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## **Where are my keys? The now of critique in a plurality of voices**

“[Facebook] wants people to find what they want  
and connect them to ideas they like online.”<sup>1</sup>

In the study of culture, the term contemporaneity is often utilised in order to temporally define an activity or process of production in relation to the present historical moment. Prominent in this discussion are the immediacy of presence in the here and now and the value of the new. Insofar, however, as something is examined in relation to a historical moment, that historical moment need not only be the current one. Contemporaneity in the sense of being in a contemporaneous state enters the discussion of historical cases with reference to cultural production in a different time and place (i.e. Baxandall’s *period eye*). More generally, with reference to making a projection from the current standpoint to a different time and place, that other time and place is accessed from a now that is subjected to a constant process of re-configuration and reiteration in relation to that past and vice versa (see historical materialism). As such, the concept of contemporaneity does not simply help us localise a relationship to the now. It implicates how experience, memory and their relationship are conceptualised. For this reason, its discussion should also concern the discursive operations through which social relations, values and ideologies become actualised in the historical process.

Particular, however, to our present historical moment is the use of new technologies and social media platforms that intensify the experiential dimension of the event and amplify the now. These are not only used in the production and experience of art but also in cultural promotion and, as we will see below, are deeply involved in how our experience of the world is mediated. This presents new challenges in how art and criticism can capture the now and critically address it as that which is permanently under construction.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Zuckerberg quoted in Jose van Dijk, *The Culture of Connectivity* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

For contemporary art, new technologies and social media platforms that allow one to gather information feed from diverse resources and manipulate it through time-delays, dislocations and superimpositions become an additional means of intersecting the spatio-temporal continuum of experience and of engaging with the concept of contemporaneity. Consider, for example, *Shadowing* (2014) by Jonathan Chomko and Matthew Rosier, submitted for and winner of the Playable City 2014 award. *Shadowing* was an interactive public installation in Bristol, UK where city lights in eight different locations were fitted with memory chips that recorded the shadows of the passers-by and played them back. This and other works that utilise new and social media can interrogate the relations between here/there, us/them and local/global and generate discussions on what it means to be contemporaneous. They have the capacity to amplify the here and the now and to merge their time and space, or *another* time and space, with ours. Moreover, when they are also interactive, their very structure, their realisation, becomes emergent.

This is one difficulty that art criticism faces when discussing this type of contemporary art practices. From a different perspective, social media are intrinsically part of marketing. They contribute to the intensification of consumerist culture that together with prevalent neo-liberal policies across the educational and the cultural sector shift the dynamics of our access to knowledge and culture. This causes changes to museum policies and the traditional model of plan-produce-publish and affects the institutional position and validity of criticism. The following discussion will try to locate these changes and reflect on the state of criticism today. It will examine different artworks that use social media and suggest an interdisciplinary approach that, based on social semiotics, turns attention to the act of communication. By understanding art criticism as interpretation in operation, we can negotiate its position within overlapping discursive frameworks and evaluate the social and critical dimensions of art.

## **Neo-liberalism 2.0**

Our everyday lives are characterised by constant feed and relay of information without measure or relevance. On the one hand, media propaganda in the service of disaster capitalism and neo-liberal warfare rely on an endless bombardment of (mis)information.<sup>2</sup> On the other, the built-in capacity of two-way communication as offered by Web 2.0 is geared by

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<sup>2</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Picador, 2008).

surveillance and profit.<sup>3</sup> This means that not only we are constantly being monitored but also that our user behaviours, generated data, demographic and psychographic information are being tracked and stored, and collected and processed for profit.

Social media platforms constantly devise new ways to make people log in, post, advertise and recommend. Consider, for example, Facebook's News Feed that informs its users of what other users are doing while sharing data from one's own behaviour. As such, they facilitate extensive commoditisation through the valorisation of surveillance.<sup>4</sup> Extensive commodification has been described as the way in which market forces shape and re-shape life and particularly spaces and relations previously untouched, or mildly touched, by capitalist social relations.<sup>5</sup> Thus the systemic logic of the internet and social media, and therefore the space that these create, is deeply connected to the development of late capitalist societies and reflects and reproduces its driving forces.

This space thrives on the capitalisation of information specifically in the sense of harvesting collective knowledge or of what Karl Marx defines as general intellect. This refers to social knowledge including technological and epistemological knowledge but also perception and language – that is, not only knowledge but also the capacity to think – as a direct force of production in a given historical moment shaped by the real life process.<sup>6</sup> It is a space that also thrives on the capitalisation of free labour. This refers to the processes through which users generate content and participate in marketing either first-party, i.e. of the platform itself, or third-party by sharing, promoting and advertising for free and while seeing this as leisure rather than work.<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, we are a long way from the celebrated “users-producers” and rather in the era of “unpaid labourers-distributors-consumers”.

As a result, we are permanently exposed to emergent temporalities and experience situations and relationships through instances of aggregated information. Yet data are by their very nature quantifiable. To give meaning to our experience, therefore, we seek to actualise ourselves amidst this aggregation of information through interaction. In the social media world, this translates to how many clicks one has, how many likes, views and tweets. It is, in other words, a very narrow understanding of interaction in marketable terms of visibility and

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Fuchs et al. (eds), *Internet and Surveillance: The Challenges of Web 2.0 and Social Media* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Nicole S. Cohen, “The Valorization of Surveillance: Towards a Political Economy of Facebook,” *Democratic Communiqué*, 22:1 (2008): 5-22.

<sup>5</sup> Vincent Mosco, *The political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal* (London: Sage, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Notebook VII – The Chapter on Capital [1857-61], trans. Martin Nicolaus (Penguin/New Left Review, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

(self)promotion. Indeed, it should come as no surprise that social media treat connectivity as a resource and sociality as a saleable asset.<sup>8</sup> They do not only quantify and commodify user behaviour and free labour but they also quantify, commodify and actualise interpersonal relations. For our part, and with our experience of the world mediated through corporate news, education and culture through digital platforms and friendship through social media, it is the experience of our own life itself that becomes mediated.

These elements – amplification of the now, quantifiable validation based on visibility and commodification of human connectedness – are intrinsic to neo-liberal policies. Neo-liberalism dictates the self-interest and preservation of the market, the dissolution of the social state, privatisation and de-regulation, and the elimination of concepts such as “public goods” and “community”. Effectively, everything becomes a commodity and everything is seen as a business and treated as such. From education and healthcare to natural resources and culture, these are no longer regarded as public goods or social services or, as some “radicals” might say, a civil or human *right* but as businesses for-profit.

For educational and cultural institutions, efficiency, accountability and quality are redefined in market terms. There is constant pressure to produce quantifiable results, meet performance goals, capitalise on social relations, collect and monitor data, and identify and capitalise on assets. This situation has dramatically changed in the past ten years or so with universities becoming global vendors of instructional commodities and student-teacher relations mediated by the consumption of things such as educational software used in exchange for allowing the vendors to harvest and trade student data.<sup>9</sup> The humanities are particularly faced with severe cutbacks in funding and demands for “demonstrable impact”, “applicable findings” and “added value” – what we can call the “marketable scientification” of the humanities. Similar practices in the cultural sector have propelled the rapid expansion of cultural marketing.

## **Cultural marketing**

The artworld shares key characteristics with the show business. One is that appearances matter. This is not only in terms of traditional advertisement strategies and

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<sup>8</sup> van Dijk, *The Culture of Connectivity*.

<sup>9</sup> Les Levidow, “Marketizing Higher Education: Neoliberal Strategies and Counter-Strategies,” in *Neoliberalism and Education Reform*, ed. E. Wayne Ross and Rich Gibson (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2006), 237-55.

publicity but also reality TV shows such as BBC's *School of Saatchi* (2009) in the UK and Bravo's *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist* (2010-11) in the US, whose winners are offered solo exhibitions and cash prizes. Another characteristic is celebrity culture. The MoMA's PS1 director Klaus Biesenbach comes across as a dashing and unpredictable socialite. Biesenbach cut Marina Abramovic's performance *The Artist is Present* (2010) short while his recent *Bjork* show (8 March – 7 June 2015), an extravaganza of glitz, kitsch and pure spectacle, received considerable negative reviews.<sup>10</sup> Another social media star is Jerry Saltz, an art critic for *New York* magazine who had over 150,000 followers across Twitter and Facebook with his “#askjerry” initiative and who was at some point banned from the latter for allegedly posting historical art with sexually explicit imagery. This was a smart move that, as expected, increased his popularity. Likewise, there is a long list of “difficult” artists such as Tino Sehgal who is notorious for slating critics and hosts alike. As in show business proper, these examples demonstrate the importance of the *persona* that one projects. This directly relates to marketing and self-promotion and increasingly becomes a staple in art education. As they say, there is no such thing as bad publicity. In a sense, we might have reverted back to pop art, but pop art with a twist: social media.

