

Sylvain Menétrey
Engestrasse 1
3012 Bern
sylvain.menetrey@gmail.com
+41 76 335 95 00

Clouds in the Cave

The Exhibition as Image in the Digital Age

Executive Master in Art Market Studies. University of Zurich
Diploma Thesis

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Sebastian Egenhofer,
Kunsthistorisches Institut, Zurich

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I hereby certify that this diploma thesis has been composed by myself, and describes my own work, unless otherwise acknowledged in the text. All references and verbatim extracts have been quoted, and all sources of information have been specifically acknowledged. This diploma thesis has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree.

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I. Introduction

This thesis derives from and is an extension of the collective exhibition *Clouds in the Cave* that I curated at the Kunsthalle Fri Art in Fribourg¹. The show focussed on some contemporary art practices from eight young Swiss and international artists who endorse the fluidity of the artwork, and its possibility to be open at both ends in the digital age. In other words, that a work can issue from a production, an appropriation, or a combination of both and that through its digital reproduction it can be transformed and updated as easily as a website.

The exhibited works, just as the exhibition as a whole, oscillate between a series of polarities, which can be non-exhaustively listed as such: image/object, materiality/immateriality, mediation/experience, 2D/3D or publicity/art. The show exists in two distinct versions: in the physical and in the digital space. The latter consisting of exhibition views, some of which were digitally modified by participating artist Phillip Zach, thus creating new works exclusively visible in the online version of the exhibition.

Clouds in the Cave questions the acuteness and specificity of an exhibition in a physical space while online exhibitions, online galleries or online auctions are spreading all over the internet. It asks somewhat provocatively, whether an art venue should not be turned into a photography studio where exhibitions would be staged only to get photographed and then distributed online. The legitimacy of a museum needs to be questioned in the digital age. Is it not indeed a residue of the industrial age, which anachronistically fetishizes objects? Would the online exhibition of an entire collection not be more efficient to achieve the educational mission of a museum than the accumulation of works, which most of the time remain in storage hidden to the public? Why is the direct experience of a work valued? Does digitalisation imply a trivialisation of the art object that reduces it to advertisement?

¹ *Clouds in the Cave*, an exhibition with Florian Auer, Neïl Beloufa, Alan Bogana & Marta Riniker-Radich, Carmen Gheorghe, Aurélien Mole & Syndicat, Artie Vierkant, Phillip Zach, 26.02-03.05.2015, Fri Art, Fribourg.

After a decade of immaterial bytes of digital art exclusively visible inside the web system at the end of the 1990s, we now witness a strong re-materialisation of digital content shown as objects in galleries and art institutions. Can this movement be seen as a return to the commodity form and as the triumph of the market? Must we endorse Lucy Lippard's word, who when retrospectively contemplating the failure of Conceptual art, which constituted the previous wave of dematerialisation, said that "art and artists in a capitalist society remain luxuries"?² This thesis will be an attempt to clarify whether these forms of fluid artworks in-between objects and images, art and documentation, go beyond the critique of the commodity and the critique of the society of spectacle.

It will be demonstrated that if the appetite of the market for new forms of art is quite obvious in this case there are also other logics inherent to the digital format, which are at play in this resettlement of the digital art inside the white cube. The understanding of two confluent phenomena will be necessary to grasp the current materialisation of digital art. Firstly, the Internet formerly seen as an emancipatory sphere has become more and more invaded by capitalistic conglomerates to the point that it is now not so much different than reality. As art critic Gene McHugh states: "What we mean when we say *Internet* became not a thing in the world to escape into but rather *the world we sought to escape from*... sigh... It became the place where business was conducted, where bills were paid. It became the place where people tracked you down."³ Concurrently, our experience of the reality is now shaped by computers, which is epitomized by the moniker "ubicom" (ubiquitous computer). The clear line of demarcation between the online and the offline worlds, or real and virtual, has collapsed. Capable of seamlessly hybridising and reformatting, images have become the main currency of exchange in this fluid environment. From Plato's *Allegory of the Cavern* to Guy Debord's *Society of Spectacle*, image and reality have been opposed, the former being described as an illusion that betrays our senses. But against this interpretation is the claim that images help us to understand our world. This thesis is an attempt to understand the current status and value of

² Lippard 1973, XXI.

³ McHugh 2011, p. 5

image. To do so the relationship between art and documentation during three historical moments, which were marked by major technological shifts in the fields of reproduction and distribution of art, will be considered. The first stage started with the invention of photography in the 19th century, followed by the development of mass media in the Post-war era and, in the 1990s, the advent of digital photography and the Internet. Each of these technical revolutions challenged the practice of art. Photography accelerated the movement towards the autonomy of art, liberating the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture from the necessity to represent reality. Alongside the printing technique, photography also made it possible to duplicate and to spread works of art to a wider audience, which were suddenly no longer linked to a specific site of display but could penetrate everywhere. Because of its ubiquitous status, the artwork lost its aura, which depended on the cult or ritual value that it was attributed. Marcel Duchamp radically expressed the trivial condition of the work of art in the industrial age through the invention of the ready-made, a serial object of apparently no transcendence that proclaimed the death of originality. Only the museum can restore the lost aura by exhibiting the object, which gains then an exhibition value, as enunciated by Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Work of Art at the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936).

The electric media exasperated this mode of distribution of art to the point of “global instantaneity” stressed by Marshall McLuhan⁴. Though reluctant towards photography that they only used in a “de-skilled” way, Conceptual artists nevertheless fully embraced the new media of their time and the possibility that they offered in spreading ideas. Art started then to equate communication. A key figure and untiring promoter of the dematerialisation of art, the art dealer and curator Seth Siegelaub inverted the traditional hierarchical order of art by publishing catalogues, ephemera and advertisements that constituted the work in itself and not a piece of documentation. It will be analysed how his activities, along with those of the artists he promoted and exhibited, pioneered the new conquests of the late capitalism such as the commodity-sign value and

⁴ McLuhan 2002

immaterial economy by decoupling art from its exchange value and productive labour.

It will be scrutinized in the following pages how Conceptual art failed to achieve its goals and how this failure led the critical project of art into a dead-end. Nowadays contemporary artists are again deploying their activities inside the media sphere. Current art relates to postproduction, circulation and acceleration. While this clear participatory strategy could end in the same unwanted complicity as Conceptual art, we can also imagine that they can expose and circumvent the growing alienating vacuity of the network. The artists who participated in *Clouds in the Cave*, while fully informed of the becoming-image of their work, added visual traps and illusions to their works. In doing so they brought to light the advertisement mechanisms inherent to art documentation in the digital age and, as it will be shown, short-circuit the flawless circulation of images.

II. The Mechanical Age

1. History of the mechanical reproduction of works of art

Early on, photography was acknowledged as a technique that enabled much quicker and more faithful reproduction of art than previous existing reproduction techniques, such as engraving. In her *Histoire mondiale de la photographie*, Naomi Rosenblum pinpoints the mid-19th century for the first diffusions of photograph prints of artworks. “In the middle of the 19th century, professional photographers became aware that precise reproduction of works of art could be culturally and commercially favourable, spreading prints representing masterworks of western art, all over Europe. No doubt that starting from this moment photography has been the main supplier of artistic images in the world: the possibilities for the public to access the human artistic legacy has been thus revolutionized.”⁵

The industrialisation of art reproduction opened up a large intellectual debate. The champions of photographic reproduction argued its educational role in the enlightenment of the masses, while opposite voices lamented on the trivialisation of the masterwork under these new conditions. Among the interesting experiences involving photography, the exhibition organised in 1929 by Alexander Dorner, then director of the Hannover Provincial Museum, should be cited. Dorner showed original graphic works and their photographic reproduction side by side. He publicly challenged the connoisseurs, asking them to distinguish hand-made from machine-made works. The exhibition generated an important polemic opposing the progressive director and some conservative critics. The art historian Kurt Karl Eberlein insisted that “the mysterious magical, biological *aura* of a work of art cannot be forged” and that

⁵ « Se rendant compte qu'une reproduction précise des œuvres d'art pourrait être fort avantageuse culturellement et commercialement, un certain nombre de photographes professionnels se mirent, à partir du milieu du XIX^{ème} siècle, à diffuser dans toute l'Europe des tirages représentant les chefs-d'œuvre de l'art occidental. Il est indubitable que, depuis ce moment, la photographie a été la pourvoyeuse d'images artistiques la plus importante du monde : elle a révolutionné les possibilités pour le public d'accéder à l'héritage artistique de l'humanité. », Naomi Rosenblum, *Une Histoire mondiale de la photographie*, Paris, Abbeville, 2000, p.239 (my translation).

“only a brutal utilitarianism can enslave art to its purposes, making it a means to an end and thereby reducing it to art for all.”⁶

On the contrary, other authors such as André Malraux welcomed photography as a means to gather works of art from every cultures of the world in his *Musée imaginaire*. With his *Atlas Mnemosyne*, created between 1921 and 1929, art historian Aby Warburg was one of the first scholars to use photographs of artworks as an analytical and creative tool. He juxtaposed images coming from different contexts in order to invent a comparative methodology involving several elements. Incidentally, the introduction of photography profoundly changed the mode of teaching art history, allowing the students to stay in the classroom and view slides of the studied objects instead of only working by memory. There is no room here to develop more theses examples, but what can be retained is that, on an epistemological level, photography clearly allowed new ways of considering artworks and of teaching.

The most influential analysis on the impact of mechanical reproduction remains Walter Benjamin’s milestone essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction*. Benjamin’s main idea is that mechanical reproduction destroys the aura of the artwork. He refers to art history to explain this particular notion. For him, the aura of an artwork derives from its religious purpose. In pre-modern societies a work of art was used for rituals, thus acquiring some magical properties in the viewer’s mind. This religious remnant evaporates with reproduction. With the onset of mechanical reproduction a work ceases to lay claim to originality, because: “The *hic and nunc* of the original constitutes what is called authenticity.”⁷ The demand for an original print becomes “absurd” under these conditions. If we may lament on this loss, Benjamin also suggests a possible gain for the spectator who can appropriate himself an artwork, which authority has been cleared. Benjamin praised the disruptive nature of photography as a way to liberate art from its bourgeois and fetishist status. Starting from the same idea of the destruction of the aura by the mechanical reproduction, however, Theodor Adorno negatively identified this

⁶ Eberlein 1989, p.148

⁷ Benjamin 2005.

movement with the commodification of art. Along with cinema or radio, photography is part of what the philosopher despised as the culture industry. “It has made the technology of the culture industry no more than the achievement of standardisation and mass production, sacrificing whatever involved a distinction between the logic of the work and that of the social system.”⁸ The dispute between Benjamin and Adorno has been carried on throughout the 20th and 21st centuries by other commentators and the consequences they foresaw have been for the most part realised. The digitalisation of culture constitutes the latest chapter of this debate. On one hand it opens a more democratic era with larger access to culture for the public but on the other hand it has resulted in a small number of huge multinationals, who are accumulating and privatizing the digital data and even market our personal data.

