

**Mary Anne Francis**

**Indifferent forms: the cultural politics of medium online, or the formal remit of diversity and difference**

**Abstract**

Concerned with the capacity of cultural form to represent diversity and difference, this text considers how the internet's potentially plural media are realised in the writing about internet art. Discussion is referred to an anthology, *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, ed. Omar Kholeif (2014), which is arguably typical.

A detailed survey finds that its contributors pay little heed to media, if slightly more to medium. The article considers the reasons for this inattention. Reading Kholeif's anthology against the grain, it finds that aspects of the online environment undercut distinctions between media. It then refers this situation to the idea of the 'End of Art' while claiming that media still do material work - which plays a significant role in the representation of diversity and difference.

The article concludes by proposing a scheme of work for understanding the capacity of online media to facilitate multifarious subjects' representations in art.

**Search words**

Mary Anne Francis • James Bridle • Omar Kholeif • Jennifer Chan • diversity and difference • online art • post-internet • post-media • the New Aesthetic • converging media

Much has been made of the internet's capacity for multifarious content. Or to put this in the medium's vernacular: '[s]eemingly endless inscriptions and mutations produced by virtually anybody and everybody infinitely circulate', (Abbas & Abou-Rahme: 223), when 'endlessness' - of number rather than extent – provides a necessary if not sufficient condition for expressive difference.

Far less attention has been paid to the internet's capacity for formal diversity; when 'formal' designates its visible, consumed materiality. Typically, in writing about digital culture both before and outside the internet, this mode of attention appears as a concern with 'medium' or 'media'. As the internet continues the tradition of 'New Media', it is ironic that there is very little writing about its intersection with the latter term: very little writing about media - and medium - especially in art-discourse, where if anywhere one might expect to see such concerns.

In looking at this absence, its possible causes, and how it might be redressed, this text assumes that medium matters. It assumes that medium has a role to play in giving voice to the diversity of subjects who are, perhaps, more enabled by the online as an expressive space than any previous means of publication.

### **How medium matters**

As David Davies notes in 'Medium in Art', his title's central term has been 'characterized in a number of different ways' (Davies: 181). And as his essay demonstrates, the subject, philosophically addressed, is complex. On the definitional issue, Davies contends: '[i]n its most general sense, a medium is a *means* of

transmitting some matter from a source to a site of reception' (Davies: 181). And continues: '[a]n art medium, then, is presumably something that mediates the transmission of the content of an artwork to a receiver' (Davies: 181).

In this way, art's medium is 'instrumental' (to use Davies' term): it carries something out. This is also a philosophical determination, because the chapter then looks at ways in which, exceptionally, for some philosophers (Monroe Beardsley) art's medium is not instrumental. Committed to the notion of art's material specificity, I contend that medium in art is instrumental.

However, in committing to this view, there is more to be discussed – not the least because this definition fails to distinguish art from other signifying forms, regarded as instrumental. Chiefly, there is the question of *how* precisely art's medium functions. Davies reviews a number of accounts, with Richard Wollheim's being the most compelling. Critiquing the non-instrumentalising aims of formalist approaches to medium, which in valorising that as an end in itself negate its 'extrinsic or ulterior purpose' - to transmit - Davies proposes a compromise:

If a medium is intrinsically a means of transmitting or communicating something, then to appreciate the medium *for its own sake* in appreciating a work [of art] is to attend not simply to *what* is communicated but to *the manner in which* that thing is communicated (Davies: 186).

And he continues: 'Appreciation, so construed, exhibits what Wollheim terms "twofoldness", requiring that we attend both to the content of a work and to the way in which that content is articulated in the medium' (Davies: 186); its 'object' - 'what is represented' - and its 'medium' - 'representation' (Wollheim: 213).

Davies then proceeds by way of his earlier discussion of Joseph Margolis, invoking the latter's distinction between 'the "physical medium"' of art and 'the "artistic medium"', when '[i]n the case of paintings, for example, the physical medium consists of pigment (oils, tempera, water colours) applied to a surface (wood, canvas, glass), while the artistic medium is "a purposeful system of brushstrokes"' (Davies: 183). An 'artistic statement', Davies argues, will 'exploit' its artistic medium. Thus for art, medium functions as the (in-)visible substrate of depiction, and also does expressive, communicative work.

