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Signature



Question Presented by Dissertation Committee-

Define “online community art practice,” devoting some time to each of the terms. What are the historical antecedents to such contemporary practice? What problems or opportunities do new digital media pose for such practitioners?

Answer by Vaughn Whitney Garland -

Conventional definitions of new media and digital media often posit the crowning achievement of technology within the context of the ever-expanding interconnectivity between people. These same definitions often celebrate the creation of the Internet as a place where anyone—at any time—can communicate with everyone else. Not only does the Internet enable access to the world in real time, it also facilitates improved participation and communication among users. Artists using the online community either as a viewing participant, or as a creativity collaborator, are challenging notions of authorship, originality, and presence. Along with participation, the Internet allows anyone access, is a public space, and gives the user information and communication at a click of the button. The possibility for new online artwork is vast. These artworks can comment on a range of questions including what it means to be a shared participant within a community of users. These online artworks, which speak to—and of—Internet communities, address what it means to be connected to others but do so in a disembodied

way. For some critics, being a member of an online community is not a real interaction, only a mediated illusion. For others, it is a way to make works of art.

Like digital images, which are generally defined as a document of information that is shared and manipulated with code and through a remediation, the online group relies on a similar experience. The online community is a type of collaborative encounter where thoughts and creations are shared and developed as a group. For media critic Jaron Lanier this group structure is at least a worry and, at most, a frightful threat to future art forms and discoveries. Lanier asks questions of originality and individuality when a disembodied group starts to act as a collaborative organization. One of the most important and relevant questions for Lanier is what happens to the individual when it enters into the group? The same question can be asked of digital art in much the same way as Adorno asked about Jazz in 1933 and 1936. Is online art a symptom of unthinking mass culture? Can works of art that are made by, for, or in conversation with an online community become a form of high art? In order to answer these questions it is important to look at how we are using remediation, interconnectivity, convergence, and participation to create high *objects d'art*.

Remediation is not particular to digital media—it has been happening since Plato. In many ways remediation has been a way to share information, to tell stories, to instruct, to build religious beliefs, and to challenge authority. Painters have been using remediation for centuries, much like cinematographers used remediation to engage with story. For centuries remediation was used to place the individual, the body, in relationship to a perceived reality. Remediation offers a type of activated reality, wherein the viewer is asked to suspend his or her beliefs about physical reality and enter into a

pseudo reality and treat it as the real. Even though digital media mimics the act of remediation, and sometimes reality, remediation is not new:

Remediation did not begin with the introduction of digital media. We can identify the same process throughout the last several hundred years of Western visual representation. A painting by the seventeenth-century artist Pieter Saenredam, a photography by Edward Weston, and a computer system for virtual reality are different in many important ways, but they are all attempts to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of a medium and the act of mediation. All of them seek to put the viewer in the same space as the objects viewed.¹

Remediation is an underlying precursor for technology to find new ways of doing something, but it relies on the act of immediacy between reality and the pseudo real. Immediacy asks that the participant perform with such speed and with such certainty that the experience is in fact real, that once they enter into the event they have mentally and emotionally left the real behind. Take for example the cinema. Once the participant enters into the theater and the movie starts, the participant falls into a pseudo real, not attached to the world outside. The same can be said for hyper-realistic painting. In fact, upon entering a room George Washington bowed to a painting by Charles Wilson Peale because the figures in the painting seemed so real.²

It is believed that man's ability to create the illusion of reality reached its pinnacle with Virtual Reality (VR). VR technology has become the symbol and possibility of human-manipulated reality. VR asks that the participant completely suspend belief of a physical world and become numb to the to a digital reality in order to find collaboration with technology. "As computer scientists themselves put it, the goal of virtual reality is to foster in the viewer a sense of presence: the viewer should forget that she is in fact wearing a computer interface and accept the graphic image that it offers as her own visual

¹ Bolter and Grusin (1999) 11

² Peale (1795)

world.’’³ While VR received much praise for the possibility of humans computer cyborg technology I think VR has been surpassed by a screen society, where participants choose to remain activated in the real world but have filled that world with a system of technological hyperlinks to the digital world. I do not see VR becoming an acceptable space for socially “real” occurrences (as evidence, take for example the recent deficient ticket sales with 3D films). What is interesting to consider and to evaluate with current works of art is an analysis of immediacy and remediation as a way to see if that technology extends past the acceptable perceptions of reality. Immediacy of the real has been used to sell most technology to society and that immediacy relies on what is believable. When the telegraph was first proposed, it was supposed to “hook” up the world. The telegraph was to bring the world together in such a way that information about events were to arrive as quickly as they happened and the speed of the telegraph’s grasp on society was swift. “It is anticipated that the whole of the populous parts of the United States will, within two or three years, be covered with net-work like a spider’s web.’’⁴

Yet, our current digital media seems to be presented as the best and most developed form of remediation, and, in fact, the point where remediation hits its apex. In part some critics believe that digital media is fundamentally remediation of old media, nothing more. “Digital visual media can best be understood through the ways in which they honor, rival, and revise liner-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print. What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer

³ Bolter and Grusin (1999) 22

⁴ Standage (1998) 57,58

the challenges of new media.”⁵ Yet, does remediation bring a better awareness on the media that it mediates? Yes. Remediation opens up a critique in much the same way McLuhan suggested in “The Medium is the Message.” The media becomes the content of the remediation. It makes digital media different by appropriating all forms of media through its remediation. The printing press mediated scribal culture into print culture and in so doing made visible the act of writing. “It is much easier to see what a medium does—the possibilities inherent in the material form of an art—when the same expressive or communicative contents are transposed from one medium into another.”⁶ But, what also changed from the scribal culture to the print culture was the ways authors produced books. Throughout scribal culture books were written not by one person, but by a group of people. Oftentimes the “content” of the book came from within a community, an original independent author was not presented. Once the printing press appeared the concepts of originality and authorship followed closely behind.

One of the most significant concerns about the Internet remains a question of authorship against community. Very often an independent voice may or may not be attached to an Internet statement because it may be mediated from other sources and or created by a collaborative process. One way to look at this discussion is to look back at the concepts of authorship during the twentieth century. Theories of authorship, and community collaboration have allowed new media the freedom to return to a state of creation similar to scribal culture. Where much of the authority given by scribes relied on church influence, hierarchies, and policies, what is different now is that society becomes the way to access information collectively. On the Internet, and with digital

⁵ Bolter and Grusin (1999) 14

⁶ Guillory (2010) 324

media, a creator may not be independent and enlightened, rather an individual who is participating in a communal discussion. If to address the Internet as a point of loss for the artistic process, where the artist becomes a participant, or receiver, instead of a director then the discussion on the death of the author may be a vital concern with significant meaning. Instead of autonomous artists, once removed to a writing desk or the easel, new digital artists, Internet artists, act as directors of information and media. We might say that digital artists act in much the same way as Roland Barthes's non-author. According to Roland Barthes, authors are collaborators that share ideas and language.

Roland Barthes wrote "The Death of the Author" the same year Debord wrote *The Society of the Spectacle*. In this work, Barthes proposed that the author is not a singular, autonomous entity, but a body that appropriates from a larger system of language. "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of the original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawing from the innumerable center of culture."⁷ For Barthes, the author is a manipulator of previously refined and reused information, not the godlike creative genius where authority and expertise rested. Instead, the author was one that took from society, only adding back a specific individual voice. Yet, by removing the author completely Barthes proposed that the text would come alive. By putting down the author as a character full of human qualities and characterizations, the text can thus become what it essentially is—a text. "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final

⁷ Barthes (1977) 213

signified, to close the writing.”⁸ Put simply, for some time we look at works of art in relation to the artist. We see the paintings of Jackson Pollock through the life of the painter, not as autonomous objects. When the author is applied to the work of art, the object suffers because it is defined, in part, by the identity and life actions of the author/artists. “The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire’s work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh’s his madness, Tchaikovsky’s his voice. The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* confiding in us.”⁹

Two years after “Death of the Author” was published Michel Foucault proposed his own idea on the dilemma of the author. Foucault proposed that an evaluation the author's function would allow a better understanding the text. Foucault suggested that at any give time we could approach the text as a relationship with the “author function,” the properties subscribed to the author in order to study the work. Foucault saw a way in which the subject of a particular work can take various forms, where the way in which we approach a work of art; a text in his case, that work of art depends on the system and focus of evaluation. That in fact we can see a work of art in one function and then see that same work of art in different light once the function had changed. “Perhaps it is time to study discourses not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformation,

⁸ Barthes (1977) 213

⁹ Barthes (1977) 211

but according to their modes of existence.”¹⁰ In his article Foucault proposed four ways in which to see the author: as author/god, as representative of language, as identifier, and a non-author. Mark Poster sees this he last author function as a representative of the digital author. This digital author would be one that works with information, so therefore, is similar to the digital artists who manipulate code in an image. The digital author is not an autonomous agent but an agent collaborating with technology and code:

The figure of the author in the modern period is bound to print technology, while in the more recent, perhaps postmodern, perhaps future, computer mediated, even networked form of writing produces, amid the contingent world of events, a digital author. The chief difference between the two, I contend, is the degree and shape of alterity in the relation of author to writing. Analogue authors configure a strong bond between the text and the self of the writer a narcissistic, mirroring relation as the text is fundamentally an expression of the author – his or her style, mind, or feelings. The digital author connotes a greater alterity between the text and the author, due in part to the digital nature of the writing.¹¹

The reasons why author and author functions are important to theories of new media and digital media are twofold. First, artists and artworks can be looked at independently, as autonomous bodies. Secondly, works of art can be examined through multiple screens, and by various disciplines. I think this second rationale is integral to the creation, and development, of interdisciplinary studies. Not only can members of another discipline investigate artworks, they can be looked at through multiple windows, which could be given a comprehensive explanation. Furthermore, works of art that take place online, in Internet communities, may also share in these research methods. The online artwork can exist as an autonomous *object d’art*. It can also be a shared experience where the language of the community aids in its presence and definition. It can become a way to look at the process and procedures the work, and the artists, went

¹⁰ Foucault, (1977) 290

¹¹ Poster (2001) 490

through in order to carry out the task of creation. What is different between previous media and what is possible with online artwork is that the online artwork can be many different things all at the same time.

Digital media can look like text, image, sound, and now touch, taste, and smell. Take for example new investments in movies that produce smells as the viewer watches the screen. While convergence between media is not new, digital media uses convergence better than anything else. An artist has at his/her fingertips the power of technology that will wake you up, cook you breakfast, drive you down the street, and tell you they love you through a “text” message using “emotioncons.” At our fingertips are technologies that have the power to enter every aspect of our life and do so to make us better, to make us feel better. We truly live in a mediated *Pee-wee’s Playhouse*. Digital media’s hold on convergence relies on the participant’s willingness to move and move quickly. Convergence culture is a culture that welcomes as much mediated technology as it can handle, and then more. Due to the number of screens that fill our lives, the amount of technology that we carry, it is not hard to see that we are in a convergence culture. “Convergence does not depend on any specific delivery mechanism. Rather, convergence represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communication systems, toward multiple way so accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatorial culture.”¹² Convergence has become such a part of our life it is increasingly difficult to see an autonomous work of art. More and more our ideas, our

¹² Jenkins (2006) 254

lives, our habits, our creative energies, seem to be connected to a larger system. This is what Suzi Gablik calls *Connective Aesthetics*. Gablik is interested in how artworks are connected through society. She also calls the ways in which we have become connected to each other as a paradigm shift away from the “autonomous” work of art. “Art, with its subtext of power and profit, is heavily implicated in this ideology. Individualism and freedom were the great modernist buzzwords, but they are hardly the most creative response to our planet’s immediate needs, which now demand complex and sensitive forms of interaction and linking.”¹³ The type of art that Gablik proposes is an art that “listens” instead of acts. Gablik’s art is an art of action and reaction. Participation between the artists and the community produces an artist that works collaboratively with the social situation, producing a bond between artist as participant and viewer as participant.

Better participation has always been applied to new media, to new forms of communicative technologies. Like old new media, the Internet has claimed that participation is a key to its success. Digital humanists expound on the ability for anyone to get on-line, to participate with the world around them. Through the Internet we can see wars start and end, revolutions in real time, movies stars in court as the verdict is read, and have the ability to shop for swimming trunks. Anyone can have a voice on the Internet and they can be anything. Users can participate by clicking on a link or by creating your own link for others to view and share. Yet, the ways in which we participate are changing radically. As past viewers entered into the event by being led, by being a viewer/spectator, new viewers become participants, deciding what they wish

¹³ Gablik (1992) 3,4

to do and see. New users are leaders, followers, consumers, and producers all at the same time. It is not hard to see that we are still trying to understand what it means to be an online community participant, or an individual participant. “The term *Participatory Culture* contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media produces and consumer as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us full understands.”¹⁴

How do users participate? What are the reasons why users participate? What benefits does participation allow? These are questions that still need to be asked and answered. Internet theorist Clay Shirky proposes that participation happens in four stages. First, users of technology enter into a situation where they “share” information with each other. Internet communities that rely on this type of sharing include Flickr, where users upload, tag, and share photographs. The second level of Internet participation is “cooperation.” Shirky describes this model as a tool that asks participants to change behaviors in order to come together. “One simple form of cooperation...is conversation...as with e-mail, IM, or text messaging.”¹⁵ Here, participants are asked to enter into the event in much the same way, usually in relationship to the type of technology needed for the cooperation. The third method is an extension of the second and remains the larger problem for many who still look at autonomous works of art. This method is called “collaborative production.” In collaborative production a group, not a particular individual, makes decisions. Because the group made decisions the final product is the property of the group. This is where we find much of the criticism for

¹⁴ Jenkins (2006) 3

¹⁵ Shirky (2008) 50

information or objects relating to the Internet, including sites like Wikipedia. This is also where much of Jaron Lanier's criticism of the "crowd" rests, because the crowd represents the online community or group. Shirky's final method is "collective action." This is the hardest method because it assumes that in order for a collective to act, the collective must agree on a set of proposals and make plans. The community enters a decision as divided voices but come together as one voice. "It requires a group of people to commit themselves to undertaking a particular effort together, and to do so in a way that makes the decision of the group binding on the individual members."¹⁶ The problem with participation rests in how the event's members are engaged. While participation brings people together, there must always be a reason for people to come together (we can call it an interest for now). That interest in a topic, an event, a movement, directs one to seek out others who might be interested in the same engagement. If one becomes less engaged, or not engaged in a group, that voice might be lost in the larger group's decision. Yet, in order for participation and collaborative action to take place engagement must be fueled with passion. Passions remains a way for people to come together under one topic and work for one voice. What is yet to be understood are the changing dynamics of group behavior since the introduction of the Internet. Has group passion changed through our interactions with the Internet? How does online practices and use construct passion in the real world? Take for example the growing *Occupy Wall Street* movement, where thousands of passionate people convene for many different reasons. This type of participation is new, but it still relies on engagement in order for success. "Engagement refers to subjective states, that is, a mobilized, focused attention

¹⁶ Shirky (2008) 51

on some object. It is in a sense a prerequisite for participation: To ‘participate’ in politics, presuppose some degree of engagement. For engagement to become embodied in participation and thereby give rise to civic agency there must be some connection to practical, do-able activities, where citizens can feel empowered.”¹⁷

At the end of the 1990s French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud saw a group of practicing artists who were taking the philosophies of Marx and Debord and making works of art that presented a social experience instead of the traditional *object d’art*. These artists appropriated social situations as a way to create work, by forming a direct collaboration, relationship, between artists, participant, and environment. In these works, which Bourriaud called *Relational Aesthetics*, artists stepped into a position of event organizer where they created a reason to assemble instead of an object used to document the creative process. Relational art was a way to appropriate the social production of a work of art, which for Bourriaud, like Marx and Debord, existed in all work. Bourriaud termed relational art as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”¹⁸ In *Relational Aesthetics* “projects” artists ask viewers to participate in the making of the work. Take for example the 1992 installation by Rikrit Tiravanij where the artist asks his audience to join him in the gallery where he cooked Thai food. The participants were instructed to consume the “artwork,” free of charge.¹⁹ For Bourriaud this type of work extended directly from the situation Debord proposed—that the social spectacle becomes the real and that the work of *d’etournement*

¹⁷ Dahlgren (2009) 80,81

¹⁸ Bourriaud (2002) 14

¹⁹ Tiravanij (1992)

is to work from within the spectacle in order to comment on the spectacle. This *d'etournement* would shatter perceptions of the gallery space, the autonomous artwork, and the work as commodity. “What is collapsing before our very eyes is nothing other than this falsely aristocratic conception of the arrangement of works of art, associated with the feeling of territorial acquisition. In other words, it is no longer possible to regard the contemporary work as a space to be walked through (the ‘owner’s tour’ is akin to the collector’s). It is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion.”²⁰ Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, and the relational artwork created throughout the 1990s, have immense consequences and implications for work made online. Like the social situation of a public “free” space used by relational artists, the Internet, as it exists today, is also considered a “free” space. What this means is that as long as one is able to plug into the system they are able to go anywhere they wish within the online public sphere. If digital artists were to follow the examples of relational art as an online tool to create work the Internet could become much more interesting.

Bourriaud furthered his theory on artist/group participation with the 2007 article *Postproduction*. Here, Bourriaud suggests that not only are the artists of the 1990s appropriating Debord, but also they “contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creating and copy, readymade and original work.”²¹ In this article Bourriaud posits that new art is a remix of past work. While relational aesthetics dealt with the physical social situation, postproduction constructs works of art that use the net as a network, as a way of getting information to

²⁰ Bourriaud (2002) 15

²¹ Bourriaud (2007) 13

and out from the public sphere. On the net, everything is available for appropriation, which then comments on how society and humanity is closely linked to the social situation between people. Additionally, these new works of art seek different viewing structures and create new ways of communicating. They are also being built not out of commodity and not out of the traditional notions that object equals product but out a new set of credentials, some of which are still to be defined. The digital object d'art is changing from a pure interactive experience to a plastic experience where participants of the art object, or "project," are viewed not through a pure "real" experience, but through the screen. What is still undiscovered are ways in which the screening experience may also become a "pure" experience. Postproduction art appropriates past information as it positions into a different context, recalling Duchamp's redefinition of art by moving the urinal off the bathroom wall and presenting under different context in the exhibition space:

Postproduction apprehends the forms of knowledge generated by the appearance of the Net (how to find one's bearings in the cultural chaos and how to extract new modes of production from it). Indeed, it is striking that the tools most often used by artists today in order to produce these relational models are preexisting works for formal structures, as if the world of cultural products and artworks constituted an autonomous strata that could provide tools of connection between individuals; as if the establishment of new forms of sociality and a true critique of contemporary forms of life involved a different attitude in relation to artistic patrimony, through the production of new relationships to culture in general and to the artwork in particular."²²

What happens to the spectator when he or she shares in participating with the artist? Once the lines between the artists, the participant, the work, and the environment have been crossed a level of freedom is established. Jacques Ranciere refers to this at *The Emancipated Spectator*. For Ranciere the act of emancipation is a type of

²² Bourriaud (2007) 14

recognition of the system, or knowledge used for the *d'etournement*. “Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions.”²³ Once the participant understands that they are interacting with a production, that they are participants to an ongoing situation, the product becomes not based on an object but on the experience. The participant then becomes the act as producer of the work, not a bystander. The emancipated spectacle is a vehicle away from the passive viewing of the participant into an active contributor. This change takes the viewer away from autonomous independence and treats them as members of a group. “That is what the word ‘emancipation’ means: the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body.”²⁴

For some new digital media critics the group, and the Internet, is a threat to the creativity of the individual. For these critics, artists not only worry about copyright they also need to worry about online communities who share and produce joint projects and decision. Jaron Lanier leads this charge against online community participation. Lanier fears that the cloud, the online community has too much power. He criticizes the online community as a group that relies on the amount of support of an idea or a topic instead of the topic’s quality and “truthfulness.” Take for example Wikipedia, Lanier’s most used example of Web 2.0. The administrators of Wikipedia announces that it is a free and

²³ Ranciere (2009) 13

²⁴ Ranciere (2009) 19

open community when it is in fact managed or regulated by a small group of information trolls who call themselves “syops” (system operators). Syops are self-appointed and group approved supervisors who can decide if an entry is worthy of inclusion in the encyclopedia. While there are several parameters for inclusion in Wikipedia, one of them relies on the amount of time an entry has been active. If I come up with the craziest, possibly untrue, idea and then ask three peers to write an online review of that idea I have a better chance to have that idea presented as a trustworthy entry in Wikipedia. Here, Lanier’s worry is valid. In the cloud, quantity sometimes outweighs the truthfulness of an idea. This is what Lanier calls Digital Maoism. For Lanier, Digital Maoism champions the extent to which a digital object has been affected by the digital culture, which he calls “Metaness.” “Digital Maoism doesn’t reject all hierarchy. Instead, it overwhelmingly rewards the one preferred hierarchy of digital metaness, in which a mashup is more important than the sources who were mashed. A blog of blog is more exalted than a mere blog... ‘Meta’ equals power in the cloud.”²⁵ While Lanier takes his argument to the point where he seems more paranoid than logical, he does have substantial worries of the cloud. This is not to say that the potential to use the cloud as a way to talk about current ideals, as *d’etournement*, is outweighed by the worry that the artistic voice might be lost in the atmosphere. In resistance to the growing monopoly on creative culture, artists still have a chance to develop the net, and the artwork represented by and for the net. There is still an immeasurable amount of freedom on the net but there is still enough to worry about concerning the future of the Net. “Never in our history has a painter had to worry about whether his paints infringed on someone else’s work...there

²⁵ Lanier (2010) 79

is a free market in pencils; we needn't worry about its effect on creativity. But there is a highly regulated, monopolized market in cultural icons; the right to cultivate and transform them is not similarly free."²⁶ If the cloud turns into a corporation that owns the property of the community then, we will have a different system. This is why we should listen to some of the worries of Lanier but at the same time should treat him as a grumpy old man. The Internet is currently a free space and ready for creativity.

While Lanier continues to complain about the power of a collective online body I find that this body does have power to push free, creative, issues and ideas forward. It is up to artists to figure out how to direct and document future projects. But, like the emancipated spectator who becomes an actor, the community has the power to grab hold of the ideas and push them forward. The same happened to Jazz after Adorno's critique. While critics of online art get bogged down with what it means to be in a community, we still have the ability to look at the individual. We can see online works of art as both autonomous and part of a community. Even when it seems so vast, and complicated, let us remember that the Internet can address one person as a time as much as it can represent a collective:

The collective powered shared by spectators does not stem from the fact that they are members of a collective body or from some specific form of interactivity. It is the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest is as much as this adventure is not like any other. This shared power of equality on intelligence links individual, makes them exchange their intellectual adventures, in so far as it keeps them separate from one another, equally capable of using the power everyone has to plot her own path.²⁷

²⁶ Lessig (2004) 186

²⁷ Ranciere (2009) 16,17

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