Towards a Theory of Social Media Art

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The bursting of the dotcom bubble at the start of the century, along with the phasing-in of the so-called Web 2.0 and its standard business model, gave rise to a context that was quite unlike the one which had previously served as a testing ground for the earliest iterations of Internet art.

If the shift from the information society to the means-of-access-to-information society had been particularly fruitful for the development of multiple lines of media art, then the changes that were bringing about a personal-means-of-access-to-and-broadcasting-of-information society were proving to be even more promising. Before long, blogs, microblogging platforms, metaverses, social networks and the emerging collective archives for photography and video had all become new contexts for artists to carry out critical action and exploration. This was the beginning of social media art, the range of artistic practices that would use the emerging participative platforms of Web 2.0 as their own particular field of action. The new, online forms of socialisation, as well as the logics themselves of

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the communication model centred on 'user-generated content' and, more specifically, on the 'broadcast yourself' notion, would form the basis of these new offshoots of contemporary art.

We would witness, therefore, and particularly from 2004 onwards, a prolific evolution of a range of artistic practices that, having emerged as 'net.art' in the early nineties, would now find new routes for their growth and development, based on the cutting-edge social and participatory dynamics of the social web and the technologies behind it. In any case, the fiercely critical and ironic quality that permeated the early works of Internet art would continue to be their defining trait.

In order to speak of a second era of Internet art, or 'social media art', means looking into a period when online artistic creation had reached a level of sophistication that only ever seemed possible once the late-90s 'net lag' had been overcome. This was a new phase, in which the frenzied hype around the early net.art had cooled down, and there was a certain air of despondency caused by the fact that so many of net.art's founding critical principles had since been institutionalised and neutralised.

1. Artistic practices and new online participatory platforms

One of the key catalysts in the surge of social media art was the rise of the blogging phenomenon at the end of the last century, at a time when services such as Blogger, MSN Spaces, AOL Journals and LiveJournal all started to make it possible for anybody, even those without any technical expertise, to set up, in a matter of minutes, their own personal logbook. In the mid-2000s, there were estimated to be around 71.7 million active blogs around the world, and this number was increasing at an astonishing rate (some statistics from 2006 indicate that over 175,000 blogs were being created per day).

The surge of the blogging phenomenon brought with it a vast collection of new forms of social critique and political debate, and active channels for opinion-forming and collective action. Blogs were soon shown to be the ideal place for cultivating and establishing critical voices of dissent, based on self-expression and personal and creative subjectivity, as a springboard for social transformation and change. All of this seemed to prove that the slogan 'We, the Media' was gradually coming true.

It was around 2005 when the blog was beginning to be explored as a specific medium for artistic creation. We recall, for example, the works included in the blog called 'blog art', by Marisa Olson and Abe Linkoln [http://blog-art.blogspot.com/], the pieces selected for exhibitions such as 'art + blog = blogart?' (2007) curated by Wilfried Agricola de Cologne for his JavaMuseum, or in 'BlogArt/ Blogumentary', curated by Annette Finnsdottir in 2007.

Generally speaking, in the early works of blog-art there appeared to be a fascination with reclaiming the self within the media landscape, hence the turn towards what we might call a certain 'egology'. At the start of the century, as opposed to the old *cyberpunk* dystopias that were based on simulation, avatars and post-human bodies, the development of Web 2.0-style participatory platforms instead imposed a radical return to *reality*, to specific people and lives, to the individuality of a person, with a first name and a last name, with a life story, someone who shares, who openly talks about their life. Many artists were enthusiastic about this new central role of the self, who engages in self-expression, carries out self-research, and who publicly shares their thoughts, ideas, opinions and confessions. In fact, one of the fundamental aspects of blog-art is the critical consideration of how the world has become a direct reflection of what I perceive, what I feel, what I believe. Many of these new artistic proposals focused on the fine line between the possible effects of the emotional reduction of the common social reality (a typical formalisation of egotistical narcissism 2.0) and these new technologies' potential for democratising the exercising of opinion, in the context of the Internet.

