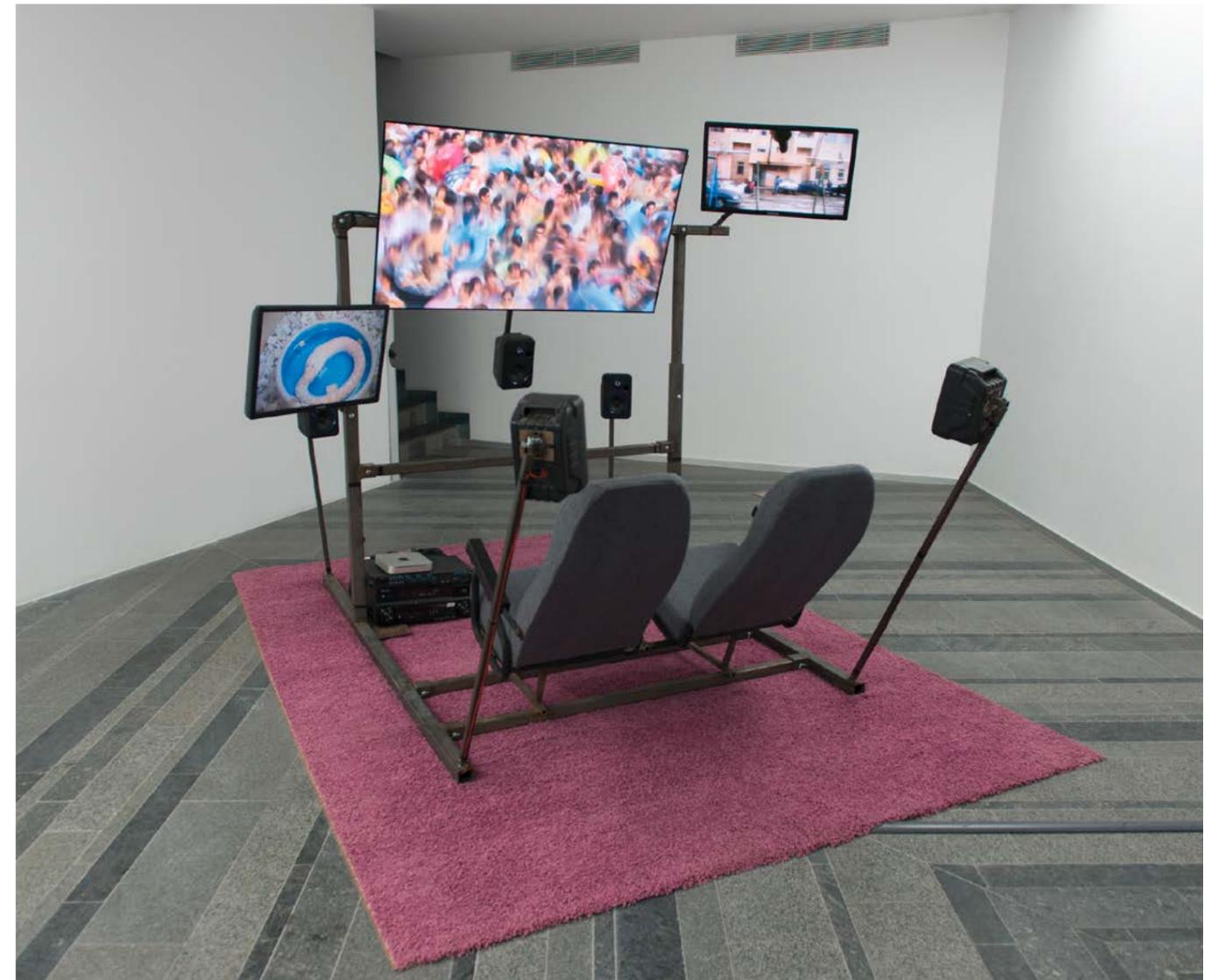# LIKE
BRUCE LEE SAYS:
BE WATER

We are at a terrifically interesting point for art—some artists are trying to maintain their position in a world made precarious and uncertain by the internet, but some, whom we might call 'Post-Internet', are becoming water.
Text by **JAMES TABBUSH**

At a small dinner party for young artists and art students I attended recently, I noticed a woman looking at me and winking as she writhed distractedly. I should add for clarity's sake that she wasn't there in person but appeared on a screen above the courgette salad and Turkish bread.

Behind her was the familiar flowing form of the iTunes visualizer. Every so often, a window would appear asking for three 'credits' to continue watching a nude version, with which window the woman would interact in complex fashion in regard to which was in front and which behind; it wasn't at all clear where she thought she was.

Next a competition started among those present as to who could replace the iTunes whirls with the most fantastically inappropriate video and music. The dancing woman now found herself dancing in a transparent layer above grinding gears, advertising landscapes and jelly babies. Last up was a striptease overlaid on to images of sausage production, which was great in all sorts of ways. Nobody needed to think about why these different juxtapositions were funny or interesting, because we were all young people who had grown up with the internet—there was a pleasing kind of group consciousness.

In an interview with *Rhizome* recently, Kari Altmann said that artists of her circle ('Post-Internet' artists, roughly speaking) were behaving more like content feeds than like artists of the past. She could predict what any of them were going to post or combine next. 'Images became meta images,' she said, narrating these changes. 'Objects became meta images. Everything could be linked. Everything was part of a stream, then a mass.'

You see this phenomenon in the Twitter feed of an artist like Joey Holder, a fairly recent Goldsmiths graduate who posts a great quantity of images of marine biological oddities and their corollaries in the world of technology, and makes work that displays a similarly filtered set of images in semi-transparent overlays. Her work is sensual, overwhelming, a bit of a data dump. She quoted to me from her artist's statement: 'Fragmented patterns clash against automated representations, each vying for the viewer's attention, creating a barrage of excess and exuberance.' Alternatively, we could think about The Jogging, a strangely popular Tumblr (popular outside the art world, which is a rare thing indeed for an artist's project) in which Post-Internet irony is combined with cheap gags in a massive and super-rapid stream of images, memes and videos.

These works are not like novels or symphonies; they don't weave a tapestry of meaning out of internet detritus. Instead they filter and collate, or combine two streams of data into one. Altmann continues: 'One image wasn't enough. The timeline from thought to post diminished. All content sources became equalized.' Even those of us who are not art-world insiders are
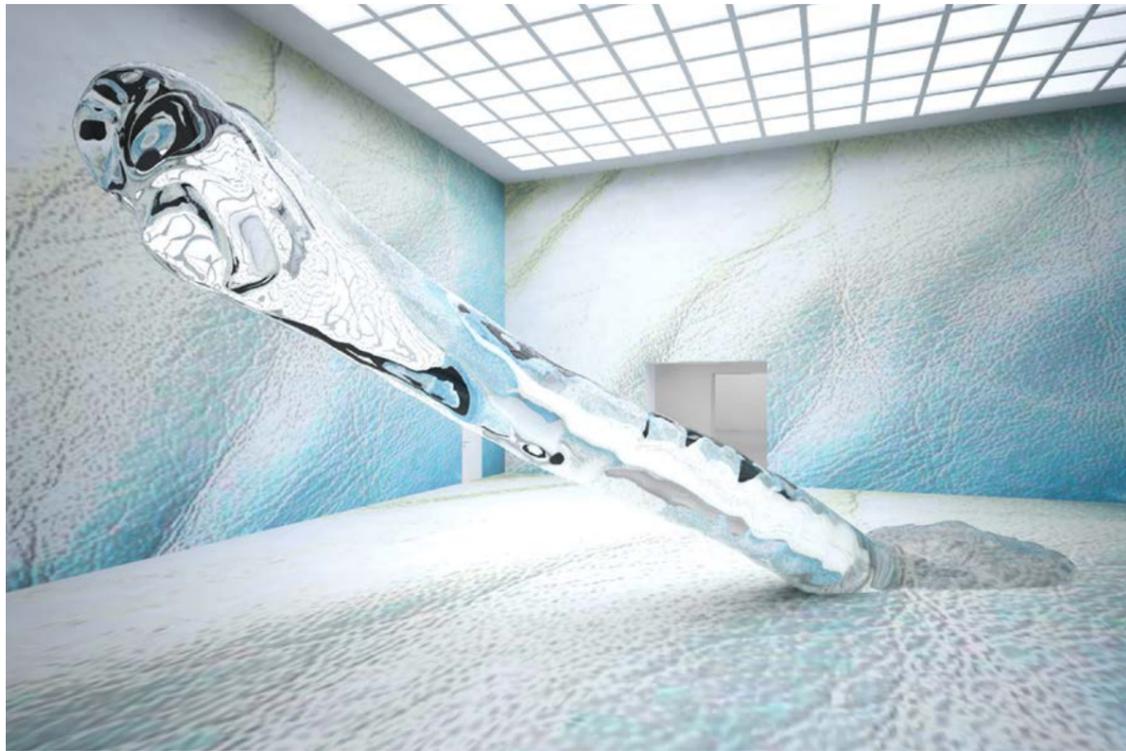
Previous pages, left
Lizzie Fitch/Ryan Trecartin
Priority Innfield
2013
Installation view
Zabludowicz Collection
London, 2014

