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Magazin für Kunstkritik

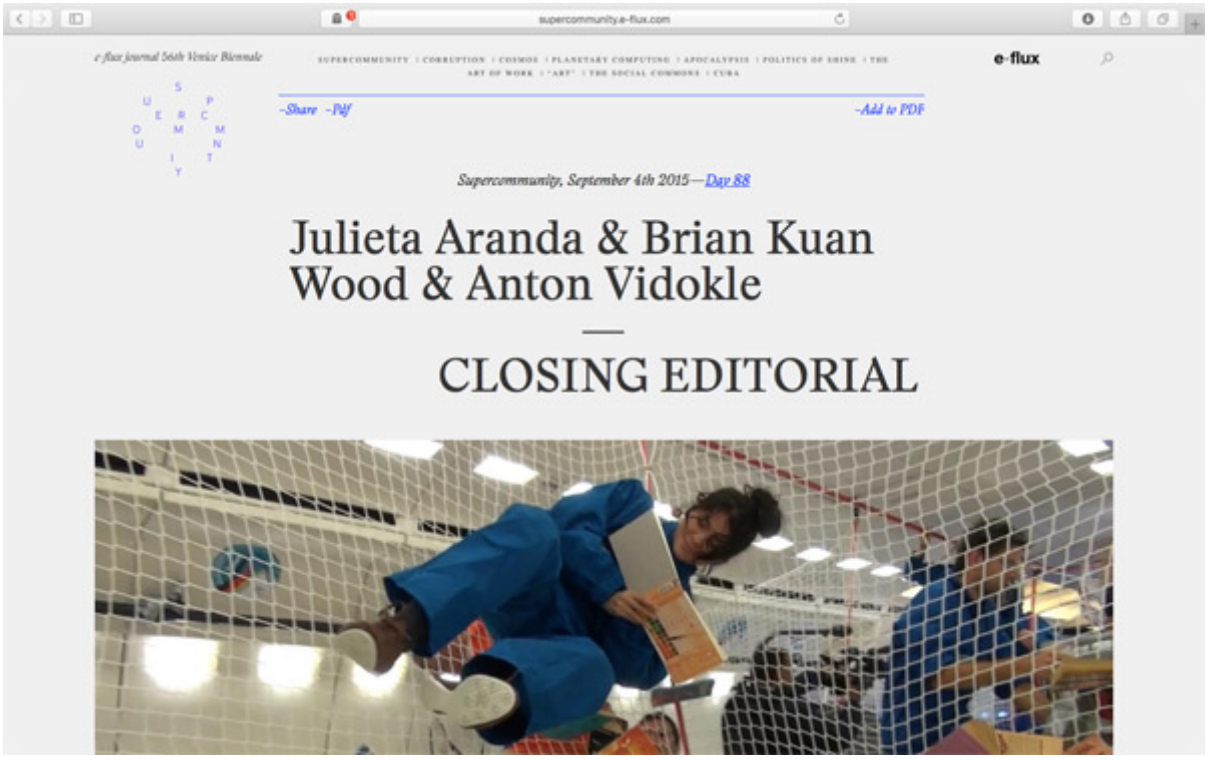
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Supercommunity, Superconversation, Supernova

