

TRANSCRIPT OF AUDIO FILE

Hello, my name's Morgan Quaintance and I'm a writer and artist who's been working professionally in the field for the past 10 years. What you're about to listen to is my response to an invitation from New Contemporaries. Following the shift in viewing conditions caused by Covid-19, I was asked to consider what opportunities the digital space (that is the internet and the world wide web) now offers to the organisation, its artist and the audience.

As I've written it in the dark, with respect to whatever plans New Contemporaries may have for future development, it's possible that things I recommend or point out, may already be in the offing. What follows, then, is a largely speculative text, a friendly provocation designed to invite questions, rebuttals and perhaps operate as a catalyst for creative thinking.

So, let's begin with an inventory of art practice since the 1960s; the usual agreed upon decade for that transition from modern to contemporary, or (to borrow Roland Barthes' frame) from the death of the author to the birth of the reader.

As good a place as any to start is minimalist sculpture. With its sea change emphasis on embodied experience, truth to materials, and considerations of physical space, it stands in direct opposition to the disembodied, atemporal and disinterested purity of mid-century Greenbergian abstraction.

Then, if we leave strict chronology aside, the work of Robert Morris, Donald Judd and others could be followed by pop art, op art, conceptual art, land art, environmental art, socially engaged art, institutional critique, photorealist painting, hyperrealist sculpture, performance art, structural film, video art, neo-expressionism, neo-geometrical abstraction, the pictures generation, appropriation art, kinetic art, process based/'zombie' abstraction, participatory art, new genre public art, installation art, design as art, relational aesthetics, and so on and so on. In addition to the basic common denominator linking everything in that list – being that they're all broad labels for stylistic and philosophical approaches to the production of contemporary art –, there is one other key element they all have in common. All the names in that list have been given to modes of art practice that are primarily made and displayed in the physical world. Clearly, there's a lot of options for artists looking to find a mode of production best suited to realise their ideas in that context. But what if you're interested in making work in and for the physical world's opposite? What about the immaterial world of the internet, or, perhaps more generally, the world wide web?

Now, if we leave aside niche distinctions of approach that might divide subcultural tribes of self-identified 'internet artists', 'new media' or 'digital' artists (i.e. those who may consider themselves as outliers in relation to the art world proper). And, if we just focus on the practice based distinctions widely accepted and understood by structured and structuring institutions in the art world (i.e. universities, arts magazines, museums, galleries, funding bodies and so on) then there are really only two stylistic and aesthetic approaches designated for art made for or displayed in the immaterial realm: net.art and post-internet art. What the difference between the mass of options available for a material practice versus the lack of options available for an immaterial practice shows, is that there's been a massive shortfall in institutional attention to the digital realm. What organisations like New Contemporaries are now in a position to do is help to redress that imbalance, specifically because of circumstances forced upon the field by Covid-19's distancing requirements. They

are now in a position to contribute to a long overdue development of a discipline. As such it's necessary to begin with some first principles.

Another way of describing the common denominator for materially based works is to use the phrase site-specific. Generally associated with sculpture, and again gaining prominence from the '60s onwards, site-specificity largely refers to works made for or in response to a specific geographical location. Land art is a good example. Take Robert Smithson's 1970 work 'Spiral Jetty'. Using a combination of mud, salt crystals and rocks, Smithson and associates constructed a 1,500-foot-long (460 m) coil jutting out from Utah's Great Salt Lake. It wasn't made for the Thames, and it wasn't made for Brighton beach. It also certainly wasn't made for the internet. Richard Serra, another American sculptor, expressed the essential and necessary fixity of site specific work best. He said, 'to move the work is to destroy the work'. Of course, the logic of this maxim seems clear to us if we think of moving huge coils in the sea, or the work Serra made that statement about called *Tilted Arc*, a 120 foot-long, 12-foot-high steel sculpture that was initially placed in the Foley Federal Plaza in New York. Both works were obviously made for specific locations or sites. But what if we expand that notion of site a bit, and stretch it so that the entire physical world itself is a location that works are specifically made for or in response to. Now we can see how artworks made across all the previously listed real world disciplines are site-specific. And so, perhaps to move them from the physical to the immaterial is to destroy them too.

It follows, then, that it's also time to recognise the internet and world wide web as site specific locations. So, rather than simply expecting artists to provide gifs, jpegs, or mp4s of works previously made for or conceived with a physical gallery in mind, where possible, organisations like New Contemporaries could (budget willing) encourage and commission artists to produce projects that are net-native, or site-specific to the digital realm. That said, New Contemporaries (NC) has never existed as a commissioning body, and so if Arts Council England are slow to support such a move (economically speaking), NC might at least begin to function as a serious space for the support and dissemination of previously made internet based work. Such a move would be in keeping with the organisation's previous support for photography and moving image when both were new entrants to the disciplinary field.

