ARTIST MEETS AUDIENCE:
UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL MEANING OF ART ON THE INTERNET

JOKE BEYL
MEDIA STUDIES DEPARTMENT
FREE UNIVERSITY OF BRUSSELS

JOKE BAUWENS PhD
MEDIA STUDIES DEPARTMENT
FREE UNIVERSITY OF BRUSSELS

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ABSTRACT

Thinking about art as a process of social communication, this article intends to understand how the relationship between the artist and the audience is potentially altered in an interactive Internet environment. By drawing on a review of old and contemporary theorists, we show that ideas about the digital encounter of artists and beholders bear great resemblance to opinions uttered about 'old' media's impact on this distinct relationship. Hence, it appears that new media's impact on artists' relationship with their audience needs to be understood as an evolution rather than as a revolution. Following these recurring insights, the possible change in aesthetic experiences can be understood in contrasting ways. This article gives an overview of the different arguments and so aims to provide a framework for researching and understanding the changes in the field of art, which are induced and reinforced through Internet.

INTRODUCTION

The breakthrough of a new medium always provokes debate among researchers, theoreticians as well as professionals about what impact it will have on the social meaning of art. This often arouses provocative statements. For instance, Leo Tolstoy, as early as the end of the 19th century ([1896], 1960), highlighted mass media's potential to creatively involve every member of society in – what he called – real, uniting art. In the 1930s Walter Benjamin ([1935], 1985) mentioned how the mechanical reproduction of art allowed for a more critical and active consumer. Marshall McLuhan (1966, p. 310) in the 1960s saw electric technology as 'the fate that calls men to the role of artist in society' by stimulating imaginative participation. Jean-François Lyotard (1988), however, criticised in the 1980s the loss of common artistic contemplation due to the conceptualised and individualised use of technologies such as computers.

Turning to our age, the question – how the Internet is shaping the social meaning of art – often seems to echo old dreams and fears about the relationship between technical media and art. Drawing on a review of old and contemporary theorists, it shows that ideas and arguments about the digital encounter of artists and beholders bear great resemblance to opinions uttered about 'old' media's impact on this distinct relationship. In particular, the participatory and interactive opportunities offered by the Internet touch upon issues about democratisation of art both as a practice of consumption and production and about art, artists and aura (e.g. Bruckman 1995; Lovejoy 2004; Bolter 2007; Aristarkhova 2007). One specific debate in this context – that constitutes the point of interest in this article – focuses on the impact of the interactive Internet on, in Mikhail Bakhtin's ([1981]Holquist, 2004: pp. 21-25, 300) terms, the social dialogue between the artist and his audience. Thinking about art as a process of social communication, i.e. an exchange of symbolic content between the meaning creator and the meaning receiver, we explore how the relationship between the artist and his audience is shaped and potentially altered in an interactive Internet environment. On the one hand, this media technological advancement could allow the artist to engage in a more direct contact with his audience. On the other hand, it permits the beholder to inspire the artist from a co-creative point of view.

This article, then, intends to reflect theoretically about the changing social relationship between the actors involved and about the possible implications for the creative, on the part of the artist, and perceptive, on the part of the audience, processes the artistic experience involves. Without ignoring the specificities of the Internet as a medium, we contend that old ideas about the social dialogue between the artist and his audience can help us understand the emergent changes in the social meaning of art. Rather than seeing the Internet and its interactive opportunities in particular as a revolutionary break in how artists and audiences engage with each other, old and new theories show that we are witnessing a radicalisation of modern and high-modern ideas about art and artists' role and position in society.

INTERNET-MEDIATED AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Today, probably the interactive Internet, also known as Web2.0, is considered to have most impact on the gap between contexts of content production (by professionals) and contexts of content reception (by audiences). In particular, its diverse opportunities in terms of two-way communication, interactivity and participation are seen as a way of bridging both environments and worlds. These features are often conceived of as social and democratic opportunities of the Internet, that, in theory, enable every user to react, to voice one's opinion, to distribute this opinion on a global scale, to share it and, consequently, to mould societal debates. This is understood as a clear

break away from the classic mass media in which broadcasting was the main criterion, the audience was positioned in a passive and receiving role, and monologue was the mode of social communication (Thompson 1995; Cover 2006; Croteau 2006; Jenkins 2006; Howard 2008).