Previous pages, right
Jon Rafman
Future Generation
Art Prize
2014
Installation view
Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev

Left
Kari Altmann
*How to Hide your Plasma
(Handheld Shapeshift for
Liquid Chrystal Gallery)*
2010 (still)

Below left
Jon Rafman,
Oh the Humanity
HD video, mp4, 3 minutes

Opposite
Timur Si-Qin
Untitled (Axe Effect)
2014
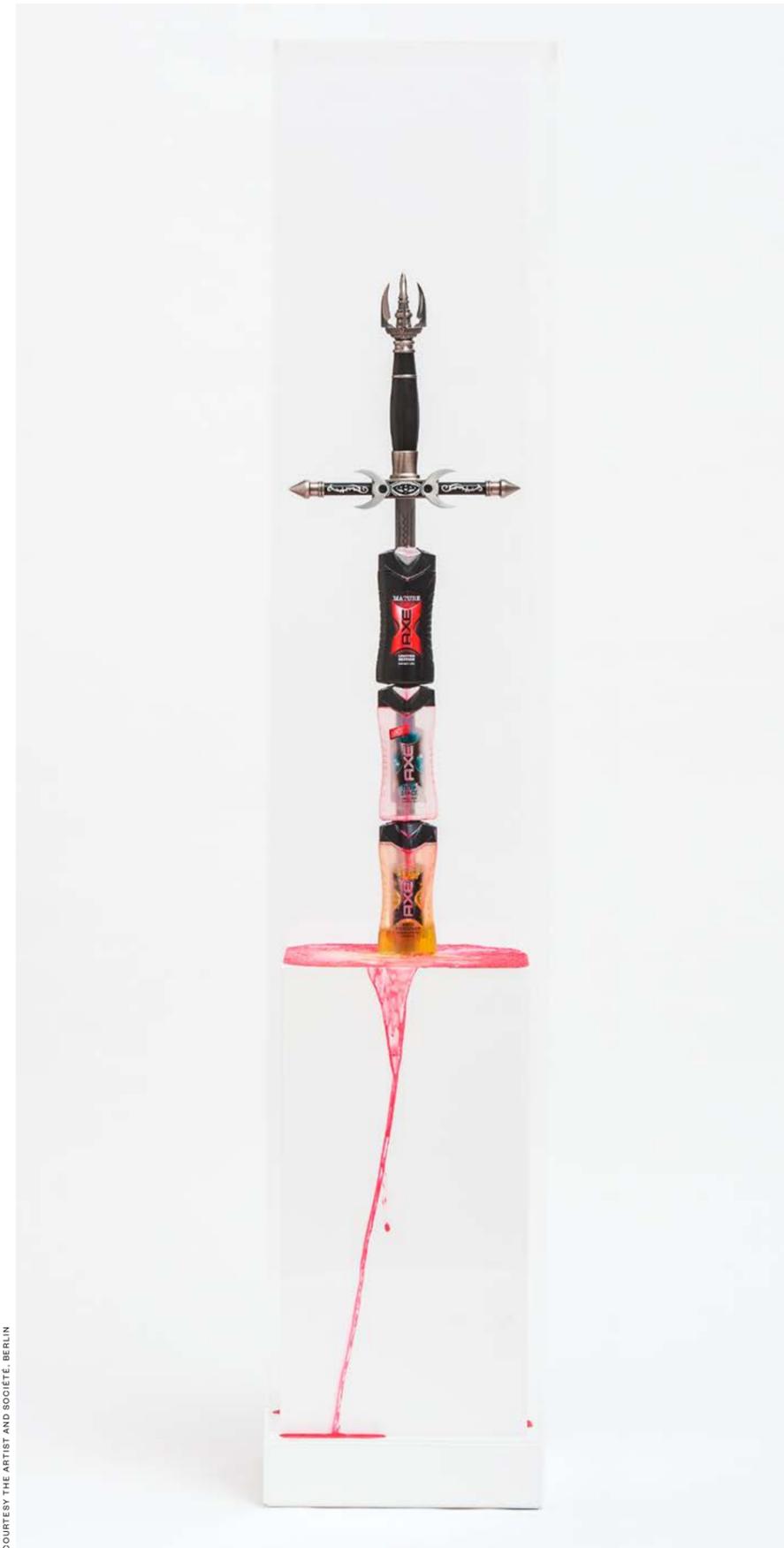
familiar with this from Facebook. The time taken between having a funny idea and publishing a celebrity's photograph with a wilfully ungrammatical sentence overlaid in bold has become exponentially smaller in the last few years. When we find out about, say, oil-cooled computers or a new kind of manbag, we will often post it to interested friends without thinking much about it beforehand. These are obvious things. But the idea that artists are doing the same, that they use the same unreflective processes to make their work, this seems significant.