To come back more specifically to photography, a point that Benjamin’s account did not predict, is that photography would become itself an important sector of the art market where vintage and first prints are highly praised. In fact, Benjamin never speaks of photography as an aesthetic medium. His only concern is its influence over the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture. The format of this thesis does not fully develop the reception of photography as an artistic medium. Nevertheless it can be said that two major components delayed its recognition. Firstly, critics disqualified photography because they saw it as a mere mechanical recording of reality functioning with no creative impulse from the artist. Photography’s second lack of authority derives from its use in the advertisement system, which embeds it in the society of spectacle. These two arguments against photography will be further developed in this thesis.

2. Marcel Duchamp the para-photographer

Marcel Duchamp is a paradigmatic example of an artist strongly aware of the revolution that mechanical reproduction imposed on art. The *Nude Descending*

⁸ Adorno/Horckheimer 2005.

the Staircase (1912) was an attempt to infuse movement in painting the same way Edward Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey showed decomposed movements in photography. After he painted two versions of the painting, Duchamp made a third version in the form of a photographic facsimile coloured by hand in 1916 (*Nude Descending a Staircase No3*). This variation is emblematic of Duchamp's approach to creative reproduction. From the 1920s onwards he nearly stopped producing new works in order to reproduce his previous ones. The *Box in a Valise* (1936), his portable museum contained 69 replicas and facsimiles, made with photography but also with more crafty methods of reproduction such as stencil painting. In doing so, he blurred the frontier between the handwork and the industrial work as well as between the original and the reproduction.

Fountain (1917) is an earlier example that highlights Duchamp's concerns with photographic reproduction. Signed and sent by a certain R. Mutt, that now everybody knows to be Duchamp, for an exhibition held at the Grand Central Palace in New York by the Society of Independent Artists, this urinal caused a dispute among the members of the selection jury, some of them according to Beatrice Wood despised the object as "indecent". Eventually the urinal was rejected by the committee. Duchamp, who belonged to the board of directors, resigned from this position as a sign of protest. After its exclusion the urinal mysteriously disappeared. The only remaining trace of its existence is the photograph taken by Joseph Stieglitz and published in the satirical magazine *The Blind Man* in 1917. As remarked by Francis Naumann the image does not fit in Stieglitz's oeuvre⁹. The art historian develops the hypothesis that Duchamp was much involved in the fabrication of the picture¹⁰, which could be considered as a work of the artist in its own right. Therefore the picture of the ready-made could be considered as another avatar of the ready-made serial product.

A hollow object, *Fountain* symbolises the begetting and more generally the reproduction process. It is sexually meaningful and ambiguous. The urinal is the

⁹ Naumann 1999.

¹⁰ As he most likely was in the article of *The Blind Man* called "The Richard Mutt Case" which went along the picture, see de Duve, 1996.

place where the penis penetrates. The hollow form also suggests a female womb. This sexual ambiguity reappears in Duchamp's late work *Female Fig Leaf*, which is a cast of female genitalia. This work bears the proprieties of both genders. It is at the same time concave like a mould and male genitalia, as it is convex like a cast and female genitalia. Furthermore it is, as the title indicates, a sort of shell that perfectly covers up a woman's sex.

Translated into the field of art, the sexual symbolism of *Fountain* invites the viewer to consider the ready-made and its reproduction through the perspective of a mould and its cast. This causal strain is absurd only in appearance as there is indeed a close relationship between the casting process and the way a photograph is taken.

Charles Sanders Peirce made a typology of the different signs in his seminal text *Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs*.¹¹ The index, which is a direct imprint of an object on a surface, like for instance a footprint in the sand, differs from the icon, which resembles the referent without being physically attached to it. Paintings and carved sculptures belong to the icon type of signs, whereas cast sculpture and photography belong to the indexical signs. Indeed as implied by Rosalind Krauss there is an exchange of light between the source and the negative of the photograph, which makes the reality stick to the image¹². We believe that it is this continuity between the object and its reproduction that Duchamp wanted to highlight with the photograph of the ready-made.

By using the media to spread the work, Duchamp reduces the object to its publicity. The association of the image to an advertisement is enhanced by the fact that the object depicted is an industrial object. The urinal is advertised like any other consumption good in a magazine. Furthermore Stieglitz's image dramatizes the object with artistic plays of light and shadow and uses a painting of the show as a backdrop. The picture is then far from being a neutral documentation of the work but a clearly staged photograph. In this sense the picture is close to the advertisement aesthetic.

¹¹ Peirce 1978.

¹² Rosalind Krauss 1977.

The photograph works then at the same time as publicity for the work and the work itself. The triviality of the object is doubled, in the sense that it is an industrially produced object and the repository of urine. It would have been difficult to be cruder to celebrate the death of originality and of sculpture, which is so discarded that it is replaced by an image, both sharing the propriety to be mass-reproducible items.

III. The Electric Age

1. Seth Siegelaub and the inversion of primary and secondary information

The advertisement that art dealer and promoter of a group of conceptual artists Seth Siegelaub published in the November 1968 edition of *Artforum* was not a traditional commercial communication. This black and white box stated: "This ¼ page advertisement (4 ½" x 4 ¾"), appearing in the November issue of *Artforum* magazine on page 8, in the lower left corner, is one form of documentation for the November 1968 exhibition of Douglas Huebler. Seth Siegelaub, 1100 Madison Avenue, New York, NY, 10028"¹³. Written in the dry and factual self-reflexive style being the trademark of Douglas Huebler, the advertisement can be seen as a fragment of the show, especially because Huebler's work was precisely dealing with documentation during this period. Therefore whoever possessed the magazine also possessed an excerpt of the work. The work and its publicity became identical which caused Alexander Alberro to write: "In this type of cultural mutation (in which what was stigmatized as mass or commercial culture is now received in the precincts of fine art), the work, like advertising, becomes an object whose use value is located in its publicity and sign value."¹⁴ Thus what remained only implicit in the publication of Stieglitz's photograph becomes a clear celebration of the intertwinement of art and the mass media. The question that arises is whether this synthesis of art and documentation constituted a progressive move liberating the work of its commodity status or an adoption of the codes of marketing.

Benjamin Buchloh describes the project of Conceptual art as "[...] the most consequential assault on the status of the object: its visuality, its commodity status and its form of distribution."¹⁵ The undermining of these three characteristics of art were already at the core of Duchamp's own practice. There is indeed a strong connection between Duchamp's critic of what he called "retinian" art, i.e. painting and especially cubism and the project of

¹³ *Artforum*, November, 1968.

¹⁴ Alberro 2003, p.131

¹⁵ Buchloh 1990, p.107

“dematerialization” of art carried out in the 1960s which often took the form of a use of the infrastructure of the media. Yet the media context of the 1960s is very different to the one of the 1910s as the mechanical age is replaced by electric media such as television, electric telegraph and phone which have definitely changed the pace and scape of information exchange. Accordingly the art market has grown tremendously during this lapse of time. Minimal art approached the serial production of common goods. Pop artists were fascinated by the advertisement and celebrity culture. Conceptual art reacted against this commodification of art by getting rid of the object assimilated with the commodity. Lucy Lippard explained that the new art was a “product”¹⁶ of the political ferment of the time which saw the uprising of women and Afro-American minorities, the protest against the war in Vietnam, and other left-wing and revolutionary political movements. “However, it was usually the form rather than the content of Conceptual art that carried a political message. The frame was there to be broken out of. Anti-establishment fervor in the 1960s focused on the de-mythologisation and de-commodification of art, on the need for an independent (or “alternative”) art that could not be bought and sold by the greedy sector that owned everything, that was exploiting the world and promoting the Vietnam war.”¹⁷

Implicit in Duchamp’s work, the replacement of the object by secondary information as in the *Fountain* photograph – and also with the *Green Box*, which gathered all his preparatory notes for the production of the *Large Glass* and constitutes a verbal counterpart to the visual work – would become common in Conceptual art. *Information*, Kynaston McShine’s large survey exhibition of Conceptual art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970 is evidence of this shift of focus.

Seth Siegelaub’s activities are very telling of the concerns of Conceptual art. After a few traditional shows in a gallery space during the years 1964-1966 he started to organize more experimental exhibitions, some of them were rooted in

¹⁶ Lippard 2006, p.XII

¹⁷ Lippard 2006, p.XIV

an exhibition space, others not. For instance, the *Xerox Book* (1968) was an exhibition that existed only in the form of a book that comprised contributions of seven artists: Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris and Lawrence Weiner. Each were given twenty-five pages and asked to respond to the standard sheet format as well as to use a photocopier to produce their work. No essay introduced the artistic contributions, which were then published in the most literal way. To give an insight of the content: the twenty-five pages of Carl Andre's consist of a progressive composition of tinted squares, a new square being added randomly to the previous layout on each following page [e.g. (fig. 2)]. The work seems to suggest the process of numbering and turning the pages. Joseph Kosuth's work is a series of sentences such as "Xerox machine specifications" which reflexively list the components of the book [e.g. (fig. 3)]. Sol LeWitt's work clearly diverts from the objective of the book to show the actual work. The instruction material from one of his variable geometries he provided was in fact produced as a wall drawing elsewhere.

The choice of photocopy as a reproduction technique was driven by its novelty. As stressed by Siegelau in the press release of the project: "this is the first time that these artists have worked in this process"¹⁸. Another important factor was the accessibility of the medium. It allowed basically everybody to be a printer. This accessibility will be later praised by independent publishers for publications of fanzines. However, in 1968, the technique was still expensive. Eventually Siegelau chose offset to duplicate the book, which was then ironically only produced by xerography. In addition, its low resolution in accordance with the negation of the aesthetic component defended by the Conceptual artists was also a strong argument in favour of xerography. "My thought about Xeroxing - of course I have control over what the men did - was that I chose Xerox as opposed to offset or any other process because its such a bland, shitty reproduction, really just for the exchange of information. That's all a Xerox is about. I mean it's not even you know, defined. So Xerox just cuts down on the visual aspect of looking at the information."¹⁹

¹⁸ Alberro 2003.

