Max Ryan is an RCA student researching the use of feedback and social media in arts institutions.

Max Ryan: How do you think museums and institutions borrow from the stack or from the defunct Web 2.0? Is this beneficial to their critical positions?

Geert Lovink: Most museums have now woken up and their marketing departments have started to implement a 'social media marketing strategy'. This is in line with the neighboring industrial sectors that are into Greek Yoghurt and Free Range Pork Products. Of course, we should not see the arts sector as an exception! In fact, they have been relatively slow in the implementation of 'social media' in their organisational structure. We do not need to spend much time on that analysis. For decades museum directors and their staff looked down on this silly, hyped-up IT phenomenon called the internet. It was primitive and lacked aesthetic, it was slow and glitchy. This attitude turned out not to be a generational problem. The elitist approach has been passed on from one group of curators and managers to the next, and still travels comfortably across the globe. Years ago I thought this all would change over time but it doesn't. In the end, why should our cultural elites be bothered with international business machines and the banalities of the market? Why bother with technologies invented for engineers?

The key here is the term you're referring to, 'critical positions'. That's not possible in the case of the current curators and art critics because they have no clue. In terms of the internet they have disqualified themselves. One needs to engage with the art form and content in order to formulate a critical position. If you don't bother, you disqualify yourself when it comes to critique. There is no theater criticism without a thorough knowledge of theater as a form, its genres and classics—and without a basic engagement and passion for the rich art form. The same counts for books and films. Can you imagine a literature critic who doesn't like reading? The film critic that never saw a film? In the internet context that's all normal.

MR: In an interview John Stack, the former head of digital transformation at the Tate, said it was the responsibility of the museum to go to where the audience is and prompt conversation online. They saw the where as existing on social media platforms. What do you think of the idea of social media as a discursive space? Can it exist in the same way that is associated with arts spaces? Does the context of the platforms effect this?

GL: Social media as we know them right now are not discursive machines. The internet in general might be, in theory, but the current social media architectures do not facilitate extensive exchanges. There is a historical reason for this. Social media grew out of a specific part of web culture of the blogs, in the early 2000s, after the baroque and excessive dotcom period of e-commerce had fallen to pieces. Social media picked up on the 'updating' part of blog culture, and stripped off the content bit. There is a reason why Twitter is limited to 140 characters. There was no technological limitation (not enough bandwidth, computing power, interface etc.). The same can be said of Facebook's aversion to discussion and debate. For a good decade already Facebook has been repressing the user's need for community tools. There is no value in it for them. People need to like and share, say something fast and move on.

The arts do not need quick responses but thorough reflection and then debate about the positions people have formulated. Criticism presumes careful observation. This is then filtered through a rich vocabulary which every discipline has developed over the past decades and even centuries. Believe it or not, this even exists in the case of the internet. The fact that curators and e-flux discourse managers in particular strategically position themselves outside of this (with publication titles such as 'The Internet Does Not Exist') tells us more about the awkward position the contemporary arts scene has maneuvered itself into, now that everyone is online 24/7, is walking around with smart phones everywhere (incl. museums) and the relevant visual culture production (and related conversations) has effectively migrated to platforms such as YouTube, Tumblr and Instagram.

MR: Art involves a great deal of interpretation, so how does the gallery's presence on Facebook or other social platforms enable visitors to voice their own interpretations about art and what does this add to an understanding of the work? How is artistic interpretation benefited through comment culture?

GL: It doesn't. Art galleries cannot compensate for the current poverty of the dominant social media platforms that were neither built to expand on details and provide insight nor to spark debate beyond likes and short remarks. Social media platforms as we know them are deeply commercial 'machines of loving grace' that aim to provide other machines with valuable data (clicks on ads etc.). The arts are not operating outside of the 'clickbaiting' mechanism. The museum sector is completely part of the advertisement ecology in which Google and Facebook play a dominant role. I cannot stress

enough the important work that Douglas Rushkoff is doing in this context. Please all look his 2014 PBS documentary 'Generation Like'. Keep in mind that contemporary arts does not operate outside of the branding reality, even though we advocate a critical stand or even deal with political art works. 'Terms and Conditions May Apply' from 2013 is also still relevant, as is the work of Andrew Keen and Evgene Morozov, and many others. The systematic denial among arts officials of the social media hegemony is a painful self-delusion. We're all subjected to this new political economy of the platforms. It's never too late to catch up these issues as it is only getting more important. The idea of social media as hype that will fade away next season is short-sided and counter-productive. This topic needs our urgent attention.

MR: Does the 'openness' to external voices exemplify democracy in action or just the rhetoric of tech companies when taking place on social media?

GL: There is no 'openness' whatsoever. Social media were not designed to foster debate. All they do is 'monitor' short exchanges and impressions. The platforms are used as measurement tools in marketing campaigns. The related ad firms in the background measure likes and retweets and clicks and sell these data profiles to third parties. It does not matter what people say on Facebook or Twitter, and the actual work on social media has been delegated to interns inside PR departments. There are large offices that do the 'twittering' for celebrities and CEOs and give constant feedback about the latest ups and downs. If we want to oppose this logic, we need to start building hybrid offline and online networks from scratch. These days that's very easy to do and there is a whole array of online tools to do this. Every subculture has its own preferences. In the end it is not decided by what software you've chosen but whether you've been able to cultivate real online conversations that have multiple consequences in both the real and the virtual world. What counts is the density and richness of the real existing online culture. Users immediately recognize it if the dialogue is fake.

