that the existence of an “exterior” in respect of the system, or in this case discourse, is not a necessary condition for the criticism thereof.

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This is highly reminiscent of the concept of “subversive affirmation” in the hands of the German theoreticians Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse. They use the term to describe a tactic of resistance, examples of which are to be found both in the unofficial art of the former Eastern bloc and in the media and internet activism that marked the start of the twenty-first century.<sup>99</sup> As the allusion to Adorno’s concept of “mimesis as a strategy of resistance” in the subtitle of their articles implies, this is a variation on the same theme. However, the authors adapt it to a situation in which critical art can no longer rely on an “exterior” in respect of the culture industry. According to Arns and Sasse, subversive affirmation “is characterised precisely by the fact that with affirmation there is simultaneously taking place a distancing from, or revelation of what

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>97</sup> Josef FULKA, “Od interpelace k performativu (feminismus a konstrukce rodové identity)”, *Sborník prací Fakulty sociálních studií Brněnské univerzity. Sociální studia*, 2002, no. 7, p. 48.

<sup>98</sup> Judith BUTLER, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge 1990, p. 138–139.

<sup>99</sup> Inke ARNS – Sylvia SASSE, “Subversive Affirmation. On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance”, in: IRWIN (eds.), *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, London: Afterall 2006, p. 444.

is being affirmed. In subversive affirmation there is always a surplus which destabilises affirmation and turns it into its opposite.”**100**

The supreme form of subversive affirmation is an approach that Slavoj Žižek calls over-identification. According to Žižek, the cynical ideology of postmodernism, which recuperates its own criticism, cannot be confronted by irony, but only, on the contrary, by a complete identification that takes the system more seriously than it takes itself and teases out all the ensuing consequences. This would make the biggest threat to ideology not an ironic critic, but a fanatic who brings to light the concealed obscenity of its nature and thus deprives it of its power.**101**

Of the examples that Arns and Sasse draw on in order to illustrate subversive affirmation in practice, I would like to draw attention to the activities of the Yes Men duo, active mainly in the first decade of this century.**102** The duo repeatedly created fake websites for VIPs (e.g. George W. Bush) and international trade organisations such as GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and the WTO (World Trade Organisation). They then appeared in the media and at conferences as representatives of the people and organisations their websites were mimicking. At the same time they hyperbolised the consequences ensuing from the ideologies of those whose identities they had assumed or publicly “confessed” to their misdemeanours. For instance, in the role of representatives of the WTO they suggested improving the democratic process by selling votes in an auction, they introduced a fictional device (in the form of a huge gilded phallus) intended to stimulate factory workers to greater productivity by means of an electric shock, and they announced that the WTO would be shut down due to all the errors it had committed.**103**

As key representatives of “hactivism”**104** or tactical media**105** from the start of the millennium, the Yes Men are the immediate predecessors of post-internet art. Might we therefore interpret the

**100** *Ibid.*, p. 445.

**101** Slavoj ŽIŽEK, “Why are Laibach and *Neue Slowenische Kunst* not Fascists?”, in: *The Universal Exception*, London: Continuum 2006, p. 65.

**102** Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos. The two appeared under different pseudonyms and are also members of the activist project RT Mark, <http://www.rtmk.com/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

**103** ARNS–SASSE, “Subversive Affirmation”, pp. 454–455.

**104** A “hactivist” is someone who uses the technology of computers and computer networks for the purpose of civil disobedience, protest, or political activism. See “Glossary” in: KSOLEIM, *You Are Here*, p. 241.

**105** A form of activism involving temporary interventions in the mass media.

strategies deployed by artists associated with the DIS collective as an example of subversive affirmation? Is it possible that these artists adopted new forms of the promotion and sale of commodities offered by the post-internet condition with the intention of unmasking the current form of capitalism?

