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Publication date
2021
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
Art in the Age of Anxiety
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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Tuters, M. D., & Kholeif, O. (Ed.) (2021). On Voicing. In *Art in the Age of Anxiety* (pp. 271-275). Mörel Books.

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In conversation

Marc Tuters & Omar Kholeif

OK: Hi Marc. I am excited to talk to you on Google Docs. I have been in self-quarantine at 'home' for 23 days now because of the context around COVID-19. I thought I would somehow have all this 'free' time to be Zooming friends and family around the globe, reading literature I never thought I would, but it seems as if time has become elastic, and I am trying to do things more hurriedly than ever before in 'lockdown', as some have called it. How about you? What have you been up to these past few weeks? I assume you are in Holland?

MT: Hi Omar. These past few weeks have indeed been extraordinary. I've heard it referred to as 'the first great crisis of the post-American world'. Every day brings something unprecedented, nearly everywhere in the world. The virus is hitting quite hard here. With about twice the population of the UAE, the Netherlands currently has about 10 times the rate of infection. In spite of this, public life continues much as it did before, in part because the government is wary of infringing on people's cherished freedom. Thus far, hospitals still seem to be coping relatively well, as compared with Italy and Spain. Those who can now work from home, including myself. In the evenings, we sometimes cheer for one another from across our balconies in the name of the brave emergency workers (whose mortality has been very high in some places). Apart from the challenge of calculating and incorporating a constantly fluctuating idea of risk into my day-to-day life, I would say that the transition to ongoing state of emergency is, so far, going about as well as could be expected. The aesthetics of teleconferencing do, however, remind me of the image, as cultivated in '90s cyber-theory, of the confined self (or what the Japanese call *hikikomori*), as a kind of terminal condition of post-modern society.

OK: Marc, I wanted to ask you about online subcultures. I guess because, when I started my career, everything that we did on the 'internet' constituted a subculture. But does such a thing as an online subculture even exist anymore? I remember when Second Life was an escapist, nerd-like fantasy world to play in and get out of my hyper-depressed reality; now it seems less relevant. I don't know if I am bored, or if the people online are somewhat less interesting. I am ever uncertain. Your thoughts?

MT: Online subculture never went away, you and I just got older. While it is hard to distinguish what exactly constitutes a distinct subculture, this is nothing new. The underground and the mainstream have always been entwined in a dialect of co-optation, which only accelerates as marketing

gets cooler. As their vernacular innovations are co-opted by 'influencers', subcultures are driven to find ways of 'hiding in the light,' as Dick Hebdige once put it. This, in turn, leads to a dizzying proliferation of niche categories of style culture, which are either so subtle that their distinguishing features are essentially invisible to the rest of us, or else they're so extreme that they can't find any common ground with each other, leading them to withdraw into their own private communities, from where they occasionally organise strategic incursions into the mainstream. An example of the latter is the long-standing trolls subculture, which has actually been around since even before the web. I would say that its response to the massively expanded user-base, which corporate social media have helped bring online, has been quite reactionary. Whereas most of us, these days, tend to see the web and apps merely as extensions of our lives, this subculture insists on the old cyber-separationist distinction between VR and RL. Tending to hang out in anonymous message boards, which themselves have no real business model, the trolls are preoccupied with keeping the web a space of play as opposed to one of work. Their mantra is 'teh internet is serious business' [sic] (which is to say that it is not), and they'll go to extreme lengths to try and keep it that way.

OK: I am also keen to understand a few further matters. For one, how do you think that modes of 'address' have shifted on and through social media over this last decade? The reason I think it's perhaps great to drop the 'sub' from 'culture' is because everyday stories are more widely voiced. For instance, so many of my friends—colleagues, artists and historians—have gone to social media to voice their despair: whether it be their depression; terminal diseases; domestic abuse and other such forms of pain—and they have used these forums as a means to galvanise advice, support, fundraise and so forth. Is this good, or is it frightening that say most countries in the world do not have support for mental-health care or domestic violence to this day?