There is just one concept missing from this grid that Davies builds from Wollheim plus Margolis. This is the idea that physical medium also signifies – as a substance - and thus contributes to the 'artistic statement'; for instance oil paint does very different signifying work from digital photography.

### **Why medium matters**

So, reading across Davies and his reading of Wollheim and Margolis, to ignore the role of medium in art is both fundamentally to misrepresent the very nature of art, and more particularly, to overlook a defining aspect of its function as a signifying form. This has several consequences.

For theoretical analysis, it implies that either art's affects as art are overlooked, or they are mis-diagnosed; possibly identified with the 'depiction' i.e. the signified rather than the signifier. Relatedly, for artists, a de-emphasis on medium implies a reduced awareness of art's lexicon, and consequently, an unwitting use of that, since art's media always entail some degree of 'manipulation' (Davies: 190). The danger with the latter is

that the artist becomes a 'medium' in another sense, as the artist is instrumentalised by their expressive means.

The politics of a neglect of medium are various. While not wanting to assume a simple relationship between cultural form and identity or subjectivity, it would nevertheless seem that to limit art's range of formal possibilities is to restrict its potential for varied, diverse expression. Different subjects have different relationships to power. The value of art – as an articulation that operates across different levels of its being (the 'object' and the manipulation of medium) that combine in myriad ways – is that its expressive potential is huge. Moreover via Wollheim's notion of 'twofoldness', art's medium offers an interpretative space. For artists who take issue with how things are typically perceived, perhaps because they are marginalised by the status-quo, this is a powerful facility; no less than a means of critique.

Hence, in many ways, medium matters much.

### **The internet as medium, and media: the literature**

The writing about the internet as medium, per se, is scant. There is more about the internet as a medium *for* a given subject, when 'medium' is used in the psychic sense – as conduit. In five Google Scholar pages, only the short text 'Does the Materiality of the Internet Matter?' by Niels Brügger addressed the internet as medium head on (eds. Brügger & Bødker: 2002). Offering a 'sketch' for 'what the objects of an analysis [of the internet's materiality] should be' (Brügger: 20), Brügger takes a technological approach to matters of medium, and is moreover writing before social media and the widespread use of smart-phones.

Elsewhere, relevant journal archives (e.g. *Mute*'s) also yielded little. A *Third Text* article by Niranjana Rajah, 'Slow download!: the internet as a medium for art', focused on its subject's role *in* cultural politics (in Malaysia), not medium *as* cultural politics, although Rajah's recourse to Hegel's 'End of History' thesis is eloquent for reasons that follow.

So I decided to see how a recent compilation of writing about art online addressed issues of medium and media. For reasons of its widespread circulation soon after publication, I chose the 2014 anthology *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, edited by Omar Kholeif. Despite the title's commonsense meaning, the book is directly relevant to this enquiry when as one of the contributors contends 'after' 'typically evokes complete embeddedness in a ubiquitous network culture' (Connor: 57). 'After' here means in the 'wake of'; not 'beyond'. And while I make no claim for the book's typicality as one among others on the subject of its title, its anthology format encourages that in offering a range of voices addressing range of political concerns from Baghdad to Finland and Rwanda to Turkey.

### **'Medium' and 'media' in *You Are Here***

While the term 'media' appears frequently, it is also frequently prefixed by 'post'. At first glance, this does not seem to indicate an enthusiasm for culture's material dimensions when, in one reading of the term, 'post-media' proposes that medium no longer matters. However, as with 'after' in this context, 'post-' has a double meaning. As Zach Blas writes, 'deployments of "post-" [...] also illustrate saturation or (pseudo)totalization' (Blas: 87). So in this paradoxical vein, 'media' is both everywhere, and as a possible consequence of that, nowhere; 'an invisible given' (Chan: 108). Either

way, the question of how ‘media’ and ‘medium’ are realized more precisely in this text, beyond their function as the back-half of a generic term, remains.

### **‘Medium’ and ‘media’: the editorial**

In his ‘Preamble’ Kholeif contends that: ‘one of the most basic concerns to grow out of [the] process’ of ‘formulating this collective narrative’ was ‘how to define the internet – as a space, as a form, or as an adjective?’ (Kholeif: 13). Precisely because it approaches matters of definition in a way that might accommodate a discussion of medium, this question is interesting. Kholeif also asks ‘[h]ow have the formal aspects of art making and art viewing been altered by the integrated dependence on designed technology?’ (Kholeif: 12). However, rather than answer either question, he refers both to the book’s contributors, explaining: ‘[i]nstead of retreading art historical debates about medium specificity, I decided that the most appropriate means to tackle such questions was to develop a platform for artists, writers, and curators to lead these discussions through the questions that were developing organically in their practice’ (Kholeif : 12). A platform, though, is not a programme.

### **‘Medium’ and ‘media’: the essays**

#### **Defined but not discussed**

There are many designations of the internet as medium in *You Are Here* that are non-reflexive; which do not question what it is to make that claim. Stephanie Bailey quotes Hito Steyerl claiming that ‘networked space is itself a medium’ (Bailey: 133), while herself describing the internet as a ‘network’ ‘textured by the surface layer of the World Wide Web’ (Bailey: 129). Jennifer Chan refers to the internet as ‘a mass medium’ (Chan: 116); when its art ‘employs the networked, decentralized structure of the internet’

(Chan: 107). Chan then elaborates: 'Post-internet practices are characterized by hybridity and by hyper-mediation of existing genres, platform-oriented activity, slippage between formal output of digital and physical environments' (Chan: 110) – but doesn't detail this media-hybridity beyond its off- and online quality. Similarly, Kholeif's essay, 'The Curator's New Medium', refers to 'the trans-media virtual environment' (Kholeif: 85) – while looking at online art as a mediation of power and capital. And Constant Dullaart discusses the steganographic capacity of the digital image to include concealed text but misses the chance to explore its implications as a form that can combine two media (Dullaart: 144).

So none of these commentators offers any detailed discussion of what the internet as 'medium' or 'media' materially entails. To be fair, Bailey comments that 'if we were to also perceive the internet as an aesthetic and therefore sensual [sic] space that has the potential to produce real and meaningful interactions and relations, we might then push the idea of the internet as a (social) medium further.' But this is a *proposal* for a definition. She continues: '[w]e could continue to explore its potential as a space within which forms of relational practice might develop across the virtual and the real, so that innovative and tangible social networks might evolve IRL' (Bailey: 133). In a gesture that occurs several times in this anthology, medium appears at the intersection of the virtual and the real - 'mixed reality' (McHugh: 32) - almost as if the medium-specificity of the virtual only appears in relief.

### **Discussion of another 'medium'**

Beyond my focus on the internet as typically experienced, or 'consumed' at the level of the screen, *You Are Here* occasionally addresses 'medium' in detail. Writing on the New Aesthetic (which denotes an online-offline entity), James Bridle claims that it is

'impossible' for him: 'not to look at these images and immediately start to think about not what they look like', but rather:

how they came to be and what they have or will become: the process of capture, storage, and distribution; the actions of filters, codecs, algorithms, processes, databases, and transfer protocols; the weight of data-centres, servers, satellites, cables, routers, switches, modems, infrastructures physical and virtual (Bridle: 23).

Similarly, Stephanie Bailey notes that '[i]t is easy to forget that the internet is a physical thing; that satellites and fibre optic networks are but some of the necessary technologies facilitating the transmission of data between people and places' (Bailey: 129). For both, 'medium' is the technological support for representation.

