CHAPTER 12

Art on the Internet

In recent decades the Internet has become the primary place for the production and distribution of writing, including literature; artistic practices; and, more generally, cultural archives.

Obviously, many cultural workers experience this shift towards the Internet as liberating, because the Internet is not selective – or at least it is much less selective than the museum or traditional publishing house. Indeed, the question that troubled artists and writers of past epochs was 'What are the criteria of choice? Why do some artworks get into the museum while other artworks do not? Why do some texts get published – and not others?' We know the catholic (so to speak) theories of selection according to which artworks do or do not deserve to be chosen by the museum or the publishing house: A work should be good, beautiful, inspiring, original, creative, powerful, expressive, historically relevant – one can cite hundreds of similar criteria. However, these theories collapsed because nobody could persuasively explain why one artwork is more beautiful, original, etc. than the rest. Or why a particular text is better written than any other text. So other theories succeeded that were more protestant, even Calvinist. According to these theories, artworks are chosen because they are chosen. The concept of divine power that is perfectly sovereign and does not need any legitimation was transferred to the museum and other traditional cultural institutions. This protestant theory of choice that stresses the unconditional power of the chooser is a precondition for the institutional critique – and the museums and other cultural

institutions were in fact criticized for the way they used and abused their alleged power.

This kind of institutional critique does not make much sense in the case of the Internet. Of course, political censorship of the Internet is practiced by some states, but that is a different story. However, here another question arises: What happens to art and literary writing as a result of their emigration from the traditional cultural institutions towards the Internet?

Historically, literature and art were considered fields of fiction. Now I would argue that the use of the Internet as the main medium of production and distribution of art and literature leads to their defictionalization. The traditional institutions – the museum, the theatre, the book – presented fiction as fiction by means of self-dissimulation. Sitting in a theatre, the spectator was supposed to reach a state of self-oblivion – to forget everything about the space he or she was sitting in. Only then was he or she able to spiritually leave everyday reality and become immersed in the fictional world presented onstage. The reader had to forget that the book is a material object like every other object in order to truly follow and enjoy the literary narrative. The art museum visitor had to forget the art museum to become spiritually absorbed in the contemplation of art. In other words, the precondition for the functioning of fiction as fiction is the dissimulation of the material, technological, institutional framing that makes this functioning possible.

Now, at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, the art of the historical avant-garde tried to thematize and to reveal the factual, material, nonfictional dimension of art. It did so by thematizing the institutional and technological framing of art – by acting against this framing and thus making it visible, experienceable by the viewer, reader, visitor. Bertolt Brecht tried to destroy the theatrical illusion. The futurist and

constructivist art movements have compared artists to industrial workers, to engineers who produce real things – even if these things can be interpreted as referring to a fiction. The same can be said about writing. At least since Mallarmé, Marinetti and Zdanevich, the production of texts has been understood as a production of things. Heidegger understood art precisely as a struggle against the fictional. In his late writings, he speaks of technological and institutional framing (*das Gestell*) as being hidden behind the image of the world (*Weltbild*). The subject who contemplates the image of the world in an allegedly sovereign manner necessarily overlooks the framing of this image. Science cannot reveal this framing, either, because science depends on it. Heidegger believed, therefore, that only art could reveal the hidden *Gestell* and demonstrate the fictional, illusionary character of our images of the world. Here Heidegger obviously had in mind avant-garde art. However, the avant-garde has never fully succeeded in the quest for the real, because the reality of art, its material side that the avant-garde tried to reveal, were refictionalized by being put under the standard conditions of art representation.

That is precisely what the Internet changed, and in a quite radical manner. The Internet functions under the presupposition of its nonfictional character, of its having a reference point in offline reality. The Internet is a medium of information – but information is always information about something. And this something is always placed outside the Internet – that is, off line. Otherwise, all the economic transactions on the Internet would become impossible, and so would military and security surveillance operations. Of course, fiction can be created on the Internet – for example, a fictional user. However, in that case, the fiction becomes a fraud that can be – and even must be – revealed.

