

Internet Atrophy: '01 for all and all for 01'

Aleksandra Domanović

Joel Holmberg

Parker Ito

Eilis McDonald

Jonathan Rafman

Temple Bar Gallery & Studios, Dublin,

8th April – 14th May 2011

Curated by Rayne Booth

Text by James Merrigan

Offline



Aleksandra Domanović, *untitled (30.11.2010)*, 2010,
printable monuments to the abolished .yudomain,
3x 7,500 page-stack sculpture, A4 inkjet:
photo by Eilis McDonald

“In the Global Village...we are like the occupants of an elevator - having proximity without community”

Marshall McLuhan[1]

In Bob Hanke’s brilliant essay *McLuban, Virilio and the Electric Speed in the age of Digital Reproduction*, there is a passage that describes the only meeting between the two philosophers, Paul Virilio and Marshall McLuhan. Hanke’s generous research creates a backstory for McLuhan to pronounce the above introductory quote. Seemingly, after a dinner at a Parisian restaurant in 1973, the pair got stuck in an elevator for over an hour. It must be mentioned that Virilio and McLuhan are always pitched against each other in the theoretical arena of new media. Virilio is the postmodern skeptic who has a ‘territorial’ grasp on time, space and power within the vector of speed, while McLuhan’s premature projections of a ‘Media Eden’ (Virilio’s phrase),[2] are due partly to being born twenty one years before his counterpart: he was late to the internet party. Both have been proven to be ‘technologically clairvoyant’. Ironically, it is ‘time’ that separates their theories, as Hanke outlines, McLuhan was already tackling the discursive element of ‘speed’ (Virilio’s ‘baby’) before his death in 1980. I mention these two protagonists because of a personally perceived flip in the mediation of “Internet Art” in the context of the group show “Offline” at Temple Bar Gallery & Studios. Although the McLuhan/Virilio argument has run its course, it once again seems pertinent as “Internet Art” becomes potentially less “etherealised” and more grounded— as evidenced in the virtual *objecthood* of the scattered and stacked paraphernalia at TBG&S.

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Curated by Rayne Booth, *Offline* is one of the first exhibitions that I have experienced that I felt I needed a camera, or some digital tool to mediate what I was seeing. It was almost as if there was no frame, structure, boundary, to support the thrash heaps of *Kitsch* and ‘station[e]ry’ objects. I write “station[e]ry” as an intended doubling of the meaning of the word, in reference to Aleksandra Domanović’s columned stacks of A4 pages, where the edge of each layered page is printed to create an image on the vertical sides of what Domanović titles—“printable monuments to the abolished. yu domain.” The artist’s statement gives some sociopolitical background to these aesthetically pleasing and innovative sculptures:

The 1991 break up of her[Domanović’s] homeland came only a few months after the country’s top domain had been registered and internet use began to spread. Domanović’s sculptural works...were produced to commemorate the recent abolition of the .yu domain.

Taking Domanović’s statement into account when tracking the multicoloured ‘ink blot’ images on the vertical sides of the towers of

paper, they take on the form of geographical maps found in ‘70s type encyclopedias (books which also had the butt ends printed). “Ink blot” also suggests the psychological *Rorschach Test*, which utilised inkblot designs to examine thought disorders. Considering Domanović’s homeland, the political context positions these forms into the shifting geographical boundary of the “break-up” of the artist’s former Yugoslavia? McLuhan wrote in 1979: “As Ecology takes over in all fields of human activity in the Eighties, every kind of change poses a pollution threat.” Domanović’s printed images have a viral tenacity that reflects McLuhan’s ecological fears—the way they wrap themselves around the plinths of paper—ubiquitous contemporary terms such as “computer virus” and “economic contagion” come to mind. If you get down on your knees and look closely at Domanović’s printed designs, vague mediated images of protest or celebration are found within their *Kitsch* makeup. It is the *Kitsch* formal sensibilities from all the artists at TBG&S that gives a clichéd filmic landscape of a post-ecological disaster. As Hank concludes from Virilio’s position: “For Virilio, the ‘information bomb’ means that media interactivity should be regarded in the same way as nuclear radioactivity.”[3] In the end, our coming together online, will be our individual and collective death in reality.