But in *You Are Here*, there are many essays for which 'medium' is simply not an issue. This applies to even those few writers who focus on the 'art' aspects of the compilation's title. So Brad Tromel discusses the way in which internet technologies and social media in particular have affected the circulation of art, its authorship and ownership. But the role of media in this is not discussed, if crucial: an image online severed from its author is less readily restored to its creator than a text. And Michael Connor explores the art / artist – networked culture axis with an emphasis on its periodization: art 'after the internet' refers on the one hand to work made 'as the "cognitive yield" of obsessive clicking' (Connor: 57) and on the other, practices 'in which the artist, even art itself, is assumed to be fully immersed in networked culture and is no longer quite able to assume the position of an observer' (Connor: 57).

Medium to major indifference to medium and media online: towards an explanation

Largely, then, *You Are Here: Art After the Internet* demonstrates a negligible concern with matters of medium and media online. Which begs the question: why?

My method for addressing this is extruded from the process of close-reading that has demonstrated the existence of the phenomenon in question in the first place.

Encouraged by an in-depth knowledge of those texts, the second part of this essay will read them for the way in which they also provide clues to a response. In other words this is an implicit discourse; a method of reading which might be seen as hermeneutically complementary to the preceding survey.

### **The absence of address to ‘media’: some speculations**

I start with arguably the more profound absence. Without having counted occurrences, ‘media’ seems to feature less in the anthology than ‘medium’, debate-evading uses of ‘post-media’ aside. This implies that either different media are less in evidence online, or that such differences do not register.

### **Smoothed striated space**

Emblematically, Brian Droitcour’s discussion of Ryan Trecartin’s video-work heads this discussion. Looking at the collaged dialogue in *K-CorealNC.K (section a)*, Droitcour invokes the concept of ‘incorporation’: ‘a technique of smoothing difference to produce inclusion and growth’ (Droitcour: 50).

Much in *You Are Here* proposes that online media have been ‘incorporated’ – when the term also acknowledges their residual physicality. Frequently, the internet is recognised as a ‘flexible, mutable, and fluid’ space (Droitcour: 50) that homogenizes formal – as well as other – differences. So, writing about the relationship between the internet as a political and aesthetic space, Bailey invokes Bernard Stiegler’s notion of a

“grammatization process” that allows for the “discretization” [...] “of behaviours, gestures, talks, flows and moves of any kind [...]”, when ‘discretization’ is a term borrowed from mathematics to describe the transformation of continuous forms into data that is, typically, computer-ready. This, she implies, results in the ‘smooth space of the internet’ (Bailey: 132). Although Bailey is more concerned with grammatization as ‘a modification or reduction of human characteristics precisely so that they might fit into the digitized, online system’ (Bailey: 132), ‘grammatization’ equally pertains to the digitization of media (e.g. image, music, text). Thus homogenized via code that is typically phenomenalized as pixels or sound ‘samples’, media are ‘smoothed’, if not quite to the point of indifference. They are also ‘smoothed’ or incorporated via standardizing sites such as YouTube or Instagram.

Thus levelled, media-distinctiveness obtrudes less online than offline, possibly as a consequence of digitisation and being networked, which may account for its relative invisibility in *You Are Here*. And the internet as digital and networked medium also produces another de-differentiation. Rather than being seen to homogenize media, however, digitisation now increases their commutability: the ease by which expression in one media can be translated into another.

### **Commutability**

This is proposed in *You Are Here* by Tyler Coburn’s monologue, ‘NaturallySpeaking’, which stars the digital instructor of a mutant voice-recognition-programme – in print. When the willing suspension of disbelief would normally permit Coburn’s readers to ‘hear’ the speaker, this is frustrated by a ‘meta’ punctuation of the text. Ironically, suspension is suspended precisely by commands used to mark punctuation when dictating to a typist:

'We could like you to read aloud for a few minutes

while the computer listens to you and learns how you speak PERIOD' (Coburn: 156).

This 'hack' reminds us that digitisation facilitates translation between media e.g. Text-to-Speech; 'OCR' (Optical Character Recognition), and 'scored' music into sound via software such as Sibelius. Easily transformed, media are, procedurally, more proximate. So just as reduction in the formal differences between digital media can explain their reduced visibility as distinct modes, so the latter might be also explained by their digitally enhanced commutability. A different kind of media proximity proposes another explanation of this relative invisibility, again, proposed by *You Are Here*.

