RESPONSE
Contemporary Art and Online Popular Culture

The online dialogue between producers and consumers is challenging the way the relationship between high and low culture was understood throughout the 20th century. This article attempts to trace its evolution.

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"this shit would have been cool in 2005 but you're on goddamn 4chan in 2013, one of the biggest sites for "SUCH A LOSER ?" people to ever browse the Internet people someone didn't found out your dirty secret life and reveal it to everyone else we've been doing it since the early/mid 2000's it isn't special get over it"

This beautiful piece of criticism, attributed to 4chan user anon 40254871, was brought to my attention on June 3, 2014, by an *art agenda* press release, introducing Jon Rafman's upcoming exhibition *Hope Springs Eternal*[1]. The press release also features what looks like the found image of a garbage bag, in which a male sex doll ass stands out among other rubbish, with the title of the show handwritten in black ink on one buttock.

In September 2013, Montreal-based artist Rafman published online the video *Still Life (Betamale)*. The first chapter of a video trilogy about the so-called "deep web" and the videoclip for a Oneohtrix Point Never track, *Still Life* is a collection of images and animated clips from various websites, delving into fetish, violence, S&M, hentai porn and a number of other techno and sexual obsessions. After being removed from YouTube and Vimeo (which later agreed to make it available again), the video started circulating virally and was the subject of a 43-page discussion thread on 4chan, which the artist recorded and made available on his website together with the video[2]. A popular image board, 4chan has thousands of users every day, most of them posting anonymously or using a nickname, but it's almost invisible to search engines because it doesn't archive conversations and the pace of the discussion is too fast to get the attention of web crawlers.

The above-cited quote comes from this thread. Inserting it into an official press release, as well as archiving the discussion on his website, Rafman not only shows the relevance this debate has for him––he also adds another line to the dialogue started by making the video and posting it online. This dialogue, in which popular online imaging meets "high art" and Internet slang meets art criticism, can't easily be reduced to the simple way it was developed and understood throughout the 20th century. According to this model, high art––a form of cultural production that circulates only in certain venues, is discussed merely in specific forum and uses a codified language not understood by the masses––may occasionally grab elements from low, popular culture, submitting them to a process of reformatting that alchemically turns shit into gold, cultural rubbish into art. The result no longer bears any relationship to the original material or its audience, which is not invited to the discussion. Art exploits popular culture, be it mass pop or amateur cultural production, for purposes that may vary from celebration to criticism and research without giving anything back. It may occasionally become fashionable and have an impact back on pop culture, as happened when Warhol turned into photo booth filters, Richard Prince's nurses homaged by fashion photographers and Takashi Murakami's motifs put onto bags, but always without subverting the high versus low paradigm implicit in this relationship.

FROM ARTWORKS TO MEMES (AND BACK)

"With more and more media readily available through this unruly archive, the task becomes one of packaging, producing, reframing and distributing; a mode of production analogous not to the creation of material goods, but to the production of social contexts, using existing material. What a time you chose to be born!"[3]

Things start to be different when an artwork is presented in a context in which it does more than merely attract the attention of the "general" audience, when this audience is capable of a feedback response. While these conditions may be occasionally fulfilled by any kind of public space, from streets and squares to the mass media, it most often happens with distributed media, and specifically within the distributed medium of the Internet, that audience response becomes important, massive, articulated in a variety of forms, and occasionally capable of completing the artwork, turning it into something different, and even overwhelming it in a way that makes the original disappear. I'm not interested in discussing interactive or participatory artworks here, but more in the kind of unsolicited participation that is so commonplace online or in works that deliberately produce social contexts as their intended output.

Back in 2011, here in *ARTPULSE*[4], we considered the example of *Interior Semiotics*, a performance piece by student artist Natacha Stolz, which, after being posted on YouTube, was picked up by the 4chan crowd as a relevant example of "hipster art" and its audience, also pictured in the video. Rebranded as the SpaghettiO's meme, the video reached thousands of people, was sampled, commented on and remixed, and Stolz's negative reaction led to instances of harassment that used her digital persona to eventually become a consistent part of the meme itself.

