

Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*

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## THE CROWD IN THE MACHINE

Any social movement worth its salt has an origin myth: Rosa Parks for civil rights campaigners, Stonewall for gay liberation groups or, more recently, the Battle of Seattle for anti-globalization activists. In the long run, however, the historical status of these myths is unimportant. Their greater consequence—the part that endures in the practices of everyday life and sometimes flourishes in later political change—resides in the distinct pattern, rhythm or form they bring to collective purpose and belonging. Art has often sought to express such forms in order to justify its place in the modern world. The limits of this aspiration have been a primary concern for Julian Stallabrass over the course of a number of substantial books—from *Gargantua* (1996) to *High Art Lite* (1999) and, most recently, *Art Incorporated* (2004). Art, he writes in the earliest of these, ‘finds itself in a precarious and unhappy situation. It is no longer given a semblance of coherence by the avant-garde rebellion, and it is largely isolated from political and social movements.’

On one level this unhappiness could almost be taken as a definition for what modernism has, with occasional exceptions, always been. On another, it might be seen as expressing a feeling that has become particularly acute in recent years—the malaise of a modernism that has long since fallen behind its contemporaries. Stallabrass has tended towards the latter view, but in *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* he strikes a more positive note, finding in a diverse set of web-based initiatives and interventions the makings of a new avant-garde. Indeed, at the beginning of this insightful work—originating in an exhibition he curated at Tate Britain, whose publishing arm have produced this stylish and richly illustrated volume—he

asserts that in its current form, internet art is 'the most conceptually sophisticated and socially conscious area of contemporary practice'.

This is a bold claim, all the more so because Stallabrass's subject tends to elude easy classification. The root definition of internet art as a distinct genre is both simple and conventional. Its aim is to take the distribution mechanism of the internet itself—hardware, software, wired and wireless interconnectedness, multi-user functionality and interactivity, anonymity, search engines and the preferences built into their algorithms—as both its means and its concern. The medium, in other words, is the message. Various exceptions to this rudimentary definition have been raised, and it is routinely enlarged to include other networked technologies such as cell phones, beepers, fax machines, and human networks more generally; but as a rule, this is it.

Many of the artworks discussed by Stallabrass perform Situationist-style *détournements* and *dérives*, re-routing web-surfers away from the instrumentalized pathways of the corporate netscape. Elsewhere, online artists have appropriated data or imagery as electronic readymades, and several pieces discussed here have clear antecedents in Conceptual Art. Stallabrass describes a wide variety of practices, ranging from irreverent parody—such as Tomoko Takahashi's spoof word-processing programme 'Word Perfect'—to critical probings of the corporate world, all simultaneously dependent upon and at one remove from the workings of the world wide web. The group 1/0/D devised a programme which strips away the visual content of web pages to reveal an intricate tracery of links and code—an X-ray of the virtual world which, while uncovering the structures of that realm, can only be propagated within it. Others, such as the duo working as Jodi, produce web pages that introduce glitches into the smooth functioning of browsers or subvert the slick graphics of computer games.

This sort of trouble-making is central to internet art as a genre but ultimately secondary to its larger critical promise; the latter cannot be encapsulated by a single work but is rather a function of the practice as a whole. One could describe this potential, using a term popularized by Joseph Beuys, as technologically enabled 'social sculpture'; though this tends to suggest a medium or style, whereas internet art is driven by an aesthetic property or ideal—as the Italian Futurists were by speed, the Surrealists by chance, and various social realisms by the mass. Indeed, much as in crowd management techniques of the past, here email bulletin boards, online public databases and self-replicating computer viruses are all understood as plastic media that not only serve the various instrumental (and anti-instrumental) aims of their designers, managers and users, but also well up with a value that exceeds the sum of their parts—as pleasing or displeasing in their interconnected form.

This moment of aesthetic potential, when the interconnected forms of network technology become art, is like a switched-on, disembodied version

of the experience Elias Canetti described in his 1960 *Crowds and Power*: 'In that density, where there is scarcely any space between, each man is as near the other as he is to himself; and an immense feeling of relief ensues.' Such a swoon of collectivized feeling is the promise (or threat) drawn on and negotiated by internet art and, much as for the crowd, it is intimately interconnected with any stake made for its social or political value. Stallabrass is less concerned with the aesthetic dimension of collectivity peculiarly available to internet art, however, and instead assesses its artistic and political vitality by its distance from the peril of the market.

