### It's Just the Internet! Appropriation in Postinternet Art

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the use of appropriation in contemporary internet art - postinternet art - in terms of internet technology and web content. The paper suggests that postinternet art reflects our cultural reality through the ubiquity and fluidity of internet services. This results to novel artistic practices that draw on the cultural connections made online by appropriating found web content and internet technology. The paper presents a study of 190 artworks from the ArtBase Rhizome's digital archive between 2010-2015 to provide evidence on how and to what extent postinternet art appropriates the internet.

### **CCS CONCEPTS**

 Applied computing → Arts and humanities; Fine Arts; Media Arts

### **KEYWORDS**

Art and Technology, Postinternet Art, Internet Appropriation

### **ACM Reference format:**

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ARTECH2017, September 06-08, 2017, Macau, China © 2017 Association for Computing Machinery. ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-5273-4/17/09...\$15.00 http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3106548.3106608

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Every aspect of our lives today is being defined to some extent by internet technology and the web. From socialising, learning about the world, shopping, flirting and being entertained to procrastinating and playing games, a great part of our experiences is being lived online. As it is expected, culture changes along with technology, and today, the ubiquity of internet technology has reinvented the way we perceive and thus, the way we go about artmaking. Using web content and internet technology in contemporary internet art - postinternet art - becomes an organic behaviour within the wider context of internet culture.

The paper claims that appropriation is a critical element of contemporary internet art's art-making. Postinternet artworks are not simply made online or for online use, instead they reflect the state of the world today by operating online and by adopting, borrowing and exploiting every aspect that makes the internet what it is today. This can be its applications, services, culture, networks, societies, technical innovations, limitations and information amongst others. This paper examines the ways postinternet art appropriates the internet and presents data collected by reviewing 190 artworks from Rhizome's digital archive ArtBase between 2010-2015. The study reviews the works and organises them in two categories, 1. Appropriation of Internet Technology and 2. Appropriation of Web Content and then it analyses the findings. Providing evidence on how internet art appropriates the internet helps us identify the massive shift in the art world today caused by internet technology. It is important that we try to examine and understand appropriation as a behaviour that transforms the art world and encourages new ways of thinking about contemporary artistic practices engaged with the internet.

### 2 APPROPRIATION OF THE INTERNET

### 2.1 Before the Internet

To appropriate is to adopt, borrow, recycle, sample or simply use pre-existing material in ways that form the concept, structure and nature of the end-result. In art, the Tate Gallery [1] traces the practice of appropriation back to Cubism and Dadaism, by continuing into the 1940s Surrealism and 1950s Pop art and

returning to prominence in the 1980s with the Appropriation artists. Historically, the use of appropriation in art deals with pressing issues of each time like artistic representation, ownership and plagiarism, art standards and originality. It is often a deliberate, political choice that pushes boundaries and challenges established art conceptions. When Marcel Duchamp one hundred years ago, submitted his now famous readymade Fountain - a porcelain urinal that was propped atop a pedestal and signed "R. Mutt 1917" - into the Society of Independent Artists exhibition only to be rejected by the exhibition committee, he was challenging originality, ownership and plagiarism in fine art. Similarly, when Andy Warhol appropriated images from commercial art and popular culture and mass production techniques in the 1960s, he was intentionally distancing himself from the evidence of an artist's hand and was embracing expendability and the ephemera of his time as the subject matter of his work. Today however, the concept of appropriation is multifarious and unclear. The introduction of privately-run commercial internet services and the mass availability of personal computers ignited massive cultural shifts that challenge previous understandings of appropriation in art.

### 2.2 During the Internet

Since the rapid growth of internet's commercialisation and services, net art in the mid 1990s and internet art in the 2000s, have explored the cultural shifts in which internet technology played a significant role. In order to examine these quicklyevolving changes in culture, net art introduced works that used the internet as their medium which in turn defined the subject matter and the nature of these works. This is art that cannot be experienced in any other way. Internet defines both the place and time of the work as well as the reason for its existence. It is often political in the sense that aims to reveal the structures behind the medium or to manipulate its faults "glitches" or to expose its commercial interests. Hacking, copying, appropriating and sharing are common artistic practices linked to the open-source movement's principles of transparent and copyright-free distribution of software [2]. Artist duo Eva and Franco Mattes who operate under the pseudonym 0100101110101101, created Life Sharing [3] and turned their private lives into public artwork. The artists made each and every file on their computer, from texts and photos to bank statements and emails, available to anyone at any time through their website between 2001-2003. In a time where social media did not exist yet, the work's focus was sharing. Anything on their computer was available to search, read and freely copy, including the system itself, since they were using only free software.