The most interesting cases of social media art, and blog-art in particular, tend to show that artistic thinking can help playfully and poetically reshape some of the more common models of online communicative practice and social interrelation. The sense of irony that runs through most of these proposals actively negates (or even subverts) some of the most unshakeable assumptions about supposedly normal or useful online communicative exchanges, which themselves are almost always determined by the interests of the major Internet corporations. This was made patently clear, for example, in the project by Jodi called *<$BlogTitle$>* (2006-07), on the Blogger platform. It was a chaotic blog which called into question the *conventional* systems of signs and symbols on the Internet, those which are deemed entirely acceptable by the incorporated systems that manage the Internet's flows of communication. In fact, most social media art tends to follow in the footsteps of early net.art, which, rather than complying with the Internet's prevailing linguistic regimes that aimed for efficiency, instead opted for illegibility, haphazard layouts and the same glitch aesthetics as the computer error ('error' understood as something within the system, but that does not follow its rules, etc.). These proposals remind us that the pragmatic aspects of online art have always been closely linked to the idea of *destinerrance*, or the unsayable: they hope to inject a certain degree of disorder into the act of communication. It was about seeing what happens when you merge what is given and expected within a certain medium, even the medium itself, with other elements that work against it or disable it. These projects sought to radically prevent any *constructive* interaction by the visiting user-spectator, and they would find support from critical voices who denounced the fact that blogging's central ideology of commenting and participating was in fact too similar to that which, a decade beforehand, had been the great promise of electronic interaction, also long-heralded as being supposedly full of democratising potential. All of this explains why works of blog-art were often pitched somewhere between psychedelia and the subversion of code, producing (as seen in *Screenfull.net*

(2005) by Jimpunk and Abe Linkoln, for example) extreme exercises in creating chaotic and unfathomable informative material, made up of elements gathered from countless sources within the Internet culture. These proposals wanted the Internet to be understood as something more like a particular mental state rather than a context designed for communication and socialising, and they formed a motley patchwork of informational discharge, as well as a takedown of the blog as a means of communication in the most conventional sense. In many of these creations, the technological infrastructure itself is in the spotlight, revealed to be a machinic system which thus prevents any possibility of debate.

Another prominent theme in the early days of blog-art was social media's dependence on constant growth and continuous updates. It might be useful to compare blogs/social network accounts with certain aquatic animals that just drown and die if they ever stop moving. This works as a metaphor for a communication system in which the numbers of visitors and followers are, to a large extent, determined by how often new content is uploaded. It might well be the case that more and more people now regard their public and constant self-expression as a fundamental need, so no wonder this often goes hand-in-hand with a certain sense of anxiety: this is the so-called 'blog depression' or 'blog life crisis' as alluded to (with tongue firmly in cheek) in works such as *Sorry I Haven't Posted* (2010) by Cory Arcangel or, in the field of video installation more specifically concerned with social media, *Boys Who Havn't Posted In A While* (2009) by Nia Burks.

The art that investigates this relentless regime of updates, of having to keep churning out new content, which blogs and social media brought into the Internet experience, has often been taken to extremes. A good example is how life is subjected to this regime in *Psych|OS-hansbernhardblog* (2005) by UBERMORGEN, part of *The Psych/ Os Cycle*, an extreme take on the public exposure of a human being's life over time, and how the community-observing-a-representation in fact turns out to be a community-observing-a-

life. Such proposals can only be understood from the perspective of the tradition of the 1970s conceptual practices that focused on and analysed the experience of time (such as those by On Kawara and Sam Hsieh, for example). The issue at hand is how life becomes subjugated by the time-based protocols of a shared system of records. In fact, many manifestations of social media art are not really about testing a new medium, but rather about the artist's own experience on these platforms (under the watchful gaze of many others). These works almost always assert that we are, fundamentally, shared time, and today, as is pretty clear, this time is exhibited and documented all over social media.

Another important line of action in blog-art is that of 'group blogging', which emerged around the year 2002 as an attempt at turning the blog into a kind of system for the collective accumulation of different material found online. These artistic manifestations have since been the object of interesting curatorial projects, among which we must certainly highlight *Surfing Club* by Raffael Dörig at [plug. in] in 2010, which included pieces by Aids-3D, John Michael Boling, Petra Cortright, Aleksandra Domanovic, Harm van den Dorpel, Joel Holmberg, Oliver Laric, Guthrie Lonergan, Paul Slocum and Nasty Nets, Spirit Surfers and Loshadka.

Halfway between parody and decidedly ironic naivety, these types of collaborative blogs are presented as surprising catalogues of stuff, following thousands of hours of online surfing by their creators. They are the result of an impulse for building an archive, for collecting weird images, for compiling reactions to certain sensations and lived experiences, in this process of wandering around the Internet. They are collage-blogs, collections of bizarre digital objects, genuine contemporary versions of the cabinets of curiosities from centuries past.

By navigating around this memory-being, this memory-world made up of networks of infinite interconnected memories, the participants of the 'Internet Surfing Clubs' propose, as a guiding principle for their creative action, a new compulsive and transformative kind

of archiving, which is ironic and highly inventive. In this creative activity, which works as a form of specific and critical visual consumption, the artwork is but the expression of a movement, a creative and profoundly ironic trip around a whole universe of visual data and references which the artist (redefined as a kind of 'professional surfer') refuses to consume passively and complacently. Instead, they recontextualise, resituate or recreate and transform these elements, showing us different possible ways of *metabolising* the digital items that make up the visual imaginary of our times.

In the early 2010s, the evolution of the blog phenomenon would now shift, principally, towards microblogging, particularly by means of services such as Twitter (which had launched in 2006). This change was driven by the widespread uptake of new Internet-connected smartphones and tablets, which diverted the new online communicational model towards something more like social networking. Many individual blogs, characterised by their long and pensive posts, were soon replaced by accounts on Twitter and other platforms, heading towards a purely conversational model. The move from blogging to microblogging was, in any case, entirely logical and predictable, part of the inexorable trend for increasingly rapid and instantaneous communication, closer to a form of real-time communication. Ultimately, all of this was proof of the theoretical foundations upon which the emerging Web 2.0 business model was based. It is now clear that this model was never really about turning us into broadcasters of information or content providers – instead, we have become the information that is sent and shared, communicating what we are doing, how we feel, where we are, what's on our mind, etc. This development changed the conventions of online communication, and many artists would soon begin to address it critically. Early 2008 saw the appearance of the first artistic proposals to pay close attention to the multitude of social dynamics that take place on and around these new communicative services. The term 'Twitter art' became more and more prevalent. Furthermore, there was renewed interest in research that looked into the aforementioned issue of the

regimes of relentless updating, typical of blogging. A good example is the series *'working on my novel' – Great Twitter searches Volume #1* (2009) or *Follow my other Twitter – Great Twitter searches Volume #2* (2011) by Cory Arcangel, in which he studies patterns of repetition, not only in the forms of communicative expression, but also in the states and life situations experienced by the connected multitude. These issues were taken to the limit in Vanesa Linden's project *Me* (2018), which focused on the processes of constructing identity on Twitter. Also worth highlighting, with regards to the idea of the real time of online interpersonal communication, is *L'attente* (2007) by Gregory Chatonsky, a good example of a flow aesthetic that generates an automatised fiction without a scripted narrative, endlessly in progress. In fact, the continuous stream of Twitter posts is the central theme of many Internet-based installations (part of a category of online/offline hybrids that is ever full of potential, so much so that it could even be considered as a specific genre of Internet art in its own right). Along these lines, we must also single out *Murmur Study* (2009), an installation by Christopher Baker in collaboration with Márton András Juhász.

2. Social Network Art

It was 2002 when the social networks started to gain traction, and they truly took off in 2003 (let us not forget, though, that some networks had already existed for some time, such as Classmates.com, which was launched in 1995). These massive new networks would soon form a context for collective participation, one which would prove to be hugely appealing to many artists. Works such as those included in the exhibition 'My Own Private Reality – Growing Up Online in the 90s and 00s' (2007), curated by Sabine Himmelsbach and Sarah Cook, or the collection of projects selected on the website 'Antisocial Networking' (2008) are good examples of these early artistic manifestations, many of which looked into why there was

such widespread fascination with online participation, as well as questioning what this participation was really about, and how we are to understand the 'social' part of the newly 'social' web.

A great deal of the new Internet art could be described as creative exercises in dissent, in the context of the Web 2.0. We can thus regard many of these artistic practices as specific ways of offering interpretive and critical opposition to the new demands and needs that were beginning to organise the Internet and sustain its emerging business models. Also, as a whole, this new art was ideal for developing alternative models for assessing the prevailing habits of linguistic exchange and collective collaboration/participation that were typical of this second phase of the Internet - in other words, it was a critical method for exploring what we might refer to as the 'capitalism of the affects'. Clearly, interpersonal relationships and socialisation were starting to become one of the bedrocks of this new form of economic production. The management of sociability and of personal interactions soon became one of the driving forces behind the biopolitical production of the new forms of online business, where there was an increasingly blurry line between economics and communication, in a continuous fusion of the cybernetic and the affects. In fact, many works of social media art critically examine how the new biopolitical context was starting to depend, fundamentally, on a complex amalgam of productive relations between the affects and value. One of the most common strategies of this new art was to highlight how these corporations leave their fingerprints all over the processes of communication and social interrelation just by making them technically possible, and to point to the effects of this economic colonisation of communication. Ultimately, this art questions why it is more and more difficult to distinguish between validity or field of meaning and economics, between the genuine need to communicate and the mere consumption of information. By addressing topics that mirror the specific functional forms of the social web itself, these artworks' demands for interpretation show, ultimately, the need for a critical and politically engaged reflection on how the network

system operates, and on this system's mechanisms for mediating social interaction.

In addition, social networking again brought to the fore the issue of the presentation of the persona in the social space, the matter of the 'staging of the self'. This remains a key thematic focus for many artistic projects that look into the ways of dealing with identity and self-representation on the Internet. This line of artistic work includes durational projects, which can last months and even years, embedded within the continuous flows of communicative interactions on social media. Performative pieces, such as *Excellences & Perfections* by Amalia Ulman, on Instagram, or *Born Nowhere* (2011) by Laís Pontes, on Facebook, are two good examples of this type of artistic endeavour.

These kinds of social media interventions have shown the endurance, particularly in new feminist art, of strategies based on simulating gender stereotypes and playing around with fictitious roles and identities – these lines of work appear to have found, in the context of the social networks, the perfect space for new developments. Prevalent themes in these new lines of creation include the selfie craze and how these self-representations are shared, the obsession with bodily perfection and the fixation on the latest consumer trends and luxury goods. They are artistic practices which often make use of a fictitious, first-person narrative, taking as their starting point the conventions as dictated by the biggest social media stars.

In particular, photography-based online performances explore, in depth, the expectations that an image can generate via its digital circulation, expectations which we are, to some extent, predetermined to believe and appreciate. These performances play an important role in helping to clarify what we might term the new 'regimes of belief' that operate in the online context. Likewise, other users' reactions and the processes of psychological projection, as triggered by the performance itself, are central to this kind of artistic proposal. These responses are expressed in the comments posted alongside

the work, which the artists use as a way of *complementing* the images that make up the backbone of their discourse.