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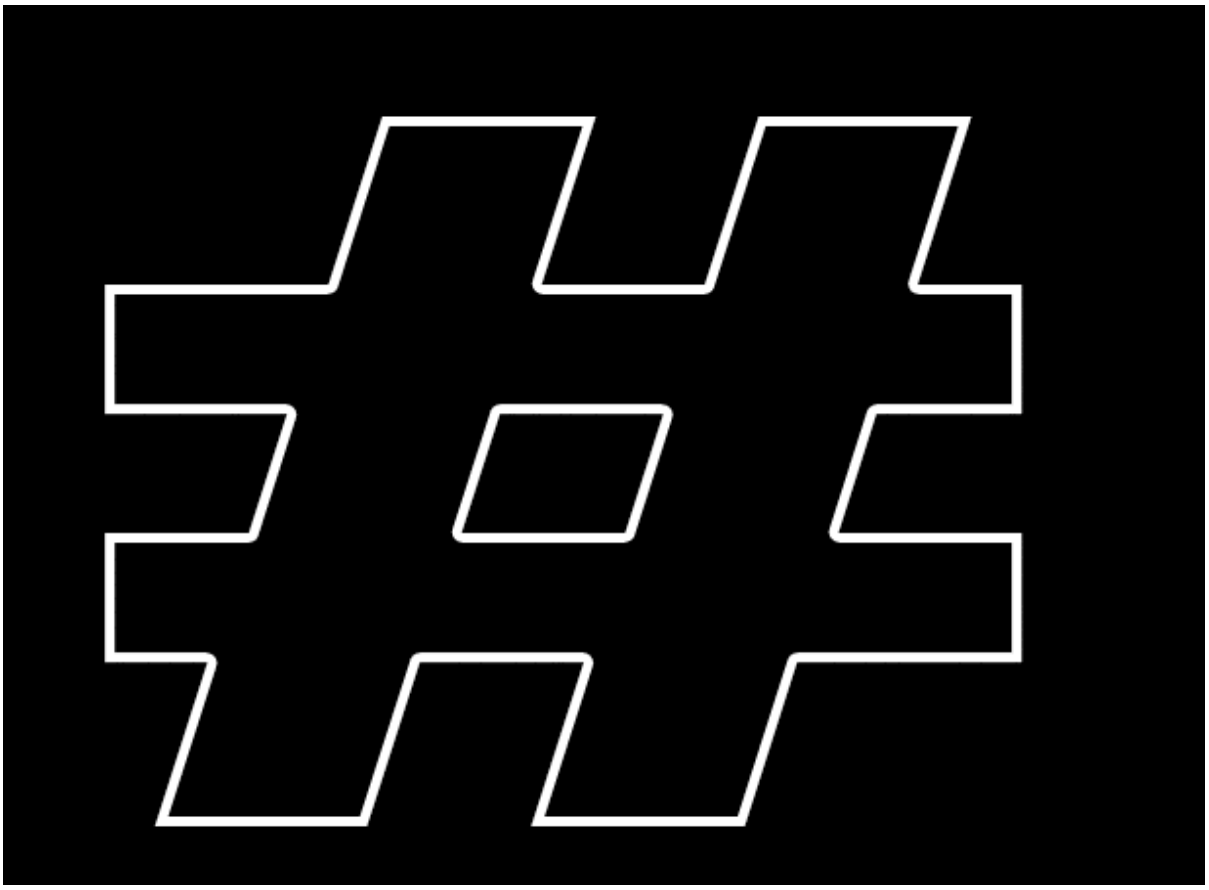
E-flux journal contributed the website *supercommunity.e-flux.com* to last year's Venice Biennale. The ambivalent project is a projection surface for collective imagination that at the same time turns out to be a monitoring and evaluation force on the net. An analysis.





Screenshot website Supercommunity.e-flux.com [http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/], 4.2.2016.

