Writing about post internet art from an art history perspective looks pretty much like an impossible task at present. Either we are still trapped in the storm of comments, opinions and debates that blew up when this proposed art label turned into a successful art meme, or we are hot on its heels. On October 30, 2014, art critic Brian Droitcour published a text [1] in *Art in America* that could be described, tongue in cheek, as the post internet version of an earlier, widely debated blog post [2]: more elegant, less personal, and written for a respected art magazine for the sake of quotes, just as post internet art is made for the white cube for the sake of pics. According to Droitcour, “a sheaf of essays grappling with the meaning of “Post-Internet” by tracing a genealogy from Olson onward would not suffice to describe what Post-Internet has become: a term to market art.” For him, post internet is an embarrassing yet useful new entry in artspeak, describing an “art made for its own installation shots”; an art that “does to art what porn does to sex – renders it lurid”, “a self-styled avant-garde that's all about putting art back in the rarefied space of the gallery”, [3] incapable of criticism and that only uses the internet as a promotional tool. From this perspective, post internet art is nothing but an opportunistic, reactionary trend in the context of a formerly radical art practice – net art – now embraced by the contemporary art world as a way to make any artwork that claims to be aware of the current means of creation and distribution irresistibly fashionable and cool.
In other words: for Droitcour, post internet art might be a good subject for art criticism, but it is not a useful label in art history, lacking historical depth and any relationship with former uses of the term; and since it refers to bad art, it will be short-lived anyway.

I agree with Droitcour on one thing: that post-internet-art-as-an-art-market-trend won’t last long, and that as an art trend, it has its drawbacks. The two are strictly related. The peril of post internet art is that it can be easily disguised as a style: a layer of visual references to the desktop and online environment that can be applied to almost anything; a way of approaching image-making that considers its online dispersion; and a limited set of topics and solutions, from corporate imaging to voice-over videos. It's a kind of “internet layer” that's very easy to adopt now it's in fashion, and will be equally easy to dismiss when it becomes uncool, and that almost everyone can catch onto. In this form, the post internet spread like a virus in 2013, after Frieze art fair director Matthew Slotover, when asked in an interview if he saw some kind of trend coming out of the applications for the fair, mentioned post internet as a “very interesting direction.” [4] Yet it did not grow in subsequent art fairs, and although a few artists who can be loosely associated with post internet art are now a stable presence in the art market, their individual success stories do not represent a stable trend.

Similarly, during the Paddles On! Auction at Phillips London in July 2013, the post internet craze enabled Australian artist Michael Staniak to sell a work for £25,000, from an initial estimate of £3,500. [5] Paddles On! is a digital art auction format conceived with the ambition of creating a market for digital art, which is now supported by a number of galleries but rarely entered the world of auctions. Staniak is an artist with little or no background in media art, who makes beautiful abstract paintings using acrylic and casting resin in a way that recalls digital painterly effects. His sudden success obscured the longer, respectable careers of some of the artists included in the auction, whose works went for much less, or remained unsold.

Taking part in a panel at Art Dubai’s Global Art Forum in March 2012, artist Constant Dullaart famously said: “Don't use the internet as a fucking condiment.” [6] This is post internet's main peril: using digital culture as a layer of make-up for artworks so long as it looks fashionable and cool.

And yet post internet is not just that. Going against Droitcour, in this text I argue that post internet art cannot really be understood without tracing its roots back to the group surfing practices that emerged in the first decade of the twenty first century, and without considering the ways it has been shaped and discussed since then. Moreover, I situate the post internet within the longer history of art in networked spaces, showing that its relationship with this history cannot be presented in the over-simplified way that is implicit in Droitcour's essay – namely a transition from a radically immaterial practice that rejected the art world to one that prostitutes itself to get a corner in the white cube; the process is much more collaborative and layered. Finally, I will show how this contextualization invites us to re-consider post internet art as one of the strategies and modes of expression of a wider and more vibrant contemporary “internet art” scene, rather than a movement comprising a defined set of artists, or the way net art rebranded itself to be accepted by the art world: a manifestation that maybe, at this point, doesn't even need a name.