Holder gave me her own take on the question: 'The problem is that everything is now reduced to this flattened state of "information". We view it through a screen, through common interfaces. I think within my own work I try to present material which doesn't easily fit within our usual frames of reference—strange creatures, alien-like life forms within these everyday interfaces to represent the limitations of our human-made structures.'

Kari Altmann, on the other hand, tries to make art out of precisely the state of affairs she worries about, in a familiar contemporary-art move. She has a few different projects which perform an algorithmic-style trawling operation, seemingly automated, making associations between starfish skin and the logo of the mobile-phone company 3, for example, to draw attention to subtle connections and frictions in the associations between images, brands and logos. It's reminiscent of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, in which the art historian created something like the first Google Images search result page in juxtaposing reproductions of Botticelli paintings next to snake dances, next to advertisements of the time. On the other hand, the theses of Altmann's juxtapositions tend to be sensual and intuitive rather than theoretical—there is no chance she will be told that she's got it wrong.

So here's the shift: these artists, even when they have a quasi-critical agenda, are not interpreting or analysing the world in the way that artists have done historically. They act as one vector among a whole network of such vectors. 'No doubt, one could describe the ambition of the twenty-first-century artists as the desire to become a network,' wrote Nicolas Bourriaud in *The Radicant*. The interpretation and analysis that do exist take the form of a thousand micro-decisions about what to repost and what to discard. The artist becomes a little more like an algorithm charting her or his own aesthetic preoccupations, or a small filtration station in a great sea of images and information.

Two significant ideas Altmann brings up in her interview are 'soft borders' and 'fluidity'. Fluidity, especially, seems like a shared metaphor that can explain something of what examples of this diffuse movement, Post-Internet Art, have in common. Water is present, in some form, in a surprising amount of this art. Digitized liquid surfaces abound. Human bodies melt or are scanned and printed on to flowing material. Water, digital and

COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES; AND ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK © RYAN TRECARTIN

PHOTO: STUART WHIPPS

> **"THIS IS THE ART WORLD
> AS FACEBOOK PAGE,
> WITH CATS AND DEAD REFUGEES
> FOLLOWING EACH OTHER
> IN QUICK SUCCESSION"**

real, turns up everywhere, in Adham Faramawy's work as well as in that of Holder and Altmann. If we were to trust our young artists as societal barometers, we might say that the two great symbols of our time were flowing water and the pot plant (the pot plant's ubiquity, however, is far more mysterious).

Liquidity is a multivalent metaphor. The torrent and the cloud are both important metaphors in the virtual world, both in different ways suggesting a limitless process. Attilia Fattori Franchini, an independent curator and cofounder of Bubblebyte.org, explains: 'On a general level, water best represents the relationship between individuals and capital, and connects abstract financial jargon with concrete meteorological manifestations. "Liquidity", in its market form, is also a means of adapting—to new economic circumstances, weather patterns or political climates.' Fluidity or liquidity can describe dematerialized information on the internet, the relations between the online and offline worlds or between information and objects. It can refer to fluid identities or to fluid capital in the economic sphere; an analogy that Hito Steyerl explored in an illuminating film appropriately titled *Liquidity, inc.* Millions of monetary transactions ripple through the material world without touching it. Experience is abstracted and dematerialized in every sphere of life.