### **Synchronous media**

Constant Dullaart's reference to steganography, which often takes an online form when images encode written text, provides an exotic instance of the way in which different media can be co-present in internet screen-space. Of course, like steganography, co-present media predates the internet: music videos are multi-media; and as Gunther Kress elaborates, so, often, too, are pedagogic explications when drawing, speech and gesture are deployed simultaneously (Kress: 162-166). But variously, the digital, and the online more particularly, seem to increase the incidence of simultaneous media in a range of cultural forms, in part because of the ease with which this layering is technically achieved. A good example would be much of YouTube's 'music', comprising not just sound, but also visual media: diegetic video; still photographs, or a synced, scrolling score. Once again, enhanced proximity, here

temporal, makes the seams between media less visible. There is one further version of this argument.

### **Proximate in place**

This is proposed by Jon Rafman's suite of images in *You Are Here*, which as Kholeif notes, are concerned with 'the virtual world of Second Life and multi-player video games' (Kholeif: 195) – and in being so often include images of screens as palimpsests within the main images. These screens often show a range of media: graphics and text; photographic image and text, and video, reminding us that online, an array of media frequently jostle in one space, even if these media are already semi-homogenized by their digitality. But rather than producing awareness of media-specificity, it is probable that the edges of these media are naturalized by an enhanced capacity for 'code-switching' (moving between different languages), especially identified with the 'digital native'<sup>1</sup>

### **Converging media**

So: in various ways, considered from a formalist perspective, media online converge – ontologically, as they are all *digital*; procedurally, as they are more readily sources for one another; temporally, in being synchronous; and then, spatially, in occupying the same communicative frame. This goes some way to explaining why 'media difference' both in general and in its particular instances is overlooked in *You Are Here*. It also proposes that existing concepts may not suffice for describing phenomenal, aesthetic differences in online culture. And indifference - to different media, traditionally defined,

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<sup>1</sup> See Gene McHugh (31) for a discussion of this term.

online - might also explain indifference to the internet as a medium per se. But equally, there may well be other explanations, to which I now turn.

### **Medium – indifference**

Following Chan, it could be argued that the internet fails to register as a medium because it is (perceived to be) ubiquitous; *il n'y a pas de hypertext*. Chan also invokes another argument for medium not mattering (much) to contemporary artists. Mapping the relationship of Post-internet practices to 'net.art and contemporary art', Chan asks: [w]hat has the formalist browser-based work of white men and women pecking at their computers in 1996 have to do with me?' The question is rhetorical, as she continues:

Your canon was Dada, Warhol and Duchamp; mine is Cantopop, Pokémon and young boys performing cover songs. Why make art that looks like, and responds to, art that is over forty years old? Why not make art that responds to online things that matter to me now? (Chan: 111).

Couched in the hipster phrasing of the New Aesthetic, this declamation tropes a number of binarisms: 'white' and non-white ethnicities with then and 'now', with high-art and pop-culture, then those again with art and 'online things'; with them and 'me', and last but not least, with formalism and, its other which is also 'online things' – 'that matter to [Chan] now'. As with the last pairs, it is the second term in all that is privileged for Chan and provides her point of identification. For the purposes of understanding the absence of attention to medium in writing on online culture, these lines propose that 'formalism' is not just unfashionable or an 'old anxiety' (Kholeif: 79) – perhaps a facile reading - but that a concern with medium is associated with a whole set of issues irrelevant to contemporary artists. 'Post-media' is realized at face value.

Chan's alignment is, of course, not unfamiliar in recent art-history, first emerging with the anti-formalist 'issue-based' art-practices of the 1980s, an era that ushered in the recent 'turns' away from aesthetics realised both in theory and in practice as media-specificity, and for which the 'Social Turn' is emblematic. But *You Are Here* also proposes that this concern with content over form may have another impetus, which in turn, charges its political affiliations very differently.