In other words: we can be critical of the post internet label, and some of the outcomes of so-called post internet art; but we can't dismiss entirely, because it is an integral part of what internet art has become in the last ten years.
As is now well known, the term “postinternet” was first used by artist and (at the time) Rhizome editor Marisa Olson in 2006, in reference to her own practice and that of her peers. While she was mainly speaking for herself, as she recently clarified, her post at Rhizome and her role as a co-founder of Nasty Nets, the first surfing club, put her in a position to speak, more broadly, about a new generation of artists who, while spending a lot of time online, were developing most of their work offline: work that was nonetheless “infused with the digital visual language, network aesthetics, and the social politics of online transmission and reception.” [7]

The term survived, together with a few alternatives such as internet-engaged art and internet-aware art (the latter first used by artist Guthrie Lonergan) until it was popularized by art critic Gene McHugh, who – thanks to a grant from the Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program – ran a blog of the same name from December 2009 to September 2010. [8] While Olson, in her use of the term, stressed the “practical” shift from making art online to making art that took advantage of the act of navigation, McHugh focused instead on the historical and conceptual reasons for this shift. He attributed them to the general transformation of the relationship between reality and the internet, which provided different terrain for the relationship between art and the internet. According to McHugh:

“No matter what your deal was/is as an artist, you had/have to deal with the Internet – not necessarily as a medium in the sense of formal aesthetics (glitch art, .gifs, etc), but as a distribution platform, a machine for altering and re-channeling work […] Even if the artist doesn’t put the work on the Internet, the work will be cast into the Internet world; and at this point, contemporary art, as a category, was/is forced, against its will, to deal with this new distribution context or at least acknowledge it.” [9]

McHugh’s year long ruminations led to the term entering critical discourse, and being adopted in

McHugh's definition is also important because it links up with the most recent definition of the term, which can be summed up in the words of Karen Archey and Robin Peckham:

This understanding of the post-internet refers not to a time “after” the internet, but rather to an internet state of mind – to think in the fashion of the network. In the context of artistic practice, the category of the post-internet describes an art object created with a consciousness of the networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception. [15]

But before moving on, it is worth spending some time on the three competing labels that emerged around 2006 – 2008 in the debate around net art. Though very different from one another, post-internet, internet-aware and internet-engaged all resulted from an aversion to medium-based labels such as net art or internet art; they all pointed to the internet as a cultural reference, and an environment, rather than a medium. This is related, on the one hand, to a general change in the perception of the relationship between reality and the internet, as McHugh pointed out; and, on the other hand, to a dissatisfaction with medium specificity and the niche status of new media art. After the dotcom bubble and with the arrival of the Web 2.0, the internet started to be perceived less as a medium and more as a key part of our daily lives; less as a utopia to construct together, and more as a dystopia we are all part of, but that still provides interesting opportunities for networking and community making, and an unprecedented tool for “surfing” reality and getting a better understanding of it. This goes beyond the scope of this essay, but it is worth noting that the idea that the information society has entered a new phase has now been universally accepted, and different people have attempted to describe this shift in different terms, but in very similar ways. More specifically, the debate around post internet art has arisen more or less in parallel to the debates around postmedia, [16] a term first used by Felix Guattari in 1996, post-digital and the New Aesthetic. First used by Kim Cascone in an essay on digital music published in 2000, [17] the notion of post-digital attracted much debate between 2008 and 2014. In 2014, Aarhus University and transmediale, Berlin set up “Post-digital Research”, an initiative that produced a peer-reviewed journal and came up with the following working definition:

Post-digital, once understood as a critical reflection of “digital” aesthetic immaterialism, now describes the messy and paradoxical condition of art and media after digital technology revolutions. “Post-digital” neither recognizes the distinction between “old” and “new” media, nor ideological affirmation of the one or the other. It merges “old” and “new”, often applying network cultural experimentation to analog technologies which it re-investigates and re-uses. It tends to focus on the experiential rather than the conceptual. It looks for DIY agency outside totalitarian innovation ideology, and for networking off big data capitalism. At the same time, it already has become commercialized. [18]