However, it's also possible that artists may initially, and for a foreseeable period in the future, still limit themselves by thinking physical first and then providing gifs, jpegs, or mp4s of such works.

Here we begin to see how serious consideration of the immaterial realm will most likely require a sector wide shift in consciousness and attention. If we envisage that shift as a kind of causal chain, then the first link on it will most likely be the university system of arts education. Art schools will not only need to incorporate an in depth art historical programme examining the internet and the web, they will also have to teach coding, web design and the use of certain multi-media tools. These cannot simply be 'elective' options with random tech assistants on a broad based course, they must be foundational and compulsory features of any curriculum identifying itself as seriously concerned with the contemporary. In many ways this paradigm shift will require something that arts education has long been averse to: craft and practical instruction.

Dissenters may argue that a formal programme isn't necessary. That if artists are interested in the internet and world wide web, then all the tools they need to explore them are available online. It's true, there's a whole world of freemium and pay as you go software and tutelage services, not to mention countless online video instructionals on platforms like

YouTube, and also a plethora of MOOCs (massive open online courses). But these are all embedded and interlinked with what I'll call the commercial web. It is a space of algorithmic manipulation where, through systems of both positive and negative reinforcement, users essentially create content and revenue for a few commercial platforms, and our actions and interactions are tracked, mapped and monetised. While users of TickTock, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Soundcloud, Mixcloud and others rightly feel they're using multimedia tools to express unique ideas and creative visions, they're also unpaid workers on a giant content farm, feeding huge multinational companies with their expressive output, generating massive profits for others and very seldom any for themselves. By facilitating serious practical and theoretical instruction in this arena, and allowing for the development of proficiency and expertise away from the commercial sphere, art schools could lay the ground for an independent practice that is not embedded in monetised systems, or subject to the same economies of attention those monetised systems prioritise.

A burgeoning sphere of independent practice is also necessary due to the increasing multi-platform restrictions of the commercial sphere. Whereas websites in the 1990s were limited but relatively stable affairs (due to those same limitations), today's crowded market of phones, tablets, desktops, laptops and smart TVs with their varied screen sizes and protocols, are all placing strains on the design consistency of sites. One current pressure is to make work accessible on all platforms and compatible with every bit of hardware. Depending on who you're employed by, it's either an unspoken or explicit instruction and in both cases this enforced universality is leading to two things: formal standardisation and restrictions on artists' imaginations.

One way around this deadlock could be to create an independent platform that functions on the internet and not the world wide web. For example, this independent platform could be one large scale (and reasonably open source) application that has been designed specifically for the creation and display of art online. It could include customisable user interfaces, and a range of multimedia and streaming capabilities that are also customisable to a degree. Artists would be able to download the app (let's call it 'App X') and make work within it, and then viewers would also download App X to view exhibitions, or individual works. In the same way Skype's alias sits on your dock or desktop, this new platform could do the same. Instead of relying on the world wide web for internet access App X will connect to the net when it's launched, bypassing the commercial web without sacrificing global connectivity.

Again, some may balk at the idea of skirting what I call the commercial web. Many still feel it's an egalitarian and open space where people freely connect with others; a kind of temporary autonomous zone, that's only really autonomous in a few spots. But, to maintain such an outlook is to ignore the avalanche of evidence to the contrary. Again and again the world wide web shows itself to be a space that thrives on superficiality, sexism, racism, homophobia, the objectification of women, the monetisation of expression, and a host of other retrogressive conditions. Why would you want contemporary art to be competing with that? We've already seen what happens when artists do. The aesthetic and conceptual results of those who took that route were visible in the reductive and limited scope of post-internet art and the cracked philosophy of accelerationism. Who wants to return to either of them?

So, for better or worse, today there is an opportunity to engage with the internet and art in a considered way, and it seems to me the answer can't simply be more shows on the world wide web, more virtual gallery walk-throughs, more link and list web pages, more

pay as you go virtual film festivals and so on. A large scale application for the display and dissemination of contemporary art could be created through cross-institutional collaboration. It could also (again if the funding can be secured) be done by and only for a single organisation like New Contemporaries. My *App X* suggestion may not be the answer. But, the point here is to try out some original thinking by offering at least a decent provocation. Maybe a good starting point for that is to ask whether the world wide web is even the right home for art and exhibitions at all. Maybe the right home is going to be a specific site yet to be made.