With the increasing use of centralised services that emerged along Web 2.0 in 2000s, internet art introduced several new experiences for creating, disseminating, communicating and experiencing art. Web 2.0 describes World Wide Web websites that emphasise user-generated content, ease of use and crossplatforms/devices experiences. With Web 2.0, online games, chat rooms and social media have become the stage upon which artists can unfold their works. The internet is not simply a performative

space for internet artists, it is also a space for interaction and connectivity to multiple social and economic cultures. Net art and internet art cannot of course be defined simply by the technical changes in internet technology throughout time. Art is part of social structure and as internet art forms keep changing, their historical context is continually re-evaluated. Today, when the internet is less of a novelty and the variety of methods of presentation and dissemination online is vast, we can identify postinternet art as the art of our time, or at least of 2010s.

### 2.3 After the Internet

"Postinternet Art" is a term coined by artist Marisa Olson and developed further by writer Gene McHugh in the critical blog "Post Internet" during its activity between December 2009 and September 2010 [4]. There are references to post-net culture as early as 2001 with examples like Lev Manovich's Post-Media Aesthetics [5]. However, as Artie Vierkant describes in his 2010 essay The Image Object Post-Internet [6], "being post-internet" is a distinction which carries ramifications beyond the art context as a societal condition at large, and it would be antithetical to attempt to pinpoint any discrete moment at which the post-internet period begins. Therefore, we can try to characterise this shift from internet art to postinternet art as the time when artists are acting less as interpreters, transcribers, narrators, curators and architects and more as fully-implicated participants. For Olson, postinternet has a specific meaning, referring to a mode of artistic activity drawing on raw materials and ideas found or developed online. For young artist Grace Miceli postinternet is escaping the traditional art world by creating an alternate one. She explains "I am just bored of it. It doesn't feel relevant to me. I don't know if I am interested in assimilating into that fancy art world as it exists currently". [7]

Within this period (loosely defined as 2010 till now) internet artists can no longer adopt a position on the outside. Internet culture becomes just culture, a new cultural reality that composes the fabric of our everyday lives. In this new reality, the World Wide Web is the perfect reflector of our culture, changing things from our viewing positions to what we consider to be knowledge. Artist Orr Amran says "I began noticing an unorthodox pattern in the way I was attending to visual content - a pattern of visualisation that only made sense with association to the Internet" [8]. Google Earth for example reflects the state of the world captured as a snapshot [9] and the Google search engine reflects a reality tailored by what internet publishers and users deem popular, interesting and important. The web is the most complete and extended archive of our culture that has ever existed while being a storehouse of cultural connections at the same time. Most importantly the web is the only place that popular culture can exist as popular culture today. Ben Huh, founder of The Cheeseburger Network points out how quickly internet culture has become a part of everyone's content diet. He says "Back in 2008, we predicted that internet culture will merge with pop culture. The idea was that memes, viral videos, and remixed content will move from the fringes to an integral part of everyone's content diet." [10] We can argue that by appropriating the internet, its technology and its content, we are appropriating all culture.

The use of appropriation in internet art today comes organically as a natural practice of experiencing life online. We as internet users can easily relate to that. Generations that have experienced living with the internet share a common understanding of what it feels like spending numerous hours online following one link after the other, ending up consuming content without knowing how you ended up there. We know what it means to "google" something and form an opinion about what this is, based on the search engine's results and images. We know what it feels like to share an inside joke that it is not truly "inside" but rather refers to popular internet culture references and memes that have gone globally viral. As internet users we reproduce, copy, repeat, quote, comment on and remix existing content, being creative on platforms that are already there. We also learn to use internet applications and technology to advertise, promote, connect, manage and organise our lives. However, we as users, visitors and consumers don't necessarily consciously appropriate internet content and technology. These behaviours happen so naturally in our everyday lives that making a distinction between simply using and appropriating is often hard. The quantity of appropriations in all social and cultural areas makes the concept of appropriation unclear. Then what does it mean then to appropriate web content and internet technology?

## 3 APPROPRIATING INTERNET TECHNOLOGY

Internet technology does not simply refer to software and hardware. Part of internet technology can be anything from domain names, web hosting, routing, protocols, the web and its applications, HTML and CSS, embedded technologies, web advertising and online shopping, email, chat, social media, search engines, online games and all the information resources, services and devices that are linked through computer networks using the internet protocol suite.