The New Aesthetic started as a visual study run on a Tumblr blog by British artist and designer James Bridle in 2011, and gathered momentum around 2012, when author Bruce Sterling made it the subject of an enthusiastic essay in Wired. [19] The New Aesthetic blog collects images from art, design, online interfaces and daily life, with a focus on how the digital manifests itself in the physical domain. As Bridle explains in an essay tellingly re-published at the beginning of the book
You Are Here: Art After the Internet:

It is impossible for me [...] not to look at these images and immediately start to think about not what they look like, but how they came to be and what they become: the processes of capture, storage, and distribution; the actions of filters, codecs, algorithms, processes, databases, and transfer protocols; the weight of datacenters, servers, satellites, cables, routers, switches, modems, infrastructures physical and virtual; and the biases and articulations of disposition and intent encoded in all of these things, and our comprehension of them. [20]

Post internet emerged along, and with a deep awareness of, these lines of thought. But the urge to reframe the art formerly known as net art was also related to another process, within the field of new media art: the need to go “beyond new media art”, both as a medium-based practice and as a cultural niche, in order to develop a better dialogue with the contemporary art world after the nonstarters at the turn of the millennium, when new media art missed the chance (offered by a number of museum exhibitions) to be viewed as one of the most interesting artistic developments of the last few years. Around 2005, many “new media artists” - led by representatives of the first net art generation – had already started working with commercial galleries and contemporary art institutions, and investigating ways to present their works in the white cube. Most of them, Jodi included, had all but stopped making net-based projects, and were working mostly on software and hardware manipulation. Two seminal exhibitions, “The Art Formerly Known as New Media” and “Postmedia Condition”, took place that year, [21] the latter introducing the concept of postmedia in the media art debate; [22] a media art festival catalog hosted an equally seminal essay, titled “'It's contemporary art, stupid'. Curating computer-based art out of the ghetto”, by curators Inke Arns and Jakob Lillemose. [23] Later in 2007, media theorist Geert Lovink lectured and wrote about “the cool obscure” of new media art, [24] and the panel discussion “Media Art Undone” took place at Transmediale in Berlin. [25] On that occasion, artist Olia Lialina said:

For a long time it did not make sense to show net art in real space: museums or galleries. For good reasons you had to experience works of net artists on your own connected computer. Yesterday for me as an artist it made sense only to talk to people in front of their computers, today I can easily imagine to apply to visitors in the gallery because in their majority they will just have gotten up from their computers. They have the necessary experience and understanding of the medium to get the ideas, jokes, enjoy the works and buy them. [26]

Surfing clubs emerged in this transitional period, and mostly attracting young artists with an art education who, albeit critical of the art market and the process of commodification of digital artifacts, felt closer to the broader contemporary art discourse than to media art culture. Explaining his approach to surfing and blogging in his essay “Spirit Surfing”, artist Kevin Bewersdorf naturally uses the work of Joseph Cornell as a reference point to show what happens when found online content is rearranged in a blog post. [27] In October 2007, Bewersdorf had a show at And/Or Gallery in Dallas together with Guthrie Lonergan, another influential pro-surfer. The exhibition featured videos, small prints, and a series of works that Bewersdorf produced by printing found online images onto ordinary objects like cushions, mouse pads and mugs using wallgreens.com, a web store with a print-on-demand service. Headed by artist and musician Paul Slocum, And/Or was a small artist-run space that, for a few years (from 2006 to 2009), gave the surfing club generation fertile terrain to present their work, test modes of presentation in the white cube without the constraints of a commercial gallery and the performance anxiety induced by a more central location, and build relationships with collectors. [28] It anticipated many of the topics and tropes of post internet art, including the form of the “dual site”: a small, outlying, brick-and-mortar meeting point for an online community that emitted a signal amplified by the documentation on its web site, as Bewersdorf and Lonergan did in their work, before they stopped producing visual art completely.
For both, “retirement” started around 2009 – 2010, at the peak of their careers, and for very similar concerns about the objectification and commodification of their art. As Lonergan said to Ed Halter in a recent interview:

Net art’s relationship to contemporary art as a whole and to the art market gets more confusing every day. It’s pretty fascinating to watch, though. I tried for years to figure out how to ‘print it out,’ to make something super-salable, but I could never quite figure it out, and I don’t think I ever will. [29]

This short tour of the origins of post internet art should make it clear that it cannot be reduced to an art fair trend, to the small Bushwick scene described by Droitcour, or to the one liner “put a work on show, take a picture of it, and circulate the photo online”. On the contrary, the phenomenon seems to be the result of the confluence of a plurality of issues, approaches and processes, and the development of a new art community, less insular and more integrated than the one that developed around the first net art, and involved in an expanded conversation. At the risk of indulging in list-making, we must at least mention artists like Hito Steyerl, Mark Leckey, Seth Price, and Metahaven, art magazines like Artforum, Mousse and Frieze, art critics and theorists like Boris Groys, David Joselit and Jennifer Allen, as part of or inspiration for this expanded conversation; of course alongside the good old crew, which was never dismissed or forgotten:

When I started trying to be an artist in the early aughts, I most identified with the net art movement. I had discovered the work of jodi.org, Olia Lialina, Vuk Cosic, and Alexei Shulgin in college (outside of my studies) and I kinda had a “Ramones” moment, ... “I can do this!” It was terribly exciting and will seem obvious now, but the idea that one could just make something and people could see it without any intermediary was mind blowing. Also, for whatever reason – though one wonders if it was due to the lack of bandwidth (?) – the work of the above artists was surgically precise and conceptually clear headed. These traits undoubtedly added further fuel to my interest, and are things I still try to this day to emulate. At the time, if one was interested in browser art, by default they were linked to media art and its histories as the media scene was kinda the only game in town open for a dialog about the browser. This has all changed now as computers are mainstream therefore so is art which deals with them. [30]
As we have seen, post internet art emerged at a time when net art was rehashing its relationship with the art world. Net art, which was always aware that its radical autonomy could only be temporary, and that always played the tongue in cheek role of “the last avant-garde”, was nonetheless initially 'mind blown' (in the words of Arcangel) by the opportunity to play different roles (including those of the institution and gallery) and reach an audience “without any intermediary”. Yet, it soon understood that in order to make the game more interesting, the art world was not to be rejected, but used and abused. This is what Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin, in their seminal piece *Introduction to net.art (1994-1999)*, call “the cultural loop”:

2. Interface with Institutions: The Cultural Loop
   a. Work outside the institution
   b. Claim that the institution is evil
   c. Challenge the institution
   d. Subvert the institution
   e. Make yourself into an institution
   f. Attract the attention of the institution
   g. Rethink the institution
   h. Work inside the institution [31]

What should be understood about this process is that it's a loop, not a straight line. Thus, “work inside the institution” is not the end of a process that goes from autonomy to integration, but part of a continuous loop in which net celebrity serves to get into the gallery, and art world recognition serves to generate more interest online. The gallery and the museum are not the end point. And integration is not the end point, but a means to get more autonomy. This does not mean, of course, that net art has to have a co-dependent relationship with the system. There is a long list of artists who developed substantial bodies of work and were extremely
influential among their peers, but who refused to join the cultural loop: Bewersdorf and Lonergan are good examples. But anyone interested in a career in art can't avoid joining this level of the game. A good example of this comes from the artists involved in the Free Art & Technology Lab (F.A.T. Lab), a group co-founded by Evan Roth and James Powderly in 2007 during an Eyebeam residency, and now numbering 20+ artists, designers and hackers from three continents. F.A.T. Lab not only includes “professional artists”, but also professionals from various different disciplines, interested in having an arena for experimentation where they can work on projects that elude easy categorization, and can interest different audiences. Artists associated with F.A.T. Lab include Evan Roth, Aram Bartholl, Addie Wagenknecht, Golan Levin, among others. They all have a respected institutional presence, and they all have gallery representation. Some of their works could easily fit into one of the definitions of post internet art; but they keep working with technology, making online projects, participating in group projects, cultivating relationships with communities outside of the realm of art: hackers, graffiti artists, the open software and open hardware movements. The art world is just one mode of transmission, and maybe not even the most important one. Their artworks contribute to developing an identity that is much richer than those of the art world artists we are used to (perhaps closer to what an artist should be, and the best artists have been).