The critic Ed Halter claims that the difference between the DIS collective and the artistic activism of the previous decade resides in the fact that the former lack such a critical intention. At the time they were active, interventions by the Yes Men were clearly an attempt to overturn corporatism from within. However, this is not an ambition shared by the creatives behind *DIS Magazine*. DIS claims allegiance to market logic without offering any clue as to how it might transcend it. The degree of smart, ironic self-reflection that we find in the way that DIS “winks at consumerism while celebrating its emotional effects and the pleasure of its surfaces” is not sufficient to distinguish its projects from the output of fashion magazines like *Nylon* and *Vogue*, which have similar aspirations in respect of the art world.**106**

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These conclusions seem legitimate. If you browse the catalogue of artistic goods in the *DISown* internet store with its price tags, PayPal buttons and shopping basket icon, you will wait in vain for this affirmation of the system to be redeemed by negation. “Mimesis of the hardened and alienated” goes so far as to be indistinguishable from that which it mimics, while its subversive element comprises nothing more than a certain humorous, absurd quality to the images and items on offer. Instead of mocking the market, it opens itself to the suspicion that it wishes merely to thwart the expectations of a viewer versed in art theory who is accustomed to the dogma that art should be critical.

A glance at the work of the DIS collective shows that, despite the parodic tone of its manifestations, not only does post-internet art not conform to the mimesis of alienation, resignification or subversive affirmation outlined above, but actively resists inclusion therein. Is it possible to find another political framework that might convince us that this movement does not simply provide a backdrop to neoliberalism and that DIS is not simply another advertising agency?

## VI.

A term often to be heard in discussions regarding the political motivation of post-internet artists is accelerationism.<sup>107</sup> The editors of the anthology of accelerationist thinking published in 2014 describe it as follows.

Accelerationism is the name of a contemporary political heresy: the insistence that the only radical political response to capitalism is not to protest, disrupt, critique, or détourner it, but to accelerate and exacerbate its uprooting, alienating, decoding, abstractive tendencies.<sup>108</sup>

The “Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics”, published by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams in 2013, which did much to popularise this concept, presents accelerationism as a way out of the “paralysis of the political imagination” we are experiencing faced with the ever more frequent crises of the capitalist system.<sup>109</sup> While many on the left cling to the wreckage of the welfare state or the post-war, new social movements (NSMs), “accelerationists” believe it is possible to re-establish the horizon of the future in a release of the latent “forces of creative destruction” of capitalism itself.<sup>110</sup> This is based on the traditional Marxist doctrine of the conflict between forces of production and relations of production, according to which the capitalist system places restrictions on the continued development of its own technological and social achievements for fear that such developments would logically lead to the overcoming of the given economic formation. If therefore we wish to hasten the end of this system, we should not turn our back on innovation but, on the contrary, “accelerate the process of technological evolution”. The material base of neoliberalism is not to be destroyed, but redirected

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<sup>107</sup> GLAZEK, “Shopkeepers”.

<sup>108</sup> Robin MACKAY – Armen AVANESSIAN, “Introduction”, in: *idem* (eds.), *#Accelerate#*: *The Accelerationist Reader*, Falmouth: Urbanomic – Berlin: Merve 2014, p. 4.

<sup>109</sup> Nick SRNICEK – Alex WILLIAMS, “#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics”, in: MACKAY–AVANESSIAN, *#Accelerate#*, p. 349.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351.

towards generally beneficial purposes that will serve as a springboard to post-capitalism.**111**

Srnicek and Williams call the ideology of the current form of capitalism “neoliberalism 2.0”. This arose after the economic crisis of 2007–2008 (i.e. around the same time as Web 2.0) and is characterised by the ever greater penetration of the private sector into the remaining spheres of operation of democratic institutions.**112** In a similar vein (though also completely in accordance with the term culture industry as used by Adorno and Horkhemier), Steven Shaviro describes the omnipotence of the “real subsumption” of today’s capitalism.**113** Work, subjectivity and social life no longer stand “outside” capital, but acquire a function within the framework of capital, a fact reflected in the terms “social”, “cultural” and “human” capital. Even the aesthetic sphere, regarded from Kant onwards as eluding the interests associated with our desires and needs, is co-opted into the production of surplus value. This leads Shaviro to speak of the “antinomy of the aesthetic under late capitalism”: on the one hand, everything is aestheticised in order to improve its marketability, while on the other, the aesthetic is thus deprived of two of its key properties, i.e. disinterestedness and the impossibility of being subsumed under a concept. Aesthetic perception is no longer disinterested, but expresses the preferences of the consumer, to which commercial brands in turn react. At the same time it is objectively described by virtue of being transformed into data and exploited in the form of “affective labour”.