Stallabrass tracks the political, economic and technological development of the internet, and of its broadly dispersed and innovative art, wisely and well. In thematically organized chapters—such as 'The Structure of the Internet', 'The Form of Data' and 'Time and Space, Space as Time'—Stallabrass weaves together critical reflections and empirical information. The latter provides a welcome antidote to the breathless boosterism of recent years, while the former open up topics as diverse as the nature of online time, the limits of interactivity, the reaction of art institutions to the electronic upstarts, and the shared future of humans and machines.

Stallabrass gives a succinct account of the early history of the internet, from its origins in Pentagon research in the late 1960s to its rapid colonization by commerce in the early 1990s. The latter development was facilitated by the arrival of internet service providers (ISPs) and browser software for public use—which were also preconditions for the rise of web-based art. Web usage as a whole has, of course, followed previously established patterns of inequality, and is overwhelmingly concentrated in North America, Europe, Japan and South Korea. Yet although it is inevitably dependent on the availability of cheap and easy online access, internet art does not entirely replicate this pattern. Its reception is difficult to measure, but is certainly less bounded by national identities than much web traffic. Its pioneering producers, meanwhile, emerged not in the US but in Eastern Europe—where high education levels combined with non-conformist artistic traditions—and in the Netherlands and UK, where key roles were played, respectively, by state support for regional art initiatives and by the conjunction of anti-Thatcherite artists and a comparatively advanced IT sector.

The book's principal analytic parameters are marked out by its subtitle—the jostling of 'commerce' and 'culture'. Stallabrass describes well the mutual transformations wrought on each other by business and the internet, and the way in which commercial imperatives have infiltrated not only our means of handling data but our visual experience of the web. The cultural implications of this are clear: like any other art form, internet art threatens to become Internet Art Lite, as critical practitioners struggle to fend off 'those who would turn the Net into a tame, regulated broadcast space, serving as a pervasive and

ubiquitous mall'. Online as elsewhere, commerce is generally in the ascendant; but on Stallabrass's account, internet art is an important part of culture's counter-mobilization. The author is certainly right to focus on the tendency to refusal and negation—a certain Dada-like pranksterism is generally characteristic of the genre—just as he is to argue for its correlative urge to preserve the autonomous domain of culture. But like many of the modernisms and avant-garde rebellions of long ago (Dada included, at least in its Berlin incarnation), this moment can also be evaluated by the extent to which its aesthetic tendencies take on proto-political form. Internet art is unique in the recent history of art in that it has all the trappings of a modern social movement: collective forms of identification and expression, some semblance of organization, a sense of shared mission among its participants. There is also a certain vitality that perhaps stems from an awareness that their work stands at the confluence of rapid and wide-ranging historical and technological changes.

At a minimum, this alternative critical measure is implicit in Stallabrass's account and he begins it with a suitable origin myth. The fabled beginnings of internet art lie, appropriately enough, inside a computer, and were the result of a machine error or software incompatibility. In the midst of an outpouring of random ASCII characters appeared the ersatz filename that was to become the label for a new movement: 'net.art'. Much of its appeal comes precisely from its combination of technological abstraction and absurdity—as Alexei Shulgin, one of its early practitioners, put it: 'a movement or a group can't have a name like some computer file'. In fact, this merely conventional designation seems perfectly suited to a movement that escapes definition, remaining in constant organizational flux—an anti-movement, where the expression of collectivity is reduced to nothing more than a formal container. 'Net.art' evokes the anonymous abstraction of a state-issued, bureaucratically generated identity, pointing to the limits set by power; yet at the same time it denotes a kink in the system, a subcultural group whose distinctive bond is an oppositional technologism.

But if the shared affiliation of internet art's practitioners is abstraction rather than lived experience—all system and no lifeworld—where are the movement's sources of solidarity? The role of the machine itself is crucial here; though this aspect is present throughout Stallabrass's analysis, it is taken up most synthetically and conclusively in the final chapter, 'Art, Intelligent Machines and Conversation'. Via a consideration of developments in computer gaming, Stallabrass discusses the potential role of intelligent computer agents—steering a path between, on the one hand, the cod Darwinism of the libertarian Right, who see the internet as an avatar of the all-powerful market, and on the other, dreams of digital transcendence. Rather, the promise of new technology, 'in imagination, at least', is that it will 'collaborate with humans in the creation of art, and aid the emergence

of a truly collective, participatory culture'. The machine itself, he suggests, will become an actor in history.

