RHIZOME

Do You Follow? Art in Circulation 1 (Rush Transcript)

by Rhizome
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Work by Israel Lund at Eleven Rivington, June 2013

Do you follow? Art in Circulation
'Internet circulation has made all art look the same'
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[Note: This is a rush transcript compiled by editorial fellow Anton Haugen. This document will be updated.]

Rosalie Doubal: This is the first in a talk series that we have been working on with Rhizome, "Do You Follow? Art in Circulation," and today, we are addressing the statement that "Internet circulation has made all art look the same." This is presented in partnership with Rhizome, and I am extremely grateful to Curator and Editor of Rhizome Michael Connor for his incredible work in producing this. Michael will be our chair throughout the series, guiding us through, and I will be shortly be handing it over to him. We are livestreaming today and we will be having a Q&A at the end. Thank you very much for joining us and thank you very much Michael.

Michael Connor: My name is Michael Connor, I am Editor and Curator of Rhizome, an arts organization based on the internet. It's a great pleasure to be back here in London, as a guest of the ICA. Rosalie has done amazing work in putting this all together, the whole team has made us feel very supported in what forms a major component of our Autumn program.

This panel is called "Do You Follow? Art in Circulation" and it kind of continues on from a panel we did with the ICA last year called "Post-Net Aesthetics." Before I turn things over and introduce our distinguished panelists who have joined us from places near and far, I thought maybe I would take a minute to situate where we are in that conversation and then bring up a couple of the themes that today's panel discusses. Each of the three panels has certain discussions that it's referencing. Today's talk is being livestreamed, which is I think why we are so brightly lit, so hello to viewers on the internet. I hope things are working well out there. All of us can use the hashtag "doyoufollow" to continue the discussion in social media, so I welcome you to do that in keeping with the theme of our panel.

As I mentioned, last year was the "Post-Net Aesthetics" panel that Rhizome and the ICA co-organized, which was curated by Karen Archey who did an excellent job with that. That panel was picking up on a conversation about the areas of practice of Post-Internet that had been widely discussed for several years up to that point. And I think you might be able to credit last year's panel with kicking off the post-internet backlash. Over the past year, we have seen a lot of angst build on that term, and we have also seen a lot of people criticizing it.

One of the things that has happened since last year's panel there has been an extraordinary number of different definitions of post-internet offered. Those definitions fall into three different kinds of groupings, all of which are valid because all language is made up, and so words can have different meanings. Thanks for teaching me that Zach.

The first definition is the market, stylistic definition that post-internet art is a kind of style that references the internet and is popular with collectors. The definition tries to trace it to aesthetic similarities or market trends in the art work. It's a kind of definition that has usefulness but it makes people feel depressed, generally. So that's one of the real reasons why this backlash has begun.

The second kind of grouping of definitions that emerged around post-internet would be the social and historical ones. Sort of between 2006 or 2008 and maybe 2013 or 2014, people were using the word "Post-Internet" at various places and times to describe different forms of practice or different communities of practice, and I think that definition is certainly valid. We have certainly seen people use the term in New York at different times with different levels of irony. There are different moments when it was picked up in London and reinvented and used in different ways. It also had different valences in Berlin as well. Los Angeles and San Francisco had their own kind of dialogue going. In all of these places, the term was applied in different ways and so there was a diversity of practices that were attached in this way.

The third way that people try to define Post-Internet is in the thematic way, where they try to find a certain philosophical basis that unites this extraordinary diversity of practice that has been attached to the word "Post-Internet." That is what most people instinctively begin with because one expects a term that seems so authoritative as "Post-Internet" to have some underlying philosophical kernel of an idea. That may not be the case, but there are arguments that have been made more or less successfully about that word and its thematic origins.

My own use of the word tends towards the social historical definition, but I do have some interest in the thematic definitions as well. For me, a lot of the arguments and discourse around Post-Internet that I have seen playing out have revolved around the phrase and ideas around "Digital Dualism." It comes from the sociologist Nathan Jurgenson who is actually a collaborator of mine on a series of Rhizome's "Internet Subjects." He defined "Digital Dualism" as a fallacy, believing that online and offline worlds are distinct, that we can think of an offline world or an online world or irl and url, that we can draw that distinction. The offline world is inherently structured by digital technologies, network connections. I think that is a true contention. At Rhizome, one of our core philosophical ideas is that the internet is not a sort of space at all but a process or a set of processes. Thinking of the internet in terms of a spatial metaphor at all is misleading.

