Can Art History Digest Net Art?

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From its beginnings, Internet art has had an uneven and conflicted relationship with the established art world. There was a point, at the height of the dot.com boom, when it came close to being the 'next big thing', and was certainly seen as a way to reach new audiences (while conveniently creaming off sponsorship funds from the cash-rich computer companies). When the boom became a crash, many art institutions forgot about online art, or at least scaled back and ghettoised their programmes, and that forgetting became deeper and more widespread with the precipitate rise of contemporary art prices, as the gilded object once more stepped to the forefront of art-world attention. Perhaps, too, the neglect was furthered by much Internet art's association with radical politics and the methods of Tactical Media, and by the extraordinary growth of popular cultural participation online, which threatened to bury any identifiably art-like activity in a glut of appropriation, pastiche and more or less knowing trivia.

One way to try to grasp the complicated relation between the two realms is to look at the deep incompatibilities of art history and Internet art. Art history—above all, in the paradox of an art history of the contemporary—is still one of the necessary conduits through which work must pass into the security of the museum. In examining this relation, at first sight, it is the antagonisms that stand out. Lacking a medium, eschewing beauty, confined to the screen of the spreadsheet and the word processor, and apparently adhering to a discredited avant-gardism, Internet art was easy to dismiss. The most prominent recent attempt to capture the history of modern and contemporary art, *Art Since 1900*, contains no reference to Internet art (and little to media art, generally).[1]

Yet, the subject has a surprising slipperiness and complexity to it—in part because both art history and Internet art have been changing (the former, naturally, a good deal more rapidly than the latter). Some Internet art looks a lot prettier than it once did. Certainly, the stern avant-garde rejection of aesthetics characteristic of early net.art (and often proffered tongue-in-cheek) is no longer held to. Art history, as we shall see, has undergone a rapid colonisation, such that many of its core and foundational precepts are open to question. Direct engagements between the two remain fairly rare, for most of the writers on Internet art have different backgrounds, in film studies, media studies, visual culture, or most often as practitioners, organisers and curators of the art itself.[2] Even so, art history remains important to any Internet culture that wants to call itself 'art'—and that designation has had an

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[1] Hal Foster/ Rosalind Krauss/ Yve-Alain Bois/ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900*, Thames and Hudson, London 2005.
[2] A prominent exception is Oliver Grau. His major work, however, is an analysis of the historical trajectory of immersive visual technology which naturally excludes the positively Brechtian character of much Internet art. See Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusionn to Immersion*, trans. Gloria Custance, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2003.

enduring attraction. Art uses art history and vice versa, so, of course, for an online cultural worker references to avant-gardism or conceptualism is the swiftest and surest way to get what you are doing called 'art'.

That few art historians have ventured into the study of online art should not be the cause of surprise. It is sufficient to think of art history's ghettoisation and neglect of other "new media"—notably photography and video. The literature of photography long remained separate from that of art history. Photography's early theorists were photographers themselves—or poets, philosophers and cultural theorists (Baudelaire, Stieglitz, Kracaeur, Freund and Benjamin). It was only the art market interest in photography from the 1970s onwards that began to bring art historians to the study of photography, along with a sympathetic postmodern turn in art theory, which was interested in photography as the major tool of appropriation. Even so, right up to the present, some of the most significant writing about photography has been penned by practitioners (and not generally by art historians): the writings of Victor Burgin, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula and Jeff Wall stand as prominent examples. Likewise, the art-historical writing on video had to wait for that art to be drawn into the museum in the 1990s through the device of video projection. The recent apotheosis of photography in the museum offers a warning: the art-historical texts that accompany, for example, Andreas Gursky's major show at the Museum of Modern Art (2001), or Thomas Struth's show at the Metropolitan Museum (2003) certainly broke away from the ghettoisation of photography but at the cost of suppressing the history of photography, the comparisons being with the grand tradition of painting.[3] It was as if photography could only be validated by (doubtful) associations with the already sanctified tradition of Western art. Benjamin's account of that same urge, in which art is considered "a stranger to all technical considerations", still resonates: it is the attempt to "legitimize the photographer before the very tribunal he was in the process of overturning"—a situation he took to be patently absurd but is still in force seventy years after he wrote.[4] In this, present photographic practice—the peculiar, mannered and fetishised museum print with its stately and grave deportment—becomes the end-point of a history designed to bring it about; a partial history in which documentary practice, for example, is despised and written out.