But most importantly, on the Internet art and literature do not get a fixed, institutional framing, as they did in the

analogue-dominated world. Here the factory, there the theatre; here the stock market, there the museum. On the Internet, art and literature operate in the same space as military planning, tourist business, capital flows, and so on; Google shows, among other things, that there are no walls in the space of the Internet. Of course, there are specialized Web sites or blogs for art. But to address them the user must click on them, and so frame them on the surface of his or her computer, or iPad, or mobile phone. Thus, framing becomes deinstitutionalized, and the framed fictionality becomes de-fictionalized. The user cannot ignore the frame, because he or she created it. The framing – and operation of framing – become explicit and remain explicit throughout the experience of contemplating and writing. Here, the dissimulation of the frame that defined our experience of the fictional for centuries reaches its end. Art and literature can still refer to fiction and not to reality. However, we, as users, do not immerse ourselves in this fiction, do not, like Alice, go through the looking glass; instead, we perceive art production as a real process, and the artwork as a real thing. One can say that on the Internet there is no art or literature, but only information about art and literature, alongside other information about other fields of human activity. For example, the literary texts or artworks by a particular writer or artist can be found on the Internet when I Google the person's name, and they are shown to me in the context of all the other information that I find about that person: biography, other works, political activities, critical reviews, personal details. An author's 'fictional' text becomes integrated into the information about the author as a real person. Through the Internet, the avant-garde impulse that has driven art and writing since the beginning of the twentieth century finds its realization, its telos. Art is presented on the Internet as a specific kind of reality: as a working process, or even life process, taking place in the real, offline world. This

does not mean that aesthetic criteria do not play any role in the presentation of data on the Internet. However, in this case we are dealing not with art but with data design – with the aesthetic presentation of documentation about real art events and not with the production of fiction.

The word *documentation* is crucial here. In recent decades, art documentation was increasingly included in art exhibitions and art museums alongside the traditional artworks. But this proximity always seemed highly problematic. The artworks are art; they immediately demonstrate themselves as art – to be admired, emotionally experienced, etc. The artworks are also fictional – they cannot be used in a court as evidence, they do not guarantee the truth of what they represent. But art documentation is not fictional: It refers to an art event, or exhibition, or installation, or project that we assume has really taken place. Art documentation refers to art but it is not art. That is why art documentation can be reformatted, rewritten, extended, shortened, and so on. We can subject art documentation to all of these operations that we are forbidden to use with an artwork because they would change that artwork's form. And the form of the artwork is institutionally guaranteed, because only the form guarantees the reproducibility and identity of the fiction that this artwork is. By contrast, documentation can be changed at will, because its identity and reproducibility are guaranteed by the form of its 'real', external referent and not by its own form. But even if the emergence of art documentation preceded the emergence of the Internet as an art medium, only the introduction of the Internet has given to art documentation its legitimate place.

Meanwhile, the cultural institutions themselves began to use the Internet as a primary space for their self-representation. The museums put their collections on display on the Internet. And, of course, virtual depositories of art images are much more compact and much cheaper to maintain than

traditional art museums. Thus, the museums are able to present the parts of their collections that are usually kept in storage. The same can be said about the publishing houses that permanently expand the e-component of their publication programmes. And the same can be said about the Web sites of individual artists – one can find there the fullest representation of what they are doing. It is what artists mostly show to a visitor to their studios nowadays – if one comes to a studio to see a particular artist's work, this artist usually puts a laptop on the table and shows documentation of his or her activities, including not only the production of the artworks but also the artist's participation in long-term projects, temporary installations, urban interventions, political actions, etc. The Internet allows the author to make his or her art accessible to almost everyone around the world and at the same time to create a personal archive of it.

Thus, the Internet leads to the globalization of the author, of the person of the author. Here I mean again not the fictional, authorial subject allegedly investing the artwork with his intentions and meanings, to be hermeneutically deciphered and revealed. This authorial subject has already been deconstructed and proclaimed dead many times. I mean the real person, the one who exists in the offline reality to which the Internet data refers. This author uses the Internet not only to write novels or produce artworks but also to buy tickets, make restaurant reservations, conduct business. All of these activities take place in the same integrated space, and all of them are potentially accessible to other Internet users.

