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SUPER-EARTHS

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UNDERSTANDING INDIA

BREAKING NEWS

Simon Denny  
All You Need is Data  
- The DLD 2012 Conference  
REDUX, 2013  
Auckland Art Gallery  
Courtesy of the artist, Petzel  
Gallery, New York, Galerie  
Buchholz, Köln, Berlin

DLD  
MEMORIES ARE  
MADE OF THESE

13:50 - 14:50  
Sunday 22  
January 2012

www

## **Lou Cantor & Clemens Jahn**

### Interview with David Joselit

**LOU CANTOR & CLEMENS JAHN** In the chapter *Image Explosion* from your book *After Art* you propose art as an international cultural currency that transcends economic, political and social boundaries at a global scale. While art and its value systems are built on a logic and history of utmost exclusivity, where do you see a strong diplomatic potential?

**DAVID JOSELIT** Instead of *transcending* socioeconomic and geographic boundaries, art *crosses* them in its capacity as a type of currency, which is simultaneously economic (functioning, like real estate, as a hedge against the volatility of financial markets) and cultural (in that it confers prestige and distinction on those associated with it). If I am correct that art circulates as a currency, then we might assess its global dynamics in terms of investment and debt, just as the World Trade Organization and World Bank attempt (often disastrously) to manage global financial flows. The contemporary increase in legal and moral arguments aimed at repatriating cultural properties held by European and American museums, which I discuss in *After Art*, is an indication that art is indeed more and more recognized as a form of cultural wealth to which there are many conflicting claims based variously in property rights, heritage, and an assertion of global commons. By referring to art's diplomatic potential, I mean to propose a more intentional and explicitly negotiated policy toward sharing this wealth equitably – particularly between the global North and the global South.

**LOU CANTOR & CLEMENS JAHN** In the previous decades advanced globalization has transformed the art market drastically. How do you see these changes affecting the cultural value of art? Is there an aspect in the relationship between the monetary and the cultural value of art that is relevant to your theory?

**DAVID JOSELIT** It's hard not to feel demoralized by how closely the dissemination of global art infrastructures is tied to international elites who are largely those involved in building new museums, and patronizing new art fairs. I think that this condition puts enormous pressure on progressive artists to find a way to resist becoming entirely coded as a new class of courtiers. Lately I've been wondering if the appropriate strategy might have more to do with justice than with politics: a kind of justice tied to visibility and attention. The medium of art is attention, and artists can redirect how attention is *paid*.

**LOU CANTOR & CLEMENS JAHN** Bruno Latour formulates what he calls a "symmetrical anthropology" in *We Have Never Been Modern* by defining the truly modern human being as a mediator at the interface between culture and nature, subjects and objects, humans and nonhumans. How would you relate this to your concept of an "epistemology of search," where the artist is no longer a producer but a mediator and/or operator?

**DAVID JOSELIT** Latour's notion of cultural assemblages is very important to my arguments about art: for me the analogous aesthetic structure is *format* (as opposed to medium). By epistemology of search, I mean to assert that knowledge and aesthetics lies in the act of *assembling* – or searching – for content instead of inventing it. In effect, I'm proposing that artists can and do function as data miners, finding patterns within already existing and often overwhelmingly large accumulations of information.

**LOU CANTOR & CLEMENS JAHN** For us, one of the more memorable art shows in 2013 was Simon Denny's *All You Need Is Data: The DLD*

2012 Conference *REDUX* at the Munich Kunstverein. On 89 printed canvases Denny summarized the 2012 Digital-Life-Design conference, an annual assembly of “business, creative and social leaders” who present their plans and visions of how to shape people’s lives with computer technologies in the near future. While the concept of the artist as operator has been around much longer than the internet, projects like Denny’s seem like a very contemporary form of critical practice. Do you think that today art practices of *searching*, *assembling*, and *mediating* generally bear a greater critical potential than practices that try to invent or create?

**DAVID JOSELIT** I feel resistant to making a blanket statement about what kind of practices are more effective than others, but with that said, yes, I think that projects like Denny’s redirect how attention is paid, as I put it before. By resisting the “invention” of new content an artist like Denny places emphasis on the *form* that conditions how information is received. He reformats content in a way that actually pertains more to histories of modernist abstraction than might at first be apparent. This is the paradox of so much art now (including painting): it seems to focus on nothing but content, but in fact, its emphasis is on the rhetorical patterns by which content is shaped, which are, in themselves, completely abstract.

**LOU CANTOR & CLEMENS JAHN** Similar to the qualities Richard Dawkins ascribes to genes in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, you assert that “images possess vast power through their capacity for replication, remediation, and dissemination at variable velocities.” How important is an image’s connection to or affiliation with the artist – as producer or operator of the image – toward gaining the status and value of art? Can images gain value and meaning when completely detached from their origins? Maybe even fight for their own survival like Dawkins’s “selfish genes,” merely using the artist for self-preservation?

