CAN ART HISTORY DIGEST NET ART?
Julian Stallabrass

From its beginnings, Internet art has had an uneven and conflicted relation-ship with the established art world. There was a point, at the height of the dot-com boom, when it came close to being the "next big thing," and was certainly seen as a way to reach new audiences (while conveniently creaming off sponsorship funds from the cash-rich computer companies). When the boom became a crash, many art institutions forgot about online art, or at least scaled back and ghettoized their programs, and that forgetting became deeper and more widespread with the precipitate rise of con-temporary art prices, as the gilded object once more stepped to the forefront of art-world attention. Perhaps, too, the neglect was furthered by much Internet art's association with radical politics and the methods of tactical media, and by the extraordinary growth of popular cultural participation online, which threatened to bury any identifiably art-like activity in a glut of appropriation, pastiche, and more or less knowing trivia.

One way to try to grasp the complicated relation between the two realms is to look at the deep incompatibilities of art history and Internet art. Art history—above all, in the paradox of an art history of the contemporary—is still one of the necessary conduits through which works must pass as they move through the market and into the security of the museum. In examining this relation, at first sight, it is the antagonisms that stand out. Lacking a medium, eschewing beauty, confined to the screen of the spreadsheet and the word processor, and apparently adhering to a discred-ited avant-gardism, Internet art was easy to dismiss. The most prominent recent attempt to capture the history of modern and contemporary art, *Art Since 1900*, contains no reference to Internet art (and little to new media art, generally).[01]

Yet, the subject has a surprising slipperiness and complexity to it—in part because both art history and Internet art have been changing (the latter, naturally, a good deal more rapidly than the former). Some Internet art looks a lot prettier than it once did. Certainly, the stern avant-garde rejection of aesthetics characteristic of early Net art (and often proffered tongue-in-cheek) is no longer held to. Art history, as we shall see, has undergone a rapid colonization by other disciplines, such that many of its core and fundamental precepts are open to question. Direct engagements between the two remain fairly rare, for most of the writers on Internet art have different backgrounds: in film studies, media studies, visual culture, or most often as practitioners, organizers, and curators of the art itself. Even so, art history remains important to any Internet culture that wants to call itself "art"— and that designation has had an enduring attraction. Art uses art history and vice versa, so for an online cultural worker references to avant-gardism or conceptualism are the swiftest and surest way to get what you are doing to be called "art."

That few art historians have ventured into the study of online art should not be cause for surprise. It is sufficient to refer to art history's ghettoization and neglect of other "new media"—notably photography and video. The literature of photography long remained separate from that of art history. Photography's early theorists were photographers themselves—or poets, philosophers, and cultural theorists (Baudelaire, Stieglitz, Kracauer, Freud, and Benjamin). It was only the art market's interest in photography from the 1970s onward that began to bring art historians to the study of photography, along with a sympathetic postmodern turn in art theory, which was interested in photography as the major tool of appropriation. Even so, right up

01 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900 Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005).

to the present, some of the most significant writing about photography has been penned by practitioners (and not generally by art historians): the writings of Victor Burgin, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, and Jeff Wall stand as prominent examples. Likewise, the art-historical writing on video art had to wait for that art to be drawn into the museum in the 1990s through the device of video projection. The recent apotheosis of photography in the museum offers a warning: the art-historical texts that accompany, for example, Andreas Gursky's major show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2001), or Thomas Struth's show at the Metropolitan Museum (2003), certainly break photography out of its ghetto but at the cost of suppressing the history of photography, the comparisons being with the grand tradition of painting.[02] It was as if photography could only be validated by (doubtful) associations with the already sanctified tradition of Western art. Benjamin's account of that same urge, in which art is considered "a stranger to all technical considerations," still resonates: it is the attempt to "legitimize the photographer before the very tribunal he was in the process of overturning"—a situation he took to be patently absurd but which is still in force seventy years after he wrote those words.[03] In this, present photographic practice—the peculiar, mannered, and fetishized museum print with its stately deportment—becomes the end-point of a history designed to bring it about; a partial history in which documentary practice, for example, is despised and written out.

02 Peter Galassi, *Andreas Gursky*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2001; the Metropolitan exhibition originated in Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, *Thomas Struth, 1977–2002*, Dallas 2002.

03 Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings: 1927–1934*. vol. 2, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 508.

