

Contemporary Art, Daily

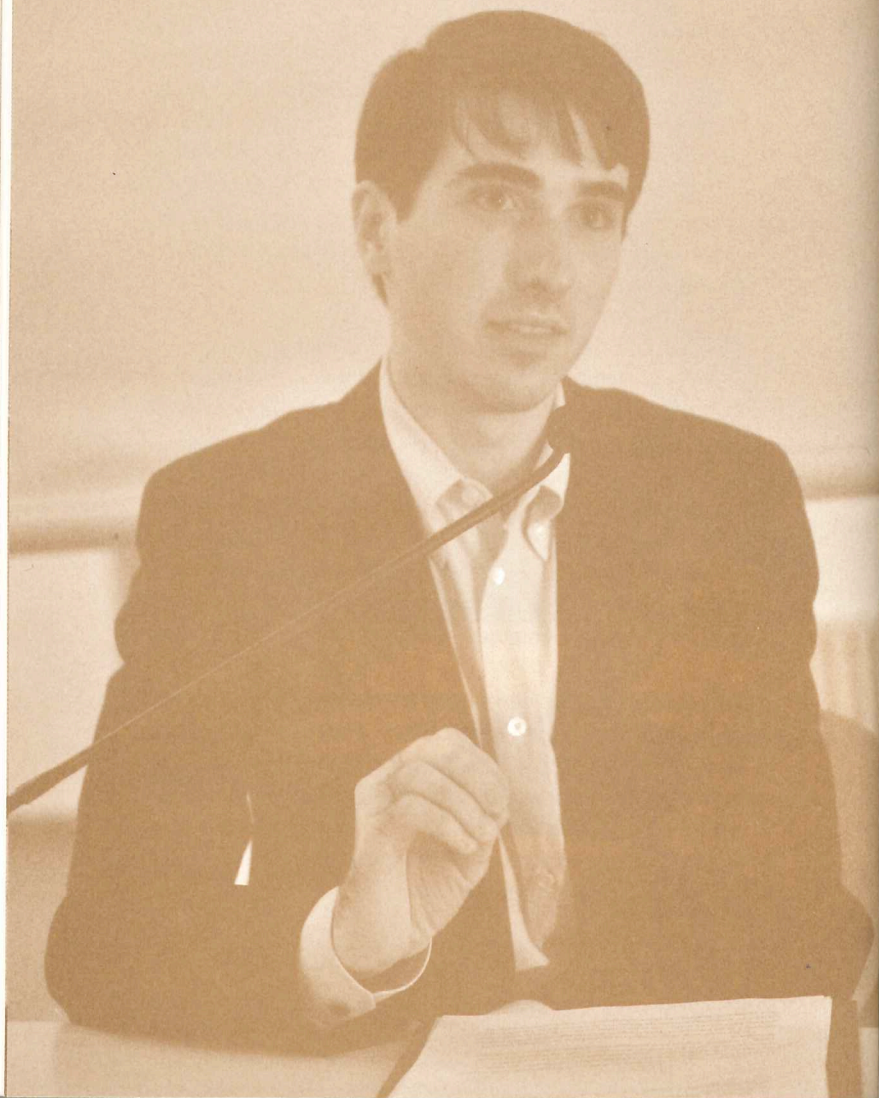
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The significance for art of the year 2008 is not limited to the market crash in October, but includes the founding of the blog Contemporary Art Daily in November, and the concurrent mushrooming of social media. Although the first and the last development have been much discussed (albeit rarely in tandem), all three have produced effects which are deeply interrelated.

In the intervening years, Contemporary Art Daily has effectively redirected traffic away from individual gallery websites and print publications to become a primary point of access for information about exhibitions.¹ Updated daily by a young artist based in Chicago, Contemporary Art Daily operates according to a feedback structure. Users suggest exhibitions to be featured, which are then filtered by an anonymous curator/blogger and fed back to their audience. Images from these exhibitions—which take place within a relatively predictable array of galleries and Kunsthallen in Europe and America—are compiled into a standard format against austere white backgrounds, with textual information in Times New Roman font, and links to share each page via social media discreetly underneath each image. Despite presenting their content in the ostensibly neutral way characteristic of media systems, with no information added apart from user “comments,” these white pages (more than the agents on either end of the feedback loop) dictate the terms by which images circulate, and survive, within them.