In the latest online performances by Laura Bey or Colectivo 8552, for example, there is a direct critique of the prevailing *broadcast yourself* logic, and of the communicative hypertrophy in which we live in the network system. Essentially, it would appear that, today, nothing is held back, everything turns to language, everything is publicised, outwardly expressed, everything becomes part of a communicative interaction. This is a context dominated by the 'be yourself' imperative, where participants have to demonstrate, visually, that they can have a good time and a life *of their own* - a context which is referenced in numerous poetic reflections on this matter. In these online interventions, which focus on the enjoyment and anxiety of displaying oneself, the Internet is revealed to be a huge theatre where we are all invited to join in, playing ourselves, in a vast confessional. Here, the words of Rousseau, in his *Confessions*, echo loudly: "Thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I."[1] In this context of hyperexposure, we are now more likely to be defined by the little that we do not show, rather than the great deal that we do openly share. Highly pertinent here is the simple installation by the collective Knaggi, entitled *Would you still love me if I showed you my browser history?* (2015).

The issue of privacy is, of course, one of the central themes in social media art, which invariably takes us back to the old debates on the demise of intimacy, and back to the discussions around how revolutionary and emancipating it could be, according to some, to live in a glass house (we recall what Walter Benjamin said about this in 1929),[2] and the inherent submission to the globalised digital panopticon.

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[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1953, p. 17.
[2] See Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' in *New Left Review* I/108, March-April 1978.

Another important field of reference for social network art is what we might consider to be the greatest danger posed by the new media *egologies*: the aforementioned emotional reduction of the common social reality. It is as if the world is only interesting to us when it serves as a stage where we can open up emotionally, something which Richard Sennet called, a long time ago, a *psychomorphic* vision of reality, i.e. reality as a mere reflection of the ego. An ego which, in many cases, tries to get to know itself by constantly examining itself in the mirrored surface of a digital device's screen (a computer, tablet or smartphone). As such, one of the most recurring themes in social media art is how the Internet tends to act like a mirrored surface, in a very literal sense. There have been many in-depth investigations into how the act of browsing the Internet is, for us, increasingly like looking in a mirror: we always come across our own affinities, the ghosts of our desires, our preferences, our curiosities, what people like us are into, or what the artificially intelligent algorithms predict we will like. This can be seen in phenomena such as 'filter bubbles', which create tailored online 'personal ecosystems', the importance of which has been widely acknowledged in the artistic sphere, even beyond social media art (it is worth remembering, for example, the exhibition 'Filter Bubble', curated by Simon Castets and Hans Ulrich Obrist, at LUMA, Zurich, in 2016).

Now that everything has turned into a game of gazes and self-presentation on the online stage, the issue of how we display ourselves and, in particular, how we adapt to the gaze of the camera, has become more important, in this world teeming with devices for visual documentation. This is a core concept in social media art, which we can express with the help of Sartre's intuition that 'being' is, above all, 'being seen': we are observed beings. It may be the case that, essentially, as users of social networks, the same thing happens to us as happened to King Aegisthus in Sartre's great play *The Flies* (1943): "But I have been trapped in my own net. I have come to see myself only as they see me." This being in the sense of being seen, like being *in vision*, is addressed in new artistic practices by

how they tirelessly explore the poetic possibilities of an extreme phenomenology of being on camera, of the self in front of the lens, in that vast space of mostly anonymous and undetected gazes, i.e. the social media space.

3. Other online relational spaces

The manifestations of social media art examine, again and again, how the arrival of the Web 2.0-style technologies and services, at the beginning of the 21st century, put an end to the cyberpunk dystopias, those based on simulation, avatars, virtual bodies and cyborgs. In the 1970s and 80s, these dystopias shaped many people's image of what the future, i.e. our present, would be like. However, with the rise of social networking and the huge online collective archives for images and videos, things ended up going in the opposite direction. Today's Internet users are asked to show their most personal, intimate side, to share their personal choices and preferences, to state their opinion – in short, to portray *themselves*. The new forms of online business no longer want users who are hidden behind an avatar or a pseudonym. Perhaps this is why metaverses such as Second Life have failed, because the user in such a space has to be represented, *acted* by an avatar. The opposite is now true – today, everything revolves around exploiting a more concrete identity, acknowledging a presence shown in *real* data, in a continuous search for selfhood.