Nevertheless, a striking feature about the literature on Internet art—even
when not written by art historians—is that it draws on some of the standard
devices of art history. One of the most persistent is the construction of
traditions or historical lines. Rachel Greene, in her introduction to *Internet Art*,
constructs two parallel lineages, one technological and one art-historical.
The two do not meet or interact, and the claims being made for the relations
between the phenomena in each line are quite different.[04] In the techno-
logical line, a causal relation is posited: without this invention or idea, the
following step could not have taken place (without the browser, there
would be no Web art). In the art-historical line, there is no clear causality:
the importance of an event may be an issue of unconscious or semi-con-
scious "influence," conscious use or retooling, the innocent reinvention of
some prior idea, or a vaguer issue of zeitgeist. We are left with the quasi-
Hegelian air of development toward a pre-ordained present. This atmosphere
is also present in the book *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on
the Internet*, with the surely laudatory aim of bringing attention to a variety
of interactive and networking practices such as mail art, which are given
focus by their new role as part of the legacy of Internet art.[05]
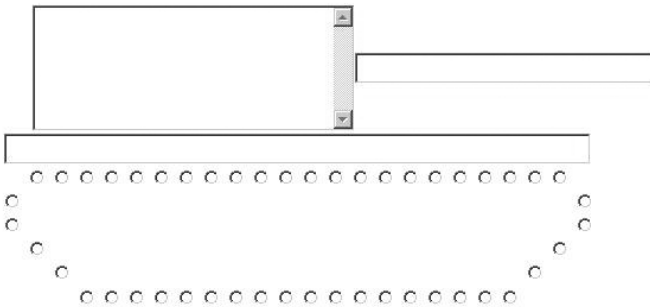
Alexei Shulgin, Form-Art,1997

Another fundamental issue (and one I have struggled with in my work on the subject): what is the art object?**06** Is it singular? Is there really something that connects Paleolithic cave painting, a Cézanne landscape, and a shopping trip by Sylvie Fleury or a dinner by Rirkrit Tiravanija? The problem is particularly acute with Internet art, in which the usual institutional assurances for the viewing of art are often absent. It has led some critics to try to hang on to autonomy and medium-specificity (even going to the extent of citing Clement Greenberg) so as to definitively fix the art status of Internet art. Tilman Baumgärtel does this in the introduction to his book *net.art 2.0.***07** It is a hard position to maintain because the Internet is not a medium, as painting is, but rather encompasses simulations of all reproducible media. Baumgärtel eventually (after some ironically tinged avant-garde pronouncements on Net purity) gives up the game: Net art's material, he says, is "utterly anything having to do with the Internet."**08** The issue is quite similar to the paradox of photographic autonomy, and presents the same difficulties for art history: that concentration on the essential characteristics of the "medium" leads not inward to such qualities as painting's flatness and abstraction, but outward to a more accurate depiction of the world, and with it all of the world's variety and contingency.

04 Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (London:Thames & Hudson, 2004), 14–28.

05 Annmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark, *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

06 Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*, (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2003); "The Aesthetics of Net.Art," *Qui Parle* 14, no. 1 (Fall/ Winter 2003–2004), 49–72.

07 Tilman Baumgärtel, *net.art 2.0: New Materials Towards Net Art* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2001), 27.

08 Baumgärtel, *net.art 2.0*, 28.

Often tied up with that word "art" is the idea, rarely now made explicit and indeed sometimes disavowed within art history, that it describes not merely an institutional category, or even a particular kind of human activity, but that it also carries with it a judgement about quality. Ernst Gombrich defended this position explicitly: art history is not the same as cultural history or a subset of sociology, because a small, defined canon of works of high quality constituted its corpus and its very reason for being.[09] We are familiar with the curious results: popular toys and figurines from the ancient world inhabit museums and form part of the subject of art history—not so their contemporary equivalents. Whole categories of visual cultural production never gain art-historical attention—amateur photography is an example, along with a large swathe of online practices, including the vast majority of the photographs uploaded to Flickr.

Associated with that idea of art and quality are a couple of art-historical as-sumptions, linked in tension if not outright contradiction: "That the true meaning of the work of art can be translated (into discourse) and that the true meaning of the work of art is untranslateable."[10] Art's *Kunstwollen* (as con-ceived by Riegl) or Structure (the Vienna School, particularly Hans Sedlmayer), or the aesthetic impulse in culture, is irreducible and recalcitrant to analysis. The particularity and autonomy of the work of art is pitched against the history of style as a narrative or causal chain. So the art object is secure in its status, and truly mysterious in its being. Equally, art history—the work of art's strange and inexplicable translation into language—is artful itself, an exercise of intuition and an aesthetic performance as much as an academic discipline.