In his foreword to the volume, Ed Halter discusses recent socio-technological development and notes the way in which, with 'venture capital', this is realised as a perpetual quest for the new. The 'engines of the market' he contends, are 'always demanding more "content"' (Halter: 16). While 'content' is certainly a synonym for 'product', and so includes technologies of form (e.g. 'Periscope', GoPro,) the term, is, however telling. The categories of online culture in its wider sense are typically conceived as subject-matter ones: porn, e-commerce, social-media, gambling, and sport, with only a few - 'music' and so-called 'film' (video) - preserving media-specific designations. When 'content' includes a vast array of subjects, as Chan's and Halter's essays demonstrate, it is futile to align a (re-)turn to content per se with any particular political project. But there is a different type of project that provides another explanatory context for the phenomena in question. This is aesthetics, or more particularly, one *theory* of aesthetics: Hegel's, the terms of which have informed the underlying scheme of this discussion.

### **Medium and the recent history of aesthetic theory**

The terms that Wollheim uses to designate representation's (art's) two aspects i.e. its 'represented' ('object'), and its 'medium' are not so far from Hegel's conceptual scheme for art - perhaps unsurprisingly, given Hegel's influence on late twentieth century

aesthetics. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel conceives of art as an evolving relationship between 'content' and 'form', when the latter is substantially identified with materiality. Indeed, medium plays a large part in Hegel's discussion of 'general types of art', which are realised as, and through, 'particular sensuous media' (Hegel: 88). The 'fine art' of painting, for example, 'employs as a medium for its content and for the plastic embodiment of that content visibility as such [...] developed into colour' (Hegel: 94).

The value of this framework goes far beyond its provision of core analytical terms, not the least because 'form' and 'content' are not specific to Hegel. Rather, it is especially useful as it provides an explanation for the phenomena in question at a more fundamental level than explanations already supplied. When the latter largely locate potential reasons for inattention to medium and media in their digital and on-line condition, Hegel's aesthetics offers a way of thinking about online art within a philosophy of history.

In proposing this perspective, I am merely extending others' application - to conceptualism - of the *Lectures on Aesthetics* and its 'end of art' thesis, to online art. Like Conceptual Art, the latter can be seen as a form of de-materialized art-practice; it is phenomenally fugitive - gone at the push of a key - and as the essays in *You Are Here* testify, is typically more concerned with 'the Idea' and the effects of this, than sensuous form.

Famously, for Arthur Danto, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* marked the moment at which art raised from within itself philosophical questions – in asking what 'art' was - and hence marked 'the end of art' as art became, precisely, philosophy. In the wider context of

Hegel's aesthetics, the transcendence of art is an inevitable development in the history of human thought. As Danto writes:

Hegel [...] saw thinking as having a history. The various historical phases of art are phases of thought expressed as art [...]. Hence art is through and through a product of thought, though limited by the fact that it must express its thoughts by sensuous means. *The End-of-Art Thesis* proclaims our liberation from having to find sensuous equivalents for the content of thought. Thinking has risen above and beyond what art is capable of. Art belongs to a less evolved mode of thinking than what the mind is capable of, not only ideally but actually, and this higher capability is found only in philosophy (Danto: 537).

Hegel himself writes: 'In conformity with such an object-matter [*free*, concrete intellectual being, which has the function of revealing itself for the inward world of spirit'], art cannot work for sensuous perception. [...] the sensuous appearance sinks into worthlessness' (Hegel: 87). Hegel's distaste for the realm associated with embodiment and (human) flesh – other (non-Western, male) forms of subjectivity, perhaps – compels him to reject the very thing that distinguishes art as art, and thus art itself, it seems.