Stolz's example is interesting for various reasons. The performance work is scholastic and mostly derivative, documented in an amateurish way by a friend of the artist. While the performance

Jon Rafman, *Still Life (Betamale),* **2013**,still from video. Courtesy of the artist

was subject to criticism, satire and commentary, it became interesting to a wider audience mostly thanks to the accidental effectiveness of some side details: the performer's problems in opening the SpaghettiO's can; and the reactions of the audience that gathered to attend the event. But more importantly, the SpaghettiO's meme is a cultural artifact in itself, the output of collective creativity that, born as a reaction to an original artifact, became more relevant and "original" than the original itself.

A similar outcome took place when *KNEECAM No. 1* (2000), a video by German artist and filmmaker Matthias Fritsch, was reposted on YouTube and other online video platforms under the name "Technoviking" by other users. It happened in September 2007, seven years after the original shooting, and in a few days the video reached millions of people, peaking at one million views in one day. Why did this happen? The original video featured low-quality documentary footage made during the Fuckparade in Berlin, a popular techno-enthusiasts' gathering. The camera attention was soon catalyzed by the charismatic character of a man apparently working as event security but also participating in the parade. The video is part of a trilogy questioning the authenticity of a filmed scene and reflecting on the role of the camera, film language and perception in times of digital moving images. Years later, this character caught the attention of the web crowds, which started making conjectures about his real identity, comparing him to other popular male characters, imitating his behavior in other videos, turning him into an image macro, and even creating derivative artifacts such as graphics, 3D models, action figures, stickers, T-shirts, user accounts, oil paintings, comics, sculptures and installations (like Wafaa Bilal's giant inflatable site-specific installation of the character's head).

Instead of reacting against this unexpected development, Fritsch started tracking it, developing an ongoing archive for research on the Technoviking meme that, to date, consists of over 2,000 single

units and 17 GB of data in the form of images, emails, blogs, forum discussions and video responses. Fritsch then started working on other projects that deal with the recycling and remixing strategies so popular on online video sharing platforms. This is the case of *Music from the Masses* (2008 - 2013), a project in which he uploaded 10 silent videos asking people to create a soundtrack for them. The result is an archive of 250 videoclips. In return for participating in the project, musicians may use the high-definition video for free, for commercial or non-commercial purposes in their work [5].

A person who did not accept and reacted vigorously to this unexpected popularity was, unexpectedly, the Technoviking himself, who in 2009 took legal action against Fritsch, asking for the removal of the *KNEECAM No. 1* video and all the derivative material (which was, of course, widely out of the control of the artist). In 2010, the plaintiff took the case in front of a German court, which in 2013 prevented Fritsch from showing the original video as long as it was possible to identify the protagonist[6].

ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Music from the Masses shows how the discovery of another level of dialogue with the audience made possible by online distribution brought Fritsch to actively pursue this dialogue, facilitating it with the creation of a framework in which other people could input new content, and to develop new working conditions, based on exchange rather than delivery. Another interesting example is offered by Nick Briz's *Diamonds* (2002), a green-screen version of Rihanna's performance of "Diamonds" on *Saturday Night Live*, made available on his website for further remixes. Following a model provided by Olive Laric's *Touch My Body (Green Screen Version)* (2008), Briz is responding to mainstream media's "top down" approach, creating the conditions for a "bottom up" process of appropriation of cultural content. What Briz's project adds to Laric's is related to Ri-
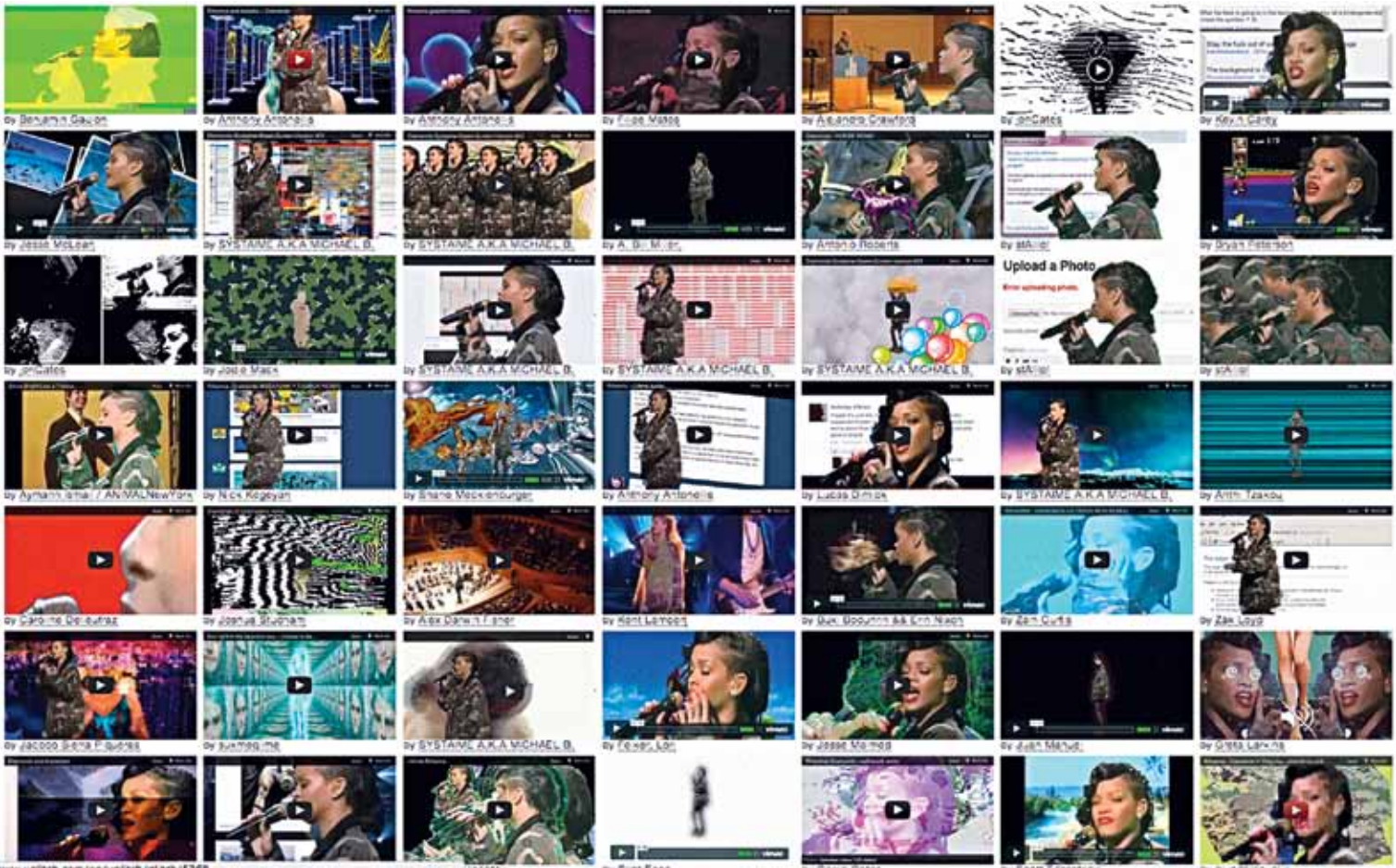
Nick Briz, *Diamonds (Green Screen Version), 2012*, digital video (0:57 mins). Courtesy of the artist.

hanna's own appropriation, in that very performance, of an obscure but trendy online subculture known as seapunk[7]. The billionaire pop star's interest and related appropriation (with no end credits) of an online subculture for aesthetic developments sparked reactions of hatred on the Internet. Briz is not just symbolically "giving back" to the Internet what comes from it but is also opening it up to new creative possibilities, suggesting that shared, collective creation will be always stronger than any individual's attempt to put her mark on it.