In Steyerl's film, a version of Bruce Lee intones, 'Be water, my friend. Empty your mind. Be formless, shapeless like water.' (One might think, what if everyone was water?) 'When you have liquidity, you're in control,' says the narrator. There is a bitter irony here, as so often with Steyerl. Our society is defined by precariousness of various kinds. Even being able to slip along with shifting trends, transactions, temporary opportunities or networks does not equate to control. Being a drop of water in a world of solids is an advantage; being a drop of water in a river isn't, really.

One of the most affecting bits of any Post-Internet Art I've seen is found at the end of Jon Rafman's *Mainsqueeze*, where a barely comprehensible image shows us a swimming pool totally full of people who rise and fall en masse with the artificial waves. The individuals are effaced; we see only bits of fluorescent colour and blank skin pixels. One piece of information could not possibly matter on its own; the only thing worth noticing is metadata. It's a kind of nightmare, to be squashed within a crowd and to be at the mercy of a wave; but these people seem to be doing it of their own accord. This one image communicates a lot about our society, and even something about the art world. Because the flow of water, the supremely unreflective activity of the digital world, is now also present in art making, even when it is producing fascinating things like Rafman's film.

If some artists are indeed fulfilling this different, more network-like role, could it also be true that no critical faculty has appeared in regard to Post-Internet Art yet? Who are the intellectual voices attempting to make judgements among this art? Criticism is often descriptive or

"DIGITIZED LIQUID SURFACES ABOUND. HUMAN BODIES MELT OR ARE SCANNED AND PRINTED ONTO FLOWING MATERIAL. WATER, DIGITAL AND REAL, TURNS UP EVERYWHERE"

sociological, and there is less of the 'theory' that has accompanied cutting-edge art since the 60s or 70s (there are certainly remnants of it, but they often seem like disconnected fragments for aesthetic effect). Patrons and collectors often seem to be happy with anything made by a young artist who makes reference to contemporary modes of consumption (rarely is the idea of production addressed, though that's probably a link for the future). This makes sense—it's difficult to employ discernment when faced with a stream or a wave, especially when that condition is so obviously emblematic of our time. Much Post-Internet Art uses tools that are impressive in themselves, from 3D printing to animated skins that deflate and change their texture, and this kind of spectacle of the contemporary can obscure the imaginative value or otherwise of the work. Furthermore, art like Timur Si-Qin's can be so good at replicating the seductiveness of luxury goods and branding

that this seductiveness becomes its main artistic virtue, making it difficult to judge from any other standpoint. As an audience, we don't tend to ask the obvious questions of this art, as we did of Jeff Koons's work, for example. There is a sense in which the nuances become all there is.

In fact, there's a wide range of critical positions within Post-Internet Art, and a range of conversations ranging from the overt to the subliminal. One might think that this disqualifies it from being a movement or group at all, but the formal concerns of this art are so shared (networked) that it's hard to maintain this position. Attilia Fattori Franchini writes that these artists do indeed work together in some sense: 'Each member belonging to the network supports each other and feeds into artistic research and discourse.' It's an interesting and new kind of movement that can contain a James Bridle, who writes articles on surveillance and who considers

himself a political activist, and also a Parker Ito, who exhibits big loud cynical paintings of himself at White Cube. This is the art world as Facebook page, with cats and dead refugees following each other in quick succession, with no link but their shared mode of presentation. This would seem to be another factor of the great undifferentiated wave—artists find that it doesn't matter whether they take a stance for or against something, or whether they take no stance at all. After all, every other possible position is also taken.

Some writers thought that the internet would bring art that couldn't be bought or sold and that would be free from the influence of the art market. The internet has not brought this about, to put it mildly. The most successful artists of this generation (Ito, Ryan Trecartin) have found ways to bring a whiff of the anarchic, overwhelming spirit of the early internet into larger art institutions, but there are a range of strategies used to commodify aspects of the web. Often they involve translating the mutations and slippages of the digital into sculpture that can be exhibited and sold. This might be within a practice, like that of Oliver Laric or Yuri Pattison, which slips, liquid-like, between the digital and the physical and between the critical and the merely mimetic. The impression is of a network that can manifest itself in any medium at all. The effect is that it doesn't matter which medium an idea or image appears in, so that ideas, images, data or objects are similarly dematerialized and undifferentiated.