Many have argued that art also can be considered as a communicative, hence social process in which both production and reception of culture are involved (Dewey 1958; Tolstoy 1960; Williams 1989; Luhmann 2000; Holquist 2004). Many examples equally show that the sphere of art production and reception heavily bear the marks of digitisation and the Internet (Bruckman 1995; Lovejoy 2004; Bolter 2007; Aristarkhova 2007; Lehmann 2009). Still the discussion about the impact of the Internet on the relationship between cultural producers and consumers has mainly concentrated on popular culture and mass media entertainment. Clearly, the question how the Internet is co-shaping the encounter and relationship between artists and their public and – by extension – society, is relatively under-explored in theoretical and empirical research. The latter especially is manifestly missing, which means that the theoretical arguments heard in the discussion either lack empirical substantiation from the field of art, or are grounded in empirical evidence drawn from the spheres of popular culture and mass media.

However, drawing on the few contemporary studies on the importance of the interactive Internet for the artistic and aesthetic experience, the diversity of viewpoints originating from various theoretical origins is significant. Standpoints range from a sound belief in the opportunity offered by digital media and the interactive Internet to allow the audience to become a co-authority, over more cautious judgments concerning the willingness of both the artist and the audience to change their relationship, to a more critical opinion stressing the loss of a common aesthetic feeling.

Notwithstanding the topicality of this debate, it can be questioned whether these viewpoints actually are to be considered new. So, it can be argued that current opinions concerning social impact in light of the digital encounter of the artistic creator and the aesthetic beholder bear great resemblance to opinions uttered about 'old' media's impact on this distinct relationship. How, then, should this resemblance be understood? Are contemporary reflections about the Internet too often inspired by old dreams? Should what is happening today be valued as a next evolutionary step rather than as an irreversible transition? By confronting both old and new ideas we try to shed light on these questions.

TIGHTENING THE BONDS BETWEEN ARTIST AND AUDIENCE

Some authors, as will be elaborated further on, argue that digital media, and more specifically the interactive Internet, allow for the audience to become a legitimate meaning creator and, thus, to act on the same level as the artist. In this context, it is believed that digital media allow for the artist to (re)-connect with ordinary life. Several arguments focusing on, respectively, the artist, the audience, the work of art and the technology found this belief.

It is interesting to descry a connection between this present-day viewpoint and Leo N. Tolstoy's much older ideas about a future of art whereof every member of society can be a part and in which every consumer can become a producer. Even as early as the end of the 19th century Tolstoy ([1896] 1960, pp. 171-172) already gave an indication of the possible positive influence of communication media on the gap between – what he called – real, universal and uniting art, on the one hand, and art that is aimed at pleasing a select group of people, on the other hand. The rise of means of communication such as telegraphs, telephones and the press as well as the enlarged

presence of publications, pictures, concerts and theatres for the people were all, according to Tolstoy, still very far from accomplishing what should be done. Yet, he saw in them the germ of the direction in which 'good' art instinctively presses forward to regain the path natural to it, i.e. a unification of all men in their highest feelings. In this context, at the end of his book '*What is art?*' Tolstoy ([1896] 1960, pp. 174-176) reflected upon the future of art. He held an optimistic attitude in that he believed artistic activity would be accessible to all. Throughout this book, phrases like 'all the artists of genius now hidden among the masses will become producers of art' ([1896]Tolstoy 1960, p. 175) expressed this firm conviction. Following Tolstoy, the art of the future would be produced by anyone in society who felt the need to do so.

Almost a hundred years later, this belief of everybody being a potential creative collaborator re-appeared. According to Howard Rheingold (1992, pp. 113-128), computer artist Myron Krueger – labelled by Rheingold as one of the founding fathers of 'cyberspace technology' – considered his audience to be an 'artistic collaborator'. However, Krueger did continue to situate the artist as 'facilitator' on a 'meta' level. A similar idea can be found in an essay of Amy Bruckman's (1995) in which she referred to the artist's changing role in the networked society. In essence, it was argued that the online world implied a new type of artist. More specific, Bruckman referred to the artist as a person who facilitates and inspires others: 'the artist as catalyst' or 'the artistic instigator'.

Contemporary authors as well join the idea of artists making use – at present and in the past – of technology to attain the avant-garde goal of communicating with a wider audience and, thus, to look for a new consciousness in art (Aristarkhova 2007, p. 317). Moreover, it is argued that manifestations of social and mobile computing, such as *Facebook* and *YouTube*, might realise the avant-garde goal of abolishing the distinction between art (aesthetics) and everyday life (praxis): 'Social computing is art as life practice, or perhaps (what amounts to the same thing) it is the parody of art as life practice.' (Bolter 2007, p. 117)

Secondly, current thinkers focus on the fact that the audience, as well, is eager to engage within the collaborative construction of art. It is argued that today, more than ever before, the audience wants to experience art in an interactive way. This means, firstly, that the 'spectator' focuses principally on what he or she wants to see and, secondly, that this spectator does no longer settle for merely viewing the work of art. Rather, the spectator wants to engage in a more active way (Oddey and White 2009, pp. 8-9). Some authors highlight that users co-creating media products for artistic goals is not a new development. On the contrary, it is argued that the idea of radical, community and creative use of media technology is a typical characteristic of human nature (Harrison & Barthel 2009, p. 174).

A third argument that underpins the idea of the beholder being a symbolic content creator can be found in reflections about the work of art itself. It is mentioned that in the context of contemporary art both the relation between art, social reality and the artist as a person have changed (Kraemer 2007, p. 197). Therefore, the artist's opinion needs to be equated with the visitors' statements of the work of art in order to attain an all-embracing interpretation of the artwork (Kraemer 2007, p. 201). This implies taking into account the behaviour of the recipient as a co-author of the artist (Kraemer 2007, p. 214). Also, new media are considered as a way for the artist to engage with offline as well as online communities, and hence, to maintain a connection with the social world. In other words, it is argued that the focus of artworks online seems to be more about the social use of technology rather than about the technology itself (Cook 2007, p. 114), 'joining art and life through an activation of or intervention into the social fabric' (Cook 2007, p. 118).

Finally, a fourth technological argument is used to underpin this optimistic view – some even call it a utopian view (Gere 2006, p. 120) – about the impact of technology on the relationship between the artist and the beholder. It is argued that the distinct characteristics of the technology itself stimulate the emergence of a new type of creation. This, however, is not exclusively related to digital technologies and, more specific, to the Internet. On the contrary, this viewpoint is very like the one Walter Benjamin expressed in the 1930s when he reflected upon the alienation between the context of art production and the context of art reception and the way media technology can impact this. According to Benjamin, the separation of the production and the reception context could have an added value for the beholder. This idea was raised in Benjamin's essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' that appeared in 1935. In this essay Benjamin ([1935] 1985, pp. 20-35) stated that the mechanical reproduction of art (which no longer was a case of unicity and authenticity, yet of mechanically produced and reproduced cultural objects) had resulted in a modification of both the nature and the function of the work of art. However, although he did not deny that the aesthetic experience had changed, Benjamin did not say that the experience of art had become poorer. Experiencing art no longer was to be understood as an individual, ritual and contemplative act. Instead, the perception of mechanically reproduced art, such as in the case of film, equalled a collective, deeper and more critical experience that allowed the beholder to better understand the world in which he lived. Moreover, Benjamin pointed to the fact that the mechanical reproduction of art led up to a situation wherein the exchange of the positions of cultural producer and consumer became easier. He argued that this specific way of creating cultural objects allowed the beholder to become a critical expert and a producer, since the opportunity to take part in these art forms was greater than before.

Benjamin did not hold an isolated stance in reflecting in a more positive way about the impact of technological developments on society. Other contemporaries as well perceived the advent of media and technology as an opportunity to rebuild a 'living culture' (Finkelstein 1947, p. 250). Mass production and distribution make it possible for art to be in the possession of everyone, it was said. Moreover, this 'encourages the audience to be not passive spectators, but active critics and commentators, taking part in the production of the work of art, trying a hand even at creation' (Finkelstein 1947, p. 250). Hence, it was believed that mechanical creation and reproduction of art could restore the close relation between the artist and his audience that once existed in the early folk cultures. Since art is communication it involves not only the creator, but also an audience and a language familiar to both. This language is a product of society because societal changes, for instance the development of mass media, compel the artist to reinvent artistic structures as well as the way he relates to his audience. Also, it was argued that continuously fruitful relationships allow the artist himself to grow, thus inspiring other artists and new paths for art (Finkelstein 1947, pp. 9-13, 64-66, 102-103).

These ideas re-emerged in the 1970s when John McHale (1971, pp. 335-339) referred to the impact of (mass) media, such as the copying machine, cameras and tape recorders, on the public's' participation in the creation of cultural forms. In his view, art became a communicated experience in which personalised information exchange between people takes place:

> *The promise within the newer media is of greater penetration and interaction of life-art-culture rather than the forms-objects-images that preserved and isolated cultural life. (McHale 1971, p. 339)*

Decades later, several scholars elaborated on these ideas. Media sociologist John B. Thompson (1995) believed that the separation of contexts determines the communicative and social relations in modern society, which is pre-eminently mediatised. Before the introduction of media technologies, both contexts inevitably had to coincide for people to be able to interact or encounter. With the advent of media technologies, the context of production

and the context of reception did no longer necessarily have to be part of the same framework of time and space, since processes of communication and symbolic exchange could take place in a virtual environment. In the age of mass media this type of symbolic exchange is characterised by asymmetry. The mass media (institutions, industries as well as media professionals) produce and distribute symbolic content. The audience mainly acts as a receiver and contributes little in this process. Yet in spite of this asymmetric relationship, Thompson did not believe that this inevitably put the audience in a powerless position. Since the producer of meaning was no longer present during the reception process, the public was free to handle the symbolic content in line or not with the way media professionals and media institutions intended. Thompson wrote down these ideas in 1995, just before the Internet's major breakthrough. As a result, he dealt only to a limited degree with the emerging new information and communication technologies. However, if mass communication processes can transcend one-way communication, it might be interesting to reflect on the possible implications for both creators and receivers of cultural contents. How should these new forms of simultaneous, interactive and collective communication be understood on a social level and how do they influence the gap between the professionals (artists) and the amateurs (art audience)? Do dissimilarity and asymmetry still apply to this relationship? And how can and will this type of communication influence the cultural system in the long term?

Simon Lindgren, for one, reflects about these questions. In this context, he makes a connection between Walter Benjamin's writings on mechanical media and his own reflections on Web2.0. Lindgren applies the analytical concept of Benjamin's 'flâneur' to the current web surfer in order to understand the transition towards an interactive Internet environment. This transition, Lindgren states, should not be understood as a revolution. Rather, we witness a continuation and intensification of an already existing move from simple media consumption towards increased participation and interaction. In order to underline this stance, Lindgren argues that Benjamin's interpretation of the modern flâneur is pursued in the idea of the post-modern web user. Like the flâneur, the web user intends to collect raw materials for the production of culture and identity. Both have 'a desire to take control of the "alienating space" by "aestheticising" and "colonising" it' (Lindgren 2007, web). Hence, Lindgren argues for a continuation of Benjamin's observations of the modern world to understand post-modern virtual and interactive developments.

KEEPING ONE'S DISTANCE

However, given this belief in the Internet's potential to artistically authorise both the artist and the audience, some authors hold a more moderate standpoint. The so-called promise of new media, of fusing art and life and of gaining access to worldwide audiences is considered with more caution since the possibility of enhanced user interaction also challenges the traditional role of the artist. It is argued that, in light of these digital developments, contemporary artists are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, these developments open up new artistic opportunities for the artist. On the other hand, the artist places himself outside his traditional role vis-à-vis the viewer, by allowing the audience to gain power as well as access to authoring and shaping the outcome of the work of art (Lovejoy 2004, pp. 8-9, 148-149, 167-168). Also, the interactive Internet's impact on the traditional role of the public can be questioned. In this context, it is interesting to refer to Nick Couldry's research on the power of the media world (2000). Couldry mentions that the media audience is not always prepared to undermine existing authority. Achieving access to the creative process might end in a demystification of the symbolic experience. Thus, it can be doubted whether the audience really wants to gain authority. Perhaps the beholder is more impassioned when acting as a recipient.

This brings up a more critical view on digital media and its impact on artistic experience which fits in with John Dewey's ([1934], 1958, pp. 46-57) criticism, already expressed in 1934. In Dewey's analysis of the modern world, themes like the loss of a common sense and of meaningful experience are at the forefront. According to Dewey, these processes were the outcome of the mechanisation of industry. In the mechanised modern world, he observed a chasm between action (artistic work) and perception of art. Dewey regretted this societal development, for this resulted in a type of passive reception, reception as a way of mere 'undergoing' instead of an active perception of the artistic 'doing'. The main reason for the gap that originated between these two types of action was, according to Dewey ([1934], 1958, pp. 3-19), the fact that art lost its social character, that it no longer served a social purpose and that it became detached from everyday life. This separation diverted attention from what the producer and the beholder had in common, that is, living in a society in which particular values were shared.

This rather negative view on technology's impact on the social relationship between the artist and the beholder recurs throughout time. For example, Adolfo Vasquez' reflections that were published in the 1970s echoed Dewey's. In his work *Art and Society, Essays in Marxist Aesthetics* (Vasquez 1973), Vasquez departed from a social definition of art, conceiving the artist as a social actor, the work of art as the connecting link between the artist and other members of society and, lastly, the artistic creation as a social force which affects other people. According to Vasquez, the artistic creation could be regarded as an original means of communication between the artist and other members of society (Vasquez 1973, pp. 112-113). However, Vasquez emphasised that bourgeois society had instigated a modern type of artist who tried to assure his creative freedom by disentangling himself from a direct and personal relationship with the client. Therefore, artists started to create work for potential, abstract and invisible consumers. As a result, the concrete and personal ties between the artist and his audience were broken. According to Vasquez, this chasm increased during the Industrial Revolution under which society came to be ruled by the laws of capitalist material market production. This forced the artist into an objective relationship with the consumer. Taking into account this evolution, Vasquez stressed the need to re-establish the abandoned communication 'by rebuilding the bridges between the artist and the people' (Vasquez 1973, pp. 118-119). In line with Dewey's ideas, he argued that this search for reconnecting the artist and the audience was a mutual task. The beholder, as well, should be actively involved for communication to be restored (Vasquez 1973, p. 225).

From a critical perspective, Jean-François Lyotard's essay (1988, pp. 119-130), which he wrote for the 'Art et Communication' colloquium that took place at the Sorbonne in October 1985, also elaborates on this theme. Lyotard diagnosed a detrimental impact of new technologies on art, and more specific, on artistic reception, which is grounded in everyday sentiments. Lyotard questioned how a 'communicabilité universelle' – which he defined as a community where everyone, being in a similar situation in front of a work of art, at least judges the work in an equal manner – can persist when art becomes determined in a conceptual way (Lyotard 1988, p. 121). According to Lyotard, the aesthetical sentiment necessitates presentation, that is, the sense that something is somewhere immediately, rather than representational. However, due to new technologies and industrial reproduction, being here-and-now is no longer an issue at stake in the case of representation. As a result, this threatens the emergence of aesthetic pleasure since these new technologies hinder free reflexive judgements about art (Lyotard 1988 p. 123). Lyotard talked about our loss of destiny and even of the end of art as a result of this conceptualised use of technology that led toward a situation wherein perception was all that remained when the sensible became mediated by reason. This prompted Lyotard to reflect about art and technology in a more critical way. Technologies, such as computers, presuppose an active, and even an interactive attitude from the art's audience. As a result, *passibilité* (not passivity), which he understood as encountering an aesthetic feeling

that puts the beholder out of countenance, as pleasure and as a way to take part in a larger community, is being replaced by conceptual practices of communication (Lyotard 1988, p. 128). Lyotard regretted the loss of mere contemplation, of reflection and of being part of a community in exchange for personal, yet reproductive activity as a result of the emergence of new technologies in art reception.

SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF A CULTURAL ENCOUNTER ON THE INTERNET

Notwithstanding the various theoretical reflections on the possible impact of the Internet on the relationship between the context of art production and the context of art consumption, this has not been the topic of much empirical research so far. Rather it is in the context of popular culture, media and creative industry that the participative opportunities offered by the Internet and, hence, the prevailing relationship between the content producer and the content consumer has been examined more extensively. We believe that these media cultural theoretical viewpoints – although they pass by the specificities of the artistic field – allow us to gain insight into the social and aesthetical impact of the interactive Internet by focusing on the power relations between the producer and the consumer.