MR: The Tate's mission statement is to 'promote public understanding and enjoyment of British, modern and contemporary art'. Does digital evolution through utilisation of social media equate to this? In the vein of tactical media, what other methods could be leveraged to promote criticism and discussion?

GL: We need to make the distinction between internet as a distribution channel for existing content and formats and the medium an sich that

reflects on its own materiality, as a topic in itself (critique of the monopolies, alternative software, interface culture, post-digital art works, theory etc.). Both approaches are interesting, there is heaps going on in both fields and enough to report about. The Tate, for instance, as a global stage could give important impulses as both catalyst and intermediary. Maybe this is too much Dutch pragmatism. What can artists do with bitcoins? How can digital arts benefit from the blockchain technology (see the Ascribe start-up, based in Berlin, of all places). Should we suggest more topics? London wants to see itself as the global financial centre but in terms of (new media) arts and culture, criticism and theory in general it is poverty across the board. Why did Mute Magazine have to close down?

And to answer your last question, how to promote criticism and discussion? Freedom of speech is basic and needs to be defended, across the globe. It is under pressure everywhere, not the least because of an increase of algorithmic interventions. Content curation is increasingly done by machines. We've got to fight bots with bots. That's the reality of cyber war, as we speak. The insights of Snowden's revelations made a huge impact on me, but right now the task is to fight resignation and overcome fear and paranoia. We need to design new 'stages' where we can act out our collective resistance. I am very interested in new forms of organization (called orgnets) and how these cells can become 'crowd crystals' for new discourses. Later on we can see how these things scale up. Right now we need more experimentation, temporary autonomous zones where discussion can thrive. I fear this will not happen inside the monopoly social media (obviously) but maybe also not on the open internet as we know it as these public spaces are terrorized by trolls and controlled by bots. In this turbulent yet fragile global condition, what the world needs is semi-closed networks.

ML: You mention the awkward position the contemporary arts scene has manoeuvred itself into. Could you expand this?

GL: The absence at the 2015 Venice Bienale of digital arts and internet works says it all. Curators are afraid to admit they are clueless and continue their ignorant attitude towards art that deals with the digital in a direct matter (while checking their smart phone). Everyone jumps on the 'post-digital' bandwagon because that's cute and safe. Who doesn't want an offline/analogue holiday? The internet as a topic of major controversies in society simply does not exist. Just look at the current refugee crisis, Snowden, Wikileaks, the role of social media in global protests. All too hard.

Curators and critics are more than happy to embrace the race, gender, even the anthroposcene (whatever that is), but are blind for the techno-politics of the equipment and media they are using themselves so intensely. The contradictions are becoming absurd. Video was the last technology they had to deal with, but then it stopped. Performance, concept art, even paint-based arts, all fine, as long as it is not technology.

ML: Latour and Weibel argue that democracy cannot be represented, it can only be enacted. Various art galleries constantly post art from their collections on platforms such as Facebook. Can interpretations of artwork from the public on social media be considered enactment? i.e. a democracy of interpretation surrounding an artwork. Or are these interactions again too short and limited by what social media is geared toward?

GL: There cannot be a genuine interpretation and free exchange of ideas happening on current social media platforms. Have you ever tried to have a debate on Facebook? The amputated experiences on Twitter are terrible, one dimensional sniper fire that so easily causes confusion. It's not because the participants are intellectually not able to have a conversation. The architecture is ruling it out. Facebook is not part of the public sphere. Everyone knows that it is a 'walled garden' in which there is no freedom of speech. Facebook, Twitter and Apple platforms in particular are all US-American services (defined by their local social norms such as the reduction of users to 'friends') that should be compared to shopping malls. By now we have familiarized ourselves with the reality that shopping malls are not public spaces; these are corporate environments under tight surveillance. Why is it so hard in the case of social media to accept this commercial reality? Pictures of art work are posted on museum sites for marketing reasons, not to facilitate a debate about their art historical meanings or socio-political intentions.

MR: How would you react to the statement that data analysis of a website or social media could be considered a form of democracy in an institutional context? Especially where much of that data will be fed back into making the experience 'better' for the public and providing increased funds for the gallery.

GL: Data analysis of user behavior on a website is a quantitative approach to reality. I am not into that. There are enough big data sociologists, you can consult them. What's the link between marketing questionnaires and democracy? Or between voting polls and democracy, for that matter? More

visitors means more funds. Is that the neo-liberal logic you are referring to? That's the end of experimentation. It's art populism. I guess it already exists. That's the world we live in, dominated by large global museums, traveling mega shows and a tiny scene of (dead) celebrity artists that can operate within that context. I fail to see what this has got to do with democracy.