Digital Dualism as a discourse is really connected to ideas central to Post-Internet. That there is online-work and then gallery-based work: the gallery, itself being an industrial model for circulating art work. Another way is in accelerationism, accelerating the contradictions of the system to an extreme position.

Returning to last year's panel, Ben Vickers' "Post-Internet is Dead (if you want it)," I think we can call that the beginning of the Post-Internet backlash, provided descriptions of a stance one might take in terms of a disavowal or refusal of the internet, to reclaim the idea that there is an offline space. On one hand we had this integration of online and offline space, while Ben Vickers wanted to reseperate the online and offline world. Also in that backlash space, we had the anti-internet art manifesto of Zach Blas and of course, Hito Steyerl's e-flux article "Too much world: Is the Internet Dead?" All of those were really interesting in manifesting different positions about the disavowal or working against the Internet. In addition to that, we had the Facebook study, where people learned for the first time, some how, that they were subjects of a large-scale social experiment, which is central to Social media. We also had the NSA-revelations, which were made possible by Laura Poitras' film-making and her ushering through of Snowden's leaks Glenn Greenwald, etc.

So a moment of extreme cynicism, and yet, I have not been this excited about internet culture since the dot com crash.

The panel came out of research we have been doing into, I suppose, well it started with our research on VVORK, because we have been trying to archive VVORK, which is a website which started in 2007; it was a very influential thing. All it was was a place where the contributors of VVORK would serially post artworks with just a title. They did use tags but they are not very visible unless you look very hard for them. They would never write anything, but you would start to see patterns emerging. They would post like five things about Michael Jackson when Michael Jackson passed away. There was this sort of implicit provacation that there was an inherent underlying similarity to what they post.

When it first began, a lot of artists responded negatively to the implication that a lot of art looks the same, that it was reducing artistic practice and that they were not giving the artist enough due. Making things seem very similar and depressing.

I think there was actually a kind of radical possibility in this presentation of similarity that VVORK gave us. To understand that, I think it's instructive to look at the next example, which came in between VVORK and Instagram as places where people would look at art on the web, which was Contemporary Art Daily. And here, we have longer post of multiple photos of a single exhibition with the press release. If the central contention of VVORK is that all art is this kind of collaborative process of authorship in which there's a lot of copying and ideas are transmitted back and forth and the individual artist as part of this embedded collaborative network of creative producers or of practitioners who are in some kind of dialogue, Contemporary Art Daily makes this kind of argument that the artist is somehow different and standing on their own and has something special to offer the world.

That to me is more depressing than the VVORK perspective.

At Rhizome today, we are announcing back home in New York that we have come up with a new archiving tool, thanks to my amazing colleague Dragan Espenchied so [VVORK] is one of the first projects that we started to archive with this new tool. We consider the internet culture as process not space and in keeping with that, we archive pages as specific moments in time in which they are captured, and not as static pages which we download as files, so it's a different paradigm of digital conservation. That's what we're looking at here, VVORK on Rhizome.

But with this idea of VVORK and Contemporary Art Daily, I wanted to organize this panel to further explore this idea of sameness and difference, because in the past year it has been argued that all art is starting to look the same because of the internet. And we are to talk about whether or not that is the case. And if that is the case, if that presents an interesting set of conditions. So with that I am going to hand things off to Alex Bacon.

Alex Bacon: Thanks Michael. I am going to begin with perhaps the critically unpopular position, but obviously the one that inspired this particular panel which is "why does so much art look the same," but specifically in Jerry Saltz's case recently it was "Why Does So Much [New] Abstraction Look The Same?" He accompanied his article with these set of iPhone images that he took at an art fair. I think it's an especially kind of germane way of entering this topic in the context of Frieze week. Basically Saltz argued that the reason we are looking at this kind of work is not

out of any kind of critical interest but rather the interest it has to a speculative, collector class.

I think that what's interesting is that it jibes with a perhaps more sophisticated argument by Michael Sanchez in Art Forum about a year ago ["2011: Art and Transmission"] that essential a lot of this abstraction was being almost produced for sites like Contemporary Art Daily, favoring of things like gray palettes and these kind of washed out images that would play well on the screen. But what I think that what's interesting is that [Sanchez's argument] presumes that there is this kind of power that collectors, dealers, and art advisors have over artistic production. It does not quit follow the timeline of a lot of the work in question because a lot of the artists who began working abstractly, the younger generation in the mid-2000s up to the present, started making work before this market boom. It's been difficult, to fully separate how much is related to the collector interest and how much is kind of in the aesthetic development, and whether or not that even matters.