In the context of this cultural loop, the posited opposition between the radical independence of net art and post internet art's “obsession with art-world power systems” (Droitcour) shows its flaws. Let's take post internet's most criticized feature: its use of the gallery as a stage for taking documentary pictures to be distributed online. Droitcour writes:

> The Post-Internet art object looks good in a browser just as laundry detergent looks good in a commercial. Detergent isn't as stunning at a laundromat, and neither does Post-Internet art shine in the gallery. It's boring to be around. It's not really sculpture. It doesn't activate space. It's often frontal, designed to preen for the camera's lens. It's an assemblage of some sort, and there's little excitement in the way objects are placed together, and nothing is well made except for the mass-market products in it. It's the art of a cargo cult, made in awe at the way brands thrive in networks. [33]

Let's suppose this is true. After all, artists associated with post internet often claim to view mediated experience on the same level as primary experience (Laric), and to do visual art for the sake of Facebook likes (Ito); and Artie Vierkant based all his *Image Objects* project on the circular relation (another loop) between physical object and digital documentation. They all seem to agree with David Joselit when he states that value and aura, today, are not generated by uniqueness and geographical specificity, but by replicability and ubiquity. [34] In our framework, this only means that the physical artifact is not the artwork, but part of a (mostly immaterial) process in which the physical object is just one step; and that the white cube is not the main space in which the artwork manifests itself, but one of the contexts in which the art is created. You can't blame something for not being what it doesn't want to be, and for not doing what it doesn't want to do. Of course, the fact of creating a traditional, physical artifact and displaying it in the white cube seems to sanction the traditional systems of attribution of aura: turn your art into a commodity and place it in an art space. But how much criticism is there in this process of (subversive) affirmation?

In 1964, Yoko Ono published an artist book called *Grapefruit*, containing a series of “event scores”, instructions that replace the physical work of art. One of them is titled “PAINTING TO EXIST ONLY WHEN IT'S COPIED OR PHOTOGRAPHED”, and reads: “Let people copy or photograph your paintings. Destroy the originals.” At the core of this piece there is the definitive traditional art object, a painting. The “score” does not need to, but legitimately can, be performed: if so, the final result (the copy, the photograph) will have the same status as the idea. It's conceptual art at its best, claiming the supremacy of ideas over artworks-as-commodities, and combating the notion of originality. Here, the painting, the copy and the photograph are part of a process; nobody cares if they are good or bad; what's important is the process they are part of, and its meaning.
In 2013, artist Joshua Citarella curated what looks like a good post internet reenactment of Ono's event score. *Compression Artifacts* was a set emulating all the features of the white cube (white walls, gray floor, neon lighting), built in an undisclosed location in a forest, and performed in front of a live feed, broadcast during daylight hours. Once it was completed, works by Wyatt Niehaus, Kate Steciw, Brad Troemel, Artie Vierkant and Joshua Citarella were set up in the space. Following the exhibition the structure was demolished. All artworks and building materials were incinerated and regathered as ash. And all the process was, of course, documented in pictures. [35]

*Compression Artifacts* is probably the most direct manifestation of the post internet as a subversive affirmation. The sacrality of the physical artifact and the white cube are first sanctioned, only to be demystified: the artworks are burnt, the white cube is built in a forest (and then burnt). The process was only visible on the internet, first as streaming video, then as documentation. The documentation itself is not the artwork, not the end point: it's just a way to keep the ball rolling.