**DAVID JOSELIT** Brad Troemel, one of the artists behind the popular Tumblr blog, *Jogging*, argues that images circulate more easily – via

reblogging and other modes of sharing – when they are unencumbered by association with an artist, or even with art. This is undoubtedly true in many cases, but an artist’s name can also act as an accelerator – think of how someone like Andy Warhol self-consciously produced himself as a brand and consequently attracted great attention for his works. The important issue here is to theorize how images move – according to what speed and magnitude – and to recognize the shape of this mobility as a fundamental part of their meaning (perhaps more important than ostensible content). This relates to “epistemology of search,” because, as any user of Google knows, it’s easier to find content that is already popular than content that has received fewer hits or “likes.” Hito Steyerl’s theory of the “poor image,” on the other hand, links an impoverishment of information (i.e. degradation of a file), to the degree to which it moves from place to place, losing “definition” or density as it goes. In short, there is an entire political economy of image circulation, which should be of major concern to contemporary art.

**LOU CANTOR & CLEMENS JAHN** What is the role of art criticism at a time where writing can hardly keep up with an accelerated “political economy of image circulation” anymore?

**DAVID JOSELIT** Maybe to decelerate? A lot of apparent acceleration of image (or other commodity) production doesn’t represent a genuinely new structure. I think the point of criticism is to attempt to clarify enduring structures by and through which images circulate. To take a literal example, it seems like recent philosophies of Accelerationism harken back to the manic seizure of modes of production that characterized the heroic ideologies of the early Soviet Union. But instead of a dictatorship of the proletariat, Accelerationists are calling for a kind of dictatorship of the digital cognitariat.

**LOU CANTOR & CLEMENS JAHN** At the same time, the velocity at which a phrase such as Rahm Emanuel’s “you never want a serious crisis to go to waste” went around the world exemplifies a vast

dispersive potential of language in a networked age – one that sometimes seems even greater than that of images. How do you see the future potential of language-based art forms against this backdrop?

**DAVID JOSELIT** One thing I'm very interested in is what might be called the "short form" that is indigenous to digital communication: the text, the tweet, the e-mail. It seems to me that this kind of concentration of attention will have all kinds of aesthetic ramifications. An artist like Ryan Trecartin creates manic epics composed of innumerable units in this kind of short form.

**LOU CANTOR & CLEMENS JAHN** In *After Art* you refrain from explicitly discussing (inter)net art. At first glimpse, however, the works and practices of numerous net artists seem to perfectly fit the role of the "emissary [...] that can cross borders effortlessly." Could you explain the decision not to refer to these artists?

**DAVID JOSELIT** I have been criticized for not addressing Internet art more explicitly, and I'm guilty as charged. The reason (and I don't offer this as an excuse) is that for me it is very interesting to find the marks of a new technology in practices beyond that technology. For instance, painting, which has been devoted to representing action in much of its history, ends up an excellent place to trace the actions of digital images.

**LOU CANTOR & CLEMENS JAHN** You finish the last chapter of *After Art* with: "Our real work begins *after art*, in the networks it formats." Are you therefore suggesting that what comes after art takes place beyond a distinction between artwork and "by-work" – between *ergon* and *parergon* – and in that sense beyond the logic of center and periphery?

**DAVID JOSELIT** Certainly the notion of center and periphery is relevant here, but what I really mean is that works of art have what

Arjun Appadurai calls a “social life,” passing through many stages and settings. When we attach a meaning to a work of art, we fix, or reify it semiotically, just as exchanging it for money objectifies it financially. Art begins to exert its power once it enters the world and I think that historians and critics should try to trace or assess its various states rather than diagnosing a consistent meaning. In that sense, the task of analysis begins *after art* – after the production of the work is complete and it has entered the world. For me, the value of art is to continuously stage – or format – situations of self-disclosure, each of which is significantly different.

**LOU CANTOR & CLEMENS JAHN** What about artworks that are either based on an “open form” – as proposed by Oskar Hansen in 1959 – and are thus never completed, and artworks that only enter the world *while* they are being produced: ephemeral, and performative artworks, that are incompatible with information and communication technologies, and therefore cannot be disseminated online?

**DAVID JOSELIT** Most of the art made in the world is not widely disseminated; it’s very important to remember that what we recognize as global is a tiny subset of world art. I think that the refusal of easy transferability continues to be a powerful strategy linked to a long tradition of modernist negation. What’s interesting is that today’s equivalent to the “blank canvas” in some ways is the undocumented performance. This means that the relative prominence of aesthetic platforms has changed, but the resistance to easy consumption remains a consistent concern of artists since the mid-nineteenth century at least.

