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Participation in the Digital Public:
New Media Art as Online Community

Précis

This dissertation will focus on *Community Online Art Projects* (COAPs), online works of art produced through user engagement and participation and which are orchestrated by artists who employ the connected nature of the Internet. COAPs compel a reassessment of the standard theory that digital works of art are defined primarily by the remediation from analog data into digital code. While COAPs are firstly the product of the Internet, thus the product of the computer, COAPs have the power to extend beyond the computer because they rely on the engagement and participation of collaborators. In order to show how COAPs challenge traditional concepts of art practice, I will examine COAPs by considering three prominent characteristics of online collaborative communication technologies: *remediation, participation*, and *interconnection*.

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A growing number of artists, theorists, critics, and curators view the Internet as a

powerful tool that enables wide-spread access to the world in real time—a tool which

facilitates improved participation and communication among users and through this can

challenge some conventional ideas about the nature of art. Such projects as *Google Maps*

Road Trip, Marisa's American Idol Audition Training Blog, The Artist is Present,

LearningtoLoveYouMore.com, and *JstChillin,* represent only a sample of the range of

works that use the online community itself as a site for art practice[1]. In doing so, these

projects employ the specific characteristics of the internet: participation, interconnection,

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[1] Other Community Online Art Projects include *Net VS Net Collective*, *Pseudo.com*, Raphael Rubinstein's *The Silo*, *The Steve Museum*, along with collaborated group platforms like *Flickr*, *Pinterest*, and Flash Mobs.

and remediation. In some new digital artworks, what becomes significant is the manner of participating, not the production of a discrete object. Anyone—at any time—can potentially share with others instantly. This cooperative nature has enormous possibilities for the art world, as for so many others. As such, these works pose a number of intriguing questions. What does it mean to be a participant within a community of users? How are current art objects created? Is the concept of creative originality and ownership of an object disappearing?

The Internet offers a store of new tools for art making, including databases, several distinct coding languages and open source content. However, while the increasingly participatory nature of the Internet may theoretically allow greater access to online public spaces, exactly how and why Internet artworks differ from previous artworks is still being disputed. My dissertation will explore how community online art projects, which I presently refer to as COAPs, serve as new options of practice and production for contemporary artists.[*]

Community Online Art Projects are works of art produced through user engagement and participation online. Artists who not only employ the Internet as a collaborative environment but also explore the connected nature of the Internet as a practice orchestrate the projects under investigation in this dissertation. The power of the Internet to create new works of art can be seen in the viral nature of some Internet content, where information is passed around a large community of users within seconds. Not only can artists start a project but they can also explore the sharing nature of the online community to engage with many more people than would be possible in one

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[*]As a side note I am not thrilled by the term "COAPs." I will use this acronym until I find a better term that describes online art made by artists with the help of participating users. I would like to use "Internet Art" but this term currently carries various definitions concerning art that appears online.

gallery or exhibition setting. That said, I will not examine the many ways art appears online, including posting or exhibiting art, documenting it, or creating new art with the aid of the computer and other digital devices. This dissertation will only address the works of art that have been created by artists specifically using the Internet as a medium that employ participants as creative collaborators.

In this dissertation I will examine four issues raises by COAPs. First, by exploring how COAPs descend from earlier technological advancements in the arts, this dissertation seeks a more accurate definition of "new media." Many outspoken theorists who have been instrumental in defining our perception of new media make a clear distinction—separating the world along technological lines. According to this line of thought, new media, by definition, begins with digitization, the development of computers, and the appearance of code. Leading new media theorist Lev Manovich posits that new media directly emerges from computer culture and that "new media" is merely "old media" remediated into digital code. As Manovich boldly suggests: "New media are the cultural objects which use digital computer technology for distribution and exhibition."[2] Other who have proposed important ways to define and categorize new media include Mark Hansen, John Guillory, Jaron Lanier, Lawrence Lessig, Marshall McLuhan, Michel Foucault, and Noah Waldrip-Fruin, among others.

