OTLET SALONS

Me, Myself and I Edition, March 25, 2021
Limits, morals, controls and advantages of screen culture
otletsalons.wordpress.com

SUMMARY

The topic of this 7th, online, Otlet Salon is self representation in a digital environment. Direct occasion is the exhibition 'Me, Myself and I', exploring the democratization of screen technology. The exhibitor presented contemporary artists who are looking into the limits, morals, controls, advantages and disadvantages of these tendencies.

Exhibition and speakers circle questions like: what triggers these artists to become protagonist in their work?; is technology bringing artist more options for self exploration?; and what is the impact of this technological boom on a younger generation and the work of psychologists?

Key note speaker Tina Sauerlaender, art historian, curator and publicist, focussing "on the impact of the digital and the internet on individual environments and society as well as on virtual reality in visual arts." Sauerlaender is currently finishing a PhD on self representation in digital art. She presents a quick scan of what digital art entails and a rainbow palette of examples.

The two panel members add an extra layer to this overview larded with examples. Artist Arvida Byström connects her own practice to a general view on online presence. Clinical psychologist Tom Van Daele talks us trough the pros and cons of online technology versus disorders like anorexia.

Their contributions are followed by answers to questions that bind the different topics together.

NB - Behind the colored text below are hyperlinks

INTRODUCTION

After a long break, the Otlet Salons return with a series of three editions. The salons, that were first organized in 2015 in the spirit of the Belgian bibliographer, pacifist and entrepreneur Paul Otlet, echo the informal atmosphere of 19th century literary salons, where people from the arts would mix with people from various other backgrounds but with like minds: the openness to different ideas.

As with every social engagement in these pandemic times, this ultimately interactive event was siphoned to Zoom. It's not in the spirit of the salons to reject this fact. Moreover, the digital character is completely in sync with todays topic: self representation in a digital environment. Be honest, did you turn your self view of or have your eyes been wandering to the corner to the screen?

In 2016 we closed with an edition on virtual reality, centered around the work of Belgian artist Eric Joris / CREW. On of the questions he posed is relatable to what was discussed during this 7th edition: "Should we consider social media a form of virtual reality? And if so, does it give us freedom to become who we want to be, letting go of social differences, or are we trapping ourselves in yet another set of rules?"

The 'Me, Myself and I'-edition lends its central theme from the 2020 exhibition with the same title at Biennale de L'image Possible Liège. A taster of this exhibition was shown as the SCREEN IT project at art fair Art Brussels 2019, dealing with the impact of screen culture on the arts and featuring one of our contributing guests: artist Arvida Byström. Both exhibits were curated by this evening's moderator Pieter-Jan Valgaeren, curator, researcher and lecturer.

KEY NOTE

TINA SAUERLAENDER is an art historian, curator and publicist, focussing "on the impact of the digital and the internet on individual environments and societ, as well as on virtual reality in visual arts." She is the director of exhibition platform the peer to space, Berlin. She is currently finishing a PhD on self representation in digital art. Against a sparkly pink-and-purple background Sauerlaender presents a quick scan of what digital art entails and a rainbow palette of examples.

She begins by defining what digital art is. Many things, in fact, starting in the sixties: computer generated, photocopier, analog video editing, internet, video sharing, social platforms.
"Early figurative computer art at first was mostly abstract. It was often made by mathematicians trying out what they could do with software, with code', she elaborates. An early example is Charles Csuri, described as "the father of digital art and computer animation" (wikipedia).

Sauerlaender moves on to an **overview per decade,** larding it with examples of artists in whose work self representation is an important aspect. We will mention a selection here.

1970's | Self portraits with photo copier
Artists: Andy Warhol. Sonia Lardy, would continue working with new technologies. Also the age of analogue video, artists moving in slomo in front of their camera's creating delirious effects.

1980's | Video digitizer becomes popular. This is a steady scanner you would have to move in front of to record an object - or a person - in its entirety. This enabled artists to work more figuratively and use their own image/portrait.
Artist: Joan Truckenbrod, on of the pioneers in digital art

1990's | Internet age and web based arts. Works become more diverse and media get mixed.
Artists: Patrice Caire; Petko Dourmana. For one work the latter created an interactive online image of himself with pills next to him. A user/viewer could feed the image drugs and provoke reactions; Rafael Rozendaal. Early interactive websites. By clicking on his portrait you can really quickly change his identity by adding or changing facial hair.