If, in terms of political economy, social media are *primarily* deployed for marketing and surveillance as previously discussed, in terms of social relations, they are characterised by shifting trends, strife for visibility and fixation on the ephemeral. They heavily rely on word of mouth and the *credibility* of their contents is closely associated with numbers (quantity over quality). It is precisely because social media transform the ways in which people interact and receive and exchange information that they are used by museums, as they are used by other agents, to improve their marketing and communication practices. This combined with neo-liberal policies of privatisation, commodification of culture and open market competitiveness, there is a notable shift in the museum's public image.

Traditionally, the museum has been understood as having an educational function and a mission to preserve cultural heritage and to configure identity. Likewise, its main objectives have been to facilitate the manifestation and development of identity through socialisation and interaction, and to encourage connections to other cultures and times across generational and cultural boundaries. However, the intensification of cultural consumption in capitalist societies also demands increasing investment in the museum's marketability.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Peter Schjeldahl, “MoMA's embarrassing Björk Crush,” *The New Yorker*, 17 March, 2015, accessed 30 October 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/moma-embarrassing-bjork-crush>.

Cultural business consultants such as VISSCH+STAM and MuseumNextPractice offer paid services for “future-proofing” museums and helping them develop their digital engagement strategies. Utilising an MBA terminology that also becomes prevalent across university websites and funding applications, such services include training workshops and crash courses in entrepreneurship, marketing, strategic planning and museum branding for prices that range between 5,000 euro for a full day ideation session to 20,000 euro for a five-day strategy session.<sup>11</sup> The first step in any strategic planning is the identification of the museum’s goals and focus as well as of its assets, audiences, target groups and key influencers. Community building is certainly one such goal but so are promotion and marketing, increasing visitor numbers, enhancing long-term relations, remaining connected with audiences outside the actual visit hours and expanding access for different types of audiences – what in business-oriented language is referred to as “augmented museum experience”. The institution must moreover pitch and recognise market and cultural trends, define its resources and boundaries, and measure and evaluate performance. One way to do this is by gathering statistics from its social media usage.

As part of the museum’s marketing strategy, social media are indispensable in monitoring and motivating cultural consumption. They have diverse capabilities that can support the museum’s multi-layered commercial outlook, cater for different target groups and employed to meet different goals. Being two-way channels, they allow museums to engage their audiences (i.e. inform about exhibitions, offer images and exclusive information and publish reviews and in-depth analyses) while at the same time they are used to gather opinions and formulate market reports based on user behaviour.<sup>12</sup> The following channels have been classified by business entrepreneurs according to their main objective, primary audience and content: websites that offer potential visitors images and practical information such as opening hours, locations and calendar; newsletters that inform loyal audiences about events and milestones; a main blog for repeated visitors and the local press with original short content that presents and discusses the museum’s projects; a director’s blog for high frequency visitors and the press with longer articles and videos that also inform members and trustees; Tumblr and Instagram for the young local audience with user-generated content and behind-the-scenes invites geared towards building a community; Facebook for the general

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<sup>11</sup> “Our Products,” MuseumNextPractice, accessed 30 October 2015, <http://www.museumnext.com/Practice/>.

<sup>12</sup> Natalia Dudareva, “Museums in Social Media,” in *Museums and the Web 2013*, ed. N. Proctor & R. Cherry (Silver Spring, MD: Museums and the Web). Published 1 June 2014, accessed 30 October 2015. <http://mwf2014.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/museums-in-social-media/>.