Post internet art – at least, that post internet art that puts emphasis on the importance of mediation and distribution – exists in the white cube as the artworks displayed in *Compression Artifacts*, as the temporary materialization of an idea (that may eventually be destroyed, or sold to a collector). What's important is not the piece in there, but the idea out there. This idea does not manifest itself as a single object, but is most effectively exemplified by the digital image. It is free, it travels, it gathers metadata along the way, it can be appropriated, used, abused, perused, and further developed. It can show up in different contexts. It's ephemeral, but it can survive.
One could argue that you can put it however you like, but all this is done just for the sake of self promotion, and that burning a few cheap and easily reproducible artifacts to chase online success is not really such a big deal.

One project that reverse-engineers the online circulation of images, showing that there is much more at stake, is Oliver Laric's *Lincoln 3D Scans* (2013). In collaboration with the Usher Gallery and The Collection in Lincoln, UK, the artist 3D scanned some of the sculptures on show in the museum, and made the 3D models available online for free use. The scans include 18th and 19th century sculptures, archaeological finds, design objects, Nigerian sculptures: no masterpieces, but anonymous or semi-anonymous objects of mostly historical value. Anybody can download an STL file from the website, turn it into something else (a 3D printed sculpture, an animated gif) and upload documentation (or the artwork itself if a digital file) in an online gallery. The source works aren't by young, ambitious contemporary artists; their online redistribution can't be mistaken for self promotion. They are almost forgotten fragments of our cultural history, translated into digital files to contribute to the commons and let other people do whatever they want with them; in other words, to give them another chance to come alive, different from the preservation strategies of a museum. [36]

With this project, and its 2014 spin-off *Yuanmingyuan 3D* (featuring 3D scans of marble columns from the Old Summer Palace in Beijing, that can be downloaded and used without copyright
restrictions) [37] Laric is involved in a complex work of negotiation with institutions, with the aim of introducing them to open content philosophies and persuading them to share their heritage, in the belief that an idea is alive only if it can be used and expanded by others. This is mostly what's at stake in the post internet obsession with image dispersion: the survival of an idea beyond the narrow confines of the art world. More than looking for likes, artists are tutoring their memes, aware that a gallery show or an auction record can't save their works from oblivion. 10,000 notes on Tumblr can't either, but the combination of both can give them more chances to be the starting point for something else.

Lincoln 3D Scans also offers further proof that net art, rebranded as post internet art, didn't leave the net for the gallery, and that artists didn't stop enjoying the kind of freedom, reach, sometimes power, and direct dialogue with audiences that the internet allows them, to settle into a comfortable, shiny booth. Guthrie Lonergan is right when he says that net art’s relationship to contemporary art as a whole gets more confusing every day; but this is not a bad thing. It's just a symptom of the fact that the internet has become an important part of the world we live in, to the point that it's increasingly difficult to address contemporaneity without addressing some of the consequences of this shift, at any level. Post internet might be a weak, forgettable label for this complex panorama; or it may be one of those weak labels that end up being accepted by art history. What we can say now is that, twenty years after the first net art, the meme is more alive and viral than ever, and the subject of heated debates.

Notes


[21] “The Art Formerly Known as New Media” was curated by Sarah Cook and Steve Dietz for the Banff Centre, Canada (from September 17 to October 23, 2005), and put on display works from the Centre new media collection; the touring exhibition “Postmedia Condition” (curated by Peter Weibel) was first presented at the Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum (November 15, 2005 – January 16, 2006).
[22] For more on this subject, cf. Domenico Quaranta, Beyond New Media Art, cit.
[34] David Joselit, After Art, Princeton University Press 2012.
[35] Documentation of the project and a statement are available online at http://joshuacitarella.com/artifacts.html.
[36] The project is available online at http://lincoln3dscans.co.uk/.
[37] The project is available online at http://yuanmingyuan3d.com.