Of course, authors and artists, like other individuals and like organizations, try to escape this total visibility by creating sophisticated systems of passwords and data protection. Today, subjectivity has become a technical construction: The contemporary subject is defined as the owner of a set of passwords that he or she knows and other people do not know.

The contemporary subject is primarily a keeper of secrets. In a certain way it is a very traditional definition of the human subject, which was always described as knowing something about itself that maybe only God knew but other people could not, being ontologically prevented from reading others' thoughts. However, today we have to do not with ontologically but rather technically protected secrets. The Internet is a space in which the subject is originally constituted as something transparent, observable – only afterwards does he or she take steps to be technically protected, to conceal the originally revealed secret. Moreover, every technical protection can be breached. Today, the *hermeneutiker* is a hacker. The contemporary Internet is place of cyberwars in which the secret is the prize. To know the secret means to gain control of the subject that is constituted by this secret; thus the cyberwars are wars of subjectivation and desubjectivation. But these wars can take place only because the Internet is originally a place of transparency and referentiality.

Nevertheless, the so-called content providers often complain that their artistic production drowns in the sea of data that circulates through the Internet and, thus, remain invisible. Indeed, the Internet also functions as a huge rubbish tip in which everything disappears rather than emerges – most Internet productions (and personae) never get the degree of public attention that their authors hoped to achieve. Ultimately, everyone searches the Internet for information about what has happened to one's own friends and acquaintances. One follows certain blogs, information sites, e-magazines, Web sites – and ignores everything else. So the standard trajectory of a contemporary author is not from the local to the global, but from the global to the local. Traditionally, the reputation of an author – be it writer or artist – moved from local to global. One had to become known locally first to be able to establish oneself globally later. Today,

one starts with self-globalization. To put one's own texts or artwork on the Internet means to directly address the global audience – avoiding any local mediation. Here, the personal becomes global and the global becomes personal. At the same time, the Internet offers a means of quantifying the global success of an author, because the Internet is a huge machine for equalizing both readers and readings. It quantifies success according to the rule One click, one reading (or viewing). However, to be able to survive in the contemporary culture one also has to draw the attention of the local, offline audience to one's global exposure – to become not only globally present but also locally familiar.

Here a more general question arises: Who is the reader, or who is the spectator of the Internet itself? It cannot be a human being, because a human being's gaze does not have the capacity to grasp the whole of the Internet. But it also must not be God, because the divine gaze is infinite – and the Internet is finite. Often enough we think about the Internet in terms of infinite data flows that transcend the limits of individual control. But in fact, the Internet is not a place of data flows, it is a machine for stopping and reversing data flows. The medium of the Internet is electricity, and the supply of electricity is finite. Therefore, the Internet cannot support infinite data flows. The Internet runs on a finite number of cables, terminals, computers, mobile phones, and other equipment units. The efficiency of the Internet is based precisely on its finiteness and, therefore, on its observability. Search engines such as Google demonstrate this. Nowadays, one hears a lot about the growing degree of surveillance – especially through the Internet. But surveillance is not something external to the Internet, or some specific technical use of the Internet. The Internet is by its essence a machine of surveillance. It divides the flow of data into small, traceable and reversible operations, and thus exposes every user to its surveillance – real or

possible. The gaze that reads the Internet is the algorithmic gaze. And, at least potentially, this algorithmic gaze can see and read everything that has ever been put on the Internet.

Now what does this original transparency mean for the artists? It seems to me that the real problem is not the Internet as place of distribution and exhibition of art but the Internet as working space. Under the traditional, institutional regime art was produced in one place –the atelier of an artist or the room of a writer – and shown in another place, in a museum or gallery, or in a published book. The emergence of the Internet erased this difference between the production and exhibition of art. The process of art production as far as it involves the use of the Internet is already exposed from beginning to end. Earlier, only industrial workers operated under the gaze of others, under the permanent control that was so eloquently described by Michel Foucault. Writers or artists worked in seclusion – beyond that panoptic, public control. However, if the so-called creative worker uses the Internet, he or she is subjected to the same or an even greater degree of surveillance as the Foucauldian worker.

