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Net Gains

STATE OF THE ART

Claire Bishop versus the Internet

In 'Digital Divide' – an essay published in the 50th anniversary issue of *Artforum* last September – Claire Bishop argues that the art world has an ambivalent relationship to the digital world in which we live. 'While many artists use digital technology,' she writes, 'how many really confront the question of what it means to think, see and filter affect through the digital? How many thematize this, or reflect deeply on how we experience, and are altered by, the digitization of our existence?' While granting that the ubiquitous nature of digital technology underlies many of the processes of contemporary art production and its circulation, Bishop contends that, generally speaking, the art world still grimly clings to a nostalgia for outmoded technology, such as the 16mm film projector. By this stubborn bond to the auratic art object, claims Bishop, the institutions that make up the art world 'disavow' the digital from contemporary art.

While right to query the impact that the Internet has played in art production, Bishop – as pointed out by New Museum curator Lauren Cornell and critic Brian Droicour in a letter published in *Artforum's* January issue – fails to realize the pertinent timing of her question. In response, she points out that she was limiting her analysis to the 'mainstream' art world rather than trying to provide an exhaustive survey of new forms of digital practice, which she admits are outside of her remit and expertise. To the few artists – such as Frances Stark, Thomas Hirschhorn and Ryan Trecartin – who Bishop notes are producing work that 'confronts the question of the digital', we might add a number of artists from a younger generation, all of whom make work that questions, uses or engages directly with the digital world that we find ourselves increasingly embedded within. Artists such as Trisha Baga, Lucas Blalock (who is featured in this issue), Simon Denny, Aleksandra Domanović, Yngve Holen, Keller/Kosmas (AIDS 3D), Oliver Laric, Katja Novitskova, Jon Rafman and Timur Si-Qin – to name but a few – all take the social condition afforded by the digital revolution as a primary subject.

Reframing Bishop's initial question – which is a good one – we might ask: how are artists to engage with our increasingly online reality while avoiding technological solipsism or an all-too-familiar Internet aesthetic? More importantly, how, when the predominant mode of engagement with art is still in the physical world, can online systems, setups, speeds and solutions cross the 'digital divide'? A distinction must be made between the kind of technology artists regularly use, such as the digital camera and the digital projector, and work made on, (and for) display on computer screens. The former is easily transferable to the gallery

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setting, while the latter is not.

While not wholly discounting Bishop's point that the art world is predominantly populated by pre-Internet forms of media, a small but telling shift has occurred. The successful crossover of the aforementioned artists is largely because the work they make is physically – as well as virtually – based. That only a relatively small number of artists have broken the mould should come as no surprise, even if the time it has taken might (as Bishop points out, Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web in 1989). If the value of the art work relies on an economic model of scarcity, then the relative freedoms of the Internet and the ease with which we can copy and distribute data raise significant problems for dealers who rely on authorship, authenticity and limited editions. Thorny issues of the relative status of works existing across a range of media aside, unfortunately for the online art work, there is no 'Gangnam Style'-type revenue stream.

But what about Bishop's point that most artists are not 'thinking, seeing and filtering *affect* through the digital?' At the Bas Fisher Invitational in Miami last year, an exhibition titled 'Shell Reflexive', curated by Agatha Wara, drew together the work of a number of young, mostly Berlin-based artists (many from the list above), focusing on the driving commerciality of our Internet topography. Using an online presentational aesthetic and consumer logic, each artist made and displayed a consumer product that could be thought of as a shell or a support object, from an iPhone skin to a pillowcase. As revealed in the recent furore over Instagram reserving the right to sell users' images (a proposal quickly redacted by the parent company Facebook), control over online cultural production often doesn't lie with the producer. These artists seemed to be highlighting the economic logic of Google or Facebook, not by critique but by imitation: we'll sell you the platform but reserve the rights to the art work. As Pablo Larios has argued (in the September 2012 issue of *frieze d/e*), writing on the subject of young artists embracing the online strategies of the mega-corporation: 'Instead of choosing sides, these artists seem to embrace the catch-22 of living and working in a society whose contradictions are self-generating.' It is, perhaps, this complicity with the digital that muddies the waters in an analysis of its affective exploration.

This leaves us with the contradictions of transplanting the digital into the physical art space. Much of the work made using online technologies is near-impossible to translate into the offline world of exhibition-making (even for younger artists, the paradigm is still that of the gallery space) without some qualitative loss of format, context and meaning. However, this very act of transplantation opens up new possibilities in the presentation of art making and exhibition design. Artists and curators have to think harder and more creatively in reconfiguring the visual economy of the computer screen (private, confined, flat) in the exhibition space (public, open, layered). Of course, trying to reformat the social and political power struggles of a networked medium that relies on the instant performativity of the process for its enactment is no easy task. But for digital affect to transform into art world effect we need to recognize that the process is underway. The wheel is already spinning.

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