

Daniel Fone
MA DIGITAL ARTS
dan@hammerheadrabbits.com

PGPD RESEARCH PAPER

Title: What lessons have online participatory artists learned from their theoretical (Nicholas Bourriaud) and practicing (Allan Kaprow) 'real world' forebears and what potential routes forward can be taken from them?

ABSTRACT

In this essay I discuss the theory and practice of the participatory art of the conventional art world in order to apply the lessons to internet based art.

The theoretical backdrop, in the context of the art of the past twenty years, is provided largely by Nicholas Bourriaud with his book 'Relational Aesthetics'. Participatory art is beginning to come in to its own, after a long period on the fringes. It was championed throughout the 60s by Allan Kaprow with his Happenings. The means of online participation, Web 2.0, is changing rapidly and as a consequence theory is easier to find online. As such it is often unpublished.

My key methods have been to

- Introduce examples of participatory art that I feel have been successful, extract useful comments made by the artists of said works.
- Look at the development of Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics'.
- Look at theoretical developments in online 'telepresence' and involvement.
- Examine examples of online participatory art that I feel to be indicative of the wider scene.
- Ask whether online artists are repeating the mistakes of the past.

My aim has been to discover a good foundation for online participation to move forward using the knowledge of the past. I believe I have uncovered some clear points of potential use to future practitioners.

Five keywords: Participation – Online – Telepresence – Involvement - Communication

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relational Aesthetics, Nicholas Bourriaud

In 'Relational Aesthetics' Nicholas Bourriaud argues that the most exciting contemporary art is in inter-human relations. The art is not to be found in any static object but the interplay of the audience. This paper argues that his flat disdain for technological art is misplaced, while many of his criticisms of it remain fair.

Participation, Claire Bishop

Claire Bishop gathers essays by theorists, artists and curators in order to get a clear overview of the shape of art history in this area. I have referred to several essays in this very diverse book, using it as a grounding point in both theoretical and practical terms.

The Language of New Media, Lev Manovich

The rapid development of new media is thoroughly investigated in this seminal book that has provided the basis of much new media based theoretical enquiry that has followed it. I use it to introduce and back up the concept and validity of telepresence.

Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace, Janet Murray

Janet Murray explores the concepts of immersion and agency when applied to computers. Agency is an important part of achieving a sense of involvement with any participatory artwork. I argue that with much online art participation, this sense of agency is often absent.

Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life, Allan Kaprow – Edited by Jeff Kelley

Allan Kaprow is a hugely important figure in the history of participatory art. His Happenings and his reflection on them throw light on many of the pitfalls that remain prevalent in this kind of practice. He is one of my key sources of lessons from the past.

INTRODUCTION

After the area of relations between Humankind and deity, and then humankind and the object, artistic practice is now focused on the sphere of inter-human relations, as illustrated by artistic activities that have been in progress since the early 1990s. So the artists set his sights more and more clearly on the relations that his work will create among his public, and on the invention of models of sociability. This specific production determines not only an ideological and practical arena, but new formal fields as well. By this, I mean that over and above the relational character intrinsic to the artwork, the figures of reference of the sphere of human relations have now become fully-fledged artistic "forms". (Bourriaud, 1998, p28)

In his collection of essays 'Relational Aesthetics', Nicholas Bourriaud looks at the evolution of contemporary art forms predicated on relations between people. He considers artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija. Tiravanija typically creates spaces in which his audience can relax in a manner in which they might more ordinarily in their homes. For example, in 'Untitled (free)' the audience can eat the Thai food which he has provided, consult their itineraries for the other galleries they may be visiting that day and generally sit to relax with one another.

In the exhibition guide to 'No Ghosts in the Wall: Rirkrit Tiravanija, A Retrospective' the artist himself comments that

The exhibition came at an economically depressed time in New York that provided fertile grounds to establish it as the cornerstone of Tiravanija's practice. We don't use the word 'practice' lightly - It is as if the artist were a doctor administering the viewer with a dose of opiate to cure all maladies. (Tiravanija, 2004, p149)

This work and Tiravanija's description of it raises several questions which can be applied to many participatory artworks:

- Why is it 'as if the artist were a doctor'?
- From which element of the work does Tiravanija believe these medicinal qualities come? Is it the free food? Or the fact that the food is being given away in the name of art? Perhaps the provision of a space in which to relax? All of these things combined?
- There are plenty of cafes and bistros offering a similar service to this one. Is the re-contextualisation and consequent ambiguity achieved by its location in a gallery really that valuable?
- What is the impact of the grand narrative of art history in the background?

Could we read this work as medicinal in part because of its declared artistic context? In short, is art a modern, secular kind of church?

- Does the artist intend to propose a new social possibility in which a better way of living may become apparent? Is this a likely outcome for art?

PARTICIPATION IN ART HISTORY

The roots of this participatory art can be found some time before the 1990s in different Dadaist experiments and subsequently in the Happenings of Allan Kaprow. In looking at previous examples of this art we can begin to think about these questions in more depth.

Participatory art is defined primarily by the premise that the viewer must affect some agency over the work before it can take its intended shape. The viewer should have a good level of control over the extent of that agency and the direction in which it can move. The barrier between artist and viewer thus becomes blurred. There must nonetheless be a governing structure in place, without which the audience will only be confused.

Umberto Eco documented this dynamic:

The possibilities which the work's openness makes available always work within a given field of relations. As in the Einsteinian universe, in the 'work in movement' we may well deny that there is a single prescribed point of view. But this does not mean complete chaos in its internal relations. What it does imply is an organising rule which governs these relations. Therefore, to sum up, we can say that the 'work in movement' is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions, but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. The invitation offers the performer the opportunity for an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author.

In other words, the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee, a work to be completed. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed, the work in question will still be his own. It will not be a different work, and at the end of the interpretive dialogue, a form which is his form will have been organised, oriented and endowed with specifications for proper development. (Eco, 1962, p36)

Kaprow took a similar approach to his Happenings:

I think it is a mark of mutual respect that all persons involved in a

Happening be willing and committed participants who have a clear idea what they are to do. This is simply accomplished by writing out the scenario or score for all and discussing it thoroughly with them beforehand. In this respect it is not different from the preparations for a parade, a football match, a wedding or religious service.

(Kaprow, 1966, p103)

One of my favourite collaborative pieces is 'Funk Lessons' by Adrian Piper. It consists of Piper teaching a largely white, middle class audience how to 'get down and party together' to funk music, an idiom that sprung from black working class culture. In the process people confronted assumptions they had made about race, class and the status arising from different facets of attendant cultural mores. The artist encouraged this in her commentary, which she presented in a lecture hall style familiar to these sophisticated students.

The intimate scale of the dialogue permitted a more extensive exploration of individual reactions to funk music and dance, which are usually fairly intense and complex. For example, it sometimes elicited anxiety , anger or contempt from middle class, college educated whites: anxiety because its association with black, working class culture engenders unresolved racist feelings that are then repressed or denied rather than examined; anger; because it is both sexually threatening and and culturally intrusive to individuals schooled exclusively in the idiom of European-descended tradition of classical, folk and/or popular music; contempt, because it sounds 'mindless' or 'monotonous' to individuals who, through lack of exposure or musicological training, are unable to discern its rhythmic, melodic and topical complexity.

Alternately, funk sometimes elicited condescension from middle class, college educated blacks....

(Piper, 1985, p133)

She goes on to say she got perhaps even more from the process than her audience. Through it she was able to acknowledge her own perplexity regarding not only being a black woman who would often 'pass' as being white, but also her absorption in to white culture through the arts and academia. Though formally simple, Piper's combination of funk music and college lecture proposed a chiasmic moment in which all present could share an examination of something of the essential difficulty inherent in being human. As such, this simple event became quite complex.

In surveying the art of the 1990s, Nicholas Bourriaud developed these and other concepts further, offering contemporary art a theoretical structure more suited to its burgeoning formal pluralism.

The setting is widening; after the isolated object, it now can embrace the whole scene: the form of Gordon Matta-Clark or Dan Graham's work can not be reduced to the "things" those two artists "produce"; it is not the simple secondary effects of a composition, as the formalistic aesthetic would like to advance, but the principle acting as a trajectory evolving through signs, objects forms and gestures... The contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination. An artwork is a dot on a line. (Bourriaud, 1998, p20-21)

Bourriaud takes this further when he speaks of the lack of a need to be concerned about the lack monuments, or long lasting effects of the work.

Contemporary work is more than ever this “demonstration, for everyone to come, of the possibility of creating significance by inhabiting the edge of the abyss”, to borrow the words Cornelius Costoriadis – a formal resolution which touches on eternity precisely because it is specific and temporary. (Bourriaud, 1998, p54)

AGENCY AND TELEPRESENCE or RELATIONAL AESTHETICS AT A DISTANCE

Agency is the sensation that when we do something, our actions will have consequences which can be seen and felt in the real world. In computing terms, this translates as being able to open a file when we click on it. The opposite might be sitting and watching an egg timer icon. Janet Murray develops the idea in ‘Hamlet on the Holodeck’ in the context of interactive narrative.

As I move forward, I feel a sense of powerfulness, of significant action, that is tied to my pleasure in the unfolding story. In an adventure game this pleasure also feels like winning. But in a narrative experience not structured as a win-lose contest the movement forward has the feeling of enacting a meaningful experience both consciously chosen and surprising. However, there is a drawback to the maze orientation: it moves the character towards a single solution, toward finding the one way out. The desire for agency in digital environments makes us impatient when our options are so limited. We want an open road with a wide latitude to explore and more than one way to get

**somewhere. We want the "pullulating" web that Borges described, constantly bifurcating, with every branch deeply explorable.
(Murray, 1997, p133)**

Telepresence is the idea that one can be present from a distance, similarly to the way one can be heard on the other side of the world via telephone.

**Telepresence allows the subject to control not just the simulation but reality itself. Telepresence provides the ability to manipulate remotely physical reality in real time through its image. The body of the teleoperator is transmitted in real time, to another location where it can act on the subject's behalf - repairing a space station, doing underwater excavation, or bombing a military base in Iraq or Yugoslavia.
(Manovich, 2001, p166-167)**

While the above quote outlines the most literal definition of telepresence (go to <http://www.ieor.berkeley.edu/~goldberg/garden/Ars/> for a project exploring this), the term can be applied to most activities on the internet, which provides us with telepresence through a number of channels. The flourishing of blogs on all subjects, Skype, Myspace, Facebook, and of course individuals' own websites are all examples of people engaging in teleaction. The massive growth of these websites indicates that people are becoming increasingly comfortable using computers as a communication tool.

In light of this, participatory art acquires new potential when implemented online. In fact, the current incarnation of the web is, by its nature, a collaborative and communicative medium.

Surprisingly, then, online participatory art projects often feel dissatisfying. Examples of online participatory art I have found include:

Everlandia: <http://www.everlandia.net/main.php>

This site offers us the opportunity to create our own fantasy landscape. Their website tell us:

Everlandia is a journey of a special/personal kind. It playfully confronts an individual with their fantasies, needs and desires. It challenges the imagination to pick and compose from those landscapes, plants and animals, which most accurately express the image of the individual's dreamland. Their Everlandia.

In fact, I felt like a hired hand building someone else's lifeless, kitsch fantasy landscape. I put together a landscape I didn't like made of components that didn't

appeal to me. I clicked on a few of the other links, which also failed to engage me. I even questioned whether the whole project was merely being ironic, sarcastic even. I left. This project would have been a lot more interesting - and more collaborative - if I'd been asked to send in a fantasy landscape I had invented entirely on my own terms. The landscapes sent back would have varied wildly in quality and content, but participation, and relational aesthetics are to be found in the doing more than in the end result.

<http://artcontext.net>

A hive of projects and ideas by Andy Deck, most of which seem to consist of making your own very basic pixelated drawing and having it included as part of a larger whole. But why? This exercise strikes me as being something of a dead end. It acquires an added dimension in 'Election 2.008'

(<http://artcontext.org/art/08/election/>) in which the blocks combine to form the words MISSION ACCOMPLISHED. The squares themselves have often been filled with words. Most of these espouse Pro Obama sentiments. There are others, though. Predictably, these range from the childish: 'Elect Gay Chick' to the perplexing: 'My fellow prisoners' and, obviously, the current: 'FALL STREET'. Taken together, because of the emphasis on the election, the squares accrue an added semiotic tension. Nonetheless, being part of this felt more like an effort than something I was enjoying contemplating. I also couldn't escape the sense that this showcased the worst of the internet, with people using it to either fool around or repeat mantras heard ad infinitum on the news. You have to ask, though, what space did they have to contribute more?

Taken together, these works outline common problems I've found with online participation when done for art's sake.

- My sense of agency is limited.
- The parameters set by the artists bore me. Should I have the option of proposing new parameters, or at least expanding the existing ones?
- The balance between artist and participant is off kilter. I can't really contribute anything of myself, breaking any sense of immersion.
- A key advantage of online communication is the fact that I can contribute in my own time. Online participation works well when people connect a little of their lives to it.
- This work only functions in a set space (the screen). I can't reflect on it when I'm not looking at it, or at least I wouldn't want to.
- The internet has the advantage of offering the opportunity for "inhabiting the edge of the abyss" as quoted above, but it can also if so desired provide a monument to it.
- Bourriaud's idea that the work is in the experience, the moment shared, is disappointingly absent here.

In short, there's nothing relational here. What does Nicholas Bourriaud make of

internet art? He has little time for it:

**Art only exercises its critical duty with regard to technology from the moment when it shifts its challenges. So the main effects of the computer revolution are visible today among artists who do not use computers. On the other hand, those who produce so-called "computer graphic" images by manipulating synthetic fractals and images, usually fall in to the trap of illustration. At best, their work is just a symptom or gadget...
(Bourriaud, 1998, p67-68)**

I can't help but feel, on first glance that he has a fair point here, at least on the evidence of the above work. He was writing in 1998, however. At this time, very few people were on the internet. Mobile phones were still the province of a few. Undeniably, he's called correctly on the tendency of many digital artists to allow technology to lead their work, reducing it to the status of 'gadget'. In 1998, Bourriaud could not easily have foