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Unoriginal Genius

by POSTmatter Editors | November 5, 2014

We speak to Dominico Quaranta, curator of a new group exhibition that interrogates plagiarism within a digital-infused age.

“Exactly because it is the strongest challenge ever thrown at the art world’s economic model and modes of distribution, the digital won’t destroy the gallery – it will make it stronger than ever.”

'Unoriginal Genius', the new group show opened this week at Carroll

/ Fletcher gallery, takes at its core the copy/paste function well known to anyone computer-literate. Curator Dominico Quaranta gives a spiralling tour through the art of the digital realm, shattering ctrl+c into an array of assembled alternate terms: filtering, selecting, archiving and reframing. In an overloaded online age of ready-to-use information and cultural content, Quaranta suggests that the way in which an artist deals with existing material may be the most defining parameter on which we evaluate their work.

Quaranta draws together a range of artists working in a variety of formats. Kim Asendorf reassembles 'stolen' pixels from one million online images into a single, abstract image, while Sara Ludy presents a work from her collaborative project Wallpapers (with Nicolas Sassoon and Sylvain Saily), in which she explores the synthetic nature, architecture and objects that can be found in virtual worlds and online repositories. Jonas Lund sells advertising space on his piece, in this challenging the art market and online economy, while Lorna Mills' photo-based GIF work is made from source material dug up through hours and hours of deep surfing. Here, plagiarism becomes a new form of originality; is the unoriginal genius the most original of all?

PM: All of the works featured in the show are derived from digital mediums, from pixels to sleep tracking apps. What is your aim in bringing them into the physical gallery space to present them? What are the challenges of exhibiting them in this format?

DQ: The internet is a public space, and all art that takes place online is by definition a form of public, and often live and performative, art. At the same time, the intent is for it to be experienced (for the most part) from the private space of one’s home, as part of a

continuous flow of information. That said, today the relationship between online and offline space (if something like an “offline” space still exists in capitalistic economies), and between private and public space, is extremely flexible.

I mostly experience net-based art at home on my desktop computer, but also in streets on my smartphone, on trains with my laptop, and in conferences, festivals, museums and gallery spaces. All these are legitimate experiences of an art practice that, through networks and screens, wants to infiltrate any kind of networked space – including the gallery. Here, the artwork is isolated from its native context, and this is simultaneously a loss and a gain. Selected out of many others and presented in an art context, it brings new attention and gives a focus that would be impossible when you check your phone on the underground. My aim is to raise awareness of and encourage people to take net-based art seriously, and invite them to go back home and integrate it into their daily online experience.

PM: How much power do you think that the physical gallery space retains as a cultural context for artworks today, particularly when faced with new digital means of distribution? Do you think that the physical and the digital work in conjunction with one another, or in opposition?

DQ: Artists didn't start challenging the institutional framework of art in the 21st century: all the most prominent artistic practices introduced from the Sixties onward - from performance to Land art to graffiti - are somehow against the white cube. This challenge didn't make the art world weaker - it made it stronger. One of the paradoxes of our time is that art simultaneously can and cannot exist outside of the art world. When there's no difference between art and life; when art can happen anywhere, and take any possible shape, the art world has the very last word in showing us what's art and what's not. This doesn't mean that I can't enjoy, let's say, the Spiral Jetty or jodi.org outside of this context. Exactly because it is the strongest challenge ever thrown at the art world's economic model and modes of distribution, the digital won't destroy the gallery – it will make it stronger than ever.

PM: Richard Prince's Instagram appropriation goes beyond his earlier work in this area, as it enables him to interact with the subjects of his images. What are your thoughts on the new potential for interactivity and feedback - both positive and negative - that are now activated through the communications technology available to us? How does this shape the future of art and appropriation?

DQ: The possibility to exist in a public social context, in which it can trigger different forms of response from its audience, is one of the most interesting things that has happened to art in recent years. Artists are actively experimenting with it, particularly through releasing their work anonymously on platforms where it couldn't be understood as art. For example, in Eva and Franco Mattes's recent project, crowd workers execute instructions for performances, and the related video documentation is released without attribution on all kinds of obscure social platform.

PM: You have stated that it has become more necessary than ever for us to move beyond the terms 'appropriation' and 'plagiarism' to more neutral ones such as filtering and editing. How do you think that the Tumblr-influenced age of open image sharing, image saturation and image-led trends has influenced this shift?

DQ: The first time I saw Tumblr I saw it on my daughter's computer. I said, "what's that"? She had organized a bunch of photos according to color. As she scrolled down I was reminded about how I used to look at hundreds of slides on my custom made giant light box. What I was looking at and what I was remembering wasn't that different. The next question I asked her was, "whose images were those and did you have to ask "permission" to use them". She looked at me like I was the "man from Mars". "Permission"? "For what"?

These words are Prince's, not mine. His Instagram series recently shown at Gagosian, however, proves that he only got half of the lesson. He still feels the need to point to the act of appropriation as meaningful in itself, as if he were shouting, "Hey look, I'm stealing picture's from other people's accounts without permission!" How were these images selected out of billions? How were they reframed? What kind of relationship did they trigger? How were they turned into an art world commodity? This is what is interesting in that work. The theft in itself should be irrelevant in an age of ubiquitous downloading and screenshotting.

PM: Do you think that originality still exists? How would you define it?

DQ: Originality is what is left after you have made any effort to be unoriginal.

Unoriginal Genius is on show at Carroll / Fletcher Project Space until 22nd November.