### **Medium: a mis-reading**

However, what Danto's rhetoric underplays is that dialectically, perhaps, Hegel is actually equivocal on the subject of art's matter. Having made the point above, Hegel immediately says: '[b]ut, on the other hand, this type of Art, like every other, needs an external vehicle of expression' (Hegel: 87). Such it could be said, is for Hegel, art's fatal flaw. Seen from this perspective, art is condemned to materiality, however minimal. As much as Hegel's aesthetics provides a context in which minimisation of medium in the

theory and / or practice of online art might be understood, as a stage in art's 'evolution' towards immateriality, it also, implicitly warns against indifference to medium, and media. Which is to say, art's materiality is, equally, commended to it as a necessary aspect of its being.

### **'The internet as a (social) medium': an outline for research**

There are grounds, then for returning to Stephanie Bailey's eloquent observation: 'if we were [...] to perceive the internet as an aesthetic and therefore sensual [sic] space that has the potential to produce real and meaningful interactions and relations, we might then push the idea of the internet as a (social) medium further' (Bailey: 133). Predicating the 'social' potential of the internet as a medium in part on its aesthetic, sensuous dimension, Bailey's hypothesis offers a compelling prompt to think about the ways in which the formal aspects of online art may offer scope for the articulation of diversity and difference. And in turn, this should be referred to Kholeif's speculation that the 'formal aspects of art making and art viewing' might be 'altered by the integrated dependence on designed technology' (Kholeif: 12).

Exceeding Brügger's 'sketch' for looking at the internet's 'materiality' – its quality as medium – this elaborated scheme of work is structured by the following: the distinction between the expressive condition of medium as such (i.e. its social value) and its capacity to enable expression via being manipulated or 'exploited'; and the distinction between the internet as 'medium' and 'media' - which subdivides the previous distinction. The detail of the grid that constitutes this scheme is referred where possible to shards of clues in *You Are Here* – once more.

### **The signifying properties of online medium and media**

*You Are Here* proposes that the idea of 'media' online is overlooked - both critically and, fundamentally, perceptually. Further, it proposes that there are compelling explanations for this inattention: perhaps most strikingly as conventional media-differences are flattened in the (meta-) medium of the online digital. This means that it is more productive to focus this discussion of the signifying potential on the internet as *medium* when that is less neglected in critical discussion.

Here is not the place to offer a comprehensive description of the internet as a medium for art, if principally because this scheme of work requires rather a focus upon those formal aspects that might especially facilitate the representation of diversity and difference. Three of these are salient.

The first can be described as the internet's (relative) availability as a means of art-production and dissemination. To some extent, this is related to its 'ubiquity', which is frequently noted in *You Are Here* (Bridle; Chan; Connor), and is enabled by the internet's wide-ranging distribution in its guise as a mode of publication. More particularly, the internet's availability as art medium is facilitated by two significant conditions. First: technological, whereby in all sorts of ways (e.g. technical, economic, infrastructural), it becomes accessible; and second: epistemological, whereby many different things online are recognised or known as 'art'. In this latter instance, 'art' takes on a nominalist quality – if not for its users, who might defend their definitions by referring to the object's (perceived) essence as art. Or in Brad Tromel's terms, art is the subject of 'image anarchism', when that describes the ways in which, online, art is defined by 'users of social media' – in myriad different ways (Tromel: 39).

Of course, this accessibility is not unequivocal. The internet is not 'ubiquitous' across the globe – either as a means of production or in its passive form. The notion of digital

'saturation' is hyperbole, which speaks of the particular material conditions of their existence in technologically advanced metropolitan centres. Something of this is caught in Zach Blas' notion of 'pseudo-totalization' (Blas: 88). And unevenness of access to internet communication is powerfully addressed in the visual essay by Model Court looking at the technological mediation of international justice, which, between Rwanda and Finland, threatens to fail for want of a fibre optic link.

Such should be the first, key concern for a programme of research looking at the internet as art medium and its political constituencies, with further questions involving the matter of who is included and excluded by the internet's historically enhanced availability as a mode of production, first at the technological level, and then by a pluralising art-theory - 'image anarchism'. The second key concern is the realization of the internet as a hybrid medium, and its art likewise.