Nevertheless, a striking feature about the literature on Internet art—even when not written by art historians— is that it draws on some of the standard devices of art history. One of the most persistent is the construction of traditions or historical lines. Rachel Greene, in her introduction to *Internet Art* constructs two parallel lineages, one technological, one art-historical. The two do not meet or interact, and the claims being made for the relations between the phenomena in each line are quite different.[5] In the technological line, a causal relation is posited: without this invention or idea, the following step could not have taken place (without the browser, there would be no Web art). In the art-historical line, there is no clear causality: the importance of an event may be an issue of unconscious or semi-conscious 'influence', conscious use or retooling, the innocent reinvention of some prior idea, or a

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[3] Peter Galassi, *Andreas Gursky*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2001; the Metropolitan exhibition originated in Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, *Thomas Struth, 1977-2002*, Dallas 2002.
[4] Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings. Volume 2. 1927-1934*, Michael W. Jennings/ Howard Eiland/ Gary Smith, eds., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, vol. II, p. 508.
[5] Rachel Greene, *Internet Art*, Thames & Hudson, London 2004, pp. 14-28.

vaguer issue of zeitgeist. We are left with the quasi-Hegelian air of development towards a pre-ordained present.

Another fundamental issue (and one I have struggled with in my work on the subject): what is the art object?[6] Is it singular? Is there really something that connects Palaeolithic cave painting, a Cézanne landscape and a shopping trip by Sylvie Fleury or a dinner by Rikrit Tiravanaja? The problem is particularly acute with Internet art where the usual institutional assurances for the viewing of art are often absent. It has led some critics to try to hang onto autonomy and medium-specificity (going to the extent of citing Clement Greenberg, even) so as to definitively fix the art status of Internet art. Tilman Baumgärtel does this in the introduction to his book *net.art 2.0*.[7] It's a hard position to maintain because the Net is not a medium, as painting is, but rather encompasses simulations of all reproducible media. Baumgärtel eventually (after some ironically tinged avant-garde pronouncements on net purity) gives up the game: net art's material, he says, is "utterly anything having to do with the Internet".[8] The issue is quite similar to the paradox of photographic autonomy, and presents the same difficulties for art history: that concentration on the essential characteristics of the "medium" leads not inwards to such qualities as painting's flatness and abstraction but outwards to a more accurate depiction of the world, and with it all of the world's variety and contingency.

Often tied up with that word "art" is the idea, rarely made explicit and indeed sometimes disavowed within art history, that it describes not merely an institutional category, or even a particular kind of human activity, but that it also carries with it a judgement about quality. Ernst Gombrich defended this position explicitly: art history was not the same as cultural history or a subset of sociology, because a small, defined canon of works of high quality constituted its corpus and its very reason for being.[9] We are familiar with the curious results: popular toys and figurines from the ancient world inhabit museums and form part of the subject of art history; not so their contemporary equivalents. Whole categories of visual cultural production never gain art-historical attention—amateur photography is an example, along with a large swathe of online practices, including the vast majority of the photographs uploaded to Flickr.