audience with photos, catchy texts and links to enhance the museum's fan base; Twitter for the loyal audience with shorts texts and links (this can be personalised for different members of staff); Pinterest for international art enthusiasts with user-generated original content aiming to make the brand visual; Google + for national art enthusiasts with videos, events and exclusive meet-ups; and project-specific or members' apps for special events.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of activities, these can include "instawalks" (guided or unguided walks often accompanied by themes and offering visitors the possibility to upload their pictures on the museum's Instagram page); apps that allow visitors to create and share their own visual responses to exhibits (i.e. the app *The Warhol: D.I.Y. Pop* created by the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh); and dedicated selfies' areas such as the mirror selfie area in The National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen.<sup>14</sup> Museums can also engage their audiences with late night parties and events with special guests that are appropriately hash-tagged and tweeted and ongoing behind-the-scenes video series. Coming full circle back to show business, these cash in on reality TV's most sellable characteristic: that of purporting "amateurism" and offering a slice of life or some "insider's" view in contrast to some other, corporate image that is simultaneously promoted by the same organisation. Here, the Facebook-trained museum visitor will most probably welcome, if not celebrate, this exposure and dissection of the divide between private/public.

Such re-conceptualisations of the relation between the institution and its audience come to replace the traditional model of plan-produce-publish on behalf of the former. Regarding the latter, visitors have the illusion of a personalised museum experience while freely contributing to its marketing and promotion. This is not to say that user-generated content does not have applications in research and learning. One concerns issues of identity and memory. The Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, for example, used Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and its museum blog to make its collection more relevant and complete by inviting people to share information and stories relating to photographs of postcolonial migrants from its holdings.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jasper Visser and Jim Richardson, *Digital Engagement in Culture, Heritage and the Arts*. Published in 2014, accessed on 30 October 2015. <http://digitalengagementframework.com/>.

<sup>14</sup> Jonas Heide Smith, "The Me/Us/Them model: Prioritizing museum Social-media Efforts for Maximum Reach," in *MW2015: Museums and the Web 2015*. Published 31 January 2015, accessed 30 October 2015. <http://mw2015.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/the-meusthem-model-prioritizing-museum-social-media-efforts-for-maximum-reach/>.

<sup>15</sup> Randi Lorenz Marselis and Laura Maria Schütze, "One Way to Holland: Migrant Heritage and Social Media," in *Museum Communication and Social Media: The Connected Museum*, ed. Kirsten Drotner and Kim Christian Schrøder (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 75-92.



But where does one draw the line between accessing and consuming culture? The problem is not only that of budget. It is unattainable to argue that if a museum had adequate funds it could successfully balance its commercial, educational and cultural guises without losing value. It is the lack of non-commercial funding that compels a museum to enter the open market for revenue, and staying up-to-date with new marketing strategies and technologies creates a vicious circle between the costs involved and what is generated. Therefore, it does not follow that turning the museum into a better business for-profit will make it a better cultural and educational institution.

The deeper problem is that social media put pressure on museums to quantify their success and efficiency as *commercial* outlets. As Kirsten Drotner and Kim Christian Schrøder observe:

The commercial nature and communicative rationale of most social media with their quantitative rankings and evaluations play into existing pressures for museums to treat (potential) visitors as consumers of particular services and to think in terms of visitor volume (clicks, “likes,” unique views) as indicators of communicative success.<sup>16</sup>

As an increasingly commercialised entity, the museum-*brand* cannot be satisfied with community engagement or promote itself as a cheap day out. It must become competitive in the global market and re-define its objectives and, with 2 billion people sharing content online, a key objective becomes converting social media followers and their friends into visitors, customers and brand advocates. Doing this has particular difficulties.

Museums integrate the digital into their marketing and promotional services but they must also cope with the costs involved in training and/or hiring personnel, maintenance and update, and new health and safety issues that digital engagement strategies can create (i.e. approaching artworks, accessing dangerous surfaces, blocking exits). They simplify their publications to fit cross-channel applications, especially mobile phones that are the main way of accessing the internet, and accelerate their response time through live chats; but they must also address the quantity versus quality predicament of social media. Which is to say, it is one

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<sup>16</sup> Kirsten Drotner and Kim Christian Schrøder, “Introduction: Museum Communication and Social Media – The Connected Museum,” in *Museum Communication and Social Media: The Connected Museum*, ed. Kirsten Drotner and Kim Christian Schrøder (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 1-16.

thing to foster user-generated content but strong marketing campaigns and trendy shows do not guarantee a deep dialogue between the institution and the community.<sup>17</sup>

More importantly, utilised applications, programmes and accessories are often developed by outside companies which can gain access to the museum's user data (as in the case of educational software previously mentioned) and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have fully incorporated third-party marketing, data mining, targeted advertising and "buy now" options. Such user-orientation establishes a customer relationship between the museum and the community and cultivates a corporate culture that easily feeds into the discourse "the customer is always right". It departs from the museum's educational function and commitment to the preservation and revival of cultural heritage, and risks decreasing the significance and professionalism of its contribution in favour of visitor satisfaction, which predominates in the development of the museum's policy and programme. In a nutshell, we are left with the mediation of experience, the capitalisation of human connectedness, quantity over quality, and private profit over public service.