The accelerationist art project proposed by Shaviro is based on the assumption that, if there exists no exterior in respect of the capitalist system, then capitalism can only be overcome from within. While art, which has hitherto attempted to confront the system by means of transgression, is constructed on the idea of a radical “exterior” in respect of power, accelerationist art must be completely immanent to the system. Its task is to “intensify the horrors of contemporary capitalism”, and though this will not in itself bring political change,

**111** *Ibid.*, p. 355.

**112** *Ibid.*, p. 350.

**113** Steven SHAVIRO, “Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption”, *e-flux journal*, June 2013, no. 46, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/accelerationistaesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

it will “offer us a kind of satisfaction and relief by telling us that we have finally hit bottom...”. According to Shaviro, this is tantamount to establishing “aesthetic ineffectiveness”, i.e. the liberation of our aesthetic experience from the purposeful logic of capitalism.

## VII.

Is accelerationism the fundamental political framework of the appropriation of consumerism by post-internet artists? If so, this would entail a change of perspective against modern and postmodern forms of critical art that attempt to mount a resistance to the culture industry by means of the mimesis, resignification, or subversive affirmation of its manifestations. Acceding to the demands of the cultural industry would no longer serve simply as a means of its negation, but would have value as affirmation. At the same time, this would not be about appealing to the existing social system in the sense of the “affirmative character of culture” in critical theory,<sup>114</sup> but about an affirmation of the very forces of production that permit this system to be transcended.

In his article on DIS, Christopher Glazek calls the use of the term accelerationism in connection with the group’s activities a “Marxist alibi”, using which creative work based on different motivations is retrospectively rationalised. He maintains that this circle of artists is in fact not challenging consumerism in order to contribute to the destruction of capitalism, but in order to mock the art world.<sup>115</sup>

An aversion to the institutional system of art shines out from many of the photographs and videos in which DIS reveals its different facets (study at art school, the language of art criticism, etc.) as being forms of commercial practices. Young people in studios are shown in t-shirts or tracksuits featuring hand painted brands such as Nike and Adidas.<sup>116</sup> In an advertisement announcing a global competition for art school students, a model recites clichés from the lexicon of contemporary art criticism (“The artwork can be relational, art can create microtopias ANYWHERE! Art can be a service, an interaction...”), as

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<sup>114</sup> Herbert MARCUSE, “The Affirmative Character of Culture”, in: *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, London: MyFlyBooks 2009, p. 65–98.

<sup>115</sup> GLAZEK, “Shopkeepers”.

<sup>116</sup> <http://dismagazine.com/distaste/trends/33026/art-school-trends/> (accessed 1 November 2014).

though she were listing the attractive features of a new washing powder or drink.**117**

As Glazek explains, for the generation graduating from art school in the period after the economic crisis, the greatest source of repression is not consumer capitalism, but the rigid codes of art schools and academic theories. As far as this generation is concerned, the market, and above all internet commerce, represents a refreshing alternative to the robust commercial and bureaucratic apparatus of the institutions of the art world (whether this involve the European model of grants and residencies or the American system of private galleries).**118** These days, art school graduates seek inspiration more in fashion designers and risk-taking entrepreneurs skilfully gaming the economic system than they do in traditional artists labouring under the misapprehension that their job description obliges them to be rebellious.**119**

If we embrace this interpretation, it would seem that we are witnessing the overturning of Adorno's idea of autonomous art as a refuge from the reifying power of the market. The aim of DIS as representative of its generation is the liberation of emerging artists from a dependency on collectors, commercial galleries, curators and specialist journals. Artists should strike out on their own by turning themselves into commercial brands offering works to the masses by means of the dynamic sales strategies of internet trading, such as self-promotion on social media. Any convergence with the culture industry is not in order to criticise it but in order that, with its assistance, the artist extricate herself from a dependency on the rigid hierarchies of the art world.