Setting aside the newness of the technology at issue here, we should note that the role Stallabrass potentially ascribes to the machine evokes an old idea—the interrelation of progressive technologization and progressive socialization that has always been the promise of modernity. The echo is entirely appropriate if one sees internet art as marking a return to a largely forsaken avant-garde role. Indeed, many of its practitioners explicitly refer to modernist strategies—as Stallabrass puts it, looking back 'in sometimes Benjaminian fashion' towards modernism and 'recovering its spectral, Utopian ideals, so as to look forward beyond postmodernism'. But a slightly different perspective is opened up if we ask what, exactly, is being technologized? It can be argued that it is decidedly *not* the internet itself in all its high-tech, user-friendly, McLuhanesque splendour that makes the critical difference, at least when considering social movements. It is not the power of the new machine—as a networking tool, for example, or as an interactive medium—but instead the power it has over the experience of subjectivity that endows it with its greatest potential: the capacity for producing self-estrangement; or, in the vocabulary of the period that is being recalled, proletarianization.

Such self-estrangement has been a central theme in recent internet art, above all since ®<sup>TM</sup>ark (pronounced 'artmark') was publicly condemned by George W. Bush in 2000 for their parody website gw bush.com during his first presidential campaign. The group's name, a play on the concept of the registered trademark, shares the hollow form of net.art itself but is further developed by crossing empty technological and legal categories in a distinctive networking project. As they put it on their website, '®<sup>TM</sup>ark is a brokerage that benefits from "limited liability" just like any other corporation; using this principle, ®<sup>TM</sup>ark supports the sabotage (informative alteration) of corporate products . . . by channelling funds from investors to workers for specific projects.' It is, in other words, culture that realizes itself in the form of commerce—and this is its open secret, its method of social organization and of generating collective consciousness. It makes itself strange, and in so doing lays out the material conditions for political action. Similar strategies have been developed by other groups—among them, the Institute for Applied Autonomy, the Bureau of Inverse Technology, 0100010110101101.org, Hacktivist.com, the Experimental Interaction Unit, Public Netbase and, most notably, the Critical Art Ensemble. (A member of the latter, Steve Kurtz, was investigated by the FBI earlier this year under suspicion of being a bioterrorist, but has since been charged only with Mail and Wire Fraud—essentially, for impersonating a scientist.)

At issue for all of these groups, as it was put by the founders of the mail list Nettime where the first discussions about net.art took place, is 'the urgent

need for the production of a collective subjectivity from within the Net in order to counter its oppressive and alienating effects'. More than any medium to date, the internet offers not only a laboratory for such production, but also ample opportunity for field-testing. However, for internet artist-activists just as for modernist avant-gardes before them, the machine itself—the industrial plant then, the information factory now—has been the means simultaneously of alienation and enlightenment, of the self-estrangement of the commodity form and the self-realization of class-consciousness. It might even be argued that modernist art only found its way out of its precarious and unhappy position when it was able to picture culture and commerce, lifeworld and system, man and machine, as indissociable—so intimately bound up with each other that they could not be said to be at odds.

Here, Stallabrass's analysis would benefit from fuller consideration of the aesthetic dimension mentioned above. For the pleasure that modernist art at its best offers is not release from the competitive turmoil of the marketplace—as, for instance, in Matisse's description of his art as an armchair for a tired businessman—but rather more like the release from isolation that Canetti experienced in the crowd. This pleasure—though it can just as easily be displeasure—is an embodied experience of abstraction, of individuality becoming generalized, systematized, collectivized; it is an experience of subject become object, and it has been the hallmark of advanced art from Courbet to Cézanne, Malevich to Heartfield. Then as now, the necessary engine for that abstraction is commodification. The critical question for internet art—which draws sustenance from the 'ubiquitous mall' of the contemporary world far more than did Manet or Picasso—might then be not so much how to stand firm against the threat of commerce, but rather how to draw from new commodity forms the latent politicization they enable when experienced aesthetically.

Modernism developed its formal vocabulary and claim to social agency by asking: what it is like to experience the world as a commodity? As a thing? As a cog in the machine? With one foot planted squarely in the high-tech sector—the day job of choice for most practitioners—internet art is well situated to renew this experiment. In so doing, Stallabrass's brave study suggests, it holds out the promise of a possible way out of the 'precarious and unhappy situation' art has suffered increasingly since the mid-twentieth century. Whether internet art will be able to rise out of this unhappiness and draw an 'immense feeling of relief' from its lived abstraction, its proletarianization, remains an open question. Its ability to adapt its criticisms to a shifting political and cultural environment, its inventiveness and healthy irreverence, provide at least some grounds for sharing Stallabrass's measured optimism.