### **The state of art criticism**

The use of social media in the commodification and consumption of culture has drastic and totalising effects on our social existence. It embraces and utilises the participation of the user as a customer and therefore establishes one's identity as such, and conflates consumption with learning and sociability since social media is one of the predominant means through which social life is actualised.

Through a plurality of voices and because of their emergent qualities and the competing interests that they serve, social media shift the dynamics of the artworld and the production of knowledge. It may be that museums aim at providing an enjoyable and educational experience that can lead to transformative social change; yet marketing, visitor satisfaction and branding are now placed high on the agenda. So where does that leave the art critic?

This seems to be a reoccurring question across art councils and marketing summits (i.e. Australia's Council for the Arts Marketing Summit 2010 panel "Who's the critic now" and the International Association of Art Critics' panel "Art Criticism and Social Media" at

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<sup>17</sup> "The Happy Museum: A tale of how it could turn out all right," *The Happy Museum* website, published 2001, accessed 30 October 2015. <http://www.happymuseumproject.org>.

the College Art Association's annual 2013 conference). Similar to the different extensions of the museum as a cultural-educational institution and as a business previously discussed, here too the question is not whether serious art criticism or analysis proper can become replaced by social media popularity because these serve different functions. The one is financial. Smaller cultural outlets cannot compete with block-buster shows and their popular criticism *lite*, which remain the money-bringers in the artworld showbiz, with lengthy, heavy analyses. Moreover, while user-generated content and visitors' feedback contribute to the development of a museum's marketing strategies and wider visibility through social media platforms is beneficial for both museums and artists, the professional art critic remains an important gatekeeper in the artworld both in terms of promotion and evaluation.

The relation between popularity and quality in the culture industry is a complex one. Popularity of numbers is important for museums, artists and audiences as consumers but these also rely on insights from an authority to contextualise artistic practice within broader debates and historical perspectives and to offer an informed opinion *why* the work is good. Such insights of course are not irrelevant to a work's marketability. Something does not necessarily need to be popular in order to be qualified as good and if the measure of popularity is mass culture the response in this case would come from the sub-culture of the "cult". The reverse, however, is not straightforward. This is not because wider marketability does not compensate for low quality (and mass culture is the case *par excellence* where marketability becomes the criterion<sup>18</sup>) but because the dominant systems of classification and evaluation are part of the same mechanism that systemically supports the commodification of culture.

As such, at the crux of the debate regarding the status of art criticism in the current state of affairs that is dominated and mediated by social media is the impact of market forces on the quality and content of writing about the arts. The emergent temporalities that social media generate and the intensification of cultural consumption create a double paradox for the art critic. On the one hand, the art critic must underline the new-ness of the discovery in order to differentiate, promote and qualify his or her analysis as worthwhile. At the same time, analysis needs a critical distance and one must step back in order to consider the act and its effects in the social and historical context, situate it within wider debates including art

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<sup>18</sup> Theodor Adorno introduced the term "culture industry" to specify how mass culture does not spontaneously arise from the masses but rather integrates consumers from above. Adorno explains how cultural entities are governed by the principle of their realisation as value and are no longer to be understood as *also* commodities but as commodities through and through. Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered" [1967], *New German Critique* 6 (1975):12-19.

historiography and tradition and make it relevant. In other words, criticism *dilutes* the temporality of the event.

On the other hand, the institutional framework within which the art critic operates such as the museum and the university demands that the object of study is denominated as “new” and follows the trends of its time. This is so because the institution itself must respond to a competitive open market and demonstrate that it engages with “relevant” research. At the same time, however, it strives to maintain its own image as producer of robust knowledge, as serious, analytical and enduring. This means that the art critic is required to *enhance* the work’s temporality but also contain its effects.