Nevertheless, we cannot overlook the huge growth that took place, above all in the first decade of this new century, in terms of actions and performances that were devised for the great many metaverses. We can illustrate this by considering, for example, the collective Second Front and their neo-surrealist performances in Second Life. In these performances, the avatar-body underwent infinite transformations, characterised by absolute variability and, furthermore, free from any material restrictions. These initiatives followed up the already-established argument in favour of the

migration of bodies to the digital context, regarding the Internet as a much-needed *prosthesis*, a field open to an ever-changing be-whatever-you-want-to-be, and a potential escape route from the obsession with identities that depend on the physical body. They were works of art that chose to consider the idea of the avatar as an element that could quash identity, and the aim was for the subject to adopt, radically, multiple identities, by means of extraordinary bodily appearances.

As well as this, we must not forget that the virtual surroundings of online multiplayer games would serve as an interesting setting for another offshoot of social media art. The artistic interventions that focus on these spaces seek, above all, to dispel the idea that online games or metaverses are merely forms of entertainment, and instead turn them into a means for encouraging as yet undeveloped modes of social interaction, trying out new forms of sociability. This was the broad intention behind *agoraXchange* (2004), an initiative coordinated by Jackie Stevens and proposed as an online community dedicated to the imagining and constructing of a multiplayer game of global politics that might be able to challenge the violence and inequality in today's international political systems. In a similar vein was *Distributive Justice* (2001) by Andreja Kuluncic, included in Documenta XI at Kassel, which was a scathing criticism of the current models of economic distribution, proposing alternative routes for critical thought with regards to individual autonomy and human relations on the Internet.

The in-depth research into the mediating role that multiplayer games and environments can play when designing alternative forms of coexistence is undoubtedly the most interesting part of projects like these. If, in a game, the user assumes the role of *being in power*, this idea might easily be extended to collective empowerment in terms of a set of social needs, linked to the recurring idea of a 'joystick nation'. This is why the concept of virtuality must shake off, progressively, its connotation of falsehood, of mere appearance or simulation, of that which is not real, in order to claim back its

more accurate meaning of the potential to be: the virtual should be understood as potentiality that exists outside of reality, as well as something dynamic, like in engineering when they use the term 'virtual displacements' to refer to the potential movement of a given mechanical system. Thus, virtuality would replace fantasy as the basis and cornerstone for thinking about certain transformations in the sociopolitical sphere, affording them credibility by trying them out, in advance, in the digital context.

Also of great interest are the lines of artistic work that engage with the 'persistent worlds' of some multiplayer games, which can host tens of thousands of players at the same time. In these new 'social' spaces we have seen the rise of different kinds of interventions and 'code-performances' that recall many of the aims and intentions, in some cases long-forgotten, of the first manifestations of public art in urban contexts.

4. Artistic practices and the 'network-system'

In this second phase of the poetics of connectivity, the deeply analytical trait that so characterised the earliest online artistic practices is still their most distinctive feature today. This is true of those proposals that work specifically within social media, and also of those 'offline' works that focus on issues around the state of hyperconnectivity following the spread and uptake of the Internet. These latter pieces also look into how experience and subjectivity are produced in our times (they form part of a range of practices which are today grouped under the label 'post-Internet art'). They are all initiatives in which the potential of artistic thinking and experience continues to be tested, in many different ways, as part of a critical reflection about digital connectivity and its role as the key articulatory element of the new life rules that so define our time.

Like the first iterations of Internet art, social media art still makes use of *invagination* as a key strategy for action. This is about

containing the medium instead of being contained by it, presenting the medium instead of being presented by it. The key point is not how to create a work of art as if it were a spectacle that can pass comment on the emerging social conditions in the context of the Internet, but rather, how to present the Internet as a *spectacle* in its own right.

The best social media artworks elaborate on how, today, power tends to become merged with life, how power has become increasingly abstract, how it is no longer exerted upon individuals, but rather, and very much in line with Foucault's diagnosis, power circulates right through them – all of us, whether aware of it or not, help it circulate. In many of these works, they clearly set out how the most effective devices for exerting power in the network culture are now based on participatory logics, on the pleasurable flows of social activity.

