

BETTER CALL MARK

The massification of digital technologies developed through various waves since the end of the Twentieth century. The first wave was arguably caused by the tsunami of Windows 95, the first accessible personal computer with a Graphical User Interface (GUI), that found in the World Wide Web its killer application. From 16 million users in December 1995, the internet population grew up to 361 million users in December 2000. The second wave was generated by the joint advent of smartphones (which made digital media accessible even for those who don't need a computer), wifi networks and 3G connections (which allowed us to be always online) and social media (which made maintaining an online presence simple, desirable and addictive). In December 2017, the internet population reached 4.1 billion users, 54% of the total world population.

The third wave was caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. During quarantine, the last pockets of the digital divide were brutally erased by the need to survive. For the first time in history, access to digital media was required not just for leisure and entertainment, but also to access some fundamental human rights: the right to work and have an income; the right to eat and buy what you need; the right to get schooling and health treatments; the right to stay in touch with your beloved ones; the right to get out, being able to prove that you are healthy. Those belonging to the large, layered elite of cognitive workers – from billionaire CEOs to precarious gig workers – became, to use a word borrowed from Paul B. Preciado, “horizontal workers”, turning their homeplaces (and often their beds) into multimedia stations where the line between work time and free time, labor and leisure, blurred to the point of disappearance. The pandemic made it clear that the way of living portrayed by the Pixar animated movie *Wall-e* (2008), where what's left of the humankind lives on a spaceship, fed with sugar and entertainment by machines and rejected by a terrestrial environment that has become dangerous, hostile and unlivable, is not only conceivable but possible and sometimes required in the here and now. The “vertical workers” – those who couldn't afford to stay at home, who had to get out and be in danger in order to make the world run smoothly – were increasingly managed and coordinated, hired and fired, by apps and disembodied systems. In December 2021, the internet population reached 5,2 billion users, 66.2% of the total world population.

According to Silvio Lorusso and Geert Lovink, with the pandemic, we entered the time of “online defaults”. Every aspect of social life that happened outside of our comforting domestic walls had to get digital, or die: online meetings, online parties, online viewing rooms, online concerts, online festivals, online fairs... “And yet – they go on writing – we feel the paucity of this networked double of social life. To be sure, the online is no less real than the offline. And yet, they are not mutually exclusive, they aren’t meant to fully replace one another. More importantly, the conversion from one to the other is not lossless.”

The latest wave of digital massification came with recurring waves of digital unease. There are many reasons for this, the most simple one is: we had no choice. There was no alternative. The second one is more subtle, but in plain sight as well: there was no alternative to the internet as it is. We couldn’t but get more trapped in that very same set of tools and solutions that the “big tech” were offering us for free (but with a cost), and that along the previous decade we learned to understand as a panopticon of massive surveillance, data mining and user exploitation. The lock-down came “with a software lock-in”, that made some of the most powerful companies in the world even more powerful, and that locked us in a Matrioska-style prison: in the shrinking cubicles of our homes, within the porous membrane of our social bubble, within the inescapable, world wide cage of networked global surveillance. We desperately needed a way out.

Enter web3 and the metaverse. When, in March 2021, a .jpg file by an author unknown to the art world was sold at auction by Christie’s for 69 million dollars, the event was mostly perceived as a revolution for the art world: new artists, new collectors, a new economy for digital works, a new infrastructure capable to disintermediate the art market and bypass its “gatekeepers”. One year later, we can better understand it as the opening fireworks of a spectacular marketing campaign for a new vision of the Web. This “new” vision wasn’t shaped in 2021, but by the cypherpunks that, in the Eighties and Nineties, developed the ethos and tools of current cryptography, and that in 2008, under the pseudonym of Satoshi Nakamoto, designed the blockchain, the technology now heralded as the foundations of the new Web: a platform described as decentralized and secure, where everybody can be the owner of their own data and digital goods, and where power is not centralized in the hands of a few giant companies, but distributed among a number of subjects, whose governance is, in turn, distributed among users. The campaign went on in the following months, with the endorsement of such testimonials as the inventor of the World Wide Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee; of the disruptor of the current panopticon, activist, whistleblower and former computer intelligence consultant Edward Snowden; and of many others, including His Holiness the Pope. It shaped a narrative based on the continuity of the new web3 with the utopian Web of

the Nineties, and on the actual possibility to destroy the dystopian Web of the early XXI century. And joining forces with the current spring of Virtual Reality, it resurrected the languishing idea of a purely virtual world with a seamless, immersive interface, where you can join events and have meetings “in person”, buy your own land and own your goods, starting from your commodified virtual body. Where the conversion from the physical world is less lossless. Somehow consistently, to give it a name investors in this virtual space drew on a cyberpunk novel from the 1990s, and called it the Metaverse.

While marking a new development in the merging between the real and the digital, these events didn't radically change the status quo: they merely pointed to a promised land, to a radically new alternative. The promises of the crypto-enthusiasts need to be socially evaluated and discussed in their political, economical, cultural and environmental implications. For one thing, the foundations of this new digital environment need to be re-designed to prevent the destruction of the planetary environment thanks to the kilotons of Co2 they are currently generating on a daily basis. Or, is the Wall-e spaceship the only possible endpoint of the ongoing dissolution of the boundaries between the digital and the physical? Better (not to) call Mark.

Domenico Quaranta is a contemporary art critic, curator and educator based in Italy.
He's the author of *Beyond New Media Art* (2013) and *Surfing with Satoshi* (2021).
More info: <http://domenicoquaranta.com>