2000's | Internet platforms as second life, You Tube. Many artist use Second Life as a 'stage' for performances and a means "to explore the conditions of the digital in their work".
Artists: Eva and Franco Mattes, reenacting earlier artworks, like Marina Abramobic and lay's performance standing naked in a museum doorway; Olia Lialina. Making GIF-models of herself as various characters that were then used by other artists for their work. Lialina explores female depictions on the web and how they would depict themselves in de early 2010's.

Many artists are interested in how interaction with an audience could come about online and how their image is received by their audiences.

Instagram and avatars
Leaving the overview, Sauerlaender zooms in on the popular social medium **Instagram,** highlighting several artists who use it as a tool and a stage, exploring how images are seen and what they mean. Two examples.

Amalia Ulman used Instagram for her 'Excellences & perfections' performance in 2014, going to great lengths to stage a "consumerist fantasy lifestyle". Afterwards she stated that her pictures didn't show her real life, causing people to react in terms of fraud.

Rah Eleh ('present' at the salon) created the character Oreo. Oreo refers to people who try to obtain access to a dominant group and applying the 'right' social codes. Oreo is a term coined for black people, coconut for brown, banana for Asians, apple for Indians. "I chose oreo because its so artificial and sweet, like the character", she'll state later on. For 'Oreo' Eleh (Iranian-Canadian) stages such a person and explores how these would state themselves, while subtly addressing white privilege and racism.

Andy Kassier created an alter ego of the same name, researching phenomena on social media, filling his instagram with carefully staged 'selfies' as both commentary and the ultimate epitomization of his topic.

Another phenomenon that deserves a special mention are **avatars**, a big topic in the past 15 years. A special mention goes out to LaTurbo Avedon, "living out and researching the possibilities of an entirely digital identity".

As the previous examples show, non-art platforms melt together with/in artistic practice today. "To art historians this is a a challenge, for they need to step outside their boxes", Sauerlaender remarks. Exciting times as self-portraiture and performance art meet in these digital platforms.

The artist is present

Several of the artists in Sauerlaenders PhD paper are present this evening (hurray for the internet!) and to round her talk up she invites several of them to comment. Among them Joan Truckenbrod: "I'm not interested in boundaries of tools or media. I just envision what I want to make and then find tools that express the ideas. I've started working early on with digital tech, but this idea of physicality is important, experiencing a material."

A question from the audience

Q. "For a musician technique is always a boundary. Do you experience a tipping point somewhere in time where digital tools and environment become your friends and you can put them at use?"

Arvida Byström: "I adjust my art to platform. Some platforms ask short works. It really depends on what you want from it. The question is how to make something look it's best without doing something that doesn't merge with the platform."

• "I'm not trying to master it. That would take the fun out of it. Besides, developments are so fast there's always a limitation in understanding the software. Mistakes have a performative quality to me that I don't what to loose by knowing too much. But yes, sometimes it is frustrating."

Doug Rosman: "My work is very self contained and based on machine learning . I'm trying to train a system to generate images of my body. A system developed by researchers who share code but not data. I'm trying to understand the tool as I go along, relying on code to be able to make my visuals because I have bad drawing skills. You never really know what comes out."

PANEL

The panel discussion is somewhat different from those in previous editions. In stead of responding to the keynote by examples taken from their own practice, the two members add an extra layer. These summaries are followed by answers to questions that bind the different topics together. First artist Arvida Byström, then psychologist Tom Van Daele.

ARVIDA BYSTRÖM (1991, Sweden) is a digital native who developed her career in an ever-transforming digital landscape. She's most widely known for her instagram pictures, but also works offline as a photographer, model and performance artist.

When she first entered the internet it felt like a twin sister. She wasn't very popular and found the internet the perfect habitat for sub-culture and misfits. Her first digital camera (age 11) was the key to the digital realm, where self portraits of teens and young adults where the most popular thing.

Byströms on and offline personae didn't match. "I photographed myself because I was scared of photographing others." Are we what we do? "Slowly the person in photographs started to separate from me", she answers her own question.

Another question: What happens to visual culture when it's oversaturated? Only time and money can assure quality. The gatekeepers aka large platforms all seem to steer in one direction, making the people who fill it unpaid labour.