The results of surveillance are sold by the corporations that control the Internet because they own the means of production, the material and technical basis of the Internet. One should not forget that the Internet is owned privately. And the owners' profits come mostly from targeted advertisement. Here we have an interesting phenomenon: the monetization of hermeneutics. Classical hermeneutics, which searched for the author behind the work, was criticized by the theoreticians of Structuralism, Close Reading, etc., who thought that it made no sense to chase ontological secrets that are inaccessible by definition. Today this old, traditional hermeneutics has been reborn as a means of the additional economic exploitation of the subjects who operate in the Internet, The surplus value that such a subject produces and that is

appropriated by the Internet corporations is the hermeneutic value: the subject not only does or produces something on the Internet but also reveals himself or herself as a human being with certain interests, desires and needs. The monetization of classical hermeneutics is one of the most interesting processes to confront us in the course of the past few decades.

Now, at first glance it seems that for the artists this permanent exposure is more positive than negative. The resynchronization of art production and art exposure through the Internet seems to make things better, not worse. Indeed, this resynchronization means that the artist does not need to produce any final product, any finished artwork; the documentation of the process of art making is already an artwork. Balzac's artist who never could present his masterpiece would have had no problem under these new conditions: The documentation of his efforts to create a masterpiece would be his masterpiece. Thus, the Internet functions more like the church than like the museum. Nietzsche wrote that with the death of God, we lost the spectator. The emergence of the Internet has given us the return of the universal spectator. So it seems that we are back in paradise and, like saints, we do the immaterial work of pure existence under the divine gaze. In fact, the life of a saint can be described as a blog that is read by God and remains uninterrupted even by the saint's death. So why do we need any secrets anymore? Why would we reject radical transparency? The answer to these questions depends on the answer to a more fundamental question: Has the Internet effected the return of God or reintroduced the *malin genie* with its evil eye?

I would suggest that the Internet is not paradise, but rather hell, or, if you like, paradise and hell at the same time. Jean-Paul Sartre said that hell is other people – that is, life under the gaze of others. He argued that the gaze of the others 'objectifies' us, and thereby negates the possibility of change

that defines our subjectivity. Sartre defined human subjectivity as a 'project' directed towards the future – and, thus, as an ontologically guaranteed secret, because it can never be revealed in the 'here and now', but only in the future. In other words, Sartre understood human subjects as struggling against the identity that had been given to them by society. That explains why he interpreted the gaze of others as hell: In the gaze of the other ,we see that we have lost the battle and have remained prisoners of our socially codified identity.

Thus, we try to avoid the gaze of the other for a while, in order to be able to reveal our 'true self' after a certain period of seclusion – to reappear in the public in a new shape, in a new form. This state of temporary absence helps us to carry out what we call the creative process – in fact, it is itself what we call the creative process. André Breton tells a story about a French poet who, when he wanted to sleep, put on his door a sign reading 'Please, be quiet – the poet is working'. This anecdote summarizes the traditional understanding of creative work: Creative work is creative because it takes place beyond public control – and even beyond the conscious control of the author. This period of absence could last days, months, years, even a lifetime. Only at the end of it, the author was expected to present a work (if not presented in his lifetime, it should be found posthumously among his effects) that would be then accepted as creative precisely because it seemed to have emerged almost out of nothingness. In other words, the creative work is the work that presupposes the desynchronization of the labour of creation from the exposure of its result, the created thing. Creative work is practiced in a parallel time of seclusion, in secrecy, so there is an effect of surprise when the creator's time gets resynchronized with the time of the audience. That is why the art practitioner traditionally wanted to be concealed, to become invisible. The reason is not that artists have committed crimes or concealed dirty secrets that they want to keep from

the gaze of others. The gaze of others is experienced by us as an evil eye not when it wants to penetrate our secrets and make them transparent (such a penetrating gaze is rather flattering and exciting), but when it denies that we have any secrets, when it reduces us to what it sees and registers.

