General

Slow-Motion Film with Crash-Test Dummies

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***Internet Art*, *The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*, Julian Stallabrass, Tate Publishing, Londen, 2003, ISBN 1854373455**

It has become the norm to judge a work of art on the connections it has with 'lifestyle', 'identity' or 'ideology'. The work of art is seen as a 'product' that derives meaning and effect not merely from strictly formal characteristics, but also from the way in which is communicates an identifiable vision or identity within a specific context or market. Viewed in this way, the artwork, in the first instance, communicates its brand quality. The brand is a closed system of values that primarily refers to this self-assigned and designed 'identity'. In regular marketing it has long been recognized that a product cannot be sold purely on the basis of its strictly formal characteristics. A successful product must communicate a message and appeal to a recognizable identity. It must be an incarnation of an ideal world, which becomes accessible by purchasing it. By buying a product (a logo) one shows that one identifies with the identity that the brand expresses. This principle has by now been so thoroughly developed that a brand is designed as if it were a flesh-and-blood human being. It must prove and fulfil its credibility at all times. Its users or buyers not only expect the brand to have human qualities, but also to be able to come into contact with it. The product must have an open connection to the end user, must be interactive. In the world-*cum*-market you must be able, just as in love, to merge as a lovesick mortal with your sweetheart. This form of emotional and economic swindle is called branding.

In the introduction to his recently published book *Internet Art, The Online Clash between Culture and Commerce* Julian Stallabrass describes how ®™Mark, a group of 'anticorporate' saboteurs operating in the grey area between activism and performance art, responded to its selection for the prestigious 'Whitney Biennial' in 2000. The invitations sent to ®™Mark, including the accompanying letter which stated that the group now belonged to the elite of the American art world, was put up for sale by ®™Mark on the Internet auction site eBay. The auction raised $4,000, which ®™Mark immediately put into its project fund. The group's action left the Whitney Biennial institution completely perplexed about whether this act was part of a serious artistic concept, or a clear act of sabotage, or perhaps simply a tasteless joke. Stallabrass describes this incident as 'symptomatic' of the dispute between the complacent art world and online activists. In his view, it demonstrates that the official art world attempts to 'brand' the culture of activists, hackers and net artists as art, but also shows that this alternative culture is in turn hostile and evasive toward the archaic, elitist and appropriating practices of the art world. The question of whether Stallabrass is making a more cunning attempt to brand this volatile phenomenon must be weighed against the evidence he submits and the argument he develops.

What counts in Stallabrass' favour is that he is thoroughly conscious of the unstable character of what can be defined as Internet art. He makes a reasonable case for the proposition that this instability is not just the result of the deliberately evasive tactics of its

makers, but is also determined by the nature of the Internet itself, as a highly changeable technological communication platform. In the first two chapters, he delves into the structure of the Internet and of data. In doing so he does not allow himself to be seduced by idealistic futuristic visions, as is the case in a lot of cyber theory. He primarily attempts to reflect on the potential contained in the phenomenon. His assumption is that this 'art', from a conceptual and social point of view, is the most evolved and contemporary. Amazingly, in this context, he insists on confining himself to 'fine art'. Stallabrass argues that 'fine art' has condemned itself to marginality (in contrast with literature, music and film) and that the Internet is the ideal medium by which to escape the archaic shackles of the traditional production and distribution of artworks. For Stallabrass, art will only become socially relevant again once art has emancipated itself from the 'old economy'. In itself this reasoning still makes sense, but it is disturbing and confusing to find the author seems not to be conscious of the fact that if this reason for existence is genuinely undermined, then the whole idea of 'fine art' no longer exists – something that should not have to matter anyway.

In the chapters on the political character of Internet art and the tradition of media tactics that is inextricably linked to it, he shows himself to be reasonably up to date, and in this light his book is a handy overview of the illustrious history of online art. Yet what is very regrettable in his story is his need to apply the old parameters of 'art' to Internet art, with considerable confusion as a result. What he particularly seems not to understand is that many of the groups and projects he describes are deliberately ambiguous. In virtually not a single instance is it something that the makers unequivocally intended as art. For ®™Mark, for example, it is just as important that business magazines or online sport fanzines write about them as renowned art journals. ®™Mark's projects are after all about resistance to global capitalism, and whether some see them as an activist or anarchist group, and others as art, or even as net entrepreneurs, makes no difference to them, as long as it contributes to their objective, and this is not to rescue 'art': that seems to be mainly Stallabrass' own quest. Stallabrass' treatment of the clash between net artists, activists and the established art world is akin to a slow-motion film with crash-test dummies. Sterile, and completely outside actual practice, with all its coincidences, static and everyday delusion. His case, despite all his attempts to call attention to the phenomenon of Internet art in an enthusiastic way, is nevertheless dominated by a concession to the established art world and its problems in classifying and conserving net art. A conservative attitude that, given the history of the innovative and the critical – whether in art or not – is hardly new. Stallabrass seems not to realize that the conflict he presents between net art and the established order has already been undermined from the inside out, and that changes usually occur not in great collisions, but through stealthy infiltrations, which destabilize the established order, causing it to continually mutate.

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Tags

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