"It sounds so negative", she interrupts herself. "Its become harder to reach out because there's so much clutter online. At the same time there's so much inspiration available, even more for artists that are trying to find stuff that isn't shown in museums and galleries, examples from the 60's."

Questions from the audience

Q: How have you further developed into this role?

AB: 'I don't see myself online as an alter ego. I'm interested in the lowbrow role of the 'influencer'. As an artist it would probably be better to separate myself more."
"I started out with photography. I don't have to be myself in that either, it's just a split

second. My life has never been interesting enough to make art about it."

On using the platform and attention economy. "I'm still trying to make what I want but optimizing because I too am sensitive to likes and views."

On internet regulations. "We need more free spaces that are not curated. How much responsibility does the government have in facilitating spaces? Governments are slower than commercial platforms. Companies like Apple decide what is allowed to be seen (What kind of nudity, for example) because many people have iPhones. This kind of conduct and the consequences should be thought trough by other people, like philosophers, not by commercial giants."

TOM VAN DAELE is clinical psychologist and head of Expertise unit PsyTS at Thomas More. His main focus is research in mental health, focusing on the added value of technology. In a fancy green-screen - weather man style presentation Van Daele talks us trough the pros and cons of internet versus anorexia.

Van Daele starts by emphasizing the potential of digital technique for mental health as a whole - websites, apps, VR -, then moves on the possible down sides.

'Sticking together': In early versions of the web anorectic girls wanting to share with like minded people ('pro-ana') would gather. You can still find remnant of these 'quoty' websites. Internet made it possible to find support and change (pro-ana) tips, tricks and ideas. The response was to try and shut these things down. Internet being difficult to control, groups simply moved to private group, adding disclaimers.

Web 2.0 provided even more platforms to share these, sometimes unhealthy, feelings, facilitated
by hashtags like #thinspo. Instagram and Facebook have hidden posts with these hashtags, executing some level of control by the private sector, pushed by government. Van Daele underlines the risk of normalization of these ideas because they infiltrate social media despite this control, translating, for example, to magazine covers advertising celebrity diets accompanied by #thinspo.

Vulnerable teens likely to internalize issues like suicide and anorexia, may find support online, but are also prone to being influenced negatively because of that vulnerability. Banning is not the solution, says Van Daele, but awareness is key. Conclusion: the omnipresent technological environment might be a good idea, but we have to keep the human and physical side in mind.

Questions from the audience

Q: Do we have to be more cautious with giving internet acces to young people?
TvD: It's impossible in the real world to have this kind of control. So how do we deal with that. I'm not negative towards social media - you can reach huge audiences by yourself. The benefits outweigh potential downsides. The main challenge is that 30-somethings and up are somewhat detached. Young people have always have had their own worlds, but the gap has become bigger due to internet. A 60+ therapist now has difficulty with understanding and connecting when they're unfamiliar with what children do on tiktok. We need to familiarize ourselves with the online world.

Q: Rah Elah wonders about the influence of online role models. "In the nineties, under the influence of heroin chique and grunge, models could only be this thin. Now there's many voices on fat liberation."
TvD: Anorexia is a means to gain control, and not necessarily a response to what is hip or seen on media. Body positivity could counteract in some cases, but its difficult interplay. It wil always be challenging for girls to find themselves in their teens, and girls tend to inflict hurt onto themselves more. Because of internet it's on a much bigger scale now, providing both positive and negative influences. It's a difficult balance.

DISCUSSION

An unexpectedly heated discussion enrolls, quickly alternating faces on the main window of the zoom screen, triggered by the testimony of one elderly lady (in het own words).

"I was hoping to understand more of why artists use themselves al the time. When the individual steps into a role to make art, I understand why you would use your own body. However, I'm still puzzled by why people take their pictures the whole day and post it.
"Arvida's words stuck: "I wanted to remake myself on my own terms." This is very philosophical, but not taking into account the social context   and surpassing everything that's been said …"

Arvida at this point interrupts quite fiercely. "You haven't listened properly. I was twelve, trying to find myself, find meaning. I'm pretty. I use that. Posting pictures means you get friends. You see beautiful people all the time, how can you not want to look like them!"

We finish somewhat unsatisfied in the knowledge that an offline Salon would have made us understand somewhat better.