The competitive image ecology of Contemporary Art Daily is a reflection of economic competition. With a record number

¹ It has even spawned copycat sites, such as <http://www.studiovisit.com>, which appears to be operated out of Shanghai.



of art students graduating from prestigious graduate programs in a market with less money to purchase their work, competition is more intense than ever. And although art since the recession arguably looks more friendly and less strategic, it is, in fact, strategic to the point of paranoia, since it must compete within an increasingly rapid and invasive system of image distribution joined with a system of social surveillance and exchange.

Since Contemporary Art Daily is a remediation not only of the art journal but, more saliently, of the group show itself, it is inseparable from the circulation of objects through group shows which, reciprocally, resemble social networks. Or rather, these social networks exist in and through their curatorial presentation. Even the way in which Contemporary Art Daily organizes information—a name underneath an image—resembles the presentation of a profile. Rainer Ganahl's assertion that the internationalism of Harald Szeemann's "When Attitudes Become Form," arguably the first contemporary group show, was facilitated by affordable jet travel seems entirely to the point, except that now the speed of this transfer has been increased from jet speed to light speed, and the temporality of curating sped up to rival that of the RSS feed.²

Contemporary Art Daily is where images go to network on a newly expanded scale. The white walls of the gallery blur into the white pages. If the circulation of art objects today is bound up with, even determined by, social media and blogs, what changes as a result? More than what one might initially think. If we accept that the network is the dominant epistemic model

2 Rainer Ganahl, "When attitudes become—curating," accessed June 12, 2011, <http://www.ganahl.info/attitudes.html>. This increase of speed is even cutting into the static duration of a show, which is increasingly subjected to multiple rehanging, events, or other interventions over the course of its run.

of the moment, we can no longer make any rigorous distinction between artworks, viewers, and artists. The nodes of a network are only describable as "actors"—a concept indifferent to the human versus non-human, or even the animate versus the inanimate. No node in the network is inactive, strictly speaking. And since Bruno Latour has argued that the terms "actor" and "network" are chiasmatic rather than binary, not only does the network possess an agency of its own, but the only type of agency of which actors are capable is networking.³ This particular animism on the level of theory has a direct, and ultimately quite prosaic, correlate in the functions of objects both in the white cube and on the white page. If there is a new anthropomorphism in art objects today, I would suggest that it takes place primarily on the level of networking as a form of behavior.

In a way peculiarly linked to speed, once objects or images reach a certain circulatory momentum, they start to become lively (the life of human subjects is, analogously, of course, now also largely maintained through momentum alone). As artworks begin to act or behave, they are no longer brands, or deposits of a social relationship (as in the Renaissance, following Michael Baxandall).⁴ They are, rather, avatars. Where brands are relatively stable, passive signifiers, avatars are more active and protean, invested with an agency of their own—to invert Szeemann's phrase, they are "forms become attitude." The objects are not deposits of the position-taking activity, but instead perform this activity themselves. Paintings and

3 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46. See also Bruno Latour, "Networks, Societies, Spheres: Reflections of an Actor-Network Theorist" (keynote address, International Seminar for Communication and Journalism, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, Los Angeles, February 19, 2010).

4 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

sculptures are social networking devices, programmed to connect with the right actors, to get into the right shows, to convey the right profile, to such an extent that their users might turn out to be simply the by-product of this activity.