In order to explain future works of art, critics need to look past what is "just" digital and find new ways to characterize what is new. By looking at the functions of contemporary online art as new media, this dissertation seeks medium specificity in Internet works of art. By asking what it means to be a participant in online communities,

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[2] Manovich (2003) 17

COAPs illustrate how art can be made from and within the Internet. Instead of remaining simple remediation of the past, as Manovich suggests, new works of art will extend past such remediation and be built out of this new medium. I see COAPS as forerunners for this new creative environment.

In order to address how these projects work one must look to the theories of *new media*, and in doing so may resolve oversimplifications and confusions over the definitions of *new media, digital media, Internet art, and web art*.   Examining the ways in which artists utilize the Internet as a collaborative space, COAPs may reveal some of the problems that appear when trying to define what is digital and new. In her essay "Constructing an Aesthetic of Web Art from a Review of Artists," Alison Coleman defines web art as "Internet art created specifically for the web."[3] This is incorrect. Unlike the Internet, which is browser based, the World Wide Web is based on the networks made through user participation and interconnectivity.   How to define Internet art and Web art is a fine distinction, but an important one. In order to properly define and provide context for COAPs, I will call on media historians and critics such as: Nicholas Abercrombie, Claire Bishop, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Peter Burger, T.J. Clark, Hal Foster, Suzi Gablik, Lisa Gitelman, John Guillory, Mark B.N. Hansen, Henry Jenkins, George P. Landow, Jaron Lanier, Lawrence Lessig, Lev Manovich, *Marshall* McLuhan, W. J. T. Mitchell, Robert Nelson, Jacques Ranciere, Richard Shiff, and Noah Waldrip-Fruin.

Second, by exploring a selected group of current online artworks I hope to define COAP more comprehensively and to find better language to describe and characterize

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[3] Alison Colman, (2005) 13.

such works of art. Instead of looking at work that is simply posted, coded, or created by digital technology, the works I will explore are located within the intersection of digital art, online art, and Internet art. I will look at artworks that exclusively use the online community as a resource for creativity and/or practice. By critiquing the contextual and aesthetic structure as it relates to community organizing, I hope to show that these new artworks are, in essence, new because they stem from the new forms of community use and collaborative creativity available online.

Third, I will connect these online artworks to previous artworks. For all their novelty, COAPs connect to previous art movements and philosophies including (to greater or lesser extents): Modernism, Post Modernism, Conceptualism, Situationism, Formalism, Dada and Neo Dada, Performance Art, Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT), Relational Aesthetics, and Connective Aesthetics. By looking at earlier art movements, whether they be the technological collaborations of EAT or the shared ownership over productions stipulated by Relational Aesthetics, I will argue that while the properties of art have not changed with the introduction of the computer, such COAPs hold great potential to take advantage of the participant. In short, I hope to identify the ways in which current community online art projects appropriate and reshape past concepts of art, authorship, and media. In order to show how COAPs relate to previous philosophies this dissertation will cite the works of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Guy Debord, Michael Fried, Clement Greenberg, Theordor Adorno, and Nicolas Bourriaud

Fourth and finally, and of least emphasis, by highlighting what is unique about COAPs I hope to suggest ways that future works of art might employ online

communities. It is my hope to show how current artists who draw on online

participation, high-speed interconnection, digital forms of remediation, and convergent

technology can now look to the Internet as a possible stage for the creation of new works

of art.

Three Properties of Community Online Art Projects

The first property of COAPs is *remediation*, the reuse and re-appropriation of

media. Much of the discussion of current practices in digital remediation circles around

the computer as a tool that transforms analog data into code. In the context of the digital

platform one of the most significant concerns and criticisms of new digital artworks is

that they are not theoretically new, only repurposed past artworks. Media critics like

Jaron Lanier, Mark Hansen, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Sarah Cook, John

Guillory, Henry Jenkins, Marshall McLuhan, W. J. T. Mitchell, and Lev Manovich in one

way or another define new media in relation to previous advances in technology. For

many of these critics, including Lanier, Hansen, and Manovich, digital code is what

makes new media "new." Therefore, what is new by definition is any analog media

transcribed from into code and placed on the computer. Does this mean that if I take a

picture of the Mona Lisa with my digital camera that that image is new? I would argue

not. In fact, what I propose is that remediation should not be the sole criterion for new

media. Remediation of analog into digital may present old information in a new way but

this does not mean that information has become completely new just because it becomes

a product of code. COAPs indicate that new works may be realizations of what it means

to be both digital and online, therefore suggesting a case of medium specificity

concerning the Internet. I propose that artists are already looking past simple computer

remediation as a qualifying attribute of what is new and have started to explore the very nature of the online world.