Another attempt to open up a dialogue with online groups or communities is offered by the work of New York-based artist David Horvitz. The originator of the *241543903 / Heads In Freezers* (2009 - ongoing) meme, which invited people to take pictures of themselves with their heads in a fridge and post them to the Internet with the name "241543903" (that would make them easily retrievable through Google Images), Horvitz is familiar with online audiences' level of response. In late 2010, he drove up the entire California coast with various friends. The trip started at the beach just north of the Mexico-U.S. border and ended in Oregon at Pelican State Beach. Along the way, Horvitz took photographs of more than 50 different state beaches, including himself in all the shots as if he was an anonymous passer-by. The photographs were then uploaded to each of the specific beach's Wikipedia page to illustrate the articles. Soon, some "wikipedians"––the closed elite of regular Wikipedia contributors–– realized that all of these images were posted from the same IP address and started discussing whether the use of images featuring the same individual, although unrecognizable, was breaking any Wikipedia policy. Soon, most of the images had been removed from the Wikipedia archives. Later in 2011, with friend and writer Ed Steck, Horvitz made a book about the project, called *Public Access*. It featured all the images along with the corresponding Wikipedia entry and screenshots from the forum discussions produced by the project[8].

Although Horvitz wanted to turn these images into visual meta data for the specific beaches, changing a private, selfish trope (the self-portrait) into a publicly useful tool, he probably knew in advance that the project would spark reactions––a repressive response that makes *Public Access* an effective exploration of the limits of a self-proclaimed open and democratic public space, that of Wikipedia.

The online encyclopedia is not exactly the place where one expects to experience art, and that's why when one meets an unusual behavior that can't be easily dismissed as an art project, things get pretty interesting. People react to art according to a protocol that belongs to the place, rather than according to the relatively safe protocol of an "art audience." Always attracted by this kind of reaction, Eva and Franco Mattes recently launched a project living in the liminal online public space offered by "obscure, peripheral or forgotten social networks around the world, in Cambodia, Russia, China, Zambia[9]." Titled *BEFNOED* (2014)––short for "By Everyone For No One Every Day"––the project collects a series of performances commissioned via crowdsourcing from anonymous workers all over the world by sending them text instructions for a simple action to be performed by them in front of a web camera. The resulting videos are published by the artists on all kinds of video sharing platforms and then collected on a Tumblr blog. The project can thus access two very different audiences: the "art audience" reaching the Tumblr blog from their website or seeing the videos in art contexts; and the unaware spectators who see one or more videos on video sharing platforms, without any additional information explaining that these videos are part of a wider performance project. The very same performers don't know exactly what they are doing––they are just

completing a task among many, for one customer among many––and probably not the weirdest one either. Using Tumblr as a distribution platform allows the videos to appear in the dashboard of other viewers––mostly westerners and creative people, but not necessarily interested in art––though decontextualized. It's too early to expect to see any kind of response, but this level of dispersion is unprecedented.

ACCIDENTAL AUDIENCES

The use of Tumblr as a distribution platform to access an "accidental audience"[10] has been successfully pursued by The Jogging, an image blog curated by a group of artists that is also accepting submissions based on a loose set of rules: posts should provide original content with a caption in which the name of the "artist" is replaced by an abstract symbol linking to his/her website. This choice underlines a first level of dissociation between the image and the artist who made it––a dissociation that could only increase thanks to the peculiar way in which images are experienced and circulated on Tumblr. Reblogging a post keeps it linked to the original source but allows us to edit the caption and add our own tags; also, as Brad Troemel, who co-founded The Jogging in 2009, noted in his essay "The Accidental Audience," many Tumblr users "drag popular images to their desktop and fraudulently repost them on Tumblr as though they had created or found the image independently." This attitude toward authorship, which Troemel defines as "image anarchism," increasingly brings art in front of an "accidental audience" that is not looking for art in the first place and elicits different reactions that are further explored by Troemel in his essay.