¹⁹ Alberro/Norvell 2001, p.39

Through the organization of exhibitions in the form of books Siegelauub shifted the relationship between primary and secondary information. The artwork – the primary information – being an idea, it appeared in the usual carrier of secondary information, i.e. the catalogue, while in the physical space was to see the produced/performed idea. To paraphrase Lawrence Weiner’s statement of intent²⁰: the work needed not to be built according to the Conceptual doxa as it is seen as a mere tautology of the idea, which is paramount. “The exhibition consists of (the ideas communicated in) the catalogue; the physical presence (or the work) is supplementary to the catalogue.”²¹

This focus on the idea instead of the object had a tremendous influence on the notions of exchange and ownership of an artwork. An idea cannot be traded as an object. The private ownership of such works of art becomes a “passé condition”²² hyperbolically emphasized by the art dealer. Presented inside the infrastructure of mass media the work becomes everybody’s immediately, as already commented about the advertisement for 1968 Douglas Huebler’s show. The advertisement anyway publicized a commercial show and worked then also as a way to attract buyers. The same can be said about all the books and catalogues Siegelauub produced. It has become clear nowadays that many galleries publish artist’s books or monographs of artists with no commercial goal – unlike real publishers – except for the one of promoting their artists. The publishing of books is a common marketing expense for galleries. Books serve as sales catalogues or to enhance the prestige of an artist.

2. Immaterial economy and marketing strategies

Another economic shift that Seth Siegelauub initiated, though not successfully, is the sponsoring of art by private companies. It is telling that the *Xerox Book* bears the name of the very company, which marketed the photocopy

²⁰ Lawrence Weiner’s statement was published for the first time in Seth Siegelauub’s *January 5-31, 1969* exhibition-catalogue.

²¹ Alberro/Norvell 2001, p.40

²² *ibid.*, p.39

machines²³. As reported by Alexander Alberro the art dealer asked Xerox to fund the project. The negotiation with the company eventually failed. A few years before, Siegelau had already founded the public relations agency Image Inc. The agency advocated the sponsoring of artists by corporations. In the presentation brochure Siegelau listed the different advantages for a company to invest in art especially in terms of positive image in the public's eye.

It is another famous Conceptual exhibition that initiated art-based private marketing. Harald Szeeman's show *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969 was indeed sponsored by Philip Morris. The company's director, John Murphy said in his speech at the opening of the exhibition that the "new art" and the business shared a common interest for "innovation"²⁴. A strong connection between Conceptual art distribution techniques and business can indeed be drawn. By abstracting the notion of exchange value and detaching art from any productive power, Conceptual art achieved what the capitalist economy dreamed of through the use of marketing²⁵. For instance Nespresso one of the biggest marketing success stories, manages to sell coffee at a much higher rate than regular coffee. The product itself constitutes a tiny part of what the consumer actually buys. The most important part of his purchase is an image and a lifestyle skilfully developed and advertised by the brand. The value of a brand, its goodwill in economic terms, can be huge even if this worth is based on a totally immaterial and symbolic capital created by marketing. Through the organization of immaterial shows, the promotion of exhibitions with unconventional advert forms and the attempts to create partnership with big companies, Siegelau clearly displaced art to the field of communication and symbolic value.

²³ Even if in a later interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist he would say that he prefers that we call it the "Photocopy Book", *A Brief History of Curating*, Obrist 2011.

²⁴ Murphy 1999.

²⁵ Brulhart 2014.

3. Media euphoria, media disgust and media subversion in Conceptual art

Seth Siegelaub's activities are just one example of the use of the media by Conceptual artists. Three things mark the Post-war context in Western countries: the economic boom, the tremendous development of consumerism and the invasion of the television in every home. These economical and technological changes were accompanied by an explosion of publicity and images. Whereas Pop artists started to create an art about this overflow of media, Conceptual artists rather used the media as a container for art. Their conceptual practice was very much the product of Marshall McLuhan's theories about media. Very influential in the 1960s, his book *Understanding Media* published in 1964, describes the world as an interconnected "global village". There was a strong feeling that the mechanical age had reached its end. The development of electricity and automation accelerated the processes of production and diffusion to the point of global instantaneity. "Automation brings in real *mass production*, not in terms of size, but of an instant inclusive embrace."²⁶ Thanks to new media, time and distance were suddenly abolished and information was able to flow freely and instantaneously.

This was in 1963 when Ed Ruscha published *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*, which is considered the first "artist's book". This work for "the paperback era"²⁷ consisted of a series of photographs with amateur aesthetic from gasoline stations taken on the road between Oklahoma City and Los Angeles. The almost indifferent look, as if these anonymous images had no author, the choice of a vernacular topic and the mass-production technique with which it was produced were idiosyncratic elements that made this project a new kind of art object. It announced the cold and dispassionate aesthetic of Conceptual art and its interest for the mass media as a vehicle.

Similarly, in the December 1966 issue of *Arts Magazine*, Dan Graham published his work *Homes for America*, which took the form of a sociological article. He used photographs of housing projects alike and their different types

²⁶ McLuhan 2002, p.381.

²⁷ Phillpot 2014, p.47.

of ornamentation he took during a stay in suburban New Jersey. As any other regular press report *Homes for America* was completed by texts giving information such as the various kitsch names of the houses that ironically commented on the serial nature of the houses²⁸. Thus Dan Graham emphasized the language used by real estate agencies to give a unique flair to standardised products. Located in a magazine and using information as an art medium, the work was mirroring the technical apparatus of capitalism to sell consumption goods. “Anticipating the work's actual modes of distribution and reception within its very structure of production, *Homes for America* eliminated the difference between the artistic construct and its (photographic) reproduction, the difference between an exhibition of art objects and the photograph of its installation, the difference between the architectural space of the gallery and the space of the catalogue and the art magazine.”²⁹

Dan Graham's works for magazines resulted in his awareness and interest of the interconnection of press and art. “Through the actual experience of running a gallery, I learned that if a work of art wasn't written about and reproduced in a magazine, it would have difficulty attaining the status of art.”³⁰ In South America, Argentinian artists Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari and Roberto Jacoby came to the same conclusion. They recognized in their manifesto *A Media Art* (1966)³¹ the importance of the media in the creation of artistic events. According to them the main characteristic of the media is to “derealize” the art object. Their aim as artists was to “unchain” information provided by the media with the help of a twist. This one took the form of hoaxes. The artists sent to journalists fake press releases and reviews of exhibitions that did not exist. Roberto Jacoby's ambition was even to create the catalogue of an exhibition prior to its organisation. The imaginary secondary information contained in the catalogue would then be used as instructions for the creation of the physical exhibition. These subversive games with the media, that recall the Situationist's actions in

²⁸ However the magazine changed the layout proposed by Graham and replaced his pictures by a single reproduction of Walker Evans' *Wooden House* (1930), which accompanied Graham's text. From 1970 onward Graham presented the piece according to its original layout. Brouwer, 2001.

²⁹ Buchloh 1990, p.124.

³⁰ Graham 2001, p.140.

³¹ Costa, Escari, Jacoby 1999.

France, would be soon stopped by the political repression that occurred in the late 1960s in Argentina.

This overview showed the different strategies and positions of the Conceptual artists towards the media. Figures such as Seth Siegelaub or Ed Ruscha optimistically embraced them. They used the media in order to undermine the commodification of art and the authority of the auratic object, but also to promote a seemingly more democratic form of art. Going one step further, the interventions of Argentinian artists developed a criticism of the illusionistic nature of the media. These two positions – the affirmative and the critical – are in our opinion the two faces of the same medal which points to the place of art in an advanced capitalist society.

Guy Debord's *Society of spectacle* (1967) and Jean Baudrillard's writings on the consumer society, especially *System of Objects* (1968), updated the Marxist analysis of the commodity fetishism by supplementing in it the role of communication in order to describe the new information age. If in their writings the commodity remains the unit that defines the social relations, they assert that it has reached a more abstract form. What is consumed in the postmodern era is no longer strictly products, but signs. Under these conditions the use value loses its importance in favour of the sign value. We buy goods rather for the status that they bring than to fulfil our basic needs. Products do not exist as pure product such as bread, but as branded products or symbols of social status. Every purchase is a reassertion of our identity as subject-consumer. This is what Baudrillard calls "personalization". This personalization is sustained by the advertisement system, which has become the mediator between people and products. "We consume the product through the product itself, but we consume its meaning through advertising."³² Becoming dominant, the sign value tends to transform all commodities into images. In a reformulation of Marx's famous sentence on the accumulation of commodities in the capitalist system Debord posits: "In societies where modern conditions of production

³² Baudrillard 2003, p.197.

prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”³³

Two artists’ testimonies provide evidence that this dissolution of the reality in the spectacle was a major concern at the time. In response to the invitation of curator Kynaston McShine to send documentation about his work for the purpose of the catalogue of the exhibition *Information* held at the Museum of Modern Art New York in 1970, Daniel Buren sent a very banal picture of the Square Montholon in Paris accompanied by the following statement: “The only possible information about my work is to really see it. Because every picture is illusion/transformation/reduction. Any information on my work is just a deformation of it.”³⁴ Carl Andre, a well-known Marxist artist, shared the same position on documentation: “The photograph is a lie. I’m afraid we get a great deal of our exposure to art through magazines and through slides, and I think this is dreadful, this is anti-art because art is a direct experience with something in the world and photography is just a rumor, a kind of pornography of art.”³⁵ This emphasis on the importance of the direct experience makes a clear division between primary and secondary information and locates the critics of the sign-value and of the spectacle inside the art system.

Most art historians and critics agree that Conceptual art failed to fulfil its initial ambitions. As Lucy Lippard admits in the conclusion of her diary *Six Years*: “Three years later the major conceptualists are selling works for substantial sums here and in Europe. They are represented (and still more unexpected – showing in) the world’s most prestigious galleries. Clearly, whatever minor revolution in communication has been achieved by the process of dematerializing the object... art and artists in a capitalist society remain luxuries.”³⁶

It may be asserted that this failure is not entirely due to the capitalist system’s assimilation tendency but also because of the mimetic implementations of the

³³ Debord, p.15.

³⁴ McShine 1970, n.p.

³⁵ Sharp 1970, n.p.