Tied to that idea of art and quality, are a couple of art-historical assumptions, linked in tension, if not outright contradiction: "that the true meaning of the work of art can be translated (into discourse) and that the true meaning of the work of art is untranslateable."[10] Art's *Kunstwollen* (as conceived by Riegl) or Structure (the Vienna School, particularly Hans Sedlmayer), or the aesthetic impulse in culture, is irreducible, unexplainable and recalcitrant to analysis. The particularity and autonomy of the work of art is pitched against the history of style as a narrative or causal chain. So the art object is secure in its status, and truly

[6] Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*, Tate Gallery Publishing, London 2003; 'The Aesthetics of Net.Art', *Qui Parle*, vol. 14, no. 1, Fall/ Winter 2003, 2004, pp. 49-72.
[7] Tilman Baumgärtel, *net.art 2.0: New Materials Towards Net Art*, Verlag für Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, Nürnberg 2001, p. 27.
[8] Baumgärtel, *net.art 2.0*, p. 28.
[9] See, for example, Ernst Gombrich, *Art History and the Social Sciences: The Romane Lecture for 1973*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1975.
[10] Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History. Meditations on a Coy Science*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1989, p. 16.

mysterious in its being. Equally, art history—the art work's strange and inexplicable translation into language—is artful itself, an exercise of intuition and an aesthetic performance as much as an academic discipline.
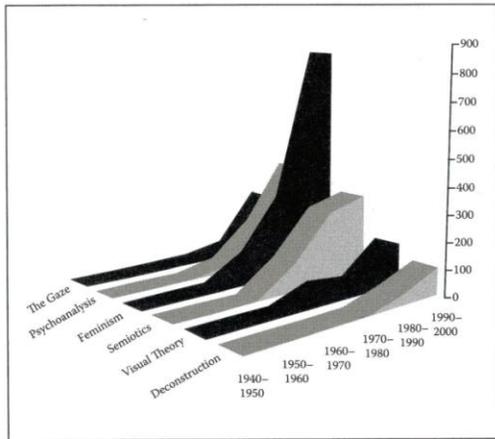

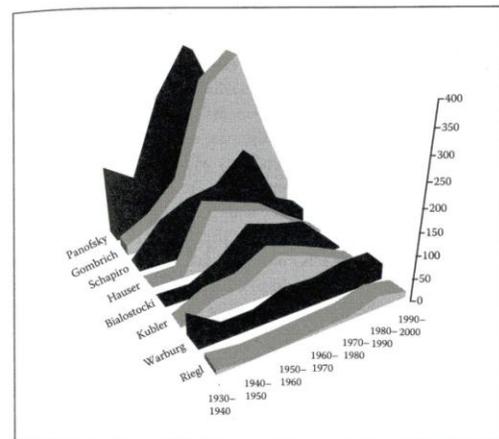**Figure 1** Theory in art history, 1940–2000.

Figure 2 Rise and fall of an older art history, 1930–2000: Citations of selected writers.

Now, of course, what I have been describing is in some ways a parody of the discipline of art history. It is, after all, a subject that has been thoroughly colonised by the practices of diverse elements of generic "Theory", at the expense of its founding figures (this is something that Thomas Crow has complained about in *The Intelligence of Art*, and that James Elkins has shown graphically through a statistical accounting of the citation of various authorities, which shows a steep decline in references to the giants of art-historical method and an equally steep rise in references to deconstruction, feminism, semiotics, etc.).[11] The discipline is very various: if, to take a single example, you look at the work of Peter Stewart on Roman cult objects that draws on the work of the anthropologist Alfred Gell, you will find an account of the relation between viewer and object that is quite alien to contemporary views, and has little to do with any of the assumptions above.[12] Nevertheless, if this parody still carries a barb, it is because the kind of high theory adopted with most success in art history supports the view of the work of art (and its creators) as ineffable objects of the highest impermeability to reason (Deleuze's Bergsonian vitalism, Lyotard's sublime, Kristeva's abject, Badiou's event, and so on), and as metaphorical keys to the zeitgeist (in some Foucaultian accounts, for example). Such a discourse has a link to the fundamental ideology of art, which would see it as a fathomless product of the individual psyche, but it is also linked to art history's necessarily close connection with the museum and the commercial gallery world, and their connection with the increasingly privatised Academy, on the hunt for business "partners". Both museums and galleries are committed to the mystification of the objects that they display, holding to the fiction of a distinct realm of high art that stands above the bureaucratised world of work and the complementary vulgar blandishments of mass culture.

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[11] Thomas Crow, *The Intelligence of Art*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC 1999; the charts appear in the series preface to Elkins' Art Seminar; see, for example, James Elkins, ed., *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, Routledge, London 2006, pp. viii-ix.
[12] Peter Stewart, 'Gell's Idols and Roman Cult', in Robin Osborne/ Jeremy Tanner, eds., *Art's Agency and Art History*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2007, pp. 158-78.

There are quite a number of reasons that Internet art is an awkward field for the pursuit of such exercises:

First (after the flush of the dot.com boom), Internet art has generally been disconnected from the museum and the market for art. There are some examples of artists selling versions of online work in limited editions with certificates of authenticity, along the lines of video art, but the gesture appears even more absurd than with video, since the work also appears in its original form for access by anyone with an Internet connection. The five-year-long speculative bubble in the art market, that burst in the autumn of 2008, sidelined online work as the prestigious object was celebrated. There was a fundamental divide in the ethos of these worlds: between the production of rare or unique, expensively made objects, protected by copyright and curatorial scruple, appearing in exclusive and controlled environments, and purchased by the mega-rich; and of the dissemination of digital works, of which no one copy is better than any other, which may appear in many places at once, which may run out of the control of artists and curators, and which are given as a gift. To the extent that online art is associated with the culture of Web 2.0 and the "wealth of networks", it appears not merely dissociated from the mainstream market for contemporary art but dangerous to it.[13] It also carries a dangerous edge for the many corporate sponsors who wish to widely disseminate their cultural goods (from brands to allegorical personifications of products) while at the same time protecting them from interference by cultural hackers and subversives.

Second, its post-medium condition does not lend itself to any plausible account of autonomy, undermining any claim that this new cultural form might have had to the status of 'art'. Worse still, lacking the comfort of materiality and (often) museum display, its post-medium condition is thought to be even more invidious than that of installation art (which has had a rough ride from prominent critics, precisely on the grounds that its lack of a medium makes it a plaint part of "the image in the service of capital").[14]

Third, and a corollary of the last point, its connections with technology are too immediate and transparent. This tends to undercut the mystery of its "object", which remains too close for many conventional art viewers to elements of mass culture and the working environment. The very swift rise of collaborative and cooperative culture, and of the participation of individuals in public cultural production—the making and uploading of videos, for example—makes drawing such distinctions even harder. Online art is continually threatened with an infection of the vulgar and the standard.

Fourth, the repudiation of the obfuscating character of much high Theory by many of its practitioners and writers challenges the heavy investment that many art historians have made in such ideas, and which--since such notions have a definite market use—they are reluctant to abandon even in the face of overwhelming evidence (psychoanalytical accounts being the most obvious example).