In 1939, at the age of 29, Clement Greenberg wrote his seminal essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*. Greenberg, from a Marxist standpoint wrote: “Kitsch keeps a dictator in closer contact with the ‘soul’ of the people.”[4] This succinct statement refers to Greenberg’s view of the Germanic and Russian peoples assimilation of *Kitsch* as a

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cultural artifact (or Fascist/ Communist Conditioning). *Kitsch* was easy to digest, rather than an esoteric, rupturing notion like *Avant-Garde*. Simply put, *Kitsch* is colourful, *Avant-Garde* is black and white; one makes you smile, the other makes you think. Uttering the terms “Avant-Garde” and “Kitsch” today has the aftertaste of ‘old hat’ nostalgia. Interestingly, although *Kitsch* is punctuated with retroactive closing brackets—appropriating the “trash heaps” of the past and situating them in the contemporary present, *Avant-Garde* has the ‘black & white’ tinge of the distant past, more modernist than postmodernist. Greenberg writes:

Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard. True enough – simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of Kitsch: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc. etc. [5]



“*Kitsch* is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy.”[6]

Eilis McDonald on the other hand utilises a form of *Kitsch* to fracture identity, traditional grounded space, and time—what McLuhan describes as “classic” notions of past, present and future. The artist’s overarching presence in her scatter installation of ‘found objects’ at TBG&S, is presumed well aware of this ‘awkwardness’ between the virtual and the human, especially when she inserts images of conspicuously placed timber and run-on-the-spot animated gifs, on her growing number of individual websites, which layer this preoccupation with our awkward negotiation of internet space. At TBG&S her ‘real inserts’ of coloured timber and ‘junk-box’ objects interrupt are false notions of an ordered art space on one hand, and on the other hand suggest a virtual space that makes idols of ‘junk’. McDonald’s intentionally clumsy displays trip over the other art objects and other art identities, swallowing and spitting them out on the gallery floor: identity becomes fluxus within McDonald’s ‘framing’.

There is a paradox though, a very new and interesting one that McDonald’s art practice poses. The artist’s ‘art identity’ over the last couple of years has been framed within and without other artists’ identities. Previous projects such as *Rapture Heap*, 2009-10, was a serial project which manifested into a ‘search and display’ of McDonald’s art identity through appropriation and collaboration. The artist’s rupturing ‘collaboration’ with the other four artists at TBG&S is a culmination of this trend to collapse identity in its virtual and art world forms. The paradox is that McDonald’s own art identity is taking on a stronger design as she plays with the fracturing of ‘real’ and spiritual identity in the context of the art world. In a sense ‘art

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identity' is safer within the collaborative or collective, while the artist as individual practitioner is a paranoid delinquent. As Boris Groys writes via Nietzsche— "it is better to be an artwork than to be an artist." [7]

By playing with internet space in the way McDonald does, there is also an intrinsic tie with God or the 'spiritual'. Our textual, mythological, fantastical negotiations of spiritual or religious space is structured around our obsession with identity— of finding one[self] or creating parameters for the [self] to 'ethically' exist in the world. We are quite good at negotiating 'spiritual space' through passed down textual references—such as the *Bible*. Having succeeded in creating an image of a virtual/spiritual space in full view through our lap tops is also counter-intuitive to imagination and the body. The 'history' of religion thought us that materialism is bad and a dematerialised body is good—things of the flesh, very bad—reflecting on the metaphysical, very good. As curious 'inhabitants' of internet space there is a naiveté or "blindspot" which proclaims that identity can be 'real' or 'built' online. In a sense, when we log on there is a gradual 'death of the object' in the less physically and mentally taxing space of the internet.