Artistic practice is often understood as being individual and personal. But what does individual or personal mean? The individual subject is usually understood as being different from others. However, here the point is not so much one's difference from others but one's difference from oneself – one's refusal to be identified according to the general criteria of identification. Indeed, the parameters that define our socially codified, nominal identity are completely foreign to us. We did not choose our names, we were not consciously present at the date and place of our birth, most of us did not found or name the city or street where we live, we did not choose our parents, our ethnicity, our nationality. All of these external parameters of our existence have no meaning for us – they do not correlate to any subjective evidence. They indicate how others see us, but they are completely irrelevant to our inner, subjective life.

Modern artists practiced a revolt against the identities that were imposed on them by others – by society, the state, their school, their parents. – for the right to sovereign self-identification. Modern art was a search for the 'true self'. And the question is not whether the true self is real or merely a metaphysical fiction. The question of identity is not a question of truth but a question of power: Who has the power over my own identity – society or I? And, more generally: Who has the control, the sovereignty over the social taxonomy, the social mechanisms of identification – the state institutions or I? That means that the struggle against my public persona and nominal identity in the name of my sovereign persona, or sovereign identity, has also a public, political dimension, because it is

directed against the dominating mechanisms of identification – the dominant social taxonomy, with all its divisions and hierarchies. That is why modern artists always said, Do not look at me. Look at what I am doing; that is my true self. Or maybe it is no self at all, an absence of my self. Later artists mostly gave up the search for the hidden, true self. Instead, they began to use their nominal identities as ready-mades, and to organize complicated games with them. But this strategy still presupposes a disidentification from a nominal, socially codified identity, in the form of artistic reappropriation, transformation and manipulation. Modernity was the time of desire for utopia. Utopian expectation is the hope that one's project of discovering or constructing the true self will be successful, and socially recognized. In other words, the individual project of seeking the true self acquires a political dimension. The artistic project becomes a revolutionary project that aims at the total transformation of society through the obliteration of taxonomies that define the functioning of this society.

The relationship of traditional cultural institutions to this Utopian desire is ambiguous. On the one hand, these institutions offer artists and writers a chance to transcend their own time, with all its taxonomies and nominal identities. The museums and other cultural archives promise to carry the artist's work into the future. However, these archives betray their promise at the moment of fulfilling it. The artist's work is carried into the future – but the nominal identity of the artist is reimposed on his or her work. In the museum catalogue we read again the name, date and place of birth, nationality – the taxonomic markers the artist sought to escape. That is why modern art aimed to destroy the museums and begin to circulate beyond borders and control.

Now, during so-called postmodernity, the search for the true self and, accordingly, the true society in which this true

self could be revealed was proclaimed to be obsolete. Therefore we tend to speak of postmodernity as a post-utopian time. But it is not quite true. Postmodernity did not give up the struggle against the subject's nominal identity – in fact, it even radicalized this struggle. Postmodernity had its own utopia, the utopia of self-dissolution of the subject into infinite, anonymous flows of energy, desire, or play of signifiers. Instead of abolishing the nominal, social self by discovering the true self through the production of art, post-modern art theory invested its hopes in the complete loss of identity through the process of reproduction: a different strategy pursuing the same goal. The postmodern utopian euphoria provoked by the notion of reproduction is well illustrated by the following passage from *On the Museum's Ruins,* published in 1993 by Douglas Crimp. In this well-known book, Crimp claimed with reference to Walter Benjamin:

> Through reproductive technology, postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fiction of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerption, accumulation and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined.[1]

The flow of reproductions overflows the museum – and individual identity drowns in this flow. The Internet became for some time the screen onto which these postmodern utopian dreams were projected – dreams about the dissolution of all identities in the infinite play of signifiers. The globalized rhizome took the place of communist mankind.

1 Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1993, p. 58.

However, the Internet has become not a place of realization but rather a graveyard for postmodern utopias – just as the museum became a graveyard for modern utopias.

On the Internet, every free-floating signifier gets an address. Moreover, every Internet image or text not only has its specific unique place but also its unique time of appearance.