The arguments put forward by these media theoreticians can be situated on a scale where on one end a thorough belief in the interactive Internet's potential to change the social relation between professionals and amateurs is shown. On the other end, a lot of criticism is voiced on this supposed potential. In this context, the structural determination of communicative processes and social relations is stressed from a macro-sociological point of view. In-between these extremes we find more moderate stands.

As is mentioned, some scholars hold a strong belief in the possibilities of the interactive Internet. They argue that the consumer can obtain more power and impact vis-à-vis the producer with reference to access, interaction and participation. It is said that a change in the relationship between the producer and the consumer takes place since the interactive Internet allows the consumer to become a legitimate source of content and, thus, to act on the same level as the traditional producer. In this context, the producer is no longer perceived as the only authority that can influence the symbolic exchange of meanings.

This belief in the consumer as co-authority is substantiated by means of several arguments. In the first place, it is argued that modern society has given rise to a new type of consumer. This new consumer is said to be active, nomadic and socially networked. In other words, this consumer is less loyal to one specific network or medium: 'If old consumers were seen as compliant, then new consumers are resistant, taking media into their own hands' (Jenkins 2004, p. 37-38). The underlying idea is that of an undermining of existing hierarchies. This results in a brand new media ecology wherein professionals and amateurs cooperate and be producer and consumer by turns (Deuze 2007, pp. 256-257). Secondly, the possibility to participate is understood as the user's explicit wish to participate. More specific, this idea refers to the desire to manipulate content in relation to personal opinions even when choice, engagement or action are not encouraged as such. Although this wish to resist on a cultural level is not new, it is highlighted that digital and interactive technologies facilitate this the best.

> *Such a perspective on interactivity is to see the audience as active and aware participants in the media process, and not as the cultural dupes of marketing techniques or authorial intent. (Cover 2006, p. 144)*

Henry Jenkins is a known protagonist of the idea of an active cultural consumer. Jenkins states that the interactive Internet stimulates the presence of two forces that sometimes enhance one another and sometimes conflict. He believes in a reconfiguration of power in which innovation will originate from so-called 'grassroots' media, i.e. the user, and consolidation will happen within 'mainstream' media. In other words, the interactive Internet allows access to the production context to create and distribute content as well as interaction between users and between users and traditional producers to co-create cultural content (Jenkins 2004, pp. 35-38).

A third argument that grounds the idea of the consumer as a co-authority can be found in the interactive Internet's possibility to transcend the type of presence that is related to one specific location. By being able to easily 'travel' to different locations in a virtual world, the user gains power, for it becomes a lot harder to isolate or control his opinion. Here, the 'empowerment' of the user is linked to the hybrid character of the interactive Internet. This hybrid character is expressed in the complex interdependence between established institutions and alternative voices in the process of co-creating content. The place of content creation can no longer be defined in an exact manner. Network locations initiated by institutions (for example the 'community' section on the website of a music hall or arts centre) as well as alternative network locations (for instance the profile page of a music fan on *MySpace*) can be the source of participative and commonly created content (Howard 2008, pp. 490-509).

However, this obtainment of authority by the consumer seems to result in a tension in which the presence of more than one authority distresses the traditional producer. As a result, the latter assumes an ambiguous attitude. Michelle Henning (2006, pp. 149-154) comes to the conclusion that this ambiguous relationship between the producer and the consumer exists within the museal field. On the one hand, museums open up for the audience, Henning states. Here, ICT are considered as a possibility to refocus on curiosity, contact, and a multitude of voices, democratisation, access and openness concerning meaning making, interaction and dialogue. On the other hand, she argues that museums intend to regain control over their audience. In this view, new media are used as a marketing tool. The main intention is to offer a large audience a similar experience via an interpretative framework. According to Henning (2006, pp. 138-139), museums try to compensate present modern, constructed and individualised capitalist society. Yet, at the same time, museums attempt to join this type of society.

The desire to participate, then, could also be comprehended in a completely different way, that is in the way of an imposed participation. In this view, the interactive Internet is seen as a medium of negative freedom that benefits the one who has the power to make the consumer believe that he is in charge, although actually he is not. This stance is founded in several critical arguments that result from a scepticism vis-à-vis the idea that the interactive Internet allows the user to act freely and, consequently, to take up a position of power.