Amid the evolution of this whole ensemble of artistic practices, it would become ever clearer that the allegorical, subjectivising and critical aspects of artistic activity, which always need a strongly interpretive side, are still crucial: they serve to encourage more reflexive and critical experiences, especially regarding the prevailing habits and forms of linguistic exchange, collaboration and participation that are found online. And, of course, an important challenge within social media art will continue to be that of working out what the new categories of absence are – above all, looking into the forms of exclusion and geographical discrimination that exist in this system of hyperconnectivity, a system which is nevertheless always presented to us as something completely inclusive and globalising.

Despite this, and compared with the first wave of Internet art, today's social media-based art is no longer quite so focused on the specificity of the Internet medium as compared to other means of expression. Likewise, it does not tend to concentrate on identifying the Internet's technical codes for functioning and interacting, nor on the possibilities that the Internet has opened up for the development

of *new* artistic languages. Today, the leading concern is what this medium is actually doing to us, understanding the Internet as the main articulatory element in our everyday lives. This is why there is so much interest in the analysis and creative thematisation of the processes of inclusion of the subject (of all of us) in the network system. Thus, the main critical angle in this particular area of art today is not so much the critical experimentation with a *new* medium, but rather our own experiences within this medium. The principle aim is to elaborate upon the seductive merging between, on the one hand, the emancipatory and equality-seeking factors as promised by electronic connectivity, and, on the other, the authoritarian factors that the user is forced to confront, amid the endless barrage from the connective system's own consumerist ideology and its effects. The critical spirit of the relationship between art and the Internet therefore resides in the elaborate blends of freedom and domination that thus arise, and in analysing the processes for the production of subjectivity and experience which characterise this relationship today.

A recurring reference point in social media art is how the driving force behind production today is not so much 'work' in the traditional sense, but rather affect-based enjoyment and relational pleasure as experienced over social media. This is perhaps why there have been so many projects that look into how our relationship with these informational machines is giving rise to an idea of desire that can be defined not as something that we are lacking, but, more than anything, as proper *functioning*. Essentially, it seems that what we most desire, so hypnotically, is to form part of the network-system, that world of permanent connectivity, characterised by a focus on the possibility for communication, as opposed to the act itself of communicating.

We must not forget that the second phase of the Internet has also entailed the consolidation of new business models that form the basis of what we have termed an inclusive network-system. Most notably, the consumption of connected devices, and the inherent economic interest in this consumption, has taken

precedence over the actual communicative or relational possibilities of these devices. This has come hand-in-hand with the powerful oligopolistic control over Internet usage, based on the proliferation of centralised platforms and closed-off spaces for hosting content and socialising. All of this threatens to break up the Internet into fragmented islands. And, given this situation, looking into how the large corporations leave their fingerprints all over the processes of communication and social interrelation, just by making them technically possible, might continue to be a fertile ground for artists. At present, the large companies that run the whole global system of connectivity always try to draw attention to the processes, to the dynamics, and no longer to the messages or their contents. There is no doubt that whatever is said, whatever we say in the context of these networks, it all forms part of the same system. We really have to bear this in mind when thinking about the 'anti-system' potential of the network-system. This is why the most interesting developments in the relationship between art and connectivity that we have seen over the last fifteen years have not been based on a creative exploration or investigation into a specific medium (the Internet) and its technologies, but rather they have focused on how individuals are assimilated into the network culture and economy, and how they adapt to it. What social media art endeavours to do, above all, is to turn the media process itself into a theme for artistic work, as well as all the assemblages that connect us to it, making us think about something that is far greater than just a means of transmission or communication, by establishing it, precisely, as an artistic activity. And, of course, if in this second era of the Internet it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between validity or field of meaning and mere economics, then this would explain why a fundamental objective of these practices today is, precisely, to reveal this distinction.