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[13] Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2006.
[14] Rosalind Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames & Hudson, London 1999, p. 56.
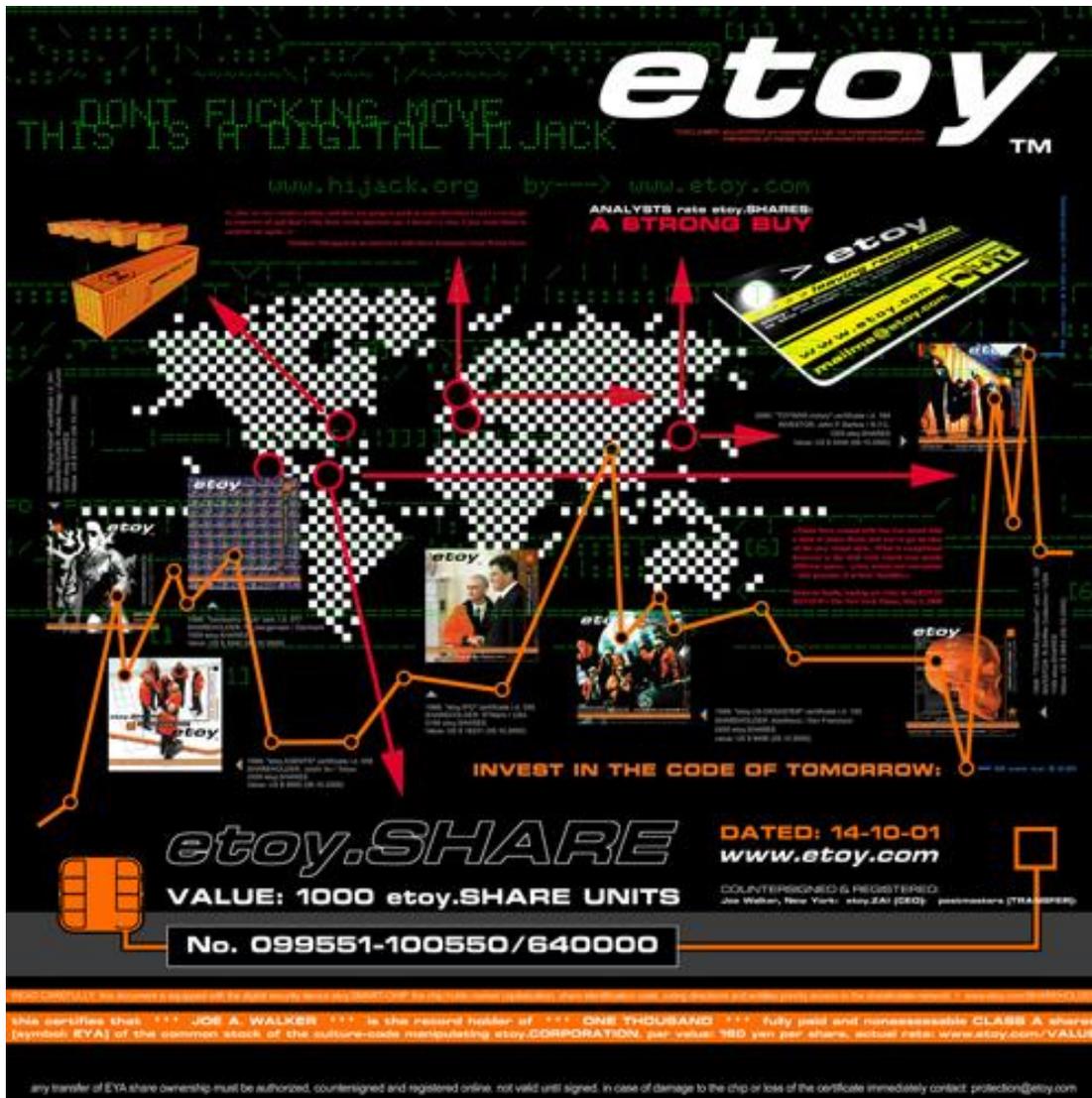
Lastly, and most damningly, much Internet art has been connected with radical political activism. At the time of its inception, this was in itself enough to have it judged to be of the utmost naivety and unfashionability. Now, when "political" art has been back in fashion for some years, a deeper problem is revealed: while documentary forms that examine the representational rhetoric of the political are deemed acceptable (in part because they reflect upon and thus also instantiate the autonomy of a medium), work that might be put to political use or encourage popular participation are much less so. The famous victory of etoy over eToys in the Toywar dispute presented the matter with absolute starkness: that "art" could produce a direct political and economic effect, and that as etoy's "Agent Gramazio" put it: "We engaged in a real power struggle with eToys—and won."[15] Some Internet art, informed by the theories of Tactical Media, strove for such effects, and as such presented those with conventional non-instrumental views of art with a dilemma. In their account of

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[15] Tilman Baumgärtel, *net.art 2.0: New Materials Towards Net Art*, Verlag für Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, Nürnberg 2001, p. 222.

such politically engaged online art, Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito are careful to sharply distinguish art from activism:

> Art arms its audience with neither evidence nor explosives but with a protected arena in which to challenge the status quo without confronting it head-on. … it encourages its audience to join in the play, ultimately freeing them of political and cultural dichotomies that pit right against wrong, left against right.[16]

So the line is clearly drawn, with art on the side of play. There is some art-critical and even art-historical writing that celebrates the activist character of online art and connects it with a long history of radical cultural engagement in other fields—the writings of Nato Thompson and Greg Sholette map these neglected histories.[17] Nevertheless, such views remain on the margin of art history.