09 See, for example, Ernst Gombrich, *Art History and the Social Sciences: The Romanes Lecture for 1973* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

10 Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 16.
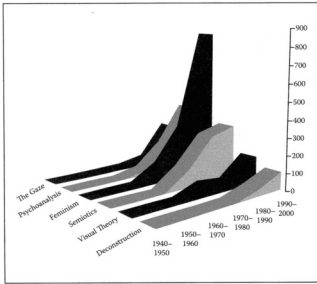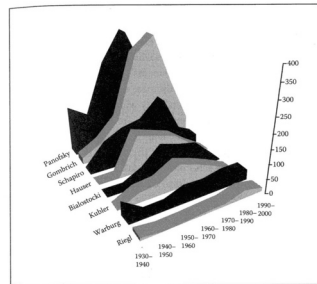
Figure 1   Theory in art history, 1940–2000.

Figure 2   Rise and fall of an older art history, 1930–2000: Citations of selected writers

Statistical Accountings by James Elkins, 2006.

Now, of course, what I have been describing is in some ways a parody of the discipline of art history. It is, after all, a subject that has been thoroughly colonized by the practices of diverse elements of generic "Theory," at the expense of its founding figures (this is something that Thomas Crow has complained about in *The Intelligence of Art*, and that James Elkins has shown graphically through a statistical accounting of the citation of various author-ities, which shows a steep decline in references to the giants of art-historical method and an equally steep rise in references to deconstruction, feminism, semiotics, etc.).[11] The discipline is very various: if, to take a single example, you look at the work of Peter Stewart on Roman cult objects that draws on the work of the anthropologist Alfred Gell, you will find an account of the relation between viewer and object that is quite alien to contemporary views, and that has little to do with any of the assumptions above.[12] Nevertheless,

[11]   Thomas Crow, *The Intelligence of Art* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999. The charts appear in the series preface to Elkins' Art Seminar; see, for example *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, ed. James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2006), viii-ix.

[12]   Peter Stewart, "Gell's Idols and Roman Cult,' in *Art's Agency and Art History* , ed. Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 158–78.

if this parody still carries a barb, it is because the kind of high theory adopted with most success in art history supports the view of works of art (and their creators) as ineffable objects of the highest impermeability to reason (Deleuze's Bergsonian vitalism, Lyotard's sublime, Kristeva's abject, Badiou's event, and so on), and as metaphorical keys to the zeitgeist (in some Foucaultian accounts, for example). Such a discourse has a link to the fundamental ideology of art, which would see it as a fathomless product of the individual psyche, but it is also linked to art history's necessarily close connection with the museum and the commercial gallery world, and their connections with the increasingly privatized Academy, on the hunt for business "partners."

There are a number of reasons why Internet art is an awkward field for the pursuit of such exercises:

First, after the flush of the dot-com boom, Internet art has generally been disconnected from the museum and the market for art. There are some examples of artists selling versions of online work in limited editions with certificates of authenticity (along the lines of video art), but the gesture appears even more absurd than with video, since the work also appears in its original form for access by anyone with an Internet connection. The five-year-long speculative bubble in the art market, which burst in the autumn of 2008, sidelined online work through the clamorous celebration of the prestigious object. There was a fundamental divide in the ethos of these worlds: between the production of rare or unique, expensively made objects, protected by copyright and curatorial scruple, appearing in exclusive and controlled environments, and purchased by the mega-rich; and the dissemination of digital works, of which no one copy is better than any other, which may appear in many places at once, which may run out of the control of artists and curators, and which are given as gifts. To the extent

that online art is associated with the culture of Web 2.0 and the "wealth of networks," it appears not merely dissociated from the mainstream market for contemporary art, but also dangerous to it.[13] It also carries a dangerous edge for the many corporate sponsors who wish to widely disseminate their cultural goods (from brands to allegorical personifications of products) while at the same time protecting them from interference by cultural hackers and subversives.

Second, its post-medium condition does not lend itself to any plausible account of autonomy, undermining one claim that this new cultural form might have had to the status of "art." Worse still, lacking the comfort of materiality and (often) museum display, its post-medium condition is thought to be even more invidious than that of installation art (which has had a rough ride from prominent critics, precisely on the grounds that its lack of a medium makes it a pliant part of "the image in the service of capital").[14]

Third (and a corollary of the last point), its connections with technology are too immediate and transparent. This tends to undercut the mystery of its "object," which remains too close for many conventional art viewers to elements of mass culture and the working environment. The very swift rise of collaborative and cooperative culture, and of the participation of individuals in public cultural production—the making and uploading of videos, for example—makes drawing such distinctions even harder. Online art is continually threatened by an infection of the vulgar and the standard.