When referring to appropriation of internet technology in this paper, we refer to all the above as tools and devices of representation. Artworks that appropriate internet technology are adopting, borrowing, recycling, sampling or simply using the internet in ways that form the concept, structure and nature of the artwork. In other words, an artist who creates a painting and chooses to share their creation online via social media does not appropriate internet technology. Instead they use internet technology to communicate with audiences and promote their work. However, an artist who performs on social media like Jennifer Chan does on her work factum/mirage [11], appropriates internet technology. Chan uses one-off pre-recorded performances on the popular online chat website Chatroulette applying edited and looped videos that are piped into the site. Chatroullette is a website that pairs random users together for webcam-based conversations. According to an informal study in 2010 within a year of the website's launch, one in eight Chatroulette "spins" showed someone naked, exposing themselves or engaging in a sexual act. On average, in sessions showing a single person 89% of these were male and 11% were female. Users were twice as likely to encounter a sign requesting female nudity than to encounter actual female nudity. As the artist starts chatting with users she uses these edited and looped videos to manipulate the user's' impression, expose the true nature of online chats interactions and how she is viewed as a woman in this context. Her work reflects a condition described by Slavoj Zizek as "interpassivity" [12]. The work is being described as "Wholly exploitative edited and looped one-off webcam performances for the masturbating population on Chatroulette".

Appropriating technology doesn't stop in online performances. Artist Mushon Zer-Aviv introduced the "spiritual" browser plugin *Good Listeners* [13], under open source license in 2011. The plugin exposes the secret ways in which our browsing habits are shared with and mined by third party web trackers (like Google Analytics and Facebook "Like") without our consent or knowledge. Whenever a site exposes the visitor's data to a third-party service, a confessional booth window is opened and the priest in the window offers words of invisible wisdom and spiritual guidance pertaining to matters of web browsing, social networking, e-commerce and digital identity.

In the 190 works reviewed for the study that is being presented in this paper, 144 (75%) of them appropriate internet technology. These 144 works demonstrate the variety and diversity of ways for appropriating internet technology and a tendency of producing technology based - not just related - artworks which indicates what art's present is about. The variation of internet technology appropriations in this study reveals to what extend internet technology has become a defining component of cultural production.

### 4 APPROPRIATING WEB CONTENT

Web content is any form of content that is encountered as part of the user experience online. This may include text, images, video, sounds, animations, activities performed and/or recorded online like chat conversations and interactions and video calls. In general, web content can be anything that exists online.

When referring to appropriation of web content in this paper, we refer to any type of found, recorded or submitted content online. Artworks that appropriate web content are adopting, borrowing, recycling, inviting or sampling web content in ways that form the concept, structure and nature of the artwork. There are artworks that focus on the appropriated content like I'm Google by Dina Kelberman [14] and others that use web content simply because they are referring to it like The Best Is Yet To Come by Silvio Lorusso [15]. I'm Google is a Tumblr blog consisting of images found on Google Image Search and videos found on Youtube. The images and videos correspond with one another in form, subject matter, or theme and are arranged in a grid that expands as the user scrolls. It is described by the artist as a stream of consciousness and it portrays the artist's experience wandering online hunting for obscure information and encountering unexpected results. The blog serves as a visual representation of this phenomenon. Lorusso's The Best Is Yet To Come is a website where found preloaders (animated gifs that frequently appear online while pages are loading) follow one another randomly and endlessly. The work's focus is not on the found gifs themselves but rather on the repetition of the circular movement that allows the waiting moment to become a contemplation experience. The gifs could have been original animations created by the artist referring to the ones that users come across online, but they are not, the artist chooses to appropriate gifs found online. The work of course refers to a time where waiting for content to load was part of surfing the internet. Since then, network access speeds have increased, especially for wireless technologies, content delivery latency has significantly reduced due to new internet services while page design and the underlying transport protocols have improved content loading significantly.

In the 190 reviewed for this study, 49 (26%) of them appropriate online found content. These 49 works demonstrate the heterogeneity of material sources used, as well as, the effortless quality of appropriating web content. By appropriating material that by default relate to most internet users' experiences, artists create an emotional relationship with the world of associations this content evokes. They also often draw our attention to the repetitious, iterative and anticipated aspects of the web while other times they focus on the unexpected of online connections.