Yet, despite all this, art history and the institutions that surround and support it may yet lay claim to Internet art in a more thoroughgoing and consistent fashion. It has begun to do so with video, about which many of the same things could be said fifteen or twenty years ago, though it has done so at the price of the profound transformation of that art. If Internet art were to pass definitively into history, and as it did so the immediate threat of its radicalism receded, its historicisation may be set in train. Art history may be seen as a rhetorical apparatus tied to the contemporary art market, and until very recently booming with it, in a massive expansion of studies of the recent past (there is a huge dominance of postwar art as against other periods in PhD subjects, with the near-disappearance of some fields).

Furthermore, the attraction may be mutual. Online Tactical Media activists naturally use the art world tactically. It may be a way of gaining access to the mass media. It may be a way of funding work, or it may be considered one point in a process through which the work passes. Hans Bernhard, formerly of etoy and now (with Maria Haas) of the duo UBERMORGEN.COM, explains:

> Becoming an artist was rather simple, it was all about usability. …after eliminating all the other candidates (such as sports, politics, etc.) there was nothing left but art. Today I consider this process to be freestyle research. Conceptual art is crossed with experimental research and mass media stunts—but the products (sites, digital images, sculptures, emails, log files, paintings, drawings, etc.) are positioned in an art context.[18]

The very playfulness and humour of much Tactical Media work may make it possible to consign it to the realm of art. UBERMORGEN.COM's own work, *Gwei—Google Will Eat Itself* (2005-08), in which Google's advertising service is used to earn money that is used to buy shares in the company, is an amusing conceit, and of only virtual utility. The time

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[16] Joline Blais/ Jon Ippolito, *At the Edge of Art*, Thames & Hudson, London 2006, p. 135.

[17] Nato Thompson/ Greg Sholette, *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Destruction of Everyday Life*, MASS MoCA Publications, North Adams, Massachusetts 2005. See also the *Third Text* special issue, 'Whither Tactical Media', edited by Gene Ray and Greg Sholette, vol. 22, no. 94, September 2008.

[18] Cited in Domenico Quaranta, UBERMORGEN.COM: The Future is Now', in Domenico Quaranta, ed., *UBERMORGEN.COM*, FP Editions, Brescia 2009, p. 70.