Since its launch in 2008, the American art magazine e-flux journal has firmly established itself as an institution in art criticism. It developed out of the platform e-flux, which was run by Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda; the two had founded it in 1996 just for «the pure pleasure of improvisation and mass communication,» as they wrote in a 2006 email conversation [http://www.e-flux.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Hans_Ulrich_Obrist_Interview.pdf?b8c429] with Hans Ulrich Obrist. Surprisingly, it developed into a profitable venture that allows them, «to stay fully independent of normal power structures that are just killing everything these days: the market, government funding organizations, collectors and sponsors.» This independence, as Vidokle and Aranda call it, is achieved through several services they offer. Particularly noteworthy is the eponymous newsletter that disseminates news about exhibitions at selected art institutions. In addition, e-flux maintains an extensive program of projects and cooperations with various institutions, museums and universities, and together with Artforum it runs a market-leading platform for art professionals offering or looking for jobs. Since 2010, e-flux also publishes a much-cited reader on contemporary art called What Is Contemporary Art? E-flux thus combines art, education, criticism and art historiography — that is, quite different roles. Yet the people running it actually went a step further: in 2012 e-flux and the social network DeviantArt, which gives registered users on its eponymous website the opportunity to publish works of their own, jointly applied for the top-level domain «.art» at ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers). The campaign’s hashtag is #savedotart. Administering the domain and creating corresponding standards are propagated by e-flux und DeviantArt as a chance for art, since it will make it possible for «.art» to be maintained by the arts, with the arts and for the arts. E-flux is promoting the vision of a virtual place for the arts that could become a «touchstone of world culture.» Had the application, which required payment of a $185,000 fee, been successful, DeviantArt and e-flux would now have been the sole proprietors of «.art» and art institutions, artists, magazines of art criticism, art universities would have had to obtain their domain names, and thus the right to work their parcel of the digital art field, from e-flux.



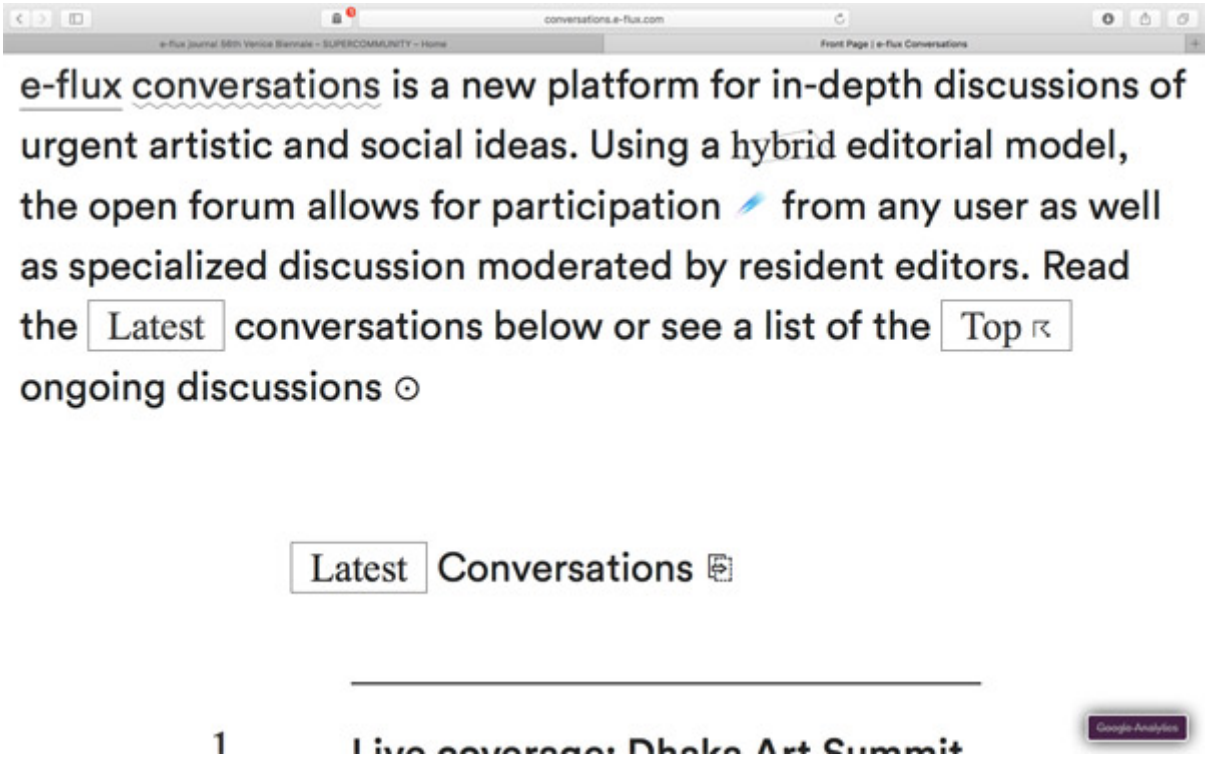
Logo der E-Flux-Bewerbung für die Top-Level-Domain «.art» #savedotart