The second function of COAPS is *participation*. I see participation as the fundamental property of the Internet as a communication tool, thus the fundamental property of COAPs. For the purpose of the works described here, COAPs enable participation through collaboration or consensus, which is essential to co-creation between artists and audience/user. What is specific to the online platform is connection and participation. Users may participate by connecting to each other by sending emails, commenting on others information and opinions, and hyper linking to sites that are associated with others. The Internet is a social enterprise as much as it is a place containing immense amounts of information. Online participation takes many forms, from liking a cause on a friend's Facebook post and clicking on a link to show support, to blogging about a topic, to starting a political movement. The ways in which users show interest online are varied and growing as new communication tools appear. There are a number of ways COAPs explore participation which the projects in this dissertation make apparent.

For example, COAP participants are confronted with multiple spaces: the physical position of the person in front of the screen, the possible multiple selves that the Internet allows, and the placement of an individual voice acting as a legitimate presence within an online community, among others. *Marisa's American Idol Audition Training Blog*, for example, reached the third position when a user searched Google for "*American Idol.*" Marisa Olson's online art project documented her actions and thoughts over three months

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. Here and henceforth in hard copies, underlining, merely connotes hyperlinks to project websites

as she readied herself for her *American Idol* audition. Olson continuously blogged about what she was doing in order to prepare to sing in front of the show's judges. Olson asked blog visitors to assist her in her training—by providing feedback, voting on outfits, or consoling her when she got sunburned during a session in a tanning bed. In much the same ways Olson uses the community to support her endeavor and, COAPs stress the importance of participation as an *integral part of the creative process*, sometimes even in the very formation of the artistic concept that defines the work.

The connection of records, which I will refer to as interconnection, is the final important dimension of COAPs. Interconnection means the various physical and digital connections shared by users. These connections may include Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs), which are software and hardware components used by users to create communication connections with others. Take, for example, the collaborative art project, *Learning to Love You More, by* contemporary artists Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher.   Here, participants came together to add information into July and Fletcher's system of assignments. By participating, the users created a more defined, and applied, art experience. Another example, and one that is geared toward museum education, allows the public to "tag" meaning to exhibited works of art. *Steve Museum* allows viewers the ability to attach descriptions or documents to objects on view in an exhibition space through social media. In the *Steve* project museums use social media as both an interconnection with viewers and a way to enlarge the language that defines objects. According to the project's website; "social tagging may provide profound new ways to

describe and access cultural heritage collections and encourage visitor engagement with collection objects"[4]

Not everyone is enthusiastic about the collaborative creativity of online communities that welcome user interaction to define meaning or information. In fact, there are many criticisms of power distributions within the Internet community, including concerns that people will lose their individual voices when placed within a larger community structure and a loss of validated information that is checked and managed by experts. For some, the cloud means a loss of ownership, expertise, and trust. How users manage, add, engage, and manipulate online content appear in works by Lawrence Lessig, Sarah Cook, Peter Dahlgren, Yochai Benkler, David Bollier, and Howard Rheingold, among others. [5] Media critic Jaron Lanier leads what is currently the most frequently articulated charge against online community participation. Lanier fears the online community has too much power. Using Wikipedia as an example, Lanier criticizes the digital collective as being a group that relies for its authority on its members. For Lanier, being leaderless leads to problems of authority and validity. This is what Lanier calls Digital Maoism, "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 that were mashed. A blog of a blog is more exalted than a mere blog…'Meta' equals power in the cloud."[6]

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[4] *Steve: The Museum Social Tagging Project*. U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services Accessed February 11, 2012, http://www.steve.museum/

[5] Some critics of Online Art and Online communities generally include. James Boyle, Burgess, Jean and Joshua Green, Len Fisher, Andrew Keen, Lucy Lippard, Peter Miller, Lisa Nakamura, Christiane Paul, Mark Poster, Julian Stallabrass, Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, Cas R. Sunstein, Nancy Stutts and Liana Kleeman, James Surowiecki.

[6] Lanier, *You are Not a Gadget,* 79.

From another perspective, law professor Lawrence Lessig cautions against the control and value given to the Internet where the Internet is controlled by a few. The loss of an "open" Internet threatens the democratic nature of participating online. Lessig's apprehension stems from the legal issues that surround creativity online. If corporations increasingly dominate the Internet, new original online art may fail to be created.   Others scholars who have looked at the legal issues that arise around the Internet include Martha Woodmansee, Peter Jaszi, and Jessica Litman

A third critique involves the often-proclaimed assertion that the Internet is entirely democratic. In more and more cases, the use of the Internet is seen as being a possibility for every individual with connection to the outside world. We think that the Internet is everywhere and that everyone is on Facebook. This is obviously not the case. COAPs only include those who are presently privileged with the ability, time, and resources to have the necessary technology to participate online.

> This rapidly changing environment of new gadgets and apps, a growing rift is revealing the divide between those who have access to information and communication channels and those who do not. Historically disenfranchised groups, such as low-income minorities, rural residents, people with disabilities, non-English speakers, seniors and youth in less affluent school systems, are the least likely to be able to navigate the online environment…This phenomenon, sometimes called the "digital divide," should be a growing equity concern for communities…The end result is a population of individuals without a voice where things are done to them, not with them.[7]

While each of the earlier mentioned critiques have merit, from authorship and authority to democracy, each comment on the Internet's distinctive nature as an instrument of participation. Participation, the cloud, and collaboration are essential to being online and for making new online works of art. Currently, evaluating the reasons behind and the possibilities for Community Online Art Projects are imperative.

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[7] Stutts and Kleeman, "The Digital Divide's Equity Implications for Richmond, Virginia," 7.

<u>Chapter Outlines and Schedules</u>

Chapter One- "That is a Beautiful Urinal" (working title)

I will relate new digital media to previous ideas, including theories of authorship,

ownership, and the changing position of the artist in relation the artwork and the

viewer/user/participant. I will further explore how media critics have defined new media,

digital art, and Internet art in ways that do not currently allow for distinctions to be made

between Online Art, Internet art, Web Art, and the like. By looking back to twentieth

century definitions of the artist, the art object, and its audience, this dissertation seeks

better evaluation of contemporary artwork, especially those artworks made in

collaboration between artist and digital participant/user. This chapter will discuss in

much detail the relationship between COAPs and the art movements mentioned earlier.

Here, I will illustrate relationships between current philosophies on new media and online

art to earlier media and cultural theorists including: Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes,

Michel Foucault, Clement Greenberg, Theodor Adorno, among others.[8]

Chapter 2- Remediation

Chapter two explores works of art that use remediation as a basis for the

conception of the analog work being re-made into a digital artifact. In many ways online

artists uses remediation as one tool among many. Some online artists look to remediation

as a reason or concept behind the work while others use remediation as a way to connect

to possible collaborators and interested groups of users. While, remediation has generally

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[8] A history of definitions of new media will includes citation from Nicolas Bourriaud, Jacques Derrida, G.W.F. Hegel, Max Horkheimer, Marshall McLuhan, Robert Nelson, and Richard Shiff.

referenced a one-way transfer from old to new media, many users of current technology see remediation as having the ability to move between different environments and platforms. This may also be called "Convergence."[9] While, for some critics like Lanier, Bolton, and Hansen, remediation is a prerequisite for new media and digital media, I want to propose that once COAPs realize what is particular to the collaborative online artworks that remediation becomes a less important defining characteristic. I will examine the works of *The Artist is Present*, by Marina Abramovic, and the collaborative exhibition artist community *JstChillin*, as they engage remediation.

Chapter 3. Participation

Unlike traditional participants who have relied on physical space for an interaction, the Internet does not need one to meet in a city square, to show up at a picket line, to appear in front of a political body. Participants can now collaborate or meet online through Internet Communication Technologies (ICT). The questions that arise out of ICTs, in relation to physical community organizations, groups, and platforms for participation, address the changing nature of participation. Some critics look at ICTs as a less valid way to participate, while others look at current ICTs as revolutionary. Take, for example, the action a user assumes by clicking on a social or political cause on Facebook.

Users may find some sort of engagement with a cause through Facebook shares and posts but instead of physically interacting with the cause's members, as they may have in the past, ICT removes the physical presence and often substitutes a simple,

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[9] Henry Jenkins (2006).

singular, "like" or say nothing model. On Facebook users can "like" a cause, a page, a post, and personal additions from another user. The "like" button provides a way to say that one user stands by the statement, cause, or action. The problem with the "like" button is how simple, and sometimes meaningless, it is to participate. What happens when a cause, like HIV awareness, is reduced to a "like" button? What if all causes only asked for a type of participation that called for a slight nod of support.   Would this be a negative, invalid, type of engagement? Perhaps.

In chapter three I will focus on ideas of participation, the most important property of COAPs as I understand them. I hope to show that current COAPs renounce the autonomous art and the Romantic conception of the artist or author as a solitary artistic genius. Such COAP artists see production of new work as a shared experience. Artists may now look toward new processes for reclaiming and sharing artworks—through databases, remediation, and digital collaboration where user identities and bodies might not be present. With this newly re-found freedom to create, contemporary Internet artists challenge the boundaries between authorship, object, and audience. A growing number of artists employ ways in which users engage and participate in the creation of artwork and art endeavors. The collaborative artwork by Peter Baldes and Mark Horowitz, *Google Maps Road Trip*, asked users to participate with the work as it took place online. The artists set up a video web stream with adjoining chat functions and links to the Google Map service in order to virtually "drive" from Los Angeles, where Marc lived, to Richmond, Virginia, where Pete lived. They accomplish this cross-country drive by clicking through the street-view images on Google's online mapping system and

communicating with any participant who decided to enter their chat room. Participants were asked to join in on the trip by chatting with the artists and with other participants.

Chapter 4. Interconnection

The number and amount of available online experiences, information, and connections are enormous. Artists can create projects that not only cross the world in a matter of seconds but also are used to reach an enormous amount of users. Interconnectivity is a fundamental part of our life, and often times we do not realize how immersed we are now in our technological extensions. Aspects of interconnection are in every facet of our lives. The Internet allows for a total emersion of connections through complex networks and the speed of which this interconnection happens grows faster every day. In chapter four I will further discuss how collaborative community online art projects are a place for interconnection, for users to come together to form a community of action. For example, the website *Learning to Love You More,* developed by Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher, is a project consisting of a series of art assignments. The purpose of the site is to send and receive art assignments between the artists in charge and the participants who want to engage the assigned material. The two artists, who acted like project administrators, would add an assignment to the website in much the same way an art teacher might in a studio course. Once the participant completed the assignment they were encouraged to return their work back to the site for publication online. The outcome of the project is an extensive network of projects completed by thousands of people.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

While participatory Internet art is still in its infancy it is very much a product of past concepts and achievements in analog as much as digital communication between users. The importance of this dissertation is to show how COAPs look to the medium specific properties, characteristics, and use of the Internet for definition. Therefore, COAPs currently illustrate how future Internet works of art may, in fact, not have to rely on remediation but may use the properties of the Internet as essential creative endeavors. For now, COAPs are the best example of the types of creativity made online. Since COAPs address what it means to be a participant in a community these online art projects are examples of what might come. Furthermore, if we understand the ways in which we use *remediation, participation, and interconnection* we may in fact understand our contemporary selves in a much more comprehensive manner. The community online art project allows us to start talking about the future of art and the Internet.

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