

Modern-Day Narcissi



Andrzej Zujewicz, "The Internet" (2012)

JOANNA DERKACZEW

Institute of Art

Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

joanna.derkaczew@gmail.com

Joanna Derkaczew, graduate from the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Warsaw, theater critic and journalists specializing in culture, is studying for a PhD at the PAS Institute of Art.

Who are the netizens – the new denizens of the digital era? What kind of a space do they inhabit? What can we expect of them, and is their behavior predictable?

The question "Who are we?" has fascinated humankind for centuries, but... enough is enough. Today, when science and philosophy wish to discover more about us,

they ask, "What can we expect of ourselves?", "How do we meet our needs and formulate our goals?", "In what spheres and contexts do we build our relationships?", "What decides how we perceive reality?", and "How and why do our perception strategies change with time?"

In order to capture this difference, George Kubler (in *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*) suggests taking a closer look at ritually-repeated actions: everyday habits, routines, and anything else that comes together to form an ordinary course of events. He goes on to ask what we mean when we say that something has changed.

As such, any study of the online generation, or generation Web 2.0, should start from looking at what life's natural rhythm means to its members.

Cynical, enlightened, naïve

The first thing to note is that their routines are no longer dependent on their physical environment. Studies of people born since 1993 (known as the Google Generation, Generation Y, or the Millennial Generation) have shown that such individuals have frequently already spent around twenty thousand hours online and ten thousand hours playing computer games. The environment in which they live, work, play and build relationships is far broader than the physical space.

If the concept of denizens of the digital era exists at all, it is precisely because these individuals' behaviors and habits exist in different spheres than those of previous generations. Their interactions with family, friends and colleagues are increasingly shaped by the formats and interfaces of the media and websites they use. For example, they express approval for something by clicking the "Like" button on Facebook precisely because that's how the social network has been designed. The instincts they acquire by spending several hours of every day online permeate into other behavior, and have a detrimental impact on their offline activities. The effects of this are visible in many fields: they are revealed in studies of personality, creativity, learning ability, social engagement, and even political involvement.

Long-term use of formatted systems online may inhibit Internet users' personal development, and limit their innovativeness and tendency to step beyond the standard. Since learning about the past and the present is also always mediated, the Internet changes our perceptions of them, limiting our critical attitude and sense of agency.

According to Graeme Kirkpatrick, the changes are sufficiently powerful to license convincing parallels between the political cynicism of contemporary neoliberal societies and the attitudes of users of computer interfaces.

The advent of computers that allow us to pursue and satisfy our basic needs for relaxation, contact with other people, and belonging to a community has affected our natural attitude towards technology. The machines in widespread use today cannot be regarded as ordinary tools which can be experimented with, changed, or adapted to one's own needs. An "instrumental approach" to computers is a privilege available to just a narrow elite of people who have the right education, and frequently also the right facilities or equipment. The vast majority of users cannot overcome the monopolistic control of the interface over their experience. Interfaces provide a way into the virtual world within them, but they do not provide the technical ability necessary for making permanent changes or controlling them. Apple is designing its products to make them unhackable and non-transparent in order to prevent users from interfering with them, even if they are determined and have the necessary skills. We interact with the interfaces without

any negotiation. According to Lev Manovich, this is "not an artifact of computer technology but a structural feature of modern society."

Users' cynicism means that they understand the nature of the given phenomenon (such as the algorithm of a computer game or the pace of the machine to which they have subordinated their physicality and actions), although they also give up on a deeper understanding, since this would manifest a resistance to authority (in this case the process driving the interface). We act consciously yet submissively; we are enlightened yet naïve.

In effect, we are held hostage by internal structures, and we even perceive the situation as convenient. There is a chasm between actions and their consequences: when we click a series of keys and icons fire an employee, or send abusive messages on an online forum, we cannot ourselves see the distress our action has caused. The same applies to taking "virtual" military action and making radical financial decisions. The interface and its features such as buttons for starring and liking online posts distances us from the effects our actions have on reality. Since the Internet is constantly reshaping many experiences, including work and education, are we seeing degeneration or progress?

