



REVOLUTION!
(IF YOU CAN FIND IT)

GAUGING DIVERSITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART AFTER THE INTERNET

By Zach Pearl

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On any given day media outlets around the world publish stories reminding us of how profoundly the Internet has changed our lives: Threats of cyber terrorism, massive data hacks and the mounting evidence of smart-phone addiction, etc. (Roberts, Petnji Yaya and Manolis). None of these would exist without the global infrastructure of networked technologies that more or less define 21st century life. Less prominent in the headlines, however, is the aesthetic dimension of this paradigm shift and the ways in which contemporary art is being radically reshaped. Post-Internet¹ realisms like participatory design and the sharing economy have enabled large-scale international collaboration in real-time and provide direct access to a global market. But, for all its revolutionary appeal, has this shift toward a more distributed arts economy done anything to diversify the contemporary art world?

On the surface, it would appear so. The 20th century figure of the curator-as-gatekeeper has eroded greatly post-Internet, with academically trained and self-taught artists alike who are self-publishing and promoting daily through online platforms. According to a 2016 United Nations report nearly half the world's population now accesses the Internet, meaning that over 3 billion individuals can publish, share and consume culture without moving through traditional channels (Biggs). This is manifest in a whole generation of emerging artists who were born post-Internet and classify as 'digital natives', circumventing gallerists and museum curators by establishing online presences through services like Instagram, Tumblr and Etsy. Digital natives are also contributing to a 'new aesthetics'—a loose configuration of Internet-influenced motifs that shape not only the look of digital artworks but also traditional media like painting and sculpture. Ultraflat colours, pixelated graphics, copies of copies and memes about memes are just some of the new lexicon symptomatic of a world where glitches, fake news and the non-placeness of globalization abound (Augé). Perhaps most interesting are the critiques of traditional values by historically persecuted minorities who are reimagining sex, race and gender in terms of the networked society and surveillance culture. Jack Halberstam's provocative *Queer Art of Failure*² (Duke University Press, 2011) is inspiring a new wave of artists to rally against heteronormativity and patriarchy through remix and the general absurdity that the Internet affords. Contemporary artists of colour are also finding new ways to illustrate systemic oppression. The idea of the 'black flâneur', for instance, was the subject of a resonant exhibition at IMT Gallery in London last year titled "Wandering/WILDING: Blackness on the Internet"³. Works in the exhibition concentrated on the paradox of the fluidity of black identity online versus the taboo of the black body in public space.

1 We live in a 'post-Internet' culture of creative labour—one can no longer "make" or "critique" or "invent" outside an epistemology of life that includes the Internet and its associations. Thus, all art made after the commercialization of the Internet is intrinsically about the Internet and its myriad tropes.

2 This work of contemporary cultural studies focuses on finding alternatives to conventional measures of success in heteronormative society. The author proposes that embracing failure opens up new forms of creativity and opportunities for cooperation that 'queer' or otherwise counter the neoliberal capitalist ideology dominating the Western world.

3 November 3rd–December 18th, 2016 at IMT Gallery, London (UK) featuring the work of Niv Acosta, Hannah Black, Evan Ifekoya, E. Jane, Devin Kenny, Tabita Rezaire, and Fannie Sosa. Curated by Legacy Russell.



While the rise of the new aesthetic is refreshing, it can be all too tempting to conclude that this movement constitutes diversification at work. The issue of equitable access to the means of producing art is still a critical barrier to realizing cultural diversity. This is evident in the net.art movement of the 1990's in which artists like Alexei Shulgin, Olia Lialina and Heath Bunting became early adopters of computer programming and employed web design to playful and even transgressive degrees. Their remarkable creations aside, making work online at that time required specialized knowledge and access to the latest technology, monetary or otherwise. This limited the scope of the net.art movement and the communities who engaged it. Now, in the era of Web 2.0, creative software is created for us, and building a website is as simple as a dropdown menu. While this template-based approach is not perfect—arguably discouraging innovation—the amount of people using the Web for creative purposes has grown exponentially.

A cursory search on Instagram reveals that there are just as many budding artists from Bangalore sharing their work with the app's 700 million users as there are artists based in Milan or New York doing the same. The relative ease-of-access to social media platforms and their use as both communication and branding tools has undoubtedly diversified the breadth of contemporary visual culture available at one's fingertips. However, the wealth of media available creates a kind of thick pea soup of culture too exhausting to navigate. A major pitfall of living post-Internet is that with more and more available content comes less visibility and even less filtration. So, in circumventing major cultural institutions artists also risk getting lost in a sea of media without the benefits of paid advertising and international brand recognition that magazines and museums typically have at their disposal. Unfortunately, this means that the weathervanes of contemporary art often remain the monolithic, pre-Internet institutions.