³⁶ Lippard 1973, XXI.

then dominating economic, social and symbolic orders by Conceptual artists. Benjamin Buchloh speaks about an aesthetic of “administration” that proliferates in their work. Sol LeWitt prompted this analysis when he said that the artist is a “clerk cataloguing the results of his premise”³⁷. The withdrawal of the artist from the production side is the cause of this approximation to the service sector. In this sense the artist shares and reproduces the values of the middle-class, who has become the reigning apolitical class in the Post-war era in the United States. Instead of being labourers, the middle-class manages the labour forces. The same mimetic mechanism is at work in the use of media by Conceptual artists. Following Marshall McLuhan’s lesson that the medium is the message – but also Clement Greenberg’s idea of “medium specificity” – most of the Conceptual artists self-reflexively showed media in a neutral way, for what they were, as for instance Joseph Kosuth’s production for the *Xerox Book*. In an attempt to escape representation these tautological mechanisms produced coded signs referring only to themselves. Did this strategy operate as a critical counter-model inside the infrastructure of media? With their serious, dry, and clearly anti-aesthetic style the conceptual productions looked like counter-cultural products in the same way that video and its distinctive rough finish was conceived as a protest against the television. But as soon as a work enters the sphere of the mass media is it not stamped by the specificities of this infrastructure, which is defined by its distribution system more than by the quality of their content? In other terms did the puritan refusal of the pop culture aesthetics coupled with the use of its vehicles not produce a sort of branded identity? That is how Buchloh understands the failure of Conceptual art: “[...] the critical annihilation of cultural conventions itself immediately acquires the conditions of the spectacle, [...] the insistence on artistic anonymity and the demolition of authorship produces instant brand names and identifiable products, and [...] the campaign to critique conventions of visibility with textual interventions, billboard signs, anonymous hand-outs, and pamphlets inevitably ends by following the pre-established mechanisms of advertising and marketing campaigns.”³⁸ The one of a kind figure Seth Siegelaub, whose position oscillates between art dealer, impresario, activist, curator and entrepreneur

³⁷ LeWitt 1967, n.p.

³⁸ Buchloh 1990, p.140.

expresses all the ambiguities of Conceptual art and his relationship to media culture. His concerns with the dematerialisation of art led him to promote products perfectly adapted to the late capitalism of commodity-sign.

With their idea exposed in their *Media Art* manifesto to disrupt the media apparatus Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari and Roberto Jacoby shared a more politically committed position. They did not naively accept the media as a distribution system but emphasized their spectacular dimension. Their happenings, of which only one under the form of a fake press release sent to the press had occurred, took the form of a guerrilla or sabotage of the communication stream that pioneered future artistic interventions. In the 1970s, for instance, American artist Robert Heinecken would insert collages mostly made out of erotic images into popular magazines that he would place back on the shelves of newsstands in order to surprise the future reader.

4. Mail art: the first network of artists

Finally the strategy of Mail art, which constituted an alternative model of the use of the media, though a very limited one because of its private circulation, must be evoked. In the 1950s, Ray Johnson started the New York Correspondence School that was the first conscious network of Mail artists. Following Clive Philpot's definition we can say that Mail art was a form of art that utilised the postal service as a system of distribution but also that could take a form relating to postal product such as stamps³⁹. The essence of Mail art is extremely different from the media art of the 1960s as the communication remains private: this is a one-to-one exchange, while media art is based on the one-to-many unidirectional principle. This one-to-one exchange interestingly enough escapes the rules of capitalism. The notion of economy of gift studied by Marcel Mauss in the primitive societies applies here as reciprocity is expected. When she receives a postal gift from one of her contacts, the Mail artist is left with no choice but to send back her own gift otherwise she would be expelled from the

³⁹ Phillpot 1995.

network. The most interesting component of Mail art lies in its network. The interconnection of computers, thanks to the Internet, will allow the same market bypass strategy for art distribution to develop in the 1990s.

IV. The Digital Age

1. Internet art

During its early years in the 1940s, the computer was not a tool for artists but rather a machine to calculate and compute complex figures. *Software* (1970), an exhibition curated by Jack Burnham at the Jewish Museum in New York was the first experiment that linked scientific experiences resulting from the new information technologies (fax, teleprinter, computer, etc.) to Conceptual art language propositions using, among others, strategies of interactivity between the spectator and the works.

It was only in the 1980s, with the development of personal computers and software that allowed picture processing and the creation of 3D animations, that computers started to be used as creative engines by artists. 1994 is the year of the Internet breakthrough emblematised by the launch of the first version of the popular Netscape navigator. Artists such as Olia Lialina, Alexander Shulgin, Vuk Cosic or Jodi used the web to spread their work created with the help of computer software. From this time onward these new technologies have provided a new medium and new distribution channels for art.

In an effort to define the specificity of new media Lev Manovich explains that what makes them unique is that they are at the “convergence” of media and computers. “All existing media are translated into numerical data accessible for the computers. The result: graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces and text become computable, i.e. simply another set of computer data.”⁴⁰ The computer acts as a “media processor”. New media combines a high number of pre-existing other media. But what is fundamentally new is the possibility to every person connected with a computer to the web to contribute to the generation of content. A network model has thus replaced the traditional, vertical, one-to-many mass media system. This new model connects actors who are emitters, receivers, producers and consumers all at once.

⁴⁰ Manovich 2001, p.48.

The creation of web pages as art by certain digital artists was similar in some way to the production of artists' books. Indeed the principle is to use the media in order to present immaterial works of art directly. Viewers of these web pages experience these digital works first hand. Furthermore the Internet often relies on the notion of gratuity. Digital art was then even less of a commodity than an artist's book, which must be, however, purchased to be experienced, which has been collected and which has been hijacked from its initial democratic form to become expensive and scarce book-objects in the 1980s.

For art, the Internet provides at the same time a public and private experience as it is there, accessible simultaneously to everyone, but through the private environment of the screen. Internet art consists then in a very radical contention of the commodity form of art, but also redefines the notion of the public sphere, which has been encroached by private interests.

As was the case with Mail art, however, the fact that Internet art developed outside the traditional institutions of art originally caused its rejection and dismissal. Internet art was seen too much as focused on technology and therefore not serious enough. Marcel Duchamp experienced the exact opposite reaction with his *Rotoreliefs* that he failed to market outside the system of art, an experiment that he famously declared was an "error, one hundred percent" to the only friend who visited his booth at the Concours Lépine of inventions in Paris. Art is still dependent on its administration by the usual institutions, which are embedded in the capitalism system.

2. Web 2.0 – image explosion

The web 2.0 coupled with the arrival on the market of interconnected and wireless devices provoked a massive change in the relationship between art and new media. Since 2004 a proliferation of documentation, especially made out of image material, has been saturating the Internet. Most of the major participative platforms such as Facebook, Youtube, Tumblr, Instagram, etc. are image-based. The convergence of phone and camera within the architecture of

smartphones can basically transform everybody into a serial photographer. More than any other format images are being taken, compressed, shared, retouched, and transformed inside the Internet.

Exhibition shots are not the least to be affected by this phenomenon. Firstly, this is because institutions developed branches online. From the museum to the off-space every art venue owns a website, a blog or a Facebook account on which it publishes documentation of its exhibiting activities. Secondly, this is because artworks are one of the favourite photographic topics to the general public.⁴¹ As a result, nowadays, the Internet has become the main provider for art experience, be it direct or especially mediated.

It could be suggested that the failure of Conceptual art to offer an alternative model to the society of spectacle has been integrated and digested by the next generations of artists. Instead of obliterating the images like their predecessors the artists of the Picture generation started to deal critically with them in the 1980s. Most of them were committed in the exposure of the gender, racial and class stereotypes conveyed by the mass-media imagery that they appropriated. Appropriation and ready-mades are still dominant elements in the contemporary art landscape. But the attitude towards these practices has changed. Images have become so pervasive that it becomes illusory not only to refuse them but also to criticise them according to artist Seth Price. "But we have entered a new kind of nature, a nature composed of images. And there can be no criticism of nature; it is always taken just as it is."⁴² The critique of the society of spectacle seems indeed outmoded and ineffective in a world where everyone constantly exposes himself or herself and shapes his or her identity with the help of the advertisement techniques.

⁴¹ Recently the term art-selfie has been spread to describe the habit to photograph oneself in front of a masterwork in a museum.

⁴² Price 2006.

3. Photogenic art

The usual steps in the life of an artwork are the following: production, exhibition, documentation and maybe sale. While the work returns to storage or is moved to its new owner – who will probably put it in storage as well – its reproduction is published on the Internet where it lives a second existence as a low-resolution image. Then it starts to circulate inside the network and can be shared, reframed, retouched, edited, manipulated, appropriated by an artist who will use it to make a new work, or will be forgotten.

If language was the medium that subsumed the other versions of an idea in Conceptual art, the still or moving images have become the ideal vectors of information on art in the digital age. It is democratic, supposedly neutral – it adds no commentary – and it fits perfectly on our screens. We live in a world of ubiquitous images without being disturbed or frustrated by them. “We have gotten used to mediation to the point we no longer see any difference between primary and second hand experience.”⁴³ Seth Price goes even further in his essay *Dispersion* maintaining that we can actually develop a more “intimate” and “thoughtful”⁴⁴ relationship with an artwork through the screen. Indeed the HD views allow us to see the texture, the colours and material of a work, sometimes better than in an exhibition space. There is also the possibility to zoom in which, when alone in front of the screen, allows appropriation of a work of art that could otherwise only be viewed in a museum space; a direct experience that can be frustrating because of security instructions, scenography or visitors’ affluence. Artist Parker Ito sums up this current digital climate well: “Right now I’m very into Monet and I wanna go to Giverny and see his garden, but you never know if it is as good as on Google.”⁴⁵

An artist having in mind that the main mode of exhibition of his work will be on the screen will logically think about it as an image. That is what fashion

⁴³ Quaranta 2013, p. 209.

⁴⁴ Price 2002, p.12.

⁴⁵ Parker Ito in interview with Domenico Quaranta and Artie Vierkant, <http://artpulsemagazine.com/i-like-the-direct-experience-of-documentation-a-conversation-with-artie-vierkant-and-parker-ito>

designer Rei Kawakubo epitomized with the Comme des Garçons fall 2012 ready-to-wear “flat collection” [e.g. (fig. 4)] composed of seemingly two-dimensional pieces of clothes made to fit their display on screens. Fashion shows online reports and e-boutiques have drastically transformed the modes of reception and consumption of fashion. A quite absurd phenomenon for products supposed to be worn and to fit the measurement of a three-dimensional body. With this collection the Japanese fashion designer suggested that fashion is actually more consumed as publicity than as a product.