As far as Glazek is concerned, the danger of this approach is that, instead of creating an alternative environment for artists to present their work and make a living, it simply allows a few nimble individuals who were quick to join the game to get their product into elite galleries and amongst important collectors more effectively. These suspicions have been confirmed over the last few years, as the term post-internet has become a favourite way for curators and gallerists to describe a new broom sweeping through exhibition practice. We might even say that the prevailing understanding of the post-internet as the translation

**117** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHWQTe\\_VpsI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHWQTe_VpsI) (accessed 1 November 2014).

**118** GLAZEK, "Shopkeepers".

**119** *Ibid.*

of a digital aesthetic into the form of a conventional gallery object is a symptom of the failure of the attempt to establish a new model for the distribution of art as a counterbalance to the institutions of the art world, institutions which are well versed in adapting these new procedures to fit their own objectives.

This scepticism regarding the DIS collective is persuasive. However, I feel that Glazek is too quick to reject the possibility of examining the collective through the prism of accelerationism. Though DIS may not have set itself the task of overthrowing capitalism as its *end*, the *means* it uses can be seen as accelerationist. Post-internet artists attempt to accelerate the innovative potential of the technologies of sharing, documentation and (post)production they have acquired thanks to the internet in order to release these technologies from the manacles of the art world qua obsolete cultural formation. The new format of art as a brand that self-promotes on social media and sends forth images into the world that have the status of freely manipulable material is intended to replace the conventional model of authorship, intellectual ownership, and the artwork as luxury item subject to the control of curators, critics, gallerists and collectors. Though post-internet artists may not be trying to change the system as a whole, they are nonetheless accelerationists in their own sphere.

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Based on these conclusions, criticism of post-internet art has two options. The first simply involves a slight re-jigging of the reservations referred to above, namely that post-internet art ultimately compromises the accelerationist project to release the production of art from the cloying restrictions of the gallery system, and instead re-legitimises it by means of a reinvigoration of the form of the objects on show. This criticism does not call into question the principles of accelerationism as such, but simply shows that in practice post-internet art is unable to deliver on its promises. The second option, and the one I wish to pursue in the last part of this essay, takes as its starting point a scepticism regarding accelerationism and affirmative thinking in general. This scepticism is underpinned by critical theory, and at its core is the requirement that art retain a critical distance from cultural forms legitimising the ruling economic and political system. What is at stake is not whether post-internet art has failed in respect of this requirement, but whether it has even set itself the task.

## VIII.

There is not enough space here for a thoroughgoing consideration of accelerationism, so let us restrict ourselves to a few observations. Reading the manifesto by Srnicek and Williams, as well as other associated texts, one has the feeling that the worst is being revived and the best discarded of the Marxist intellectual tradition. By worst I have in mind the idea that historical development follows a logical and necessary path according to which changes to the forces of production must sooner or later lead to the overcoming (sublation) of the existing economic formation. By best I mean the requirement that a critical distance always be respected that prevents us from merely accepting that which is given. What entitles us to believe that the acceleration of the technological innovations of modern capitalism will lead to the collapse of this system and its replacement by a better economic model? And if we are forced to discard critical distance, what is it that will motivate us to seek a change of social conditions to begin with?

275 As Benjamin Noys<sup>120</sup> notes in an interview with Alexander Galloway,<sup>121</sup> accelerationism is an equally exaggerated position as the post-war Western Marxism represented, for instance, in Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. While Adorno's standpoint led to extreme pessimism by describing capitalism as absolutely dominant, accelerationism is excessively amenable to current forms of technology and culture and has a naive view of capitalism as a parasite that we can exterminate and thus return to "neutral technological and cultural possibilities".<sup>122</sup>

In the same interview, Galloway describes accelerationism as a political position within the framework of the wider tendency of "technophilic, network affirmationism" in contemporary thinking. In opposition to this ideological milieu, Noys defends the ongoing applicability of an ethos of negativity, i.e. a "practice of contestation and rupture" that disrupts "all the calls to embrace the positive, to embrace 'things

<sup>120</sup> Noys baptised accelerationism as part of his critique of certain motifs to be found in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jean-Françoise Lyotard and Nick Land. Benjamin NOYS, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2010, cited by Robin MACKAY – Armen AVANESSIAN, "Introduction", in: *idem*, #Accelerate#, p. 8, footnote 1.