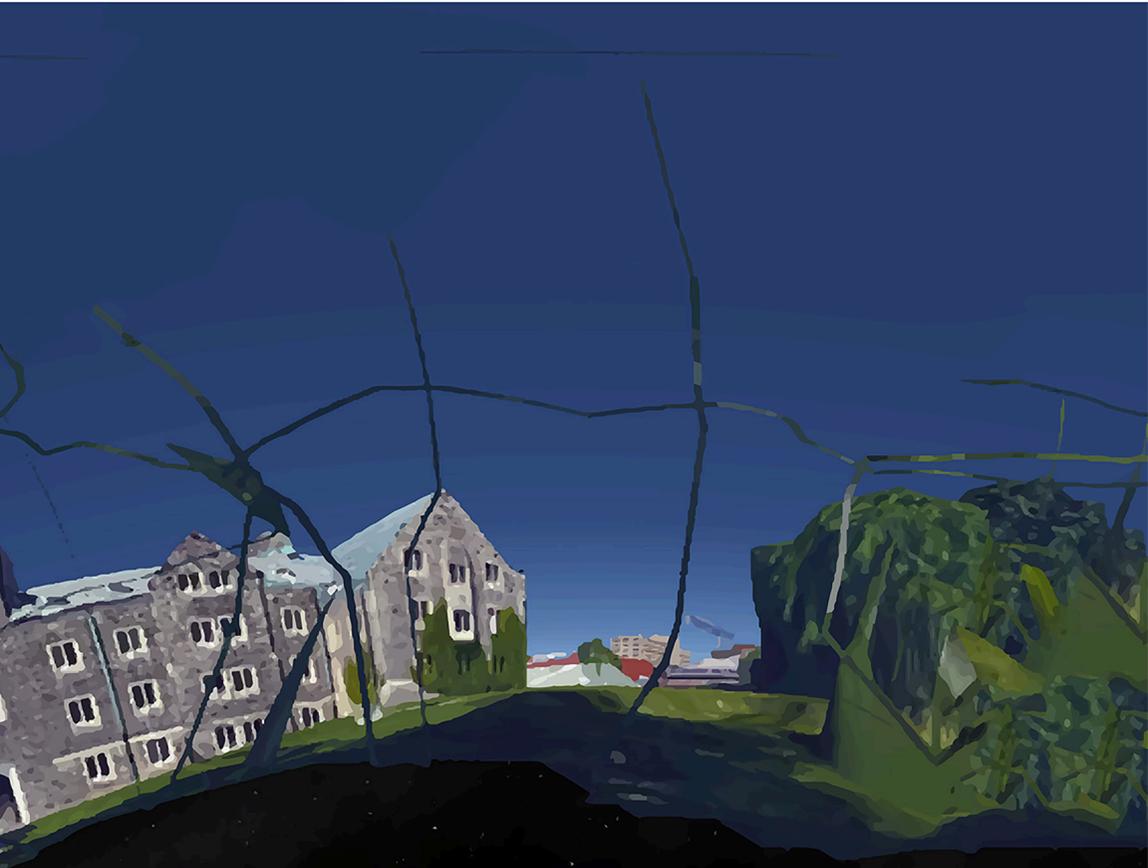
For instance, a passing glance at the homepage of ArtNews⁴—the oldest art magazine in the world—suggests that little has changed in its mandate since the days of dial-up. The first two headlines read: "Lichtenstein's 'Female Head,' from Collection of Former MoMA Lending Director Elizabeth Rea, to Be Offered at Sotheby's This Fall" and "Ritz-Carlton to Art Basel Miami Attendees: We've Canceled Your Reservation". The first article details the sale of a post-war artwork at the world's leading auction house while the second tells the billeting

drama of a swanky art fair in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma. Both stories center on huge institutions that aim to create spectacle and historically cater to audiences from privileged, European backgrounds. In contrast, a quick skim of the New York-based online-only magazine TripleCanopy⁵ yields a much different mélange. The first headline is neither a report nor a review but an announcement about a live event the magazine has organized to debut *High Treason*, the latest video game artwork by Mexican artist Juan Caloca. It situates the user as a dissident inside the National Palace exploring dungeons of contraband artworks and symbols outlawed by the Mexican government. After the event, which will act as the beta-run of the game, TripleCanopy will host the piece on their website effectively acting as both publication and online exhibition. The difference in focus and format between these publications is astonishing. While ArtNews continues to put stories about auction houses and art fairs at the forefront it also does so in a nearly 1-to-1 translation of a print publication into a digital format while TripleCanopy highlights an artist-of-colour making immaterial and politically-motivated work in a hybrid format that blends digital publication, live event and online gaming.

If this brief comparison serves as an accurate sample of the kind of ideological rift that exists between pre-Internet art institutions and the post-Internet art community then it is suffice to say that audiences seeking a more diverse art world won't see it from a mile away. They need to first become diligent researchers, spending hours down the proverbial rabbit hole to find where diversity is being championed. Admittedly, this is not ideal, but more importantly, it may be unavoidable. Even without the interference of the pre-Internet arts economy the more people who participate in a diverse, decentralized arts market require a massive public who is ever more committed to doing the work of seeking and appreciating that diversity. The ramification then of living in a world of truly diverse contemporary art is that there's simply too much world to track (Steyerl). In exchange for an age of egalitarian creative production, progressive society may have to let go, ironically, of the ideal of equal opportunity—enough to recognize that arriving at cultural diversity is not the same as achieving social equality.

4 Accessed Wednesday October 4th, 2017
<<http://www.artnews.com>>

5 Accessed Tuesday October 3rd, 2017.
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