estimated for the full purchase of Google using its own funds is over 200 million years![19] Here we seem to come up against a fundamental incompatibility between political action and cultural activism, as it is currently formulated, and which is so fixed on the creative autonomy of individuals and small groups, and which leads theorists such as Geert Lovink to repudiate all ideology in favour of the use of technology for experimentation, play and self-empowerment.[20]
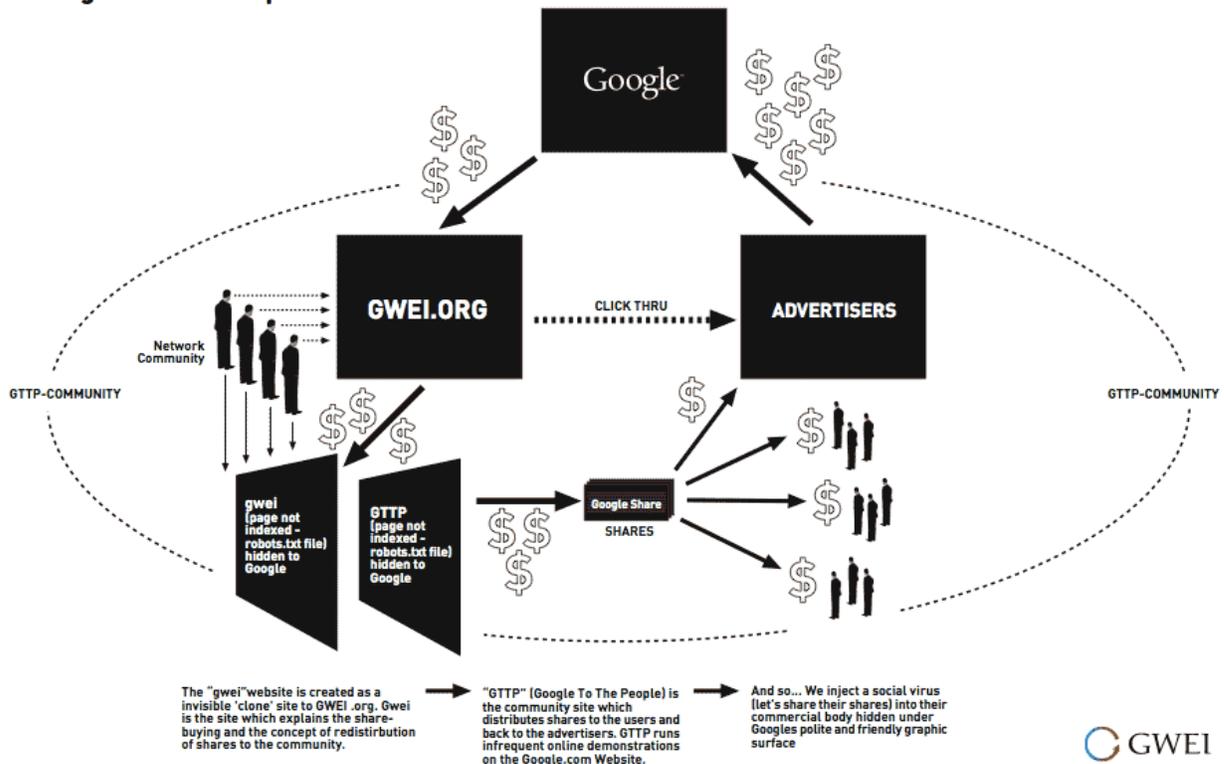
But let us flip the question over, and ask what Internet art, and digital culture broadly, may bring to art history. After all, photography, long repudiated as a subject for art history, was at its very basis as an academic subject—first in the black-and-white print and then in the colour slide (and perhaps the two are linked: again, how can a tool also be an art?). Digital resources obviously open up access to vast archival and visual resources to many more people, and this is bound to have a levelling effect not only on research but curation. Aside from the sway of the market and the museum, two major difficulties have left art history at a primitive level of analysis, dependent on the sensibilities and intuitions of its writers. The first that there has been no agreed way of describing visual phenomenon—not even paintings or drawings. This is changing with the digital reverse engineering of human picture recognition mechanisms, producing testable and systematic descriptions which may be tied

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[19] See http://www.gwei.org
[20] Gregory Sholette and Gene Ray, 'Reloading Tactical Media: An Exchange with Geert Lovink', *Third Text*, 'Whither Tactical Media', vol. 22, no. 94, September 2008, pp. 554-5.

to historical accounts.[21] The second is that there has been little work done within art history on the qualitative character of viewer interactions with art objects. Online, the surveillance of viewers is entirely standard, and begins to offer (along with the brain sciences), the feedback mechanisms a study of art needs to found itself as an objective discipline, one that can truly identify correlations and work towards the settling of questions (rather than the endless proliferation of discourse) and the demonstration of causal effects.

In this, there is the opportunity for a much more thorough demystification of the processes of the making and viewing of art than that envisaged even in the salutary writings of the Net art theorists such as Lovink, Garcia and Fuller, and with it, the prospect of clearing the fog around the very term "art" itself. It offers art history the prospect of a much deeper transformation than that effected by photography. Whether either Internet art or art history will survive such a development is an open question.

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[21] John Willats, *Art and Representation: New Principles in the Analysis of Pictures*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1997.