A work of art made to be consumed as a reproduction through a screen rather than watched in an exhibition space first has to trigger the desire to be photographed and posted on the Internet. This is no surprise that a lot of camera-ready works developed in the last years as for example Katja Novitskova’s *Approximation* [e.g. (fig. 11)] series of enlarged polished and colourful cut-out pictures of animals fixed on metal display. The choice of animals imply here that images, similarly to species, must adapt in order to survive in their environment⁴⁶.

Founded in 2008, the blog Contemporary Art Daily⁴⁷ is certainly a ground for fierce competition between images. CAD publishes everyday exhibition shots from a single exhibition that the editorial team selects among the amount of photographs transferred by the Kunsthalle and commercial galleries from all over the – mostly Western – world. “In the intervening years, Contemporary Art Daily has effectively redirected traffic away from individual gallery websites and print publications to become a primary point of access for information about exhibitions.”⁴⁸ The success of the blog has made it a subject of talk, interest, criticism and suspicion in the art world. People wonder, for instance, if the blog, which has collected a huge amount of data sent by all the candidates expecting a publication on the blog, has a hidden agenda. This accumulation of images in

⁴⁶ Katja Novitskova published in 2010 the book *Post Internet Survival Guide 2010* which “chronicles the perpetual battle for survival of the most essential formats” on the internet such as files, gadgets, species, identities, memes, brands, etc.

⁴⁷ <http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com>

⁴⁸ Sanchez 2011, p.53.

private hands appears indeed as something frightening. This fear implies that the images have a value even if they are consumed for free. In an information age this is their documentation value that is at stake: CAD accumulates huge amounts of information that is valuable for humanity and could be monetized in some manner.

The apparent selection of trendy artists as the main criterion of election has also caused resentment. It tells how much CAD has become powerful to dictate whether an image has the right to circulate on the Internet or not. Art critic Michael Sanchez who thoroughly, yet humorously, examined the publishing content of CAD argues that “Contemporary Art Daily produces a form of seeing which tries to look for patterns, for connections and inevitably finds them.”⁴⁹ The “screen povera” or the “pattern of pattern” are some motives discovered by Sanchez, who notes that images have to “behave” and to create “alliances” in order to achieve maximal visibility.

All these anthropomorphic terms imply that an image acquires liveliness when uploaded to the network. This idea reminds one of Bruno Latour’s theory of the Actor-network, which says that in a network objects are also actors, whose unique activity and agenda is to further network. Sanchez suggests that the regime of distribution of CAD establishes a feedback loop with the contemporary art production is a sort of closed and auto-generative system – the art critic uses the adjective “autotelic”.

This eternal loop is also emphasized by an online exhibition platform founded by the two French curators Camille le Houezec and Joey Villemont. The duo organized a series of online exhibitions on the website It’s Our Playground, for which they only used photographic reproductions of artworks or found images. Terminating the experience, their last project titled *Screen Play* nevertheless returned to the physical space. They showed in 2014 at SWG3 Gallery in Glasgow a selection of the images they had collected. This contextualisation of the website was however followed by a video shot in the space that came back

⁴⁹ *ibid*, p.58.

to the website. It is more interesting than the autotelic system created by Contemporary Art Daily because it adds changes and variations in the loop that becomes a spiral. *Screen Play* demonstrated the ability of images to circulate online and offline and the “endless hybridization” of the digital that can reconfigure seamlessly on every platform, format and medium. In his essay, *The Image-Object Post-Internet*, Artie Vierkant, who participated in the show *Clouds in the Cave* writes: “In the Post-internet climate, it is assumed that the work of art lies equally in the version of the object one would encounter at a gallery or museum, the images and other representations disseminated through the Internet and print publications, bootleg images of the object or its representations, and variations on any of these as edited and recontextualised by any other author.”⁵⁰

4. The role of art institutions in the digital age

The claim of the superiority of the screen-mediated experience over the direct experience seems to disqualify the museum as the first and main purveyor of art experience. Nevertheless, the work has to be produced and exhibited prior to being photographed and published on the Internet. Does that mean that an exhibition space only provides the necessary set-up for an artwork? This idea was provocatively protracted in *Clouds in the Cave* through the construction of a scenography inspired by a photography studio. But if the answer to this question is yes, then could any other location not play the same role? And if the Internet is the final recipient of art, why does it have to exist primarily in reality as an object?

From Duchamp’s attempt to make art that is not art, to the use of mass media and new media by Conceptual artists, Mail artists and Net artists, the will to create art outside the boundaries of the museum has been an enduring ambition. Most of these attempts, however, eventually failed to circumvent the traditional exhibition space. The white cube showed the same ability as

⁵⁰ Vierkant 2010.

capitalism to integrate any form of dissent. Institutional critique brought to light the museum as a place of power, control and hierarchy but these productions were mostly exhibited inside the circuit that they commented on. It was during the formerly mentioned exhibition *Information* (1970) at the MoMA that Hans Haacke organised a poll asking the spectators whether they would vote or not for governor Nelson Rockefeller, a trustee of the MoMA, knowing that he did not denounce Richard Nixon's politics in Vietnam. Haacke's intention was to reveal the hidden relations of power that affected the museum.

The art institutions do not appear more virtuous and independent today. The construction of trophy-like buildings by star-architects in recent years with the aim to duplicate the famous Bilbao-effect of revitalisation of an urban deliquescent centre integrates the museum as a marketing tool in the international urban competition. It has been made evident by the growing influence on museum programs by wealthy collectors such as François Pinault, who recently funded the solo shows of Martial Raysse and Jeff Koons at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, two artists he also intensively collects. Two arguments that point out how much the museum is far from being immune to the logic of the market. This integration within the neo-liberal capitalist system happens to be problematic because of the sacralisation of the artefacts that the museum exhibits. "Museums mobilize the notion of transcendence in an object to mask its links to market and commodity fetishism."⁵¹ Museums give this symbolic value for an object in order to be successful on the market.

Another critique addressed by Lauren Christiansen is that the museum accumulates a huge number of cultural goods often without bringing them into public view. Artworks remain locked in storage waiting for a hypothetical exhibition, like money in a bank. Consequently, the public role of the museum does not seem to be fulfilled: what has been purchased with public money remains hidden.

⁵¹ Christiansen 2011.

Lauren Chistiansen argues that by insisting on the information value of art instead of its market value, digitally reproduced artworks provide an antidote to this lack of publicness of the museum. Informed by the example of Conceptual art, it could be suggested that this reduction of a work to its image transforms it into publicity for the still existing object, which remains the desirable item. However, the context today is very different because of the nature of the digital file. Its openness, that allows anyone to reconfigure it and then make it his or her own is one part of it, but it is an argument that remains very close to Walter Benjamin's idea on the positive feedback of mechanical reproduction.

In his essay *After Art*, art historian David Joselit tried to go beyond the German philosopher's argument in order to provide an analytical scheme in accordance with the digital environment. He first draws a parallel between the way objects of art are freely circulating inside the neo-liberal market and the "explosion" of images in the internet, appropriating thus the rather cynical saying of an American collector: "People now see art as an international currency"⁵². But while the chain of sale and resale provides gains in capital, i.e. surplus value, what value does the circulation of images in the network produce? Joselit defines three types of art objects in this model of circulation: the migrant, the native and the documented object. The migrant is characterised by its nomadic and commodity status, such as, for instance, an object sold at an international fair. The native is defined by its belonging to a specific site, its *hic and nunc* in Benjaminian language. The 1970 UNESCO convention on the export and transfer of cultural properties makes a legal distinction between objects that are part of the heritage of a country and must then stay attached to their place of origin and others which can be displaced without any damage to the national memory. Walter Benjamin's refinement between exhibition (or exchange) value and cult (or use) value follow the same dialectical logic. The documented object is a new kind of object identified by Joselit. It is the product of our information age. "Because they emerge in an information era where documentation is virtually inherent in the production of art, contemporary artworks typically belong to the category of documented objects."⁵³ The value of these objects is to be

⁵² Joselit 2013, p.3.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.12

“everywhere at once”. “In place of *aura* there is *buzz*. Like a swarm of bees, a swarm of images makes a buzz, and like a new idea or trend, once an image (whether attached to a product, a policy, a person, or a work of art) achieves saturation, it has a buzz.”⁵⁴ What Joselit describes as a buzz is the activity of the network – whose *invisible hand*, one is tempted to say – makes a pattern emerge out of the unregulated and disparate actions of its parts. The value comes out of the circulation of information. This circulation of images can solve diplomatic issues. Joselit considers for instance that Ai Weiwei’s house arrest penalty in China was reduced thanks to the fame he acquired abroad with his blog.

Nevertheless, the exhibition space does not seem completely discarded by this digital mode of exchange of information. Indeed, after a decade of booming Internet art, digitally infused works are populating exhibition spaces again. One can wonder why a video that can be watched on Vimeo needs to be installed in a gallery black box. Art critic and media theorist Boris Groys develops an interesting theory to explain this return to the exhibition space, which is consubstantial to the digital file nature. In digital creation the image is the visualisation of the digital file, which consists of a code, which is always hidden to the viewer, an invisible set of data enclosed in a computer: “The digital image is a visible copy of the invisible image file, of the invisible data.”⁵⁵ And coming back to Benjamin’s notion of aura, he adds: “We have here [in the digital environment] a truly massive loss of aura - because nothing has more aura than the Invisible.”⁵⁶ Visualising a digital file is then a kind of sacrilege similar to idolatry in the mind of the iconoclasts. For Groys this is the very reason why digital material comes back into the white cube. The exhibition space is comparable to a church, a sacred space where the digital file can be “cured” through “curation”. As every visualisation of the invisible digital file is an interpretation like of a music score, it cannot be said on a screen if the interpretation is truthful to the invisible original. In the exhibition space “each

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p.16

⁵⁵ Groys 2008, p.86

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

presentation of a digital file becomes a re-creation of this file.”⁵⁷ Groys reasserts the role of the curator who chooses the material and the way a digital file must appear in its analogue copy.