There is a sense of schizophrenia here, which has been widely discussed in relation to capitalism and consumerist culture. Capitalism requires fluid consumer identities that must remain embedded in an accelerated time of formation and dissolution, emergence and morphing, instant identification and disassociation. I refer here to schizophrenia not as the limit of capitalism (cf. Deleuze and Guattari<sup>19</sup>) but schizophrenia as one of capitalism’s driving forces. Fredric Jameson discusses how postmodernism replicates and reinforces the logic and emergent social order of consumer capitalism.<sup>20</sup> The complexities of modernism and of the nomenclature around postmodernism notwithstanding, and keeping in mind that Jameson writes in the 1980s, Jameson identifies two significant features of postmodernism and late capitalism: pastiche and schizophrenia.

Pastiche is characterised by a mimetic, fragmented and privatised language that is used and re-used to such an extent that all that remains is stylistic diversity and heterogeneity without the latent feeling, as found in parody, that “there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic” (original emphasis).<sup>21</sup> For its part, schizophrenia involves the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents. Jameson borrows from Jacques Lacan’s structuralist approach to psychoanalysis and the consideration of schizophrenia as a language disorder relating to identity formation. In this case, there is no meaningful correlation across signifier, signified and referent (i.e. the word, its meaning and the “real” object in the “real” world). Words lose their meaning, their materiality becomes obsessive (i.e. word repetition as an incomprehensible incantation) and they are transformed

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<sup>19</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983)

<sup>20</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), 111-25.

<sup>21</sup> Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 114.

into images (i.e. a signifier without signified). In addition, the experience of temporality, past, present, memory and personal identity as this is developed through the persistence of the “I” and the “me” over time are also an effect of language. For this reason, Jameson explains, the schizophrenic

is condemned to live a perpetual present with which the various moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon. In other words, schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence.<sup>22</sup>

It is this condition of living in an eternal present, in an amplified and celebrated “now” where any sense of history has disappeared and there is constant data feed without measure or relevance that characterises consumerist cultures and is aggravated and sustained by social media.

How can, then, criticism take distance and reflect on the event amidst all these emergent temporalities that characterise the field of cultural production and consumption, and recuperate a critical voice from the marketable validation-by-numbers that has come to dominate institutional policies? My suggestion is to consider the communicational aspect of the event in the process of its realisation, and evaluate how social relations and power structures are reflected, (re)produced or challenged by it. This interdisciplinary approach derives from social semiotics and discourse analysis and gives particular emphasis on the social and political dimension of language. M.A.K. Halliday has examined language as a *social* semiotic, a product of the social process with two fundamental aspects, expression and action.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, language is actualised within given social contexts and communicates information about the situation, the patterns of thinking behaviour and habitual thought. It serves as the vehicle of reality, which is another social construct, and at the same time shapes it. To put it differently, language is a joint action that is fundamentally used for social purposes and as such it actualises, rather than simply reflects, social structures, hierarchies, norms and interpersonal relations. Equally, meaning making is a shared activity determined by function and use – that is, context; and context itself is not void of social value. With this in mind, we can understand a text (I use “text” in the extended sense of the word as a

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<sup>22</sup> Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 119.

<sup>23</sup> Michael A.K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic* (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1978).

semiotic field that can include linguistic, visual or gestural codes) as an instance of interaction in the socio-semiotic communicational process of *language in operation*.

Returning back to art criticism, we can consider writing about art as *interpretation in operation*. Given how emergent events of aggregated information shape experience, the moment of critique must account for both the structural components of the act and the discursive. That is, account for both the act's interaction with context and how meaning is dialectically shaped through the *mediation* of that experience. To do so, one must examine how art communicates across different contexts (institutional, discursive, geo-political, social); determine the meaning-making processes that enable social interaction; consider the interpretive frameworks, social conventions and power structures that condition such meaning-making processes; and evaluate what is achieved by this act. The benefits of utilising a social semiotic approach in the discussion of artworks that use social media are its focus on the process of communication, its acknowledgement of the emergent qualities of the event, and its close examination of how relations, experience, social norms and codes of behaviour are actualised and mediated by the act.

