**To Open [...] To Collect [...] To Expand [...] To Continue: Richard Serra's Verb List,
Post-Internet Appropriation, and the Culture of the Use of Forms**

By Brandon Bauer

How does a rethinking of Richard Serra's Verb List relate to the Post-Internet use of
forms? Taking one selected verb from each column of Serra's original list we find:

To Open [...] To Collect [...] To Expand [...] To Continue[1]

Drawn from a list of more than one hundred proposed actions, these four terms speak
directly to our cultural situation. Created at that point in time in which the waning
influence of the Greenberg school of Modernist thought was eclipsed by the ascent of
conceptualism, one can read both positions simultaneously: the heroic lone Modernist
studio artist, wresting control over his materials in self-imposed isolation, and the cool
intellectual embracing the performative models of conceptual art. We are currently in a
similar moment; the Internet and its cultural impact have become at once totalizing and
quotidian, and the philosophical position of the previous era–overlapping and
commingling, both in agreement and in opposition–is informing the next critical
development.

"Post-Internet Art"[2] in the context proposed by Marisa Olson–and expanded on by Artie
Vierkant in *The Image Object Post Internet*[3]–does not merely imply *after* the advent of the
Internet, the term "post" *can* have the dual meaning of something performed; e.g.-*posting*
one of the most ubiquitous acts online. It also implies the Internet is now imbricated in
our everyday experience, and affects our culture in ways both subtle and radical. We are
beyond the parameters of Postmodernism and into what Nicolas Bourriaud calls a
"culture of use."[4] This shift brings the culture of activity within the reach of anyone
possessing an Internet connection, and a moderate skill set that is translatable across a
wide variety of online platforms. Empowering one to take part in culture rather than
being its passive consumer creates the potential for a more engaged and empowered
social body.

In his preface to the second edition of *Postproduction*, Bourriaud discusses how
appropriation "infers an ideology of ownership," and how that culture of use is directed
toward the goal of sharing.[5] This is a notion echoed in discussions surrounding the idea
of a Post-Internet, and in which the culture of use that it intrinsically supports is now less
of a novelty. Appropriation in our era is not the outright theft or questioning of
authenticity as it was during the height of Postmodern theoretical development. With
the rise of the Internet, and in particular with the rise of the many current social
platforms, appropriation is now our reigning cultural condition. We cut, copy, paste,
post, forward, like, tweet, and share pre-existing content continually. This has relevance
and ramifications far beyond mere artistic and philosophical debate. It has an effect on
how we understand the procession of cultural innovation, as well as having direct
practical, ethical, and legal implications throughout society. The most recent example of
this clash can be seen in the two bills currently under proposal in the US Congress: the

Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) in the House of Representatives, and the PROTECT IP Act in the Senate. These bills are the latest legal challenges in a string of copyright extensions and acts attempting to create a restrictive form of clearance culture with far reaching social implications.[6]

Given the world wide web's development over a relatively short period of time into increasingly user friendly platforms–with appropriation now a cultural condition, and with these continuing challenges presented by the culture of ownership–what role can artists play in furthering the debate, and facilitating the shift into a more empowering living culture for the use of forms?

Both Bourriaud and Vierkant offer some interesting perspectives. Vierkant positions the role of the artist in the Post-Internet environment as that of the "interpreter, transcriber, narrator, curator, architect,"[7] and states that his or her goal should be to "create propositions for arrangements or representational strategies which have not yet been fully developed."[8] This is a similar notion to Bourriaud's conception of artists as "semionauts" who "produce original pathways through signs."[9] Vierkant argues otherwise, believing that that the Post-Internet artist relies on the visual, independent of language, "[marking] an abandonment of language and semiotics."[10] Others would argue that investigating semiotics in the Post-Internet era has become more important than ever. It was precisely the development of these new tools, and their embedded symbolic systems, that prompted theorist Lev Manovich to put forth a systematic critique in his book, *The Language of New Media*. For as he states:

> A Western artist sees the Internet as a perfect tool to break down all hierarchies and bring art to the people. In contrast, a post-communist subject, I cannot but see the Internet as a communal apartment of the Stalin era: no privacy, everybody spies on everybody else [...][11]

Manovich wrote this on the eve of the 21st century, in a posted message to the Rhizome e-mail list under the title "On Totalitarian Interactivity." This was before Web 2.0, and before the ubiquity of social media. Similar to Manovich's view of the early Internet, current social media platforms contain both emancipatory and dystopian potential. Social platforms like Facebook and Twitter were lauded, and in some cases even directly credited, for the downfall of dictators during the Arab Spring. While these platforms did play a role in those democratic uprisings, they are far from inherently democratic. A prime example is the experience of the activist collective, Anonymous, who were kicked off a number of social media platforms due to their campaigns. This eventually led the collective to launch their own independent social networking site.[12] The original architecture of the Internet encouraged openness and decentralization, but in our era, the web is becoming increasingly centralized and controlled by large corporations. This consolidation is being supported by the increasingly restrictive legislation attempting to wall off cultural commons as we see currently under proposal in the US Congress. Manovich for one felt that artists employing newer technologies must also be critical of the structures that facilitate their practice.

Both Bourriaud and Vierkant see the artist in a unique position for interpreting the deluge of fragmented cultural data existing in this Post-Internet environment, but to differing ends. Whereas Vierkant initially calls for an ambitious project to create "propositions for arrangements or representational strategies," he settles in the end for a transient art that shifts between the virtual and the real. As he states, this art is "a constellation of formal-aesthetic quotations, self-aware of its art context and built to be shared and cited."[13] In essence, he argues for an art of mere quotation and citation, existing for its own sake, and less critical of the structures it depends upon. This is not to say that an art of digital citation cannot also be critical; Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern's 2009 *Wikipedia Art* project[14] staged a critical performance out of Wikipedia's standards for quality and verifiability–which at once exploited and critiqued the process of legitimization through citation–and thereby exposed the structure.

Bourriaud posits an active view for the role of art in the era of the use of forms, and argues for a critical look at the deluge of images and embedded narratives in our culture. He reverses the standard critique that insists we are oversaturated by images, and instead states:

> [W]e are not saturated with images, but subjected to the lack of certain images, which must be produced to fill in the blanks of the official image of the community.[15]

Bourriaud revives the Situationist strategy of détournement, appropriation for a critical purpose, as a way of reinterpreting the images and narratives we are immersed within. He argues for a use of pre-existing material in the service of creating the emancipatory narratives we are lacking. It is disappointing that Vierkant merely advocates for an art of self-conscious quotation which relies on accepted notions of what art is, and whose goal is to become a footnote in an attempt to legitimize itself. Given the immense cultural, global, and pro-democratic shift the Post-Internet era anticipates, it is time for art to be more engaged.

Returning to the selected verbs from Serra's list, how do we interpret these actions in relation to a Post-Internet cultural situation? The use of verbs inherently suggests action, and creating a list of them serves as a reference to the philosophical debates of action painting, which stimulated dialog in the late 1960s. Gianfranco Gorgoni's famous 1969 photograph of Richard Serra throwing lead in a warehouse was in essence an update of the Hans Namuth photographs of Jackson Pollock produced a decade earlier. Thus, Serra's choice to create a list, with its focus on the performance implied through verb use, signaled the next evolution in the interpretation of the Modernist philosophical position. As before, these two positions overlap, merge, inform, and depart from one another within the actions described.

Below, I will demonstrate how Serra's verbs translate into our Post-Internet age.

To Open: "Opening" is the initial action when one interfaces with the virtual environment. To Open can also be interpretive and exploratory, "to open" oneself to new possibilities.

To Collect: Collection speaks to us on a range of levels , each with immense cultural ramifications. Big Data is constantly accumulating on the minutiae of our lives. As we move in physical space, GPS pings emanate from handheld devices. In virtual space, our actions online are tracked, cataloged, and responded to by those with access to our data patterns, and the algorithms to parse them. Beyond the dystopian vision of nameless entities collecting large data sets on unknowing individuals, collection has also become an aspect of the everyday. The Internet facilitates collecting, storing, exhibiting, and sharing photographs, music, moving images, and documents from a vast array of producers (both professional and personal) for incalculable purposes. Whether it is user updated content about holocaust survivors, family photos shared on a closed network, or digital file sharing for fun, piracy, or collegiality, we are in the midst of a great collection and shuffle of data from one person to another without cease.

To Expand: The notion of expansion may be interpreted on a number of levels: the expansion of media and platforms in art, technology, and our daily lives, or as the continual expansion and manipulation of images and ideas online. All manner of material that makes its way online becomes posted, re-posted, re-mixed, and recontextualized. In turn, these reconfigurations result in new physical and virtual forms. To Vierkant, they become the Post-Internet objects, referencing both the lived and the virtual. To Bourriaud this expansion and recontextualization by artists produces original pathways through the forest of mass-cultural signs, and expands the meanings of these forms in new and potentially emancipatory ways.

To Continue: Finally, "To Continue" speaks to the ongoing nature of these processes, and the increasing collapse between the physical and the virtual. As the forces propelling the culture of ownership continue their attempt at walling off the public domain, it becomes ever more important for artists and activists alike to push back and assert a vibrant culture of use and activity. These processes will continue. The struggle is far from over, and has great ramifications for our culture now and into the future.

The Post-Internet use of forms implies a merging of categories, philosophical positions, and a changing relationship to appropriation. It bridges the positions between formal-aesthetic forms, conceptual, and critical models. It is in this spirit that I have adapted and re-presented Serra's verb list.

Post-Internet Verb List (after Serra)[16]

To Open
To Search
To Copy
To Merge
To Bitmap
To Encode
To Loop
To Crack
To Rotate
To Collage
To Feed
To Randomize
To Download
To Store
To Interface
To Clear
To Appropriate
To Cite
To Manipulate
To Aggregate
To Import
To Screen
To Print
To Abstract
To Mask
To Document
To Delete
To Return
To Hybridize
To Grid
To Populate
To Plot
To Scrub
To Crowdsource
To Generate
To Analyze
To Problematize
To Narrate
To Critique

To Collect
To Remove
To Retrieve
To Datamosh
To Hack
To Cut
To Paste
To Splice
To Cycle
To Broadcast
To Layout
To Communicate
To Publish
To Draw
To Stylize
To Downsample
To Montage
To Animate
To Erase
To Stitch
To Index
To Lock
To Select
To Fill
To Transform
To Extract
To Link
To Hype
To Network
To Mash-up
To Perform
To Collaborate
To Project
To Interact
To Pixilate
To Microcast
To Build
To Process
To Arrange

To Expand
To Edit
To Undo
To Program
To Control
To Surveil
To Composite
To Detourn
To Access
To Archive
To Sort
To Tag
To Crop
To Chat
To Group
To Participate
To Update
To Insert
To Layer
To Compress
To Preview
To Rasterize
To Clone
To Hide
To Heal
To Trash
To Map
To Markup
To Immerse
To Systematize
To Stream
To Send
To Receive
To Remix
To Export
To Save
To Post
To Share
To Continue

[1] Richard Serra, *Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself* [1967-1968], From The Ubuweb :: Anthology of Conceptual Writing, www.ubu.com/concept/serra_verb.html.

[2] Régine Debatty, *Interview with Marisa Olson*, We Make Money Not Art, March 2008, http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2008/03/how-does-one-become-marisa.php

[3] Artie Vierkant, *The Image Object Post-Internet* (2010), http://jstchillin.org/artie/vierkant.html.

[4] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2007). 19.

[5] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, 9.

[6] For a more in-depth discussion about copyright law, clearance culture, and the cultural ramifications of these issues see the work of Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity* (New York: Penguin, 2005), *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2008), and the work of Kembrew McLeod, *Freedom of Expression: Resistance and Repression in the Age of Intellectual Property* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007)

[7] Artie Vierkant, *The Image Object Post-Internet*. 8.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, 18.

[10] Artie Vierkant, *The Image Object Post-Internet*. 9.

[11] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001). x.

[12] Mark Brown, *Anonymous Unleashes Social Network AnonPlus After Google+ Ban*, WIRED.CO.UK, July 2011, http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2011-07/18/anonplus-announced

[13] Artie Vierkant, *The Image Object Post-Internet*. 10.

[14] Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern, *Wikipedia Art: A Collaborative Performance and Public Intervention*, http://wikipediaart.org/

[15] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, 52.

[16] Updated from *New Media Verb List (after Serra)*, Originally published in RCP.ML2K.PDF Issue #10 Extended Dance Remix, Fall 2011, http://www.master-list2000.com/rcp-ml2k-pdfzine/posts/rcp-ml2k-pdfzine-issue10.html