For reasons of its digital condition, and specifically, the capacity of the pixel and byte to phenomenalise a range of sense-based media – (moving) image, sound, written-text – online space is typically a multi-media one. This is by no means technically necessary. Text-free websites are possible, though the utilitarian condition of much online activity would make them eccentric.<sup>2</sup> And neither, with its inevitable visuality, is the screen the necessary way of accessing things online; content could be accessed aurally, for instance. The hybrid condition of the internet - as a screen-based phenomenon – is conventional. Conventionally, as such, it comprises: image-written-text; (moving-)image-music-written-text (e.g. YouTube). And as it has been noted, there is tendency for these sense-directed media to merge, online - in what Kholeif has aptly described as a 'trans-

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://webwithoutwords.com/blog/do\\_i\\_know\\_this\\_person/](http://webwithoutwords.com/blog/do_i_know_this_person/) - which is on the way to a text-free internet.

media virtual environment' (Kholeif: 85).

Several things follow from this hybridity for the representation of diversity and difference and two in particular stand out. The first is cued by James Bridle's notion of the New Aesthetic, which, including and exceeding things online, is 'an attempt to "write" critically about the network in the vernacular of the network itself: in a Tumblr, in blog posts, in YouTube videos of lectures, tweeted reports and messages, reblogs, likes, and comments' (Bridle: 22). In other words, the New Aesthetic is a hybrid or trans-medial form. As such 'it does not conform to the formal shapes – manifesto, essay, book – expected by critics and academics' (Bridle: 22). Hence, it may be argued that it represents a refusal of institutional or establishment discourse, if this is identified with mono-medium forms such as the (written) manifesto, essay and book. The same might go for hybrid, purely online forms which similarly might challenge institutionalised power and be 'largely illegible' to such (Bridle: 22). For anyone who dis-identifies with this kind of formal power, trans-medial forms offer alternatives.

At the same time, hybrid forms are expressively inclusive, at least in offering a variety of entry points. A menu of (moving-)image, written-text, and music interfaces, enables different preferences, and for the online artist, a segue into less familiar expressive forms, from the known and understood.

This notion of the segue is formalised for digital culture in the idea of the hyperlink, which is key to the third, major formal issue for this scheme of work; the social value of the internet, to artists, as a 'networked' medium (Bailey: 133). Perhaps the differences between a networked and a hybrid medium are not acute, when hyperlinks facilitate connections across difference (difference in media, form and content, for example). But hyperlinks also facilitate connections of similarity (e.g. media, form and content), though

here it could be argued that those similarities are also differences of place and time. In this respect, an enquiry into the expressive potential of a networked medium should consider the power of the gaps between 'nodes' as much as it might consider the political value of making things proximate: connections. Adroitly realised, these aspects of the hyperlink have the potential to realise a politics of empathy in difference, and intersectionality, respectively.

### **The internet as social medium for art – 'exploited'**

Replacing Davies' term, 'exploitation' with the admittedly less powerful notion of 'deployment', the next task for this scheme of work is to consider the way in which the internet as (relatively) available, hybrid and networked medium is, in detail, put to use by artists. The question here – via Davies' use of Margolis – would be: what is the online, digital equivalent of painting's 'purposeful system of brushstrokes'? (Davies: 183). Or: how do artists working with the internet as medium inflect their given means for expressive effect? For all sorts of reasons, this is a hugely demanding enquiry. Issues of the non-gestural (non-'brushstroke') quality of artists' use of pixels and the like aside, a proper study of the internet's deployment in this way would require extensive recourse to examples, then discussion and analysis of such. Again, here is not the place for that. The issue of the signifying value of a given use of medium would have to be considered – in the light of a complex relationship between a given digital idiom and its cultural significance.

In all of this, there is no doubt that art's materiality matters as much online as in so-called real life. Equally, the materiality of real life differences matter when they matter to those who live with their effects, of whatever kind, and however those differences are produced. Whether or not art's materiality will matter so much in a post-identitarian

world, to use Blas' term (Blas: 87) – whether the necessity of art's materiality is necessarily tied to larger matters - is perhaps another question.

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