

Over the past year, a handful of essays, books and talks have worked to bring critical nuance to the term “postinternet,” debating – among other things – what that nagging prefix means.

I’m less interested in passing judgment on the many interpretations than in pointing out that despite the knee-jerk response that “postinternet” currently induces, its very definitional ambiguity is generating a lively debate. Ostensibly, we are here today to continue that debate.

I share some of my colleague’s working definitions of the term. For one, we can view postinternet as a network of specific individuals ranged across physical and virtual localities, making work in conversation over the past several years. One could discuss this network on communitarian terms; celebrate the Internet’s allowance for its unbounded (if globally uneven) growth; or mold it to fit the form of an aesthetic movement, following art-historical or economic logics...

Following this thread, we might issue a simpler, more depressing definition: postinternet delineates the moment when certain artistic practices assume market viability, despite the earnestness and seriousness that informed Gene’s original work on the term.

There may be no better context than an art fair to dwell upon this point – and, indeed, the current market for postinternet art is nothing if not robust. Yet it strikes me that in dismissing practices on the terms of commodification, we can fail to parse the relative criticality of those practices.

So, too, when we dwell on prefixes in the name of discursive work, can we risk entrenching periodizing terms that may not only constrict celebrated practices, but also render others illegible.

What I’m advocating for, in short, is a shift in focus from terminology to method – from the definitional to an inquiry into what may constitute critical methodologies. If the Internet’s rapid changeability already hinders periodization, we may better understand our shifting positionalities – and the possibility of a politic – by developing methods responsive to them.

As the only artist on the panel, I feel a certain responsibility to speak with reference to my own practice, which you can take as a demonstration of my position (though certainly neither the only nor the best example). Methodologically, my work attempts to disenchant the dominant metaphors and mindsets at work in contemporary technology. This struggle for discursive terrain entails narrativity, and by various means, I hope to clear space for non-determinist, counter-normative accounts.

I situate my practice within art, because it also draws upon many of the conversations in the field. For example, in 2010, when every other critical essay seemed to theorize the conditions of the post-Fordist, cognitarian worker, I felt compelled to actually write as one such worker – to shift from the overwhelmingly diagnostic register and consider the

creative horizons borne, in this case, from a subjectivity negotiating the metrics of industrialized, online journalism.

This is not to say that the outlook is terribly good for my protagonist, who works as a “content farmer,” contracted to generate articles based on words peaking in Google Trends. Writing from his perspective thus became an exercise in claiming time and space in a field of production structured by quotas of language—in filling the spans between buzzwords with poetical speculations about our bodily relation to “the cloud.”

This project, entitled *I'm that angel*, takes form as a book, as well as a series of intimate readings and tours sited in data centers. The events call attention to the physical and geopolitical realities of the Internet, by facilitating access to the server rooms in which reader and audience already reside. We encounter the material doubles of our virtual subjectivities as data stored in server form.

Rather than concede to the seeming intractability of cognitive capitalism, these readings seek to potentiate critical operations through shared access, listening and discussion. Particularly on the tours, the audience plays a vital role in bringing geopolitical, environmental and ethical subjects to bear on how and where our data materializes in the world.

Taken as a whole, this project argues for a renewed consideration of the immanent horizons of subjectivity, sociability and creativity.

In his recent essay for *e-flux journal*, Geert Lovink writes, “the Snowden revelations in June 2013 mark the symbolic closure of the ‘new media’ era. The NSA scandal has taken away the last remains of cyber-naivety and lifted the ‘internet issue’ to the level of world politics.” If Lovink is correct, then we must begin discussing art’s shifting roles and responsibilities after Snowden.

For his part, Lovink asks us to think beyond existing cultural formats like Facebook. Can we conceive of other modes of social organization, “based on sustainable exchanges, strong ties, and a sensual imagination?”

In tandem, Lovink encourages that we develop a “dissident knowledge” that can be turned against the operative logics of our time. From various regions of the discourse, we can identify emerging methods.

First, opacity or exodus. Consider the encryption practices of Constant Dullaart, which attempt to claim private spaces within publicly viewable cultural goods. Additionally, the typefaces of former NSA contractor Sang Mun, designed to elude text-scanning software. We can also look to the writing of Tiquun and Alexander Galloway.

Second, making infrastructures visible. Benjamin Bratton claims that geopolitics should not only be understood laterally, but in the vertical strata of software and hardware, server and cloud, geography and sovereignty. This structure, “The Stack,” is “both bits

and atoms”; labor and life are component parts. Laura Poitras, Sean Dockray and Model Court are key investigators of this emergent form.

Third, reflexive identification with the norms and subject types of Web 2.0. Here we can consider calls for circulationism and “aestheticism,” as theorized by Hito Steyerl and Brad Troemel, wherein artists rely upon social media networks in legitimating – and “prosuming” – their work. We can also look to Ann Hirsch and Erica Scourti for modes of performance that, respectively, destabilize gender and algorithmic protocols.

This is far from an exhaustive list of methods or practitioners – nor should it suggest that every method is, qualitatively and ethically, alike. The line where identification slips into capitulation, and accelerationism into “solutionism” – when “aestheticism” starts glorifying, not deadpanning, neo-Darwinian logics: these are subjects beyond the scope of my presentation.

At the least, I hope this helps map positions and techniques, subjects and stakes. Learning the reach and depth of the network is part and parcel of designing methods of response.

One can speed up or slow down the Internet; the burden of critique lies not with velocity, but with how one moves – and to what end.

– Tyler Coburn

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