Let us consider some works that use Twitter. Because of the restrictions regarding their length, tweets seem to be “to the point”, even though “the point” is, in the form of comment or reaction, wider visibility and the fostering of the group mentality of being “in the know” and, specifically in this case, “in the now”. The first example is Brian Piana's *Ellsworth Kelly Hacked My Twitter* (2009). The work was based on a real-time chat with people that the artist followed on Twitter and it visually resembled a multi-coloured mosaic that expanded in a rectangular shape. The mosaic was a compilation of people's individual avatars reduced to a single, representative colour block, with each block representing an individual tweet as it came through. The results were generated in real time with the top-left pixel being the most recent tweet. Placing the cursor over a block would show the author and the time and date of the post but not its contents.

Second, Man Bartlett's *#24hEcho* (2010). For this work, the artist sat in the P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York for 24 hours and rewrote all the tweets that he received with the hash tag #24hEcho. As the description of the work indicated:

For 24 hours I will repeat, into a webcam, whatever you tell me to (when you use Twitter and the hash tag #24hEcho). I will be present in repeating your words. I

will be your puppet, your sounding board, your refuge. Otherwise, I will be silent.<sup>24</sup>

One could say that these two works operate across different sites and audiences. In the case of the latter, because Bartlett sent the re-used tweets back to their original senders as an indication that they had been received and utilised, the work made, according to one review, “Twitter that much more interactive as [the artist] acted like an auto reply machine.”<sup>25</sup>

Of course, Twitter allows one to both send and receive messages automatically and users do tend to sit on their own behind a screen and type away. Thus other than reproducing this activity within the art context (and we have seen how the artworld has already widely embraced social media), and perhaps even offering an exposé on the condition of our times, these works do not challenge this condition or indicate a way out. The reference to Kelly remains symptomatic, over-reaching into some art historical source in order to acquire surplus value and apart from the physical feat of tweeting for 24 hours there is no impact or change that these works put forward, even at an affective level for the spectator or the participant. They do not problematise social conventions or power structures in a meaningful way nor do they bring their underlying interpretive frameworks to the surface. As a result, they remain as ephemeral and as superficial as their emergent forms.



<sup>24</sup> “#24hEcho,” Man Barlett’s website, accessed 30 October 2015. [http://www.manbartlett.com/24hEcho/index\\_live.htm](http://www.manbartlett.com/24hEcho/index_live.htm).

<sup>25</sup> “Man Barlett’s #24hEcho,” Algorithmic and Data Art, accessed 30 October 2015. <https://algorithmicart2015.wordpress.com/2015/02/19/man-bartletts-24hecho/>



Brian House and Kyle McDonald, *Conversnitch* (2014). Video stills from the work's installation. © Brian House and Kyle McDonald. Images courtesy of the artists.

A third example is *Conversnitch* (2014) by Brian House and Kyle McDonald. The work consisted of an eavesdropping device that looked like a lamp and could be fitted in any corresponding fixture. It was set to record ambient conversations via a Raspberry Pi and a microphone, which were then sent via Wi-Fi to Amazon's Mechanical Turk to be transcribed and then tweeted. According to House, the project sought to bridge the gap between the presumed private physical space and the public space online.<sup>26</sup>

*Conversnitch* engages more effectively the relationships between the physical and the virtual, human and machine, legality and surveillance. By duplicating practices from the social sphere, it raises questions regarding internet privacy and security and brings to the foreground different attitudes towards them. It invites critical reflection on the Internet as a privately-owned corporate space where user data are constantly collected and stored, a space driven by commercial activity and extensively used for surveillance. By this act, the work seeks to expose certain power operations in play that characterise social media and the web but that also implicate the work itself and the complicity of the artworld. If one is prompted to contest why anyone should be eavesdropping on one's conversation (or monitor one's user behaviour), then one is equally likely to ask: and what gave the artist *that* right? As a result, and by potentially undermining its own validity, the work forces one to come vis-à-vis a plethora of practices that invade one's privacy with or without consent across different spheres of social activity.

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<sup>26</sup> "Conversnitch", Brian House's website, accessed 30 October 2015. <http://brianhouse.net/works/conversnitch/>.



This in terms of the work's potential. The question remains whether the people whose conversations were recorded and publicised were confronted with such breach of privacy – that is, whether the work succeeded in *effectively* communicating its critique to its target audience rather than simply proclaiming its intention on the gallery's wall (virtual or real) or having the art critic speaking in its stead. In that regard, *Shadowing* (2014), previously discussed, is more contained in its execution and immediate in its effect. It touches upon multifaceted issues such as surveillance and the ample use of CCTV cameras particularly in the UK but also urban living and a city's inhabitants, one's relation with the "other" and interpersonal relations. Because the public was only given a general indication of the location of the fitted street lamps when the work was first presented, this encouraged urban exploration and even gave a sense of revival. In the aftermath however, and being an award-winning work, one version of *Shadowing* is on display at London's Design Museum and another one will be presented in Tokyo in 2016 with advertised locations. Such stable institutional settings and user-friendly reiterations certainly affect the work's capacity to critically insert itself in the everyday life.