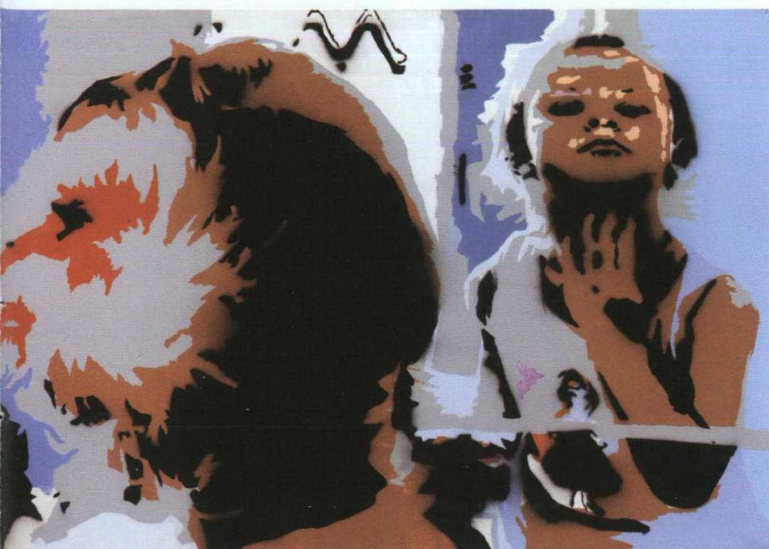
In search of award

Erik Bratland conducts an extensive analysis of this situation in his paper "Identity and competence in the network society." He investigates the effects of the fact that Internet users have access to information and communication unavailable locally, which in turn encourages reflexivity. By describing the evolving network societies in Scandinavia, he regards this trend towards increased reflexivity as key for the understanding of the ongoing changes.

He states, "In the network society the self is being transformed, and the conditions for the processes of learning and self-formation are changed.(...) This development provides new possibilities for a reflexive organization of the self, which is less and less restricted by its placement in a local context."

However, he does not associate the growing reflexivity with maturity or progress. Although all strategies of the reflexive self are independent, they are also indirect. Individuals develop via systems such as interfaces, social networks, and high-capacity hard disks over which they have limited control. Furthermore, the systems are not as widespread and open as language, the written word, and nature, although they do not exclude them; they are commercial products.

An interest in the self in relation to others and in one's own reactions is not the same as the familiar, tame egotism of former eras. Christine Rosen works on contemporary narcissism by studying individuals whose lifestyles entail spending a lot of time online (for many this is an essential part of their lives), encouraging them to "collect"



Krzysztof Krzemiński (b. 1985, Radom), "Untitled," acrylic on canvas

friends, comments and "Likes," as well as performing new roles by creating profiles, blogs, and being present on online forums under an assumed name or identity.

These activities reflect the "eternal human need for attention," largely resulting from low confidence and sense of self-worth, and the need for constant reassurance of one's attractiveness to others. However, new media also demand such narcissistic behavior of users who would not be as self-centered under different circumstances.

Rosen goes as far as recognizing this change in the very language used to describe online niches. While in the era "before social networks" communities organized themselves around a metaphor for a place (for example, supporters of particular theaters or restaurants had "lodges"), today they focus around an interest in personality. The condition of entering a world in which social or business meetings take place is to reveal something about ourselves. The websites are designed in a way that encourages users to become increasingly open. Revealing personal information is usually linked with an element of gratification; the reward is a new acquaintance, access to a new group which we might have been unable to join in "real life," or simply the promise of having fun.

Rosen does not share the enthusiasm of sociologists who see the Internet as a laboratory or educational space; a safe, friendly environment where we can learn about social roles, practice acting as part of a group, and discover and set boundaries. Rather, the author of *Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism* questions the usefulness of social networks for socializing their users. She cites examples revealing that users themselves do not perceive their online behavior as equivalent to activities in a public space.

She quotes the well-known research conducted by the University of Dayton in 2006. Potential employers and employees were asked, "When searching for a new

employer, is it acceptable to use information gathered from the candidate's online profiles?" While 40 percent of employers considered this acceptable, stating that by providing personal information in a public space candidates were giving indirect permission for this data to be accessed and used (presumed consent), 64 percent of students and employees regarded such practices as a violation of privacy.

Unpredictable online

Rosen interprets this difference in perception of privacy thus: individuals feel they should be able to compartmentalize and parcel out parts of their personalities in different settings. She describes this as a "quaintly Victorian notion of privacy," claiming that spending time online has shaped in them a tendency towards unintentional hypocrisy. They perceive the Internet as a system fully able to meet their needs: allowing them to enjoy themselves without any boundaries when they feel like it, while also protecting them from the consequences of such behavior. They also do not fully identify with their behavior online by demanding the right to be able to place an embargo on their privacy. They act as though the Internet operates on the basis of some unwritten agreement.

Rosen writes on the increasingly widespread "protean selves," first described by Robert Jay Lifton. Respondents to the poll conducted by the University of Dayton admitted that when online they frequently present themselves slightly differently, and not necessarily more favorably. They strive towards mockery and self-mockery, irony, absurdity, and humor; their emotions are not connected to a particular object or goal.

And so, in answer to one of the questions posed at the start of the article - "What can we expect of such individuals?" - Rosen states that most of their behavior cannot be predicted, since they do not have a "solid core." As such, their behavior should be studied not in terms of their potential decisions, but the systems within which they operate, since they are likely to drive those individuals towards certain activities in "real life." As such, Rosen adds her voice to the ongoing discussion of new media by expressing her misgivings, and is one of the few researchers presenting convincing studies and arguments. ■

Further reading:

- Kirkpatrick G. (2004). *Critical Technology: A Social Theory of Personal Computing*. Ashgate
- Manovich L. (2001). *The Language of New Media*. MIT Press
- Bratland E. (2009). Identity and competence in the network society. Paper presented at the West Pomeranian Educational Congress, University of Szczecin.
- Rosen Ch. (2007). Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism. *The New Atlantis*, No 17.