

# *IMAGE PLATFORM WEB PORTAL PORTAL*

I started the blog Portalen Portalen together with a friend in 2009. Blogging is a strategy for navigating information online. It is a way of arranging objects, forming a public display of whatever interests me at a particular point in time. Blogging gives me a reason to go beyond social media presence on Facebook or Instagram, and instead investigate people's artistic production. More important than the the impact blogging has on my surfing and thinking, is how it displays artistic interaction, forming networks of connections and influences. In a sense the blog is a document of possible communication between artists, revealing how they play off each other's ideas.

In this essay I will present three levels of of blogs: the images, the platforms containing them, and the web of artistic production that they form. In the first part I will analyze the relation between the artwork and the documented image, as they circulate in social network feeds. The second will describe platforms containing artworks, specifically the gallery and the blog. The third seeks to map out a change in the way artists relate to each other's work. After doing this I will focus on the aesthetics of Portalen Portalen.

## *Image*



Joshua Citarella: *Compression Artifacts*, 2013

In the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Walter Benjamin remarks that reproduction has moved images into situations beyond the scope of the original artwork<sup>1</sup>. Instead of going somewhere to see art, photography brings the work to the viewer. This is greatly intensified today, as documentation is posted to social networks during, or even before exhibitions open. This means that no matter the intentions of an artist, any artwork holds the possibility of being included into social media, blogs and feeds. As critic Michael Sanchez has pointed out, Contemporary Art Daily, a blog collecting images from exhibitions around the world, has become the primary point of access for info about exhibitions<sup>2</sup>. You can disagree, and claim that you really

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1 Benjamin, Walter (1936/1998/2005) “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. Available from: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>. (Reading date 24.05.14)

2 Sanchez, Michael (2013) “On Art and Transmission”, *Art Forum*. Available from: <http://shootandscram.blogspot.no/2013/07/michael-sanchez-on-art-and-transmission.html>. (Reading date 24.05.14)

prefer experiencing art physically, but the millions of daily visitors to Contemporary Art Daily shows that documentation has replaced the artwork as the object meeting the viewer.

What kind of object is the documented image? Does it show us the artwork, or is it a representation of the art object? For philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty sense impressions are not passively received, but actively produced<sup>3</sup>. In this regard images don't represent, they allow things to become visible. The photographic representation of an exhibition can be thought of then, not as documentation of something that has been. Instead the images provide something to see the world through. The documentation images in effect sees the work together with the viewer.

Watching the documentation of artwork in online feeds we stop paying attention to the image as representation and see it as the artwork itself. We collapse the artwork and its documentation into one thing. Documentation images thereby allow artwork to retain their purpose as sculptures, paintings or installations. In this respect the artwork still has what Benjamin would call the aura of autonomy. The aura of a documented artwork is just as strong as that of a physical piece, or perhaps stronger, as the image can be rendered in perfection, turning the spatiality and temporality of physical presence into a perfect moment of hollow glow.

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3 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1964) «Eye and Mind» (trans. Carleton Dallery), in Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Primacy of Perception and other Essays*:164

## *Platform*

Most of the emails I receive concerning Portalen Portalen are from people who want to be featured. These aren't just kids in art school. They might be artists showing me work from their latest show in a commercial gallery. Why do they even care about being featured on a blog? Part of the reason is the impact social networks have on individuation and self-recognition today. The process of becoming an individual currently means balancing between the physical self, and various social network profiles. Our interactivity renders us unable to maintain a stable, autonomous identity, instead we rely on likes from our social network followers to confirm that what we do is meaningful. The artist, just as any young person today, feels the most home online, where she receives affirmation through posts, likes, reblogs and comments. It is first in the inclusion into social networks that the artwork becomes part of the reality we experience. Just as it is important to have a studio and work exhibited in renowned galleries, it becomes vital to have your pieces shown back to you in the communal spaces of social networks.