Nonetheless, this certainly has then complicated further by creating this huge pool of artists. I often liken it to a kind of mall; everyone wants the Gucci t-shirt, but some people can only afford Old Navy, so there's kind of an artist for everyone. I think that's what I think Jerry Saltz lays out in his article, so I appreciate that.

I think an especially interesting focal point in this conversation has been what happened around Wade Guyton's inclusion in this Christie's auction recently. He was upset at the idea that his work was going to be auctioned, so he started posting on Instagram all of these photographs of him printing out this image, trying to emphasize the reproducible, anti-authorship of his work. Of course, this painting still sold for a record amount. I think it really showed that this collector class is more interested in having one of many paintings, rather than the original. I think what it also does is show us is [the collector's] relationship to the work; that they're being told almost by the work, what they want, so the seriality of the work has in turn produced this desire for multiples. Collectors, famously, are buying things in groups of ten, twenty, or more, but what I think that all this does is cloud the fact that the actual work, a lot of painting if we want to focus on that, of course, exists as an object in the world.

As a critic and as a historian (my background is in 60s and 70s minimalism, working with Ad Reinhardt and my dissertation is on Frank Stella), I can see certain of the similarities and differences. Looking at these things in person, some work stands out as an object. I really don't want to install that difference between the online space (like an Instagram) through which this imagery circulates and then the paintings themselves, as if somehow they were inseparable because what I want to propose is that some of the most interesting artists working in this vein in fact embrace the circulation of imagery of their work, that they both produce work that stands as an object, but that they don't go around saying "you don't get it if you don't see it." You would say that, but at the same time, it has another life online.

One artist who has done this in a smart way is Israel Lund. For example, here you see his show at Eleven Rivington from last yearwhere he installed four canvases in the window of the gallery. When you walked by you saw them from behind, and when you entered the gallery, you saw them backlit, very much as a computer screen. He was playing off this idea of something he calls "analog .jpg"; this idea of this hybrid status for this work that is produced in this analog-mode via silk-screening process but that he doesn't disagree with its evocation of a kind of screen space.

But I think what is interesting then is to compare it to history is that, of course, some people like to compare his work to Gerhard Richter. If we look at these two things on a screen, they do look very similar. Experientially in space, they are very different. Richter is building up dense layers of paint that he moves around with a squeegee, so there's a very tactile, physical quality to the work. Even though someone like Lund is discussed in terms of process, in a certain sense, there's more visible process in the Richter. In Lund's work, you have an image that is very hard to place. It's much more an image that could only exist in an internet age: an image where its very seductive and beautiful, but there's no way to find a footing for your eye in the work.

Another artist who works in this vein is Jacob Kassay. His silver paintings, especially, offer a very interesting commentary on this notion of perception and vision, this way we are constantly finding our identity through uploading and downloading images. Constantly taking photographs and uploading them on to social media, seeing other people's post, it's a way that we understand our place in the world and what's going on around us; it's very

much a mediator.

What's interesting about Kassay's silver paintings is that as you move around them they not only reflect and absorb the light and the imagery of the space around them, but they do this in a very fragmented way. As you move in closer to them, your image becomes more blurred, and as you move farther away, it becomes clearer. It creates this kind of interesting experience where your expectation of being fulfilled by accessing this work is always thwarted.

Fragmentation is really something at issue in Jacob's work as a whole. If you see his more recent series of works, which are based off of the left-over remnants of paintings: both his own and those of other artists, which he began by stretching up exactly as they were found. This idea of the incomplete or the fragment is related to this stream of imagery.

All of this for me, seeing the work of artists like Kassay and Lund and thinking about older generations, for me, what makes it different, I think that for these artists painting is related to the history of painting in modernism, you can't deny that. I think it's equally related to the surge of technological devices in our lives: smartphones, tablets, HD televisions; all of which have, unwittingly, have a relationship to painting. Painting is, in a certain sense, accessible to audiences today where abstract painting was the most difficult work historically; maybe museums showed it, these people were very successful in that way, but they did not have the kind of commercial viability they did today. I think it's in part because we are familiar with this kind of rectangle. It's something that acts as a frame for our experience.

What then becomes interesting for certain artists like Lund and Kassay is that they use this idea that maybe the painting becomes a momentary stop in the circulation of images. It's not that the images are either in or out of circulation but that for a moment, they are held so that you can consider them and really think about what they are doing. I think in our current moment that's a radical and important gesture. I think also important because it leaves certain of these questions that you were suggesting Michael; it poses them and makes them open. You really think about, "where is this image?" Is this an image when I see myself in the Jacob Kassay painting? Am I thinking of Instagram filters? Is it a mirror? What is this relationship?

Of course, it's to all of these things;I think this questioning is very important.