Supercommunity

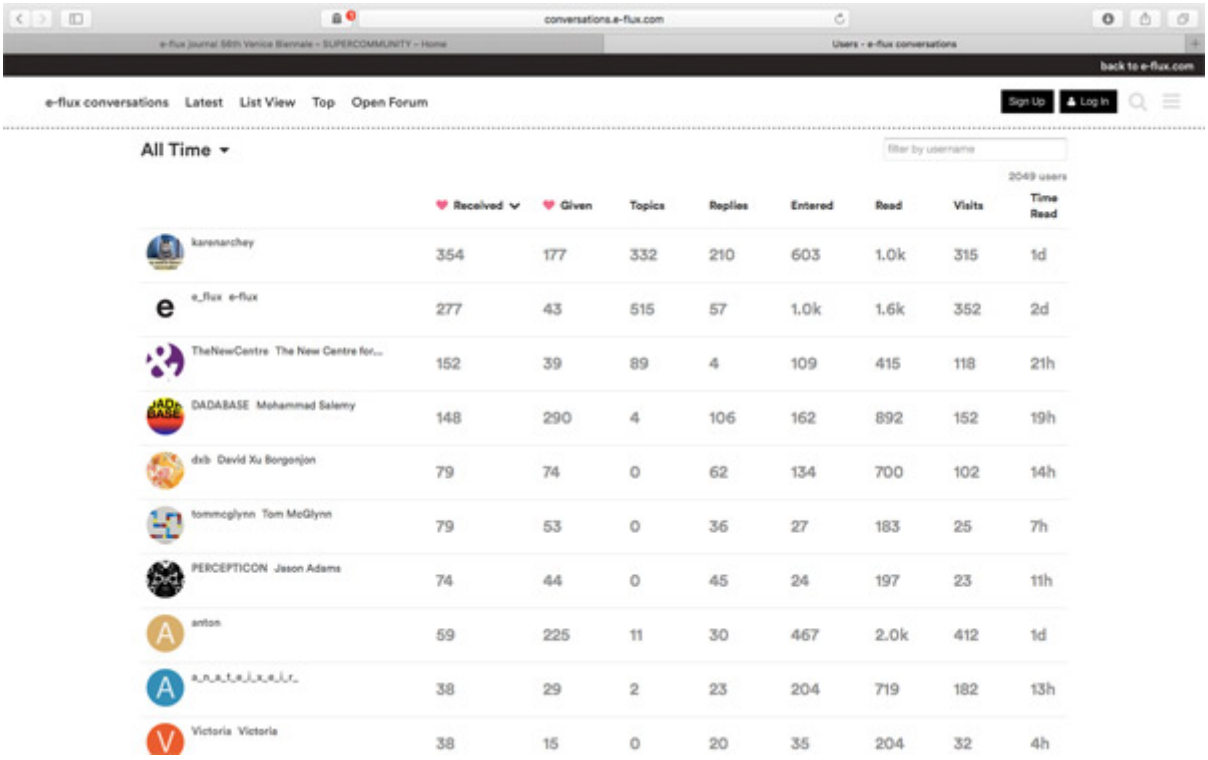
In 2015 e-flux journal participated in the Venice Biennale. Its contribution, a special issue titled Supercommunity, considered itself an artistic statement, rather than part of the program of supporting events. It was issue no. 65 of the journal, which publishes nine issues a year. Every day for two months, a new article was posted on a wooden billboard in the Giardini and published on the website supercommunity.e-flux.com [http://supercommunity.e-flux.com], the main venue of the Biennale contribution that was conceived specifically for this purpose.[1] In addition to the editorial team of e-flux, six guest editors were responsible for the flood of articles. The incessantly produced texts were divided into nine thematic blocks (including «The Social Commons: Citizens in the Shade, Aliens in the Sun,» «Corruption: Everybody Knows…,» «The Art of Work» and «Supercommunity»).