While the integration of art distribution into a larger social networking model has clear roots in the historical avant-garde, the way in which objects now function as the active curators of their own alliances/affinities with other objects and subjects is relatively new. And it seems to arise alongside the model of the avatar, one root of which might be found in the Cologne school. Not only did the Cologne artists define themselves explicitly as actors occupying positions constituted in and through a network (what is often termed *Positionierung*), their works behave in a way which collapses the distinction between alliances formed between objects and alliances formed between artists. The conditions under which a social network is activated are the same conditions under which art objects are put into relation with one another. Avatars have personality, but they are not brands, even though information is embedded in them, nor are they expressive—Martin Kippenberger’s lampposts, Michael Krebber’s canvases, and Cosima von Bonin’s animals are merely the most obvious examples. There is the tinge of historical inevitability in the fact that interest in the Cologne school would arrive with such force in America at precisely the same time that Facebook exploded, steadily increasing in the wake of the “Make Your Own Life” exhibition at the Philadelphia ICA in 2006 and culminating with “Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective” at the LAMoCA and MoMA in 2008 and 2009, respectively.

Another case study would be the way in which interest in the work of Marc Camille Chaimowicz was resurrected, roughly

contemporaneously, through the insertion of Chaimowicz into an “affinity network” of younger artists, e.g. Nairy Baghramian and Enrico David. Tastes and references circulated through this niche, creating relationships of “complicity,” to use Chaimowicz’s term, which were also canny strategies of reciprocal value production.⁵ Objects began to engage in their own networking activity, forming alliances made visible as much through shared references as through formal rhymes. By inviting others to contribute work to his retrospective at de Appel, “In the Cherished Company of Others” (2008), Chaimowicz explicitly frames his own career as the construction of an affinity network. The fact that such networking activity so frequently occurs in the form of exhibitions-as-interiors (even bedrooms, for example, in *Jean Cocteau* [2003–8]) can be seen as symptomatic. Just as actor and network define one another reciprocally to an unprecedented degree, it becomes technically impossible to separate the public from the private—even the definition of the private as a set of tastes and references, a set of “likes” to be exchanged, participates in the logic of the profile. At the moment of its eradication by precarious forms of labor, this space not only returns as a nostalgic form, but as a space of performative networking. The activities of curating one’s own life, curating the social network, and curating objects are no longer separable.

The Cologne school and the Chaimowicz network gained visibility at the moment they did because they both provided microcosmic models for how to make objects which “behave” in a network—in short, how to make avatars. The strategy of avatar-construction has become generalized (as a model for art objects as much as for human subjects) alongside the

⁵ See, for example, the statement issued on the occasion of his retrospective at de Appel in 2008, <http://www.deappel.nl/exhibitions/e/632/>.

generalization of network structures. As an aggregator of previously distinct smaller networks, Contemporary Art Daily is one prominent engine of this trend. Whereas in Cologne, the scope of circulation was relatively narrow, and the relations between players relatively fixed, networks are now much wider and more ephemeral. And avatars, too, have become more volatile, since they both have to circulate more broadly and are generated by more efficient real-time market feedback mechanisms.

The system is less complex than its parts, and surface patterns temporarily condense only in order to rapidly dissipate again. What patterns are visible on the surface of the Contemporary Art Daily system at this particular moment? Since second-order systems theory has established that the observation of a system implicates the observer in that system, I can't claim that these patterns exist beyond my own activity of seeing them. Nevertheless, I can claim that Contemporary Art Daily produces a form of seeing which tries to look for patterns, for connections, and inevitably finds them. The first of these patterns is pattern itself—the contagious logic of trends themselves is embodied in the pattern, moving seamlessly between textile, wallpaper, object, and screen window, collapsing the white screen and the white walls. In 1967, Gregory Bateson argued that patterns are the zero degree of communication; now they are an efficient form of info-currency.⁶ In addition to their connecting function, patterns have the added benefit of providing a pleasantly grounding or ordering effect against the increasingly entropic image-flow around them. Another trend—currently on the upswing along with a return of interest in psychedelia and Surrealism—is toward objects which activate what I am tempted to call the

6 Gregory Bateson, "Style, Grace and Information in Primitive Art," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 131.

"attention sink." These *domptes-regard* forcibly concentrate attention, either through purely formal means or through intensely dissonant combinations of images, producing a vibrating or centrifugal effect. The last, and perhaps the most pervasive, is what I would designate as "screen *povera*." Aligned with a broader fashion for coldly rustic surfaces, the texture of this work functions simply as a respite from information. Eyes tired from constant backlighting gravitate toward images of foxed textiles and Belgian linen, weathered wood and stone. This compensatory effect is not only produced through an encounter with the work in the gallery, but also through the screen itself.