<sup>121</sup> Alexander GALLOWAY – Benjamin NOYS, "Crash and Burn: Debating Accelerationism", *3:AM Magazine*, 4 November 2014, <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/crash-and-burn-debatingaccelerationism/> (accessed 30 November 2014).

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

as they are” **123** Although Noys agrees with the adherents of accelerationism that there exists no “outside” to capitalism, he insists that within this social framework it is always possible to find contradictions and struggles that the practice of negativity can connect up to.

The ethos of negativity invites us to continue to demand of art that it assume a critical distance from the social conditions of its existence and thus from the culture industry as the expression of these conditions. Here I would draw on one aspect of the way the term is used in Adorno and Horkheimer. These days it is clearly no longer feasible to speak of the culture industry as a totalising system that subordinates our senses and imagination to the domination of the capitalist mode of production by means of standardised products. Nevertheless, this interpretation still has a part to play in grasping the ways in which several specific models of the production and distribution of culture operate. At the same time, unlike its customary usage, which includes popular music, films and advertising, but not paintings, sculptures and conceptual projects exhibited in galleries, the term culture industry as it is deployed by Adorno and Horkheimer can also be applied to the art world inasmuch as it belongs to the “realm of administration”, **124** i.e. to the art world as an institution of late capitalist society.

In terms of the relationship to the capitalist form of the distribution of art – and to the ideology of neoliberalism as its political framework – there is basically no difference between the hierarchical system of contemporary art created for a gallery, in opposition to which the post-internet generation self-profiles, and the rhizomatic environment of the internet that, on the contrary, these same artists welcome as a space where they assert themselves using the model of commercial brands. At both poles of this opposition the same tendency predominates, perfectly encapsulated in the term culture industry, namely the subordination of aesthetic impulses to the market criteria of competition, profit and efficiency.

Though the horizontal structure of social media and the vertical construction of the art world are driven by a very dissimilar logic, what they have in common is the fact that they are compatible with the logic of exchange. Post-internet art was born of the need to accentuate their differences, but in the end, having adopted a consumer

**123** *Ibid.*

**124** ADORNO–HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 104.

aesthetic and commercial mechanisms, found itself at that very point where these differences are erased. This becomes very clear when an artist who has made their name by means of social media attracts the interest of collectors and gallerists. One form of commodity attempts to veil its plainness with another form of commodity. The charm of an artwork created for a gallery is enhanced by the fact that it is as entertaining and seductive as the products of mass culture and a commercial aesthetic, as contagious and self-proliferating as an internet meme. The appeal of advertising or fashion photography is multiplied as it acquires the fetishistic status of the artwork. The ideal commodity of the present time comes into being, combining the prestige of a white-walled gallery and the dynamism of internet commerce.

The strategies of post-internet art are not dominated by any demand for critical distance from the ruling order that could be interpreted as a form of resistance by means of the mimesis of alienation, as the resignification of the dominant discourse, or as the subversive affirmation of an ideology. Post-internet strategies are about overcoming capitalism by means of the acceleration of technological and social innovations, but fail to pass muster in respect of the accelerationist model due to their acceptance of the conventions of the art world. However, the accelerationist model itself is unconvincing in comparison with the ethos of negativity anchored in the tradition of critical theory, which links emancipatory objectives with the practice of uncovering contradictions within the system.

By successfully bringing together work for galleries and the generation of images circulating around the web, post-internet artists ultimately confirm the applicability of a market-based logic in both spheres. Their products, decked in the robes of irony and contradiction, can then be exposed to criticism similar to that previously levelled by Jameson at pastiche or by the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* at mass entertainment. The outcome is a boring joke devoid of any subversive effect. Inasmuch as we are laughing, our laughter is the “wrong laughter” as described by Adorno and Horkheimer:

There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh about. Laughter, whether reconciled or terrible, always accompanies the moment when a fear is ended. It indicates a release, whether from physical danger or from the grip of logic. Reconciled laughter resounds with the echo of escape from

power; wrong laughter copes with fear by defecting to the agencies which inspire it. It echoes the inescapability of power.**125**