MT: Perhaps I can address the scope of this question obliquely through first engaging with your notion of 'voicing', which we can conceptualise as being neither part of language nor exactly part of the body, a paradox that philosophy has long struggled with. While Rousseau, for example, imagined himself as transcribing his own 'inner voice', Derrida considered this a fundamental error of western metaphysics. Instead, Derrida sought to focus attention on the materiality of writing, which he saw not as a mirror to speech, rather as something that came from outside of

us altogether. In so doing, he helped inaugurate a new way of thinking about how our dialogue with media effectively shapes our being in the world. The consequence of this radical hypothesis is that our being has a history that's tied to that of our media. According to Derrida's student, Bernard Stiegler, our being is increasingly subject to a kind of exploitation by new media corporations, which seek to control the temporal flow of our consciousness. As much as we may, however, be subject to such exploitation, Stiegler insists that poison can also be the cure–he refers to his approach as 'pharmacological'–since new media also render us evermore entangled with one another. Returning, then, to your question of what is to be done. For many, the solution is indeed the standard one that's been on offer for the past 100 years: to take ownership of what is already the product of our own labours.

OK: I couldn't agree more. What is your opinion about the relationship between corporate governance and their actions versus the use of social media and everyday technologies by the individual? In your previous answer you said we 'must take control'. I have always said that we, as humans, feed the corporate machine and, without our desire to use it or give it content, it does not exist. How should we 'feel' or, indeed, consider the fact that much of our identities is increasingly shaped by the formal capacities of designed technologies by large corporations, and, moreover, the fact that these organisations (not all, but most) are purely using you/citizens/people for profit gain? Should one be afraid, absolve one's self from certain social or everyday technologies?

MT: The bottom line of social media is data-extractivism. In this sense, the business model of Facebook isn't actually that different from Aramco. Along such lines, we may also enquire as to the unintended consequence of these commercial activities, which are not calculated into their market price. In the case of oil production, this would be the release of CO_2. What, then, are the 'externalities' of corporate social media? In other words, what else might be going on in Facebook's project to 'bring the world closer together'? One seemingly pessimistic answer is that Facebook has actively been redefining reality along evermore partisan lines, in ways that demagogues have found useful in their recent insurgent rise to power across many parts of the world. In his famous "Postscript on Societies of Control," however, Deleuze asserted: 'There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons'. I take his point as being that both optimism, as well as pessimism, are essentially forms of fatalism. What we need

today is rather a form of realism that is capable of truthfully depicting the conditions within which we now find ourselves. I would like to think that it is this highly abstract situation that art might help render visible.

MT: For my part, I am interested to hear more about your notion of a 'post-digital condition', and how this relates to what has been called 'post-internet' art?

OK: When I released my edited volume *You Are Here: Art After the Internet* in January 2014, and subsequently followed it up with numerous books addressing the subject, I actually tried to extrapolate the 'meaning' and context behind what was called post-internet art and to apply that to the concept of the post-digital condition. For me, the post-digital condition is a milieu where we are aware that digital technologies have become ubiquitous in every single part of our cultural formation and, in many ways, essential to a particular kind of global existence—with circa 3.2-3.5 billion people now 'online' in some way. It is a world where we can no longer detach the formal aesthetics of a new-built structure from a phone design, an application's functionality, a piece of software's 'updates', an email chain's power to circulate, clothing design and so forth. All of this is tied to a digitally-induced, networked culture.

The exhibition *Art in the Age of Anxiety* seeks to make visible forms of complicity between the viewer and the art object by linking the familiar to the alien through a complex, spatialised architecture, which is intended to disorient and simultaneously soothe the viewer. Some of these ideas were present in early discussions of what constituted post-internet art, but I saw the framing of 'post-internet' art as myopic and very market and trend driven. This is something more existential. My cultural references are broad, from Gruen's transfer in mall culture—where we constantly end up seeking solace in the capitalist comfort of the mall—which, for example, is a theory I have extrapolated to articulate the comforts we find in the digital realm. But that doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of how I have tried to frame the exhibition, which has much to do with my schooling in post-colonial theory, invoking my mentor Jean Fisher's writings on the trickster—and thinking about how artists in the post-digital context, from Eva and Franco Mattes to Wafaa Bilal to Antoine Catala and Lawrence Abu Hamdan, have embodied these ideas. I've also considered deeply the post-digital condition's affective relationship to the body: I re-read *The Cyborg Manifesto* once a year—and I can never shake Debord from my first day as an undergraduate (when he was introduced to me);

Foucault's theories of madness and its institutionalism weigh heavily on me; Artaud's desire to create an alphabet of his own–which is perhaps what I am always trying to do (create an alphabet for the post-digital condition)–is ever-present. Critchley's measured fatalism is there, Sontag's candour guides me, Mark Fisher's depression often enraptured me, and Owen Hatherley's architectural criticism all create a layer cake, which informs my understanding and, indeed, has enabled the context in which this exhibition has been created. I have also recently written quite extensively about how the Metabolists, and their vision, have played into my understanding of the post-digital.