The work of Sergej Jensen provides a particularly interesting example, not only insofar as he repeatedly compares his works to screens, but in the way in which the "poor" surfaces of his works function as avatars. Although the most literal example is *The First Mensch* (2005), which reproduces the first computer-generated human figure used by Boeing for cockpit design, all of his textile-based surfaces are active in the way that avatars are. Whatever is done to the surface of the painting is done to a subject. An important component of why Jensen's avatars are presently in such high demand, and so widely imitated on the Contemporary Art Daily circuit, is that they strategically present themselves as passive, waiting, reticent, shy—all forms of behavior which are strongly prohibited if not outright eradicated by the on-demand gregariousness and invasive packeting of time imposed by network capitalism.⁷

7 See Jensen's statement, quoted in Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, "Show me yourself," in *Sergej Jensen* (Berlin: Distanz, 2011), 9, saying that he considers his paintings as "subjects," which are "wounded, mistakes or failures." Many critics have also described his work as "shy" (see Lisa Pasquariello, "Pattern Recognition," *Artforum* [Summer 2006]). Jensen repeatedly compares his work to screens, both through evocations of digital imagery (the relation of the weave of a textile to the pixels on a screen), and through installation techniques, in which his paintings are placed alongside monitors.

Avatars can be perverse, using their apparent indecision or multivalence or inertia as a strategy for constructing alliances and achieving maximum visibility. Jensen's work addresses a condition in which value is acquired through circulation alone, establishing an equivalence between circulation which results in damage (used, foxed, repaired textiles) and circulation which increases value (gallery, museum, blog).

With its links to share pages on Facebook and so on, Contemporary Art Daily makes the subsumption of art circulation under the social networking model explicit. Paintings and sculptures become less like the inert currency of brands or tokens or signatures that they used to be, and more like what Michel Serres has defined as a quasi-object. For Serres, a quasi-object is not an object at all, but an activator of subjects. By way of example, he cites the slipper passed around a group of friends playing the game of Hunt the Slipper.⁸ If the slipper extracted human capital from every player it touched, not only growing stronger with each new alliance it formed but transferring that strength onto the player as well, it would approximate the way in which art objects circulate today. This newly "transitive" mode by which objects move through networks—which include Contemporary Art Daily—is not simply a way out of the old problem of reification, but a clear reflection of the newly transitive conditions under which value is created.⁹ Leaving behind even the traditional categories of production and reception, art objects *might only* be definable transitively.

I would suggest that we begin looking at the regime of distribution emblemized by Contemporary Art Daily in two related

8 Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 225–7.

9 David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October* 130 (2009): 132.

ways. First, in terms of the rapid feedback loops which it establishes with contemporary art production, whose agency can be attributed back, recursively, only to the system itself—a form of automated magical thinking which a systems theorist would have described as autotelic. Second, in terms of the new strategies and behaviors which images need to take on in order to survive in it, a behaviorism which includes, first of all, the imperative to behave, to interface, to form alliances, in short, to be active. Transforming a quantitative into a qualitative shift, Contemporary Art Daily accelerates the speed of distribution to such an extent that it is no longer possible to disentangle what is produced by it from what is merely distributed through it—and this includes artists, viewers, its anonymous creator/curator, and myself here.

Contentious as it is, this claim actually comes very close to the definition of a media system. Media produce the subjects and the content which they need, and even if Contemporary Art Daily is not quite fully operational in this sense, and I suspect it already is, it would certainly qualify as a specific instance of what Joseph Vogl has described as a "becoming-media," with all its material components in place but its epistemological regime still under construction.¹⁰ To pretend that the current tendencies of bodies and objects in the white cube are immune from these conditions would be ostrich politics.

10 Joseph Vogl, "Becoming-media: Galileo's Telescope," *Grey Room* 29 (2007): 23.