The communal spaces of social networks are, however, filled with non-art. How should an artist respond to this? Some choose to embrace it, for instance through a modern day version of the avant-garde desire to break down the barrier between art and life. Artist Brad Troemel's attempts to disseminate work to reach 'accidental audiences'<sup>4</sup> can be seen as an example of this. The opposite strategy is found in the white-walled backdrop and illuminest lighting of the gallery interiors displayed on pages such as Contemporary Art Daily. This framing makes the art images clearly distinguishable from the visual heterogeneity in the non-art content of the streams. The high art status is guaranteed by the white backdrops.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Troemel, Brad (14.03.13) "The Accidental Audience", in *The New Enquiry*. Available from: <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-accidental-audience/>.

5 Abrams, Loney (12.08.13) "Flatland", in *The New Enquiry*. Available from: <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/flatland/>.

According to media theorist Domenico Quaranta the internet should be seen not as media, but rather as space<sup>6</sup>. Social networks then become particular places, or platforms, which open for certain possibilities of interaction between its inhabitants. Portalen Portalen uses Blogspot, where the viewer has few ways to interact with images. You can scroll through the collection, save images to your computer, share them by email, but that's about it. There's no way of telling other people on the platform that you're there, you can't like or reblog. It's possible to comment on things, but this is rare, nothing like the strings of messages attached to images on Instagram or Facebook. Blogspot offers screened existence with less emphasis on the sociality of it.

There's a certain emptiness to Blogspot, which is present also in the layout of Portalen Portalen. It's standardized, clean, with a consistent format of three images/videos per post, from an artist or an exhibition. The lack of interactivity on Blogspot, and the simple layout makes it sort of like a blog version of the white cube. While Instagram might feel like an exhibition opening – lots of people chatting, no one really interested in the artwork – Portalen Portalen feels more like entering a gallery on an off-day. You're the only one inside, there's possibly a press-release, but you don't really read that. So it's just you, the name of the artist, gallery and exhibition, the white walls and the artwork.

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6 Quaranta, Domenico (2011) "The Unbearable Aura of a Website. Originality in the Digital Age", in *In Your Computer*, Brescia: Link Editions:160.

## Web



Clockwise from top left Tillman Horning: *Glassbook/applied sculpture*, 2013; Al Ouchtomsky: *Algae for lcd display*, 2010; Jon Rafman: *Terra Derma*, 2013; Pia Eikaas: *Modern Log-Ladys Log*, 2011; Andreas Ervik: *Ancient Body New Technology*, 2013

According to Gene Mchugh a shift in artistic production has taken place, comparable to the one instigated by Duchamp's ready mades. Prior to the readymade artistic production was seen as creation on surfaces or in shapes, making images and sculptures. Duchamp changed the game by acknowledging the context in which the game is played, directing the focus toward the gallery or museum to which the artwork belongs<sup>7</sup>. With the internet a new level surfaces, a conceptualization of the network in which artists participate. Art critic David Joselit writes that the artwork is never a singular object, it exists in a network of relations to other work, to artists, curators, galleries, viewers<sup>8</sup>. He quotes Warhol: «Simply to hang a painting on the wall and say that it's art is dreadful. The whole network is important!»<sup>9</sup>.

Portalen Portalen shows the network of art production. Through the years the blog has gained a substantial amount of followers, and holds a huge archive. This has quite possibly made it important in forming certain aesthetics and stylistic ideas, and disseminating trends, looks, strategies and ways of thinking. With the inclusion of an artist into the blog, their artwork becomes a small piece in the giant archive, something that the followers and viewers scroll through, noting how the textures or the objects selected echo things elsewhere on the blog.

When I started blogging I had this idea that visual art should be treated more like the critical reception of music. Reading music reviews there's usually this attempt at placing bands and artists within certain styles and listing similar sounding projects. When people start making music they often try to copy their idols. The point isn't necessarily to transcend inspirations but to make something that is as good as the stuff you like. In visual art if someone tells you that your work is just like something else, they think your ideas aren't original. An example of this is the way art historian Peter Bürger positioned dadaists and surrealists as the originators and the neo-avant-garde

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7 Mchugh, Gene (2011) *Post Internet*, Brescia: Link Editions.