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13 See Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

14 Rosalind Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 56.

Fourth, the repudiation of the obfuscating character of much high theory by many of its practitioners and writers challenges the heavy investment that many art historians have made in such ideas, and which—since such notions have a definite market use—they are reluctant to abandon even in the face of overwhelming evidence (psychoanalytical accounts being the most obvious example).
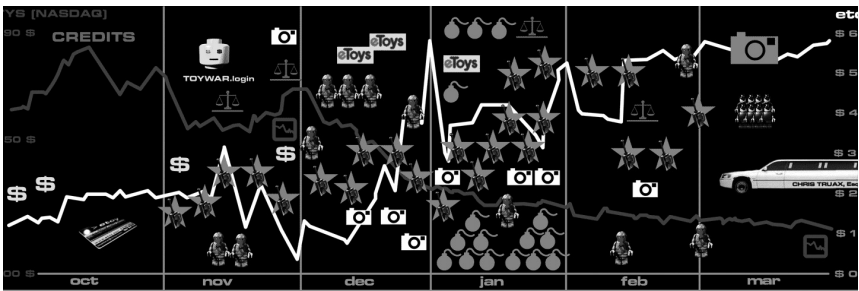
TOYWAR-timeline, 1999-2000, © etoy.CORPORATION.

Lastly, and most damningly, much Internet art has been connected with radical political activism. At the time of the first wave of "net.art," this was enough to have it judged by many to be of the utmost naivety and un-fashionability. Now, when "political" art has been back in fashion for some years, a deeper problem is revealed: while documentary forms that examine the representational rhetoric of the political are deemed acceptable (in part because they reflect upon and thus also instantiate the autonomy of a medium), works that might be put to political use or encourage popular participation are much less so. The famous victory of etoy over eToys in the Toywar dispute presented the matter with absolute starkness: that "art" could produce a direct political and economic effect, and that as etoy's "Agent Gramazio" put it: "We engaged in a real power struggle with eToys—and won."[15] Some Internet art, informed by the theories of tactical

media, strove for such effects, and as such presented those with conventional non-instrumental views of art with a dilemma. In their account of such politically engaged online art, Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito are careful to sharply distinguish art from activism:

> *Art arms its audience with neither evidence nor explosives but with a protected arena in which to challenge the status quo without confronting it head-on. … it encourages its audience to join in the play, ultimately freeing them of political and cultural dichotomies that pit right against wrong, left against right.*[16]

So the line is clearly drawn, with art on the side of play. There is some art-critical and even art-historical writing that celebrates the activist character of online art and connects it with a long history of radical cultural engagement in other fields—for instance, the writings of Nato Thompson and Greg Sholette map these neglected histories.[17] Nevertheless, such views remain on the margin of art history.

Yet, despite all this, art history and the institutions that surround and support it may yet lay claim to Internet art in a more thoroughgoing and consistent fashion. It has begun to do so with video, about which many of the same things could have been said fifteen or twenty years ago, though at the price of the profound transformation of that art. If Internet art were to pass

15 Tilman Baumgärtel, *net.art 2.0: New Materials Towards Net Art* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2001), 222.

16 Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito, *At the Edge of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), 135.

17 Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Destruction of Everyday Life* (North Adams, MA: MASS MoCA Publications, 2005). See also the *Third Text* 22, no. 94, special issue "Whither Tactical Media," ed. Gene Ray and Gregory Sholette (September 2008).

definitively into history, and as it did so the immediate threat of its radicalism receded, its historicization may be set in train. Art history may be seen as a rhetorical apparatus tied to the contemporary art market, and until very recently booming with it, in a massive expansion of studies of the recent past (there is a huge dominance of postwar art as against other periods in PhD subjects, with the near-disappearance of some fields).

Furthermore, the attraction may be mutual. Online tactical media activists, naturally, use the art world tactically. It may be a way of gaining access to the mass media. It may be a way of funding work, or it may be considered one point in a process through which the work passes. Hans Bernhard, formerly of etoy and now (with Maria Haas) of the duo UBERMORGEN.COM, explains:

> *Becoming an artist was rather simple, it was all about usability. … after eliminating all the other candidates (such as sports, politics, etc.) there was nothing left but art. Today I consider this process to be freestyle research. Conceptual art is crossed with experimental research and mass media stunts—but the products (sites, digital images, sculptures, e-mails, log files, paintings, drawings, etc.) are positioned in an art context.*[18]