It can be argued that change takes place in the sense that users do indeed produce 'content', although this is still being steered. In other words, the traditional producer is still in control. In this context, interactivity is regarded as a 'disciplining technology' (Jarrett 2008, web) by which commercial producers pretend to turn down their authority, for instance by allowing consumers to act freely in an 'online community'. Thus, in the context of a neoliberal political economy the ultimate control stays in the hands of the producer and the consumer acts the way the producer wants him to.

Because this is a process of positive seduction rather than of negative coercion, the user does not experience this exercise of the producer's power as coercion. However, according to these scholars, coercion does take place. Therefore, they do not perceive the interactive Internet as a means to give authority in the hands of the

user. Instead, it is understood as a strategy to strengthen existing power relations and to link the user more closely to the producer (Jarrett 2008). It is considered a myth that end-users will obtain more control over the outcome of their immaterial labour and the way this is monetised. Moreover, these critical thinkers do not believe that professional organisations will be prepared to give up this type of control (van Dijck 2009).

CONCLUSION

According to Richard Appignanesi (2007), it is impossible to predict the future of art in light of new media technologies. Because art is determined by the way it is received within a distinct culture, its future is said to be volatile. Hence, Appignanesi intends to warn for the 'tendentious allure of progressive art history' and, as a result, criticises the idea of reflecting about art in the context of new media technologies (Appignanesi 2007, p. 1164).

Given the focus of this article on the social relations that frame art, we nevertheless believe that it is possible and valuable to delineate several strands of thought concerning Internet's impact on art and, more specific, on the relation between the artist and the audience. This, then, could stimulate a better understanding of the encounter of old (art) and new (the interactive Internet) societal developments and thus, of living in a late modern culture.

Proceeding from our review of various viewpoints, drawn from the field of arts, humanities and social sciences, it can be argued that the interactive Internet instigates a different kind of aesthetic experience. However, following the consulted insights, this change can be understood in different and contrasting ways. It is interesting to find that these reflections about the impact of new media on the relation between the artist and the audience seem to have a long history. Both the critical, pessimistic and the more hopeful belief in the risks and opportunities of the interactive Internet for art, artists' role in society and artistic reception, have their roots in 19th century and 20th century thought.

How then should this resemblance between reflections on the impact of new media on the relationship between the artist and the beholder, and reflections on the impact of old media on this relationship be understood?

It could be argued that regardless of societal and media technological developments, art acts in an independent, though not isolated way (Luhmann 2000, pp. 49-51). As a result, instead of speaking of a revolution, it appears that media's impact on art as well as artists' relationship with their audience needs to be understood as an evolution. It could be argued that new media question the concept of aesthetic authority because interactive possibilities could imply that the position from which to decide about art and about the experience of art is no longer exclusively the one of the artist, as the consumer is allowed to participate in this conversation. Nevertheless, it should be asked what 'participating in this conversation' means. Does it mean that participation implies co-creation and co-assessing the value of art works or does it mean that participation stays limited to merely experiencing the work of art? Therefore – when reflecting about the possible participative opportunities of the Internet – it needs to be questioned whether both the artist and the beholder actually desire this type of demystification of the traditional artistic and aesthetic roles. Keeping in mind the recurring theoretical debates, reflections and predictions, the challenge is to confront these with an empirical examination of reality. Empirical research that focuses on opinions and experiences of both the artist and the audience thus could be an important eye-opener, as well as a relevant contribution to understanding the social meaning of art on the Internet today.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Joke Beyl is a teaching assistant at the Media Studies Department of the Free University of Brussels. She is preparing a PhD on the social relationship between artists and their audience – related to the concept of artistic authority – in an interactive Internet environment. Earlier, she has been working as a researcher on several projects of the IBBT-SMIT research centre. Her main research interest includes the social meaning of new media for the production, mediation and consumption of art and culture.

Joke Bauwens holds a PhD in Media & Communication Studies. She is a media sociologist, lecturing at the Media Studies Department of the Free University of Brussels. She is a member of the research centre IBBT-SMIT and CEMESO. Her research interests and expertise are situated in the field of media practices of young people, social and cultural practices in digital and virtual environments, and transitions in the field of broadcasting. She is Belgian team member of the EU-funded project EU Kids Online.

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