8 Joselit, David (2009) "Painting Beside Itself", in *October*; 130.

9 *ibid*

of the 50s to 70s in the US as rip offs<sup>10</sup>. Art historian Hal Foster responded to this by saying that the neo-avant-garde didn't attempt to transcend or rebel against prior movements, rather they poked fun at, operated on, and reworked what already existed<sup>11</sup>. What's even more important, for Foster the neo-avant-garde were the first to 'get' what the earlier avant-gardists were doing. Their repetition was required for the earlier gestures to be recognized as meaningful.

Where Foster recognizes repetition as a necessity for originality, the web pushes it even further. The project *Who Wore it Better* is a good way of framing our current situation. In the project, similar looking art is placed side by side, with the blog's title turning the production of art into a style contest. There is however, no way of 'voting' on actually who wore it better, it's an open-ended question. So rather than determining a winner, the project promotes formal and conceptual dialogue over each artist's originality. On *Who Wore it Better* homage, plagiarism, examples of simultaneity are posted, without any indications that there's a difference between these ways of working.

Portalen Portalen is a collection of other people's art, made with an awareness of shared tendencies. Instead of the originality of each work, the focus becomes similarity as a result of cultural affinity. We're swimming in pools of ideas, and our production is always a reworking of what's already out there. Instead of functioning as an autonomous producer the artist navigates trends, or rather participates in ongoing conversations with objects, words, images, strategies, techniques, etc. The web of art as an exchange of ideas.

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10 Bürger, Peter (1984) *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

11 Foster, Hal (1994) "What's Neo About the Neo-avant-garde", in *October* 70. Available from:

<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/779051?uid=3738744&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21104165367747>.



## *Portal Portal*



Samara Scott: *Dreamcatcher (detail)*, 2012

Former Portalen Portalen contributor, Christopher Schreck has described the aesthetic of the blog as «contemporary paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints whose appearance is rough and unprecious, willfully casual and decidedly *imperfect*»<sup>12</sup>. Portalen Portalen is filled with paintings that look like they are made by kids, outsiders or mentally ill, as well as mindlessly assembled objects and crude sculptures. This does not mean that I choose images that are repulsive or 'poor'. Since I started out I wanted to treat visual art like music, which meant that I worked by attraction. I simply post things that looked good, especially things that somehow ripped through everyday experiences and normal behavior.

A central theme of Portalen Portalen is the conflation of gallery spaces with contemporary office zones. An implication of this is art production as serious business. The artwork I select also

<sup>12</sup> Schreck, Christopher (29.02.12) "Medium 1", in *LPV Magazine*. Available from: <http://lpvmagazine.com/2012/02/medium-1/>.

appropriate from advertising and mass-produced goods, creating works using consumer logic and commercial gloss. The artwork uses brands, well-known visual tropes, but removes the original meaning of the object and creating new confusing content. The works show the pointlessness of production, the pointlessness of the current economic system. And it presents art production as boredom gestures, with the artwork as an alternative to utility but also to idleness. You don't want to work and add to the current economic system, but doing nothing isn't a good option either. So art production, is something to get time going.

Is there then a kind of anti-capitalist sentiment running through Portalen Portalen? According to the cute cat theory of digital activism the web 2.0 was invented so that we could share cute pictures of our cats, but the platforms can be used by activists to subvert the ones in power<sup>13</sup>. The thing is though, I'm more interested in cute cats than capitalist critique. Artist Katja Novitskova gives a different account of animals, seeing them and their beauty as powerful technologies<sup>14</sup>. We connect with animals, and they connect us with our childhood memories and with our deep evolutionary past, tapping into primal consciousness. For Novitskova the intensity of our bonding with these creatures forms possibilities for our future.

Portalen Portalen often focuses on contemporary capitalist production and office spaces. But it is from the perspective of a kid that has been brought to the workplace with her parent. The kid is bored with the whole set up, she would rather be at home playing with her cat, so she does things just to get time going. And especially things her parents told her not to do. 'Please don't put your lollipop there, it will leave a nasty stain'. And because of that she does it, and precisely because of that it feels *really* good.

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13 Zuckerman, Ethan: "The Cute Cat Talk at Etech". Available from.

<http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/03/08/the-cute-cat-theory-talk-at-etech/>.

14 See: Attention, economics and art: Katja Novitskova at TEDxVaduz: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDfEXUCGwjg>.