### 5 METHODOLOGY

To examine how and to what extent appropriation is used in contemporary internet art, a decision was made to review a number of contemporary internet artworks. The choice to use data from Rhizome's ArtBase archive was made based on the consistency and quality of the organisation's efforts to archive and preserve new media art. Rhizome is a non-for-profit organization affiliated with the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Its programs include events, exhibitions, commissions of artworks, an active website and an archive of more than 2000 new media artworks. One of the main and most well-known operations of Rhizome is its digital preservation program. ArtBase, which is Rhizome's archive of digital art and is freely accessible to the public online, was founded in 1999 to preserve works of net art that were deemed to be "of potential historical significance". Until 2008, ArtBase accepted open submissions for consideration but after 2008 works were added to the collection by curatorial invitation and through Rhizome's commissioning and exhibition programs. ArtBase has been regularly adding works to its archive until 2015. The organisation is temporarily not adding new entries to the ArtBase archive because they are assessing the archiving aspect of their infrastructure. Rhizome's ArtBase is considered to be one of the largest and longest-running online collections of internet-based artworks.

Since this study focusses on appropriation of postinternet art a decision was made to review all ArtBase artworks between 2010-today. Although postinternet art, does not begin or stop at a specific time, for this study it was decided that this was a moment in time when important technological changes occurred that affected how art is being made, how artists deal with art-making, and how audiences interact with art. Around this time

crowdfunding platforms like Kickstaster were introduced as an alternative way to bring creative projects to life; Google's Art Project online platform for art featuring today more than 32,000 artworks from 46 museums was launched; motion and voicesensing control systems were introduced to the market paving the way to a new area for virtual reality; Apple's iPad entered the market while iPhone sales doubled that year with the release of iPhone 4 - today mobile web usage surpasses desktop usage -; Google's real-time search was launched as a response to people's need for immediate updates to data streams like social media; 3D printing entered commercial production through the fashion industry and the first 3D printed clothes and shoes were introduced. At the same time, it was a time when the term postinternet art emerged as a response to what it means to experience life within an internet state of mind. Since ArtBase is not adding any new works to its archive since 2015, the study collected data from all the works added between 2010-2015. This resulted to a total of 190 works being reviewed.

Originally a decision was made to review the artworks and categorize them in three categories: 1. Appropriation of Popular Culture 2. Appropriation of Web Content and 3. Appropriation of Internet Technology. After reviewing the first 50 artworks it became clear that the Popular Culture category would need a study of its own which would also need to examine what popular culture is today. Instead, the present study was re-focused on appropriation of internet technology and web content.

All 190 works were reviewed and were categorized based on the criteria of what internet appropriation of internet technology and appropriation of web content is, described in sections 3 and 4. First it was specified what is being considered internet technology and web content between the given time frame and then it was specified what can be considered to be appropriation of internet technology and web content. Based on the above, the works were divided in two categories accompanied by short descriptions about how each work appropriates internet technology and/or web content. During the review process, it was often necessary to reexamine and reevaluate the two categories' criteria based on new findings from the artworks.

Many of the archive's links to the artworks were broken. Unreachable site, 404 error and forbidden page messages would often appear. From the total of 190 works reviewed, 40 (21%) links were broken. Some artworks didn't have links to the original or an archived form of the work, these have not been added to the broken links data. Whenever a link was broken or missing, the artwork was reached through online searches. Often artworks would be available on the artist's website or there would be a link from an interview the artist gave or an exhibition's press release. In all occasions a path to reach the artwork was found. The many broken, expired and missing links to the artworks highlight an issue that has been already identified by the art world, that of digital life, obsolescence of the digital art archive and conservation of internet artworks.

### 6 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### 6.1 Postinternet Art Appropriates the Internet

From the total of 190 artworks being reviewed 154 (81%) fit into the categories. The results exhibit extensive use of appropriation of internet technology (93%) and significant use of appropriation of web content (32%) [Figure 1]. This provides evidence that contemporary internet art consistently appropriates the internet. From the 154 artworks, 49 (32%) fit both categories [Figure 2].

Because of the study's large number of artworks being reviewed, it is also evident that the applications of internet technology and web content are many and variable and that there is no specific technique that characterises this behaviour. Instead, the artworks' reviews show that often artists appropriate the internet in ways that relate to their own experiences online. Artists can appropriate content and technology that relates to activities like image searching, social networking, online gaming, internet surfing, texting etc. The reviews suggest that appropriation in contemporary internet art comes as a natural behaviour of living with the internet instead of being a political or a tactical choice. Additionally, there is lack of evident consideration for copyright or attempt to trace or acknowledge the source of the appropriated material. Artist Johaness Osterhoff's one-year performance called iPhone live [16], documents the activities performed on his mobile phone during 2012. Screenshots are uploaded automatically to the artwork's site as a live stream of the phone's everyday activity whenever the artist presses the "home" button. Artist Krystal South began collecting images of mirrors from Craigslist with no specific purpose in mind initially. Sorting through the hundreds of photos that she collected, she found herself confronted with developing a system of organisation to contextualise these images. This resulted to her work A Mirror Unto Itself in 2011 [17], where taxonomies of these images along with an essay written as part of the artwork are available to download on the artist's website.