To summarise so far, it is not enough that art embodies the "new" and that criticism announces it. It is important that the work not only draws resources from the contemporary world and attests to the condition of our time but that it problematises the conditions through which it is actualised. One must look beyond the factuality of the medium and draw attention to what it means to partake the activities or attitudes that the work duplicates and what it means to understand what the work communicates – that is, the practices, ideologies and behaviours that are actualised, mediated and communicated by the act.

### **And now?**

One cannot but be critical of this social media spectacle. I'm referring here to Guy Debord's definition of how the spectacle determines social relations in capitalism where social experience is mediated by images.<sup>27</sup>

From the perspective of statistics and quantifiable results, media technologies appear to encourage rather than replace live arts attendance and enhance the public's engagement

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<sup>27</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* [1967] (Detroit: Black and Red, 1970).

with arts and culture.<sup>28</sup> From a more critical perspective that considers social relations, Claire Bishop argues that individual subjects experience society as atomised and fragmented because social experience is mediated by images – for example, the “diffuse” images of consumerism. As Bishop explains:

In a world where everyone can air their views to everyone we are faced not with mass empowerment but with an endless stream of banal egos. Far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it.<sup>29</sup>

As our lives become increasingly mediated, we must first interrogate the “social” in social media. Asking whether they make us all critics is similar to asking whether we are all participants now that performance art has entered the art establishment. That era is eclipsing fast when impromptu performances took the risk of pushing the boundaries between producer and consumer to the limits, experimented with the threat of failure and challenged the audience’s fear of “getting it wrong”. Museums have now dedicated performance spaces (the MoMA has a whole floor), issue time-slot tickets and clear the rooms from all surrounding art in order to “host” performances for which the artist contracts professionals. To give another example, abundance of availability and customisation of profiles does not mean that social media are democratically structured the same way that more TV channels does not mean democratic availability of information and more shopping brands do not reflect any meaningful freedom of choice.

Second, the concept of the “emergent” is not exclusive to social media. Discussing the organisation of social structures, Raymond Williams explains that cultural production is a social process, and culture a signifying system through which *necessarily* (though through other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored (original emphasis).<sup>30</sup> Williams further demonstrates the dynamic nature of cultural forms and the relations of domination and subordination, and classifies three categories of social and cultural change: dominant, residual and emergent.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> National Endowment for the Arts US, “Audience 2.0. How Technology influences Art Participation,” report published in 2008, accessed 30 October 2015. <https://www.arts.gov/publications/audience-20-how-technology-influences-arts-participation>; and Arts Council, England, “Digital audiences: Engagement with arts and culture online”, report published November 2010, accessed 30 October 2015. <http://creative-blueprint.co.uk/library/item/digital-audiences>.

<sup>29</sup> Claire Bishop, “Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We now?” in *Living As Form. Socially Engaged Art from 1999-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 34-45 (40). Lecture for Creative Time’s *Living as Form* Cooper Union, New York, 23 September 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 13.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*, 203.

Third, because meaning is dialectically shaped through the mediation of experience, it becomes paramount that art maintains and critically reflects on the tension between autonomy and heteronomy, i.e. between the universal or idea that it negotiates and the particular manifestation through which it does so; or, from a different perspective, between the work's material configuration and the discursive formulation of what it means or can mean. Such a dialectical understanding of the transformative relation between art and the world is not something new but central in the discussion of the historical avant-garde and more recently of what has been defined as social practice.<sup>32</sup>

In our present, we are becoming increasingly embedded as spectators and further alienated from our social condition. Our behaviours and sociality are being capitalised on, our experience of the world and of each other commodified, mediated and consumed, and our lives turned into lifestyles. Faced with the acceleration of information feed that is irrelevant at best and deluding at worse and the commodification of culture and knowledge, our response to social media should be to try and slow things down.

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<sup>32</sup> See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) and Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).