Since the political effects of much tactical media work are small or very difficult to gauge, and victories such as that over eToys very rare, the very playfulness and humor of such work may make it possible to consign it to the realm of art. UBERMORGEN.COM's own work, *Gwei—Google Will Eat Itself* (2005–08), in which Google's advertising service is used to earn money that is used to buy shares in the company, is an amusing conceit,

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[18] Cited in Domenico Quaranta, "UBERMORGEN.COM: The Future is Now," in *UBERMORGEN.COM*, ed. Domenico Quaranta (Brescia: FP Editions, 2009), 70.

and of only virtual utility. The estimated time for the full purchase of Google using its own funds is over 200 million years![19] Here we seem to come up against a fundamental incompatibility between political action and cultural activism, as it is currently formulated, in which the latter is fixed on the creative autonomy of individuals and small groups. That commitment leads theorists such as Geert Lovink to repudiate all ideology in favor of the use of technology for experimentation, play, and self-empowerment.[20]

But let us flip the question over, and ask what Internet art, and digital culture broadly, may bring to art history. After all, photography, long repudiated as a subject for art history, was at its very basis an academic subject—first in the black-and-white print and then in the color slide (and perhaps the two are linked: again, how can a tool also be an art?). Digital resources obviously open up access to vast archival and visual resources to many more people, and this is bound to have a leveling effect not only on research but also on curation. Aside from the sway of the market and the museum, two major difficulties have left art history at a primitive level of analysis, dependent on the sensibilities and intuitions of its writers. The first difficulty is that that there has been no agreed-upon way of describing visual phenomena—not even paintings or drawings. This is changing with the digital reverse engineering of human image recognition mechanisms, producing testable and systematic descriptions of, for example, the various systems through which perspective may be portrayed, which may be tied to historical accounts.[21] The second is that there has been little work done within art history on the qualitative

19 See http://www.gwei.org.

20 Gregory Sholette and Gene Ray, "Reloading Tactical Media: An Exchange with Geert Lovink," *Third Text* 22, no. 94, special issue "Whither Tactical Media," (September 2008): 554–55.

21 John Willats, *Art and Representation: New Principles in the Analysis of Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

character of viewer interactions with art objects. Online, the surveillance of viewers is entirely standard, and begins to offer (along with the brain sciences) the feedback mechanisms a study of art needs to found itself as an objective discipline, one that can identify correlations and work toward the settling of questions (rather than the endless proliferation of discourse) and the demonstration of causal effects. The tools, at least, for such a development are becoming available, though it plainly conflicts with the fundamental ideology of the discipline through its ties to the art world and the art market.

There is the opportunity for a much more thorough demystification of the processes of the making and viewing of art than that envisaged even in the salutary writings of the Net art theorists such as Lovink, Garcia, and Fuller, and with it, the prospect of clearing the fog around the very term "art" itself. It offers art history the prospect of a much deeper transformation than that effected by photography. Whether either Internet art or art history will survive such a development is an open question.
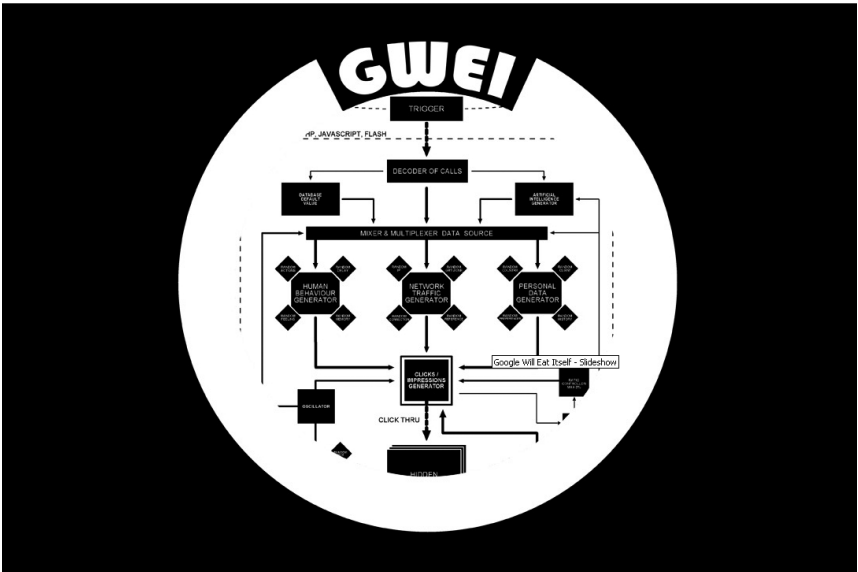
ubermorgen.com, Gwei—Google Will Eat Itself, 2005–08