William J. Mitchell points out the specificity of digital file in other words: “But there is no corresponding act of closure for an image file. In general, computer files are open to modification at any time, and mutant versions proliferate rapidly and endlessly. Scholars can often trace back through a family tree of editions or manuscripts to recover an original, definitive version, but the lineage of an image file is usually untraceable, and there may be no way to determine whether it is a freshly captured, unmanipulated record or a mutation of a mutation that has passed through many unknown hands. So we must abandon the traditional conception of an art world populated by stable, enduring, finished works and replace it with one that recognizes continual mutation and proliferation of variants – much as with oral epic poetry.”⁵⁸

Institutions have to provoke this act of closure, be it temporarily, by freezing a digital file in a material state. An exhibition asserts that what is shown is an acknowledged version of a work. This theory is somewhat consistent with our own understanding of the exhibition as a place where artworks are given an interpretation and staged similarly to an opera, for instance. This also shows one of the main differences between Conceptual art and what is sometimes called post Internet art⁵⁹. While the work did not need to be built in the Conceptual frame, its production has become necessary nowadays.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Mitchell 1992, p.52.

⁵⁹ An expression attributed to artist Marina Olson that has become popular in the last five years in the art world to describe material works comprising digital content or made with digital tools.

V. Clouds in the Cave

1. Disguise and virus

In the last ten years many artists have reflected on the colonization of reality by images, their constant reformatting, and their speed of circulation online and offline. More than a return to the Conceptual art concern to show the media as it is with tautological propositions, we think it is a will to show our current reality, our image-based reality. If the image in itself cannot be criticized, its modes of production and consumption can be interrogated. The exhibition *Clouds in the Cave* was an attempt to emphatically express the constant circulation of images with a display that exacerbates this phenomenon. Furthermore, the exhibition showed works that did not behave submissively when they were photographed but playfully recomposed and mutated in an active way: either because they had illusionistic properties that made them be perceived differently, as if disguised, in the photographic documentation, or because they lodged themselves like virus in this documentation. These strategies do not mean that the artist keeps control over the proliferation of images but that he or she thus creates bugs and surprises in the circulation system.

2. Installation as image and performance

Clouds in the Cave's scenography consisted on an illusionistic display borrowed to the equipment of a photography studio [e.g. (fig. 8)]. Called a cyclorama, this architectonic element was made of white-painted wood panels, which covered two walls and the floor. The specificity of the cyclorama lies in its round edges and corners, which erase the usual visual indications of deepness. The spectator moved inside a three-dimensional space but could not help associating what he saw with a plane, as he was not able to rely on vanishing points. The intention was to emphasize and reveal the condition of the exhibition as a future image, but also, the other way round, as a screen shot or a still image taken from the digital flow.

The blurring of the senses experienced by the viewer was enhanced by a powerful lightning system, which generated a sensation of void and unreality. Briony Fer describes the art installation as being at the same time an experience and an image, by which the viewer is “entrapped” and “entranced”⁶⁰. Being inside and outside the installation he is its activator and spectator. The perceptual mechanisms of an art installation matches in this sense Michael Fried’s critic to Minimal art as a “theatrical”⁶¹ dispositive, which needs a viewer to activate it. But it is also an image or a tableau, which is fragmented in the space. This duality was very clear in *Clouds in the Cave*. The exhibition took the form of a white monochrome structure/canvas populated with artworks/fragments. These were then parts of the installation. At the same time it requested the presence of a spectator to interrelate with it, getting trapped and amazed by the illusionistic procedures. One must add that even if the viewer was not allowed to walk on the white platform where the works were exhibited, he was able to walk around it. Opposite to an anamorphosis that prescribes a certain vantage point from where to gaze, the exhibition was visible from different viewpoints, including from behind. This allowed the spectator to see the back of some works or the backstage of the exhibition and then to deconstruct the illusionistic mechanism of the exhibition. Meant to turn the exhibition into an image the monumental display simultaneously acted as a performative component that required the presence of the beholder. Despite its apparently reductionist display *Clouds in the Cave* reasserted the spatiality and the physicality of an exhibition to be experienced live.

The reproductions of the exhibition operate on another level of perception since the cyclorama is a tool, which is meant to disintegrate when it is photographed. Depending on how the photographer framed the picture, the viewer of the exhibition shots can be then confronted to an absolute and undetectable illusion, and contemplate artworks floating in a white infinity.

Though technically the double condition of image and performance of the installation is still present after it has been digitally reproduced. Indeed, what is

⁶⁰ Fer 2001, p.79.

⁶¹ Fried 2011.

stable is the computer file, but the visualization of the image depends on many parameters such as the quality of the browser, software and screen, which enable its display. Every visualisation of the image is then an interpretation of the digital file and therefore a performance. This dependency of the digital file on the technical infrastructure was particularly stressed in the works of Aurélien Mole's and Syndicat for the exhibition. Their collective project is an extreme example of the circulation and reformatting of images. Aurélien Mole works both as an artist and an exhibition photographer. Syndicat, a graphic design collective based in Paris, used exhibitions photographs he made to create three digital collages. They showed the collages in five versions at the poster festival of Chaumont in France. Each version consisted of a digital print produced by five different printers. In this graphic design festival the idea was to show the slight variations of the printed matter resulting from the different printing devices. For the show in Fri Art, Aurélien Mole re-photographed all the posters and with the help of an image processing software placed the five photographs of the posters as layers upon each other. The prints he made out of this combined file gave birth to new images sprinkled by visual noise, consisting of semi-transparent grids, dots and other undefined motifs. These spectral patterns are traces of the various interpretations of the same digital file, to the point that when put together, they create a defined yet impure image. The same polyphonic result would occur if one would play simultaneously five cover version of the same song on a speaker. This work production process shares resemblance with Wade Guyton's printed canvases, which are produced and disturbed by "the technical malfunction"⁶² of an inkjet printer.

3. Misleading documentation

The digital image is clearly of a different nature than the analogue one. There is still an imprint of reality, which is taken, but it is translated into numbers instead of setting off a chemical reaction on the light-sensitive negative. Rosalind Krauss' indexical theory does not apply anymore to this type of image.

⁶² Kelsey 2010

Furthermore a computer-generated image shares the same technical properties than one taken by a camera. Digital photography has replaced analogue photography as a documenting technique. But it is subject to infinite modification possibilities that make it a rather dubious recorder of reality. Contemporary art practices engulfed in the hiatus between the trust attached to photography as a mirror of reality and the new perspectives offered by digital image processing in order, in particular, to propose subverted forms of documentation.

An indicative story happened in the course of the exhibition *Clouds in the Cave*. German artist Phillip Zach was invited to modify a photograph of the empty exhibition space in which he added the digital creation of a “wormhole”⁶³ suggesting that the exhibition was leading to another galaxy or more modestly to another mind-set. The work was used to announce the exhibition on the Fri Art website. Fooled by this image a visitor asked the attendant where to find the “glass sculpture” [e.g. (fig. 5)]. She was very upset to discover that the work incrustated in the photograph was a digital creation. Continuing the experience, Phillip Zach also intervened in the exhibition shots incrustating new virtual works in some images and completely perturbing other views with strong digital effects. The idea was to propose a second subjective version of the exhibition for the online audience but also use the exhibition, conceived as a pseudo-image, as the starting point for the creation of new images in a process of continual begetting and mutation. This practice is interesting because it challenges and disrupts the usual previously described chain of events in the circulation of a work of art. By the use of the Internet not just as a place where one shows pictures of photogenic works photographed in white cubes, Zach distances from the advertisement function of art documentation [e.g. (fig. 6&7)].

Young American artist Artie Vierkant series of works *Image Objects* uses a similar strategy. It is based on a digital file that Vierkant constantly modifies. Every new version of the image file is printed on Dibond⁶⁴ to create sculptural

⁶³ “A hypothetical topological feature that would fundamentally be a shortcut through spacetime”, according to Wikipedia.

⁶⁴ A composite of aluminium and polyethylene frequently used to laminate photographs.

images in the form of overlapping gradient colour frames. The artist documents the object after it has been exhibited and then modifies the photographic reproduction with an image processing software creating thus another version of the work, which becomes particularly unstable. “Nothing is in a fixed state: i.e. everything is anything else, whether because any object is capable of becoming another type of object or because an object already exists in flux between multiple instantiations.”⁶⁵

For *Clouds in the Cave* in Fri Art, Vierkant presented a series of his *Color Rendition Charts*, another on-going project [e.g. (fig. 10)]. A colour rendition chart is a grid of coloured squares commonly used during photo shooting to check the colour balance. It is usually expelled from the picture during postproduction. Taking the exact opposite approach, the artist digitally creates an image of a colour rendition chart and unsettles the grid with very simple and recognizable Photoshop effects. Each image is then printed on Dibond and is titled by its exact production date and hour implying that the transition from digital file to image/object is the radiography of a current state of the ever-changing file. After the work has been exhibited, reproduced and turned into a digital image again, it is impossible for the viewer to know whether the Photoshop modification took place during the production of the “original” image or after its reproduction like in the previous example of the *Image Object* series. These hybrid works emphasize the different modes of existence of an artwork: as an object that freezes its momentum, the same way that a photograph records a moment in the continuum of life, and as a digital image made to circulate and reconfigure on the internet. As a consequence, the digital mode of existence is more about reality than the object, which is a 3D snapshot of the real thing, as such existing only as a flux.

John Kelsey argues that: “[...] any work that holds our attention today is one that not only shows itself, but also shows it could be otherwise, shows that the relation between an artist and his own activity can always be modified, even interrupted.”⁶⁶ In bootlegging and hijacking circulating material, and in particular

⁶⁵ Vierkant 2010.

⁶⁶ Kelsey 2010.

their own work, artists show us a way to disrupt the exchange flux of information.

4. Living images

Not Yet Titled (Relief VI) [e.g. (fig. 9)] was a set of three works produced by Florian Auer for *Clouds in the Cave*. They looked like sport jerseys he attached with metal strings so that they would seem to float in space. These very ambiguous, almost flat, yet formed objects bear resemblance to classical chest sculptures. They are, similarly to Duchamp's *Female Fig Leaf*, concave moulds and convex casts, but also images, holograms and even an evocation of ghosts as their floating displays suggests. The works are then colliding a wide range of modes of presence, from the most immaterial to the most material ones. The subtitle *Relief* links them as well to Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*, which consisted of optical illusions.

The origins of the works are appropriated Internet images of football players in action. Operating the same way a 3D printer would do, the artist has translated the visual information of the image in a fabric modelled by hand and rigidified with epoxy⁶⁷ so that it looks as if in motion. Interested in the common ability of our brain to reconstruct a volumetric reality by decoding a flat image, and hence to deal with representations and simulacra that populate our world, Auer sculpted his 3D copy of a 2D image through the observation of the shadows and folds apparent on the source picture. This production process gave birth to hyperreal objects that seem to emanate directly from the screen. This phenomenon of hyperreality was enhanced by the printed pattern over the t-shirts in kinetic blue semi-transparent lines that represent the grid of a screen and reminds one of the technique of hologram. The lines and the transparency are stereotypical elements of the representation of holograms in the movie industry. For instance in *Star Wars*, Princess Leia's holographic image is seen as a bluish laser-like light. Although not yet finalized, the holographic technique,

⁶⁷ Epoxy is a type of resin

which consists of the creation of a freestanding 3D image, has been a long-lasting fantasy. This fascination gives evidence of the human will to transform the material into immaterial. But if holograms still belong to the fantasy world of science fiction, our reality is nevertheless more and more infused by special effects. The exchange between screen and reality and the incarnation of images into actions and objects is a constant interest of author and artist Hito Steyerl: "Data, sounds, and images are now routinely transitioning beyond screens into a different state of matter. They surpass the boundaries of data channels and manifest materially. They incarnate as riots or products, as lens flares, high-rises, or pixelated tanks. Images become unplugged and unhinged and start crowding off-screen space. They invade cities, transforming spaces into sites, and reality into reality. They materialize as junkspace, military invasion, and botched plastic surgery. They spread through and beyond networks, they contract and expand, they stall and stumble, they vie, they vile, they wow and woo."⁶⁸ Beyond the hyperbolic language of this stance it has become obvious that our everyday concerns and actions are influenced by the images, or in Baudrillard's vocabulary that the simulacra from now on precedes reality⁶⁹. This is exactly what Florian Auer demonstrates with his sculptures; by giving a materiality to the screen-mediated experience of a football match, he reconstructs with the help of vision only a reality that is again an obvious and imperfect simulacrum, as there is of course no possible coming back to the real thing. "This is the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by intangible as well as tangible things, which reaches its absolute fulfilment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible par excellence."⁷⁰

Already evoked in the context of Contemporary Art Daily, the idea of active images, or even living images is worth being developed. This empowerment conferred to the image is reminiscent of the fetishism of primitive cultures as well as of idolatrous behaviours. This fetishism has been transferred to the

⁶⁸ Steyerl 2013.

⁶⁹ See Baudrillard 1981, *Simulacra and Simulation's* first chapter.

⁷⁰ Debord, 1990, p.36

commodity in our capitalist society according to Marx. In *The Capital* Marx posits that we wrongly believe that a commodity has a value on its own, when the only value it truly has is the abstract amount of human labour that it contains. The commodity fetishism is the belief that the commodity has a life of its own. Occurring on the side of production this fetishism is complemented by another fetishism created by advertisements on consumption. “The object world interacts with the human world at the most fundamental of levels: it performs magical feats of transformation and bewitchment, brings instant happiness and gratification, captures the forces of nature, and holds within itself the essence of important social relationships (in fact, it substitutes for those relations).”⁷¹ Capitalism conceals the real social meaning of the commodity. Advertisement generates narratives to fill this absence of meaning. The advertisement system works then as a religious system, concludes Sut Jhally.

Besides this negative, magical influence of the active image that triggers unwanted behaviours from us, the contemporary mediascape produces images that develop independent behaviours. They are quasi-subjects that can interact together. The format of this thesis does not allow us to go much further in this direction but this idea is linked to the current philosophical research of Speculative realism that seeks to think about objects in a de-correlated way; that is to say as independent objects of study and not through their relationship to our perception. In Florian Auer’s objects these two live conditions of the image are merging. The hologram technique is completely simulated by hand. The group of works is then a simulation of the most hyperrealistic simulacrum one can dream of. Suggested by cultural critic and writer Norman Klein, the concept of “scripted space” describes the underlying information layers behind the spectacular surface of the urban landscape. Information workers for instance constantly survey, describe and prescribe cafés and monuments of a city. Our experience of reality is highly influenced by this production of information, which tends to make it resemble more and more the experience of playing a video game, where the player’s avatar is evolving inside a scripted space. But “winning a game can only happen by accepting the terms of the

⁷¹ Jhally 1990, p.62.

game.”⁷² Similarly, the experience of reality becomes more and more preconditioned by the hidden set of rules that defines it. On an aesthetical point of view the convergence between reality and video games is also striking. While high definition and technical progress provide a more immersive and reality-like experience for the gamers, the city-dwellers live in a growingly digitally augmented environment. Florian Auer’s work reflects on this overlapping of the map and the territory that creates an augmented reality.

At the same time, however, his sculpture-images are almost alive. They are in a quasi-motion and they bear some human semblances. The fact that they are three creates a sort of strange meeting from which we are excluded as spectators. Their ghost-like presence seems to be the metaphor of their intermediary state of matter.

Not Yet Titled (Relief VI) was associated with another work produced by Romanian artist Carmen Gheorghe. The two artists teamed up to show pieces that were combining to each other. Gheorghe made a floor piece with coloured sand as in the Tibetan mandala tradition. The geometric drawing included a succession of trapezia that looked like a Brancusi’s endless column. Another part of the drawing represented the perspective plan of a Sky TV sport program studio setting. Only lightly related in the exhibition space, the two works became clearly intertwined in the exhibition views because of the absence of vanishing point in the display of the exhibition. The two parts of the drawing previously described conveyed two opposite interpretations: apparently sinking into the ground the sport studio perspective recalled Michael Heizer’s negative sculptures, while the endless column was seemingly ascending. These rival perspectives made of Carmen Gheorghe an Escher-like impossible object.

Both elements of the drawing worked though as pedestals for Florian Auer’s works, which hung above the sand drawing. The sport studio perspective emphasized the hyperreal TV-mediated property of the t-shirts in today’s HD environment, while the endless column stressed the sculptural simulation at

⁷² Andersen/Pold 2011.

work in the display. Interestingly, and that brings us back to the premise of this thesis, Constantin Brancusi, a fellow countryman of Carmen Gheorghe, initiated a long dialogue between sculpture and photography. He had created a dark room in his workshop in Paris especially to photograph his work, not in a simple documentation approach, but to assert the vision he had from them. He left about 1,500 photographs of his sculptures. Through the help of light and setting, he modelled them again. Some plaster casts appear as shiny as marble. He imagined sceneries that humanized and dramatized the sculptures. They often were not showed as single objects but as groups interacting with each other in the studio. "He transformed his work space into a very special environment, where his sculptures could live and act. In the magical space of the studio, the sculptor explored a Pygmalion-like fantasy, inventing creations so fully fleshed and multifaceted that they could take on a life of their own. The studio became a sanctified space where the sculptures could live, a microcosm of his sculptural creation."⁷³ Far from desacralizing the sculptural unique object, in Brancusi's case the photograph seems to accentuate the fetish and idol predisposition of the artwork in a combination of animism and advertisement that might appear very contemporary.

⁷³ Brown 1995, p.16.

VI. Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to question the relationship between art and its photographic documentation in the digital age. The history of this relationship started with a loss. The aura of the art object was compromised by mechanical reproduction, which transformed the authentic and devotional unique object into a mass-reproduced one. This loss was followed by a series of other attacks against the conventions of art by the avant-gardes, such as the negation of authorship, the retreat from representation and the abolition of any transcendental possibility, as exemplified by the ready-mades. Conceptual art has radicalised this destructive project. The critique of the commodity and the society of spectacle led Conceptual art to reject both the object and the image in order to concentrate on immaterial propositions. This was combined with an embrace of the new technologies of their time and especially a use of the media. The textual, diagrammatic, statistic and procedural productions of the Conceptual artists fused art with documentation. It was also, as Benjamin Buchloh noted, a practice that imitated the administrative aesthetic of the then ruling middle-class. This aesthetic, mixed with its distribution inside the mass-media infrastructure, soon appeared to be critically counter-productive as it simply duplicated the dominating system. This was also reinforced by the tautological impetus of many of the conceptual productions.

As discussed, the categories between object and image, real and virtual, art and documentation are becoming increasingly interlocked in this digital age. To paraphrase one of Artie Vierkant's stances: everything can be anything else. The Internet clearly provides an unprecedented place for art experience. It allows art to be publicly accessible while offering a private experience. If this can be praised as a communal and un-hierarchical distribution of art, it nevertheless remains, as we have seen, problematic as it relies on images that have to be potent in order to find their way in this attention economy. This redounds to art production in a loop that develops with no strategy. The solution outlined in the exhibition *Clouds in the Cave* and in this paper to break this vicious circle is to propose artworks that bring perturbations in this circulation system: either by being modified in postproduction, or by behaving in such a

way in front of the camera that they mutate when they are photographed. Thus the works become not just passive consumable images or avatars but are active in exposing the contemporary condition of movement and reformatting online and offline. Paradoxically, their illusionism, their possibility to disguise and be seen as one thing or its contrary, speaks truly about their digital nature. Our world is populated by images and objects that are more and more animated, and less under our own control.

Other strategies are possible to deal with our present conditions. The experience of the New Theater in Berlin could be an example of today's belief in the primacy of the direct experience over the mediated experience of art. Younger and more renowned artists gather in this small venue to create a set and interpret plays, mostly written by Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff, who run the theatre. There is almost no documentation to these events and a strong sense of community. Thus the artists are "reclaiming the local and personal and resisting image circulation through ephemerality and collaboration."⁷⁴ This form of entrenchment of the artists is unlikely to bring a solution to the complexity and the abstraction of the contemporary world. After the linguistic turn of the Post-war, a mathematical turn may be experienced ⁷⁵, one that relies on quantification and code. The financial collapse of 2008 showed how much we are at the mercy of mad algorithms. If art has become a currency on par with money, maybe the next generation of artists will be hackers, the ones that can subvert the code.

⁷⁴ Larios 2014.

⁷⁵ An hypothesis defended by Thomas H. Ford in his article "The Mathematical Turn".

VII. Appendix

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2. Illustrations

Fig. 1



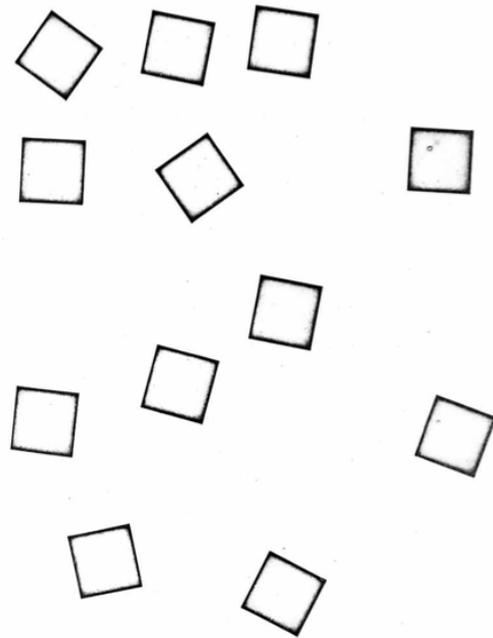
Alfred Stieglitz's photograph of *Fountain* in *The Blind Man*, illustrating the article "The Richard Mutt Case", *The Blind Man*, New York, May 1917, p.5.

Fig. 3

PHOTOGRAPH OF COLLATION MACHINE USED

Joseph Kosuth, *Untitled* ("photograph of collation machine used"), Xerox Book, 1968

Fig. 2



Carl Andre, *Untitled* (detail), photocopied tumbling boxes, Xerox Book, 1968.

Fig. 4



Comme des Garçons, *Look 1*, Fall 2012 RtW, 2012, © Tim Blanks, Style.com

Fig. 5



Phillip Zach, *Wormhole*, 2015, digital perturbation, image for the invitation to the exhibition *Clouds in the Cave*.

Fig. 6



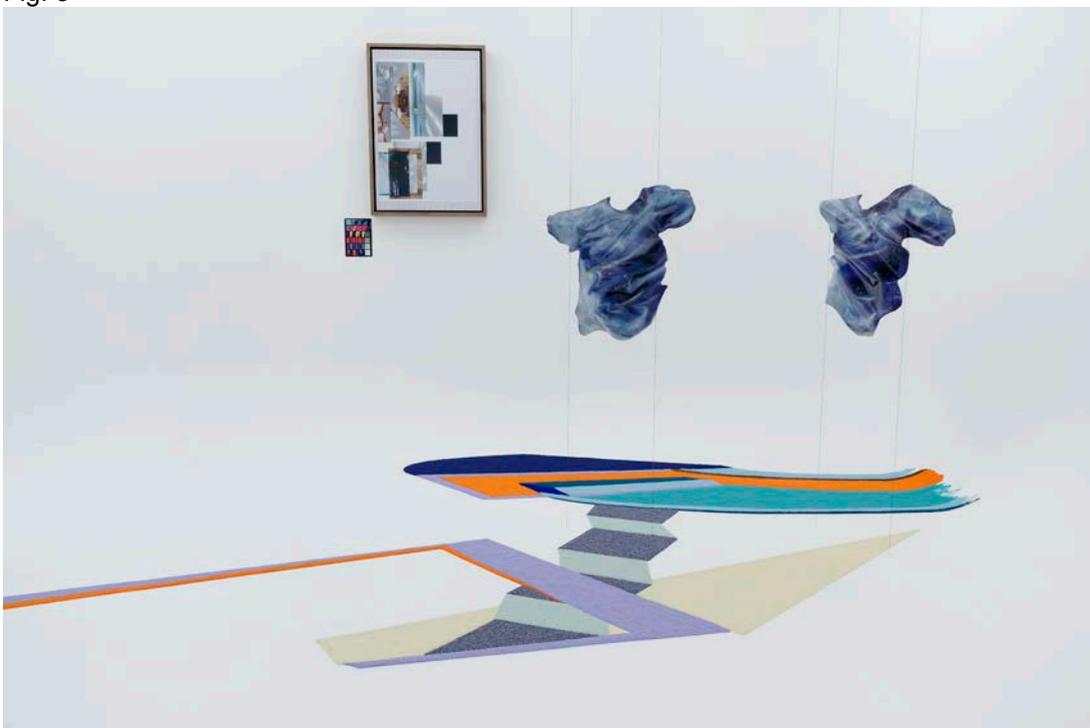
Phillip Zach, *Wormhole*, digital perturbation, 2015, *Clouds in the Cave*, Fri Art, Fribourg

Fig. 7



Phillip Zach, *Wormhole*, digital perturbation, 2015, *Clouds in the Cave*, Fri Art, Fribourg

Fig. 8



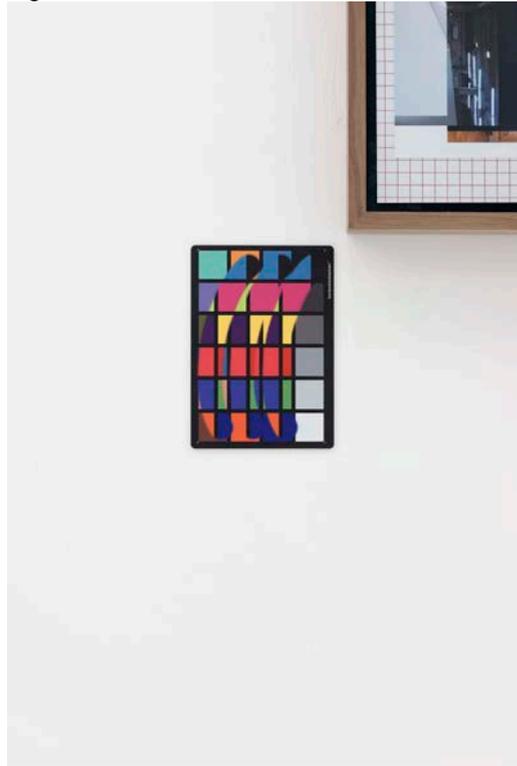
Clouds in the Cave, Fri Art, Fribourg, 2015, exhibition view, © Aurélien Mole

Fig. 9



Florian Auer, *Not Yet Titled (Relief VI)*, digital print on fabric, epoxy, variable dimensions, 2015, Fri Art, Fribourg. © Aurélien Mole

Fig. 10



Artie Vierkant, *Color Rendition Chart Wednesday 28 January 2015 10:48 AM*, digital print on dibond, 21 x 30 cm, Fri Art, Fribourg, 2015. © Aurélien Mole

Fig. 11



Katja Novitskova, *Approximation V*, digital print on aluminium, 140 x 140 cm, Kraupa Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, 2014.

3. Press release *Clouds in the Cave*

27.02 – 03.05.2015

Clouds in the Cave

Florian Auer (D, 1984)

Neïl Beloufa (F-Alg, 1985)

Alan Bogana (CH, 1979) & Marta Riniker-Radich (CH, 1982)

Carmen Gheorghe (Rou, 1976)

Aurélien Mole (F, 1975) & Syndicat

Artie Vierkant (US, 1986)

Phillip Zach (D, 1984)

Exhibition curator: Sylvain Menétrey

Since the emergence and development of mass communication technologies in the 1950s, the media have become the main conduit for the public's reception of art. Reliance on this mode of transmission is even more pronounced today due to the highly networked world of new media, which allows users to simultaneously adopt the role of recipient, producer and disseminator of information. In short, anyone can now become a media operator.

Taking this observation to its logical extreme, *Clouds in the Cave* re-assesses the situation by positing, somewhat provocatively, that exhibitions are simply a pretext for producing images. A position, which differs from the rationale of the industrial age, to which museums continue to adhere through the "sanctification" of objects.

The first floor of Fri Art has been re-designed to resemble a photographic studio. Painted entirely in white, the angles and edges of the room melt away, giving the illusion of a void in which objects appear to float. The white cube becomes the white box, a transformation that accentuates the camera-ready quality of the exhibition. Visitors' eyes focus in and track the works in much the same way as a photographer trains the camera lens on his subject. They see a succession of distinct images which gradually coalesce as they walk round the space.

The circulation of exhibitions and artworks by way of image reproductions can have a great influence on their conception. In his essay *My Work for Magazine Pages*, Dan Graham observed: 'Through the actual experience of running a gallery, I learned that if a work of art wasn't written about and reproduced in a magazine it would have difficulty attaining the status of "art". It seemed that in order to be defined as having value – that is, as "art" – a work had only to be distributed in a gallery and then to be written about and reproduced as a photograph in an art magazine.' The value of a piece of art, both artistically and economically speaking, is determined not only by its context but also by the media coverage it receives. In this networked age, exhibitions and art works

have to “deliver” in order to be visible on first-rate media platforms and garner sufficient clicks and “likes”. To put it simply, art needs to be photogenic to succeed.

Clouds in the Cave presents a series of works which, were they photographic subjects, would be fully aware that they are being photographed. Nonetheless, the works do not conform wholesale to photographic conventions; some “play” with the lens to create a misleading self-image. For example, the collaborative work by Marta Riniker-Radich and Alan Bogana reproduces with virtual means the reflection of a fictive space on the supporting pillars of the exhibition space, the last remaining architectural elements in a space that has been wiped of all three-dimensional points of reference. A person viewing only the photographic reproduction of this work would imagine the scene as actually taking place outside the field of view.

The collaborative piece by Florian Auer and Carmen Gheorghe is an examination of sculpture and its relationship to photography. Auer presents a series of sports jerseys, which appear to be floating in space like holograms or augmented reality souvenirs from a football match. The shirts, similar to a shroud or a 3D photogram, bear the imprint of an invisible body. On the floor, Carmen Gheorghe traces a geometric shape using shimmering sand. Depending from which angle the visitor looks at the work, the drawing on the floor and the imitation hologram above combine to produce what looks like a photograph of a Brancusi-like sculpture on its pedestal. It is rather fitting that the work should recall that of the Romanian sculptor, as he extensively photographed and filmed his own sculptures, fastidiously arranging them in his Paris studio in order to bring them to life, magnify their surfaces, and ultimately to arouse emotions.

The images created by Aurélien Mole and the graphic design collective Syndicat result from the overlapping of posters printed using the same source file, but by different printers. Highlighted by image processing software, these print variations form a ghostly landscape, a network of topographic curves, traces of a digital materiality.

Phillip Zach takes the premise of the exhibition to its logical extreme by distancing himself completely from the physical space and focusing exclusively on distorting the photographic documentation of the exhibition. This documentation will be immediately visible on the Fri Art website, allowing visitors to experiment with and navigate their way through the traps that their perception lays for them, as they flit back and forth between the physical and virtual exhibition space.

When taken as a whole, the exhibition can be seen as a sort of shadow play or Plato’s cave. To paraphrase Jean Baudrillard, the simulacrum is never what hides the truth; it is the simulacrum alone, which is real.