All the above demonstrate that the use of appropriation in art today is significantly different to that of previous art movements or of early internet art (net art). More research that would focus on the complexities of appropriating the internet in contemporary internet art is evidently required if we wish to examine this behavior from a sociocultural perspective.

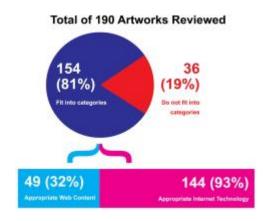


Figure 1

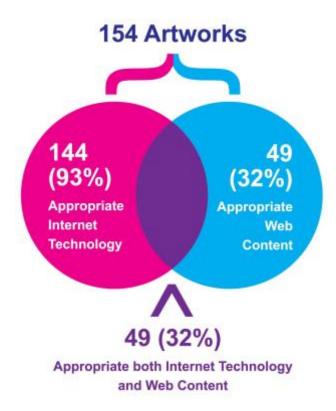


Figure 2

# 6.2 Connection between Appropriating Web Content and Appropriating Internet Technology

The results also indicate that appropriation of internet technology does not presuppose appropriation of web content as the majority (61%) of the artworks that appropriate internet technology fit only the appropriation of technology category. However, appropriation of web content presupposes appropriation of internet technology as only 1% of the artworks fit only the appropriation of web content category. In other words, the artists in the study who appropriate web content almost always appropriate internet technology in their artworks. This is not the case for the artists in the study who appropriate internet technology. More than half of them do not continue to appropriate web content too [Figure 3].

In the only two occasions were web content was appropriated without appropriating internet technology at the same time 1. images found online were used for a print on demand paperback for 56 Broken Kindle Screens by Sebastian Schmieg in 2012 [18], 2. images found online were used to create photographs for ScanOps by Andrew Norman Wilson in 2012 [19]. This suggests that more research could be conducted on the conditions of web content appropriation. Artists do not simply use found web content and leave the internet to create their work offline. Those who appropriate web content stay online and appropriate internet technology in diverse and multifarious ways.

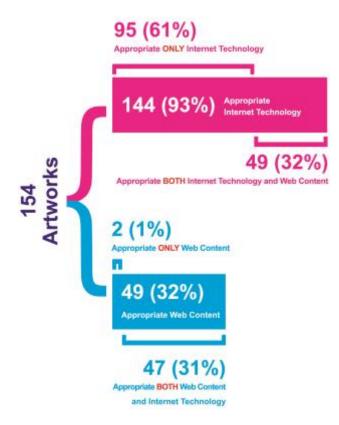


Figure 3

### 7 CONCLUSIONS

The paper provides important evidence on how and to what extent contemporary internet art appropriates the internet. It examines what appropriation in internet art means today. It specifies what can be considered appropriation of internet technology and web content. It collects extensive data from 190 artworks and reviews their use of appropriation. The findings support the paper's claim that appropriation is a critical element of contemporary internet art's art-making. The data categorisation suggests that two main categories can be identified on how appropriation is being used in postinternet art in relation to the internet. One is appropriation of internet technology and the other is appropriation of web content. Information about the nature and processes of appropriation of the internet by postinternet art is revealed during the study. Appropriating the internet becomes an organic behaviour within the wider context of experiencing life online. Artists no longer adopt a position on the outside, instead they operate within a new cultural reality that is being reflected by the World Wide Web. The variety and diversity of ways for appropriating internet technology indicates that there is no one way for using appropriation of internet technology and web content. Artists draw on their personal experiences with the internet which reflects on their art-making. The analysis of the findings suggests that they are further areas of research for appropriating the internet, such as how appropriation in art was effected by internet

technology, the conditions for appropriating web content and processes for appropriating the internet for art-making. Today, the internet is undoubtedly a defining component of cultural production and self-determination in art. To imagine art's future and our role in it, it is important that we try and understand what art's present is about.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is funded by the Digital Economy programme (RCUK Grant EP/G037582/1), which supports the HighWire Centre for Doctoral Training. (http://highwire.lancs.ac.uk)

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