Another way to reach out to the accidental audience is to make something "useful": an artwork that produces content, but that can also be used for other purposes. Back in 2010, artist, activist and programmer Greg Leuch published *Shaved Bieber*, a Firefox add-on that could be used to automatically remove unwanted Justin Bieber mentions from our browser. The work, which later evolved into Pop Block, a comprehensive tool that allows us to block any kind of content, was meant as a tool of "personal censorship" and desktop ecology, providing tools "to consumers to control, adapt, and modify the contents of the Internet from their browser[11]." But, of course, Bieber is Bieber. When the project was launched, it was massively adopted by parents who wanted to prevent their teen children from surfing the Internet for hours in search of Bieber-related content. Over two weeks, the project's popularity exploded, and Leuch became public enemy number one to hundreds of teenagers, who started insulting him, trolling him and sending him death threats via email, on forums and on social networks, while other users were praising the piece and lamenting that it was not yet available for other browsers. Leuch documented this public outcry on a Tumblr blog.

CONCLUSION

As these examples show, over the last few years we have seen the relationship between art and popular culture, and between art and popular response, change dramatically thanks to online means of production and distribution. On the one hand, the Internet has become the source of a new popular culture, orchestrated not by mainstream media, but by ordinary people who appropriate and influence mainstream popular culture, as happened with online memes and seapunk. On the other hand, the artistic practices that choose to take place on this distributed platform have the chance to infiltrate and condition online popular culture and be exposed to an unprecedented kind of response. Seth Price really nailed it: what a time you chose to be born. ∎

Eva and Franco Mattes, *Befnoed (Licking Rim),* 2014, screenshot from video. Performer and location unknown, done following the artists' instructions. Courtesy of the artists.

NOTES
1. Cf. www.art-agenda.com/shows/jon-rafman-at-galerie-antoine-ertaskiran-in-association-with-libralato/. The exhibition took place at Galerie Antoine Artaskiran, Toronto, from June 4 to 28, 2014.
2. Cf. http://jonrafman.com/betamale/.
3. Seth Price, *Dispersion*, 2002. Available online at http://www.distributedhistory.com/Disperzone.html.
4. Domenico Quaranta, "Internet Semiotics," in *ARTPULSE*, Vol. 2 No. 4, Summer 2011, pp. 22 - 25. Online at http://artpulsemagazine.com/internet-semiotics.
5. Both the archives can be publicly accessed through Matthias Fritsch's website, at http://subrealic.net.
6. Cf. Domenico Quaranta, "My Life Without Technoviking: An Interview with Matthias Fritsch", in *Rhizome*, December 5, 2013, online at http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/5/interview-matthias-fritsch/.
7. According to *Wikipedia*, seapunk is "a microculture with an identifiable style of music, design, and fashion. It developed online in 2011 via a small group of social media enthusiasts who shared a nostalgia for 1990s Internet culture. *The New York Times* described Seapunk as a "web-joke with music." It gained limited popularity as it was shared, forwarded, and linked across the Internet." Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seapunk.
8. The book has been published in paper form by Motto Distribution, and is also available online in PDF form at http://media.rhizome.org/blog/7949/Public-Access-PDF.pdf.
9. From the project's webpage on the artist's website: http://0100101110101101.org/befnoed/. The Tumblr blog is available here: http://befnoed.tumblr.com/.
10. This label comes from Brad Troemel's essay "The Accidental Audience", *The New Inquiry*, March 14, 2013, online at http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-accidental-audience/, referenced later in this text. The Jogging is available online at http://the-jogging.tumblr.com/.
11. From the project's webpage: http://gleu.ch/projects/shaved-bieber.