

Discussion Paper
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Introduction

In his 1957 lecture 'The Creative Act' Marcel Duchamp contended that art has always had a level of viewer involvement.

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.

Duchamp, M (1959) p78

So in any artwork, the viewer must have some level of ownership of the experience before they can play their part in this completion of the creative process and make the piece a success. There are many ways of encouraging this investment.

One way is that of offering the viewer a participatory role in physically as well as mentally completing the piece before them. This is by no means a new approach to art but it is undoubtedly one that has gained a lot of options as regards its delivery via the internet and other digital means over the last few years.

In my project I am making an online questionnaire to be completed by viewers in the gallery and also at home. I have come to this point in my project because my thoughts have been necessarily broad ranging and I feel that to remove any one part of this thought would be to the detriment of the work as a whole. I think the best way to get people to think about the broad ranging issues I have looked at is by asking them directly what they think and offering the opportunity to lay their thoughts out on screen. I will then give them access to other people's answers. This seems to be half of the pleasure with questionnaires.

In this essay I will look at some of the potential issues involved in my taking this approach.

A few points in favour

Janet Murray talks about the benefits of interactive narrative in her seminal book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*.

The retracing of the situation from different perspectives leads to a continual deepening in the reader's understanding of what has happened, a deepening that can bring a sense of resolution but one that allows for the complexity of the situation and that leaves the moment of shock unchanged and still central.

Murray, J (1997) p136

This very same 'deepening in the reader's understanding' is what I hope will happen in response to my questionnaire, if I can structure it well enough, and complement it with appropriate visual accompaniment.

The Department for Education and Skills advocate computer-based learning methods because of their flexibility and capacity for tailoring education toward a student's individual needs. A key bullet point here says E-learning works by 'increasing retention and improving outcomes' DfES (2003) p7. Can these benefits be applied to art? I think they can.

I would argue that with web based art the possibilities are expanded by the fact that the viewer is looking at the work from the comfort of their own home. They are at liberty to engage with it in a way they can't in a gallery. In the past, participatory artists have presented people with Thai food, given away sweets, conducted happenings and asked for mailed in contributions to projects. All of these projects have asked for a response from people but the possibility of their making an original contribution has been less great.

Online, web 2.0 technologies mean that not only can one's own contribution be seen immediately, but the contributions of others over time can be seen as well. The potential sense of viewer agency here is very significant.

Some arguments against

Lev Manovich highlights a common complaint about computer-based art.

When we use the concept of "interactive media" exclusively in relation to computer-based media, there is the danger that we will interpret "interaction" literally, equating it with physical interaction between a user and a media object (pressing a button, choosing a link, moving the body) at the expense of psychological interaction. The psychological processes of filling in, hypothesis formation, recall and identification which are required for us to comprehend any image or text at all, are mistakenly identified with an existing structure of interactive links.
Manovich, L (2001) p57

In this quote Manovich actually highlights one of my reasons for presenting the project as a questionnaire: 'The psychological processes of filling in, hypothesis formation, recall and identification'. These are exactly the processes with which I want to engage people, and which I believe the questionnaire is very well equipped to address.

There is a secondary question I must deal with here, though, that of distracting people with technology and programming. This is the digital art equivalent of acting with a capital 'A'. I've lost count of the Oscar winning performances I've seen where I felt the actor's histrionics unbalanced the film. I need to give people a sense of agency in order to engage them, but at what stage does this agency become more like a distracting toy that unbalances the work?

We can find an insight in to the shortcomings of interactivity in art by looking at criticisms of participatory art of the past. Hal Foster, in reference to Nicholas Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics' says:

As with previous attempts to involve the audience directly (in some abstract painting or some conceptual art), there is the risk of illegibility here, which might re-introduce the artist as the artist as the principal figure and primary exegete of the work. At times, 'the death of the author' has meant not 'the birth of the reader', as Roland Barthes speculated, so much as the befuddlement of the viewer.
Foster, H (2004) p194

This accusation of befuddlement can also often be applied to websites. Some people simply aren't comfortable with novel user interfaces.

Some may also ask why a viewer should do my work for me. Do people have time for this kind of thing? Do people when confronted with a request to take part in something in which they had expected to be passive retreat in to their shell?

Conclusion

In response to Manovich's comments, the main challenge for digital art generally is to avoid the trap of being too interested in purely physical or technological processes. The viewer's attention must never be too taken up with the newness of the technology at the expense of the work's deeper lines of enquiry.

For me, much of this is to do with what Manovich calls Remixability. This is the idea that culture has been broken down into modular building blocks from which new things are now made. When people can recognise a block, that recognition legitimises it. They're comfortable with it. I believe this is part of the reason for the discomfort many people still feel with a lot of 20th century art. They don't understand the blocks from which it's made. People do understand questionnaires, though. Questionnaires are a familiar part of the landscape, both online and on paper. The conventions of the user interface for this are well established. As such, they're ripe for remixing.

I don't believe that people are doing my work for me. By presenting work that requires direct viewer engagement I'm asking them to approach it from a different angle. One thing I've found with my blog is that there's something really helpful about organising and articulating your thoughts. This seems to me like a logical progression of the opening quote from Duchamp. Here, I'm asking people to actualise a process they'll most probably undergo while looking at many artworks anyway. The bonus here is that I can keep a database of those actualisations for future viewers.

As for the time issue, I think I may work toward making each question independent of the others. People can fill out as many or as few of the questions as they wish. This may mean that the site will not take a formal questionnaire structure. For people who just don't want to take part, I'll need to offer some more conventional historical information and illustrations.

On the surface of it, my main problems are very traditional ones. How can I best phrase my questions? How will I structure my questionnaire to encourage a good flow of thought? Underlying these, though, are far newer technologically based issues. What will happen if someone in a gallery half completes the questionnaire then walks away? Should it auto-complete? What of the sense of agency? I'd like to make people's answers have a reasonably immediate effect on the visually oriented part of the screen. Programming that could be a nightmare. As asked earlier, how can I avoid letting this sense of agency become like a toy? These problems are to form the bulk of my enquiries in unit 3.

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