The titular term «supercommunity» is not explained or defined more precisely in the Biennale project. It is an ad hoc compound word that cannot be found in any dictionary. The coinage implies the making of a supreme community, indeed, the best possible community, or, alternatively, refers to a controlling and evaluating agency analogous to Sigmund Freud's «super-ego.» None of these readings conclusively explains the project. The term tends to remain a floating signifier that is able to combine various contradictory interpretations in itself — similar to the empty symbols of the national «supercommunity,» such as the flag or the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which have mass appeal precisely because they are empty. Designed by Remco van Bladel, the project's corporate identity emphasizes the projection-surface aspect of the title Supercommunity. An animated logo of sorts on the website features constantly shifting letters that each time add up to the word «supercommunity.»[2]

The opening editorial is written from the point of view of an unspecified Supercommunity «I» that cites the editors in the third person. The closing editorial of e-flux journal #65, by contrast, is made up of text snippets from the articles. The editors of e-flux journal rely on polyphony. The responsibility for the thematic blocks is assigned to six different individuals and a total of 88 authors are contributing. Users can comment as much as they want on each article. There is no editorial in which the editors take positions or introduce the subject from their perspective. Is the death of the author followed by the death of the editor under the conditions of digital journalism? According to cultural scholar Mercedes Bunz, digitalization has led to the loss of the position of authority which used to declare particular information to be knowledge. The role of experts who can recognize the structure and dynamics of a subject area and provide an overview has become obsolete. In digital space this role has been taken over, on the one hand, by the users and, on the other, by algorithms.[3] With the «supercommunity» the Biennale project seems to symbolically carry the loss of experts to extremes. The «supercommunity» seems to be calling the shots here. Is what is brought home to us here that very loss of authority as experts? The editors stylize themselves as impotent, at a loss, blocked. In actual fact, however, the power is by no means in the hands of the algorithms or the users in the case of this art project. Whether fictitious, staged or not, someone is organizing, administering, governing the «supercommunity.» The scope of possibilities is defined by the editors. The «supercommunity» serves as a figure to obfuscate the actual power structure — again, not unlike national symbols.



Screenshot der Webseite Conversations.e-flux.com [http://conversations.e-flux.com] am 4.2.2016.



Screenshot der Nutzer/innenstatistik von E-Flux Conversations am 4.2.2016.

Superconversation

«Questions? Comments? Statements? Join the conversation» the reader of an article is repeatedly exhorted. Embedded in the text at various points, the inserted text bar is reminiscent of ad insertions of the kind popular on the websites of magazines. A click on the link doesn't take you to the website of a sponsor, however, but rather to the website e-flux conversations [http://conversations.e-flux.com] where, after creating a user profile, users have the opportunity to discuss the articles. «Join the conversation» and, one would like to add, become a part of the «supercommunity.» The discussion platform e-flux conversations has been part of the e-flux product line-up since October 2014. In May 2015 it had only 108 registered users, but after the Venice Biennale closed this number jumped to 2020. Relative to the size of the international art scene this participation is a success for e-flux, as platforms such as this are worthless without the time and work invested by its users.

The detailed recording of the use of e-flux conversations far exceeds what is conventionally done at discussion platforms. In addition to the titles of the contributions, the users participating in the discussion and the number of contributions, comments and hits, it is also possible to establish through the user profile how often people have logged on, what people have read, how many responses and likes the comments have generated and so on. E-flux founder Anton Vidokle, for instance, has received 59 and given 225 likes, created 11 and responded to 30 contributions, looked at 464 subjects, read altogether 2000 contributions and logged on a total of 409 days. Each click is registered and shared with the community. The degree of supervision and surveillance to which we had already gotten accustomed in the digital world is significantly exceeded here. Our reading and discussion habits are saved and visualized in a way that calls to mind the city of glass in Yevgeny Zamyatin's collectivist dystopia We. What does this mean for the community? The extent of monitoring and control exerted by e-flux conversations is astonishing. One would want to know: what is the use of those data for e-flux? Do they serve as a basis for expanding their product line-up, say, a personalization of their commercial newsletter?

Supernova

It is not just that anyone who enters supercommunity territory and whatever he or she does there is recorded: its borders are also monitored. E-flux has invited the ambitious educational and research institution The New Centre for Research & Practice to comment on the articles on the e-flux conversations platform in a specially created format called «superconversations» and at the same time to moderate the discussion. Accordingly, the discussion begins with a more than favorable interpretation of the editorial and ends with the same. Hence the role the New Centre assumes in the project is, contrary to initial expectations, not that of an independent critical entity, but rather that of a primarily mediating one: «Our work […] immediately doubled e-flux's original plan in terms of size, strength and diversity.» Accordingly, the New Centre interprets the entire project retrospectively as a reflection on intellectual work in the digital age and as a quasi-utopian attempt to develop forms of collective content-based work that defy the pressure of commodification over 88 days of the Venice Biennale. This thread elicited 37 comments. Some discussed how the coinage «supercommunity» is to be interpreted, with suggestions ranging from «general intellect» to blocks of ice and to a crack in the wall. Yet the function of the comment, the speaking position and the role of a medium, i.e., the framework of e-flux conversations itself, are what is primarily debated. More than anything, however, the comments reveal a certain helplessness or resignation vis-à-vis the framework of the discussion: «Because let's face it: we're all homogenized behind the keyboard». Not surprisingly, the discussion in this highly controlled experiment is also limited in terms of time. E-flux assigned the supercommunity a beginning and an end. Its duration corresponded to the time the Venice Biennale was open to the public. The closing editorial leaves no doubts about this: «Supercommunity is now finished. You won't get any more texts delivered to your mailbox. We survived. You survived». For a «zone of collective imagination,» as one user on e-flux conversations understands it, issues of democratic participation play a strikingly minor role at the supercommunity. Users apparently are accustomed to the quasi-feudal conditions in the digital social networks where there is no room for any wish to expand the existing framework. Nor does the realization of a democratic discourse have priority for the editors. At the symposium on Post-Digital Cultures held in Lausanne on December 4, 2015, Julieta Aranda explained that she largely blocks out the readers in editing e-flux journal. She is concerned with discussing and following what she regards as relevant. Readers and discussants are confined to their passive roles as audience.

Sobering as the analysis of the supercommunity project has turned out — launched with the aim of testing new forms of digital publishing between art and scholarship, it produced a monitoring and evaluating agency for an international art discourse —, it does offer an opportunity for a renewed discussion about the formats in which art and criticism actually occur. What are the basic conditions of a debate about art in the digital sphere? How can the relationship of various writing practices of artists, activists and scholars be rethought? What do formats that bring such practices into a dialog seeking to reorder power structures look like?

[1] The 88 articles posted on a billboard since the opening of the Biennale were merely excerpts of the articles and were like teasers, each of which accordingly ended with a reference to the website.

[2] When the mouse is moved over the logo, the letters change and form new words: «hermaphrodites, emulsification, impregnability, photosynthesis, discontentment, revolutionists, possessiveness, convalescences, reinterpreting, antiseptically, neocolonialism, misconceptions, fingerprinting, authorizations, nitroglycerine, generalization, traditionalist, conceptualizes, antiperspirant, precociousness, simplification, accomplishment, accountability, industrialists, boisterousness, archaeologists, commercializes, secularization, collaboratives, unsuccessfully.»

[3] Mercedes Bunz, The Silent Revolution: How Digitalization Transforms Knowledge, Work, Journalism and Politics without Making Too Much Noise (Basingstoke: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2014).

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