The Internet registers every moment when a certain piece of data is clicked on, liked, disliked, transferred or transformed. Accordingly, a digital image can never be merely copied (as an analogue, mechanically reproducible image can), but is always newly staged or performed. And every performance of a data file is dated and archived. Further: Every act of seeing an image or reading a text on the Internet is registered and becomes traceable. In offline reality, the act of contemplation leaves no trace – it is, actually, an empirical correlation to the traditional ontological construction of the subject as not belonging to the material world, not being a part of it. But on the Internet, an act of contemplation does leave traces. And that is the last blow that finally destroys the ontological autonomy of the subject. User or content provider – in the context of the Internet the human being acts and is perceived as an empirical person and not as an 'immaterial' subject.

Of course, we are discussing the Internet as we know it. But I expect that the present state of the Internet will be radically changed by the impending cyberwars. These wars have already been announced, and they will destroy or at least seriously damage the Internet as a means of communication and as the dominant marketplace. The contemporary world looks very much like the nineteenth-century world – a world defined by the politics of open markets, growing capitalism, celebrity culture, the return of religion, terrorism, and counterterrorism. World War I destroyed this world and made the politics of open markets impossible. By its end, the geopolitical,

military interests of the individual nation states had been revealed as much more powerful than those states' economic interests. A long period of wars and revolutions followed. Let us see what is waiting for us in the near future.

But I would like to close this final chapter with a more general consideration of the relationship between the archive and utopia. As I tried to show, the utopian impulse has always to do with the desire of the subject to break out of its own historically defined identity, to leave its place in the historical taxonomy. In a certain way, the archive gives the subject the hope of surviving his or her own contemporaneity and of revealing a true self in the future, because the archive promises to sustain and make accessible the subject's texts or artworks after death. The archive's utopian or – to use Foucault's term – heterotopian promise is crucial, because it allows the subject to develop a distance from and critical attitude towards his or her own time and immediate audience.

Archives are often interpreted as merely a means of conserving the past – of displaying the past in the present time. But in fact archives are at the same time and even primarily machines for transporting the present into the future. Artists do their work not only for their own time but also for the art archives – that is, for the future in which the artist's work will remain present. That produces a difference between politics and art. Artists and politicians share the common here and now of the public space, and they both want to shape the future – that is what unites art and politics. But politics and art shape the future in two different ways. Politics understands the future as a result of its actions, which take place here and now. Political action has to be efficient, to bring results, to transform social life. In other words, political practice shapes the future – but it disappears in and through this future; it becomes totally absorbed by its own results and consequences. The goal of present politics is to become obsolete – and to give place to a politics of the future.

But artists work not only inside the public space of their time but also for the heterogeneous space of the art archives, where their works will have a place among the works of both past and future. Art, as it functioned in modernity and still functions in our time, does not disappear after its work is done. Rather, the artwork remains present in the future. And it is precisely this anticipated future presence of art that guarantees its influence on the future, its chance to shape the future. Politics shapes the future by its disappearance. Art shapes the future by its prolonged presence. That creates a gap between art and politics – a gap that has been demonstrated often enough throughout the tragic history of the relationship between left-wing art and left-wing politics in the twentieth century.

To be sure, our archives are structured historically. And our use of these archives is still defined by the nineteenth century's tradition of historicism. Thus, we tend to posthumously reinscribe artists into the historical contexts from which they strove to escape. In this sense, the art collections that preceded the historicism of the nineteenth century – the collections that wanted to be collections of examples of pure beauty, for example – look naïve only at first glance. In fact, they are more faithful to the original utopian impulse than their more sophisticated historicist counterparts. Now, it seems to me that today we are coming to be more and more interested in the nonhistoricist approach to our past. More interested in the decontextualization and re-enactment of individual phenomena from the past than in their historical recontextualization. More interested in the utopian aspirations that lead artists out of their historical contexts than in those contexts themselves. Maybe the most interesting aspect of the Internet as archive is precisely the possibility of decontextualization and recontextualization through the cut-and-paste operations that the Internet offers to its users. And it seems to me that

this is a positive development, because it strengthens the archive's utopian potential and weakens its potential for betraying the utopian promise – a potential that is inherent in any archive, in whatever way it is structured.