This thread of thought concerning identity is also found in Parker Ito's *The Most Infamous Girl in the History of the Internet* at TBG&S. The work came into existence when the artist "asked orderartwork.com to create a series of paintings based on a stock photo depicting a smiling, blonde female wearing a backpack which (amongst its other usages) a "parked domain" company called Demand Media employs to catch the

eye of Web surfers who accidentally click to the sites it owns." We are told on the exhibition map of works for *Offline* that this work is a collaboration between McDonald and Ito. Once again we don't know where one artist begins and the other ends—just like the image of the "blonde female", who is depicted on a canvas and flag at TBG&S, McDonald actual art practice becomes a type of internet 'meme' (an idea that takes the form of a hyperlink, image, website etc. and is spread across the internet), luring the viewer from one ill defined space to another, a very apt reflection of our current, largely virtual existence—Hanke write via McLuhan's "Global Village":

It is the velocity of media that determines the possible forms of self-consciousness or identity: print media fostered 'individualism' and 'nationalism' while the immediacy of electromagnetic media fosters retribalisation. (groupism) on a world-wide scale and disembodied existence (everybody is a no-body). [8]

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Parker Ito/Ellis McDonald, *The most famous girl in the history of the internet*, jpg image transferred onto fabric, 2011. (with Jonathan Rafman's *Nine eyes of Google street*.
 View in background: photo by Ellis McDonald.

If we are promoting this disembodied existence via the internet, how does this online existence effect the human citizen in the city? Virilio describes:

a world-city, the city to end all cities, a virtual city of which every real city will ultimately be a suburb, a sort of omnipolitian periphery whose centre will be nowhere and circumference everywhere.[9]

After leaving TBG&S, Joel Holmberg and Jonathan Rafman's Lambada prints of internet imagery stayed with me—the viral internet circus had made its mark. Homberg's *Getty Images Hollywood Sign*, plays with what he refers to as "corporate residue." The image depicts the iconic Hollywood sign being layered over by the ubiquitous and vivid "Getty Images" copyright watermark. Just behind Holmberg's sign, McDonald has placed a *Newton's Cradle*—or the more appropriate term in relation to Holmberg's "corporate residue"; "Executive Ball Clicker": subliminal capitalism is waiting to startup!



Jonathan Rafman, *Nine eyes of Google street view*, (excerpts), Lambada print, 2010: photo by Eilis McDonald.

Joel Holmberg could also be Jonathan Rafman (I had to check who was who!). Rafman states that his series of photographs—*Nine Eyes of google Street*—“reintroduces the human gaze and reasserts the uniqueness and importance of the individual.” McDonald is also part of Rafman's series of photographs in the form of the artist's 'extra terrestrial' slouching on a chair. Beneath Rafman's photo McDonald has placed the 'real' object of the extra terrestrial smoking and looking up at Rafman's photos. These efforts to “reassert” individuality are in the process of collapse at TBG&S. Our growing affiliation with internet space allows the viewer to assimilate the 'real' objects at TBG&S as mediated versions. Before, “Internet Art” was a defiant sub-group within the art world, that was testing the groundlessness of the 'art-object'. Now, 'Internet Art' is a language that we understand more than 'Art' itself.

Between the artists at TBG&S, there is the practice of what McLuhan describes as “groupism,” which is defined in the diaspora of individual identity through our now paired evolution with the internet. At TBG&S, the less than definite space (staged primarily by McDonald), enacts a type of 'real' demonstration or protest for and against “disembodied existence.” This is not political. There is no Left versus Right. Art has lost its position, even if those past positions were constructed by arbitrary rules, there was at least a false floor to stand on. That is what make's Booth curatorial so intriguing, it reflects the current state of negotiating the world, without blatantly illustrating it. There is a 'tone' rather than a curatorial 'thread' linking all the works together, which is refreshing. I am defining

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“tone” as something that can only be sensed, while “thread” is a conceptualist *trope* of the so-called successful curatorial. Both artist and curator find an awkward platform for their manifestations of virtual space in ‘physical’ space. This highlights the ‘gap’ between the ‘manmade’ and the ‘mediated’—body and mind, what Dave Beech repeats via John Roberts as the post-Cartesian artist; a deskilled entity that is divorced from the body.[10] The absurd questions that I am left with are: will technology become symbiotic with humanity? Maybe we will end up looking like one of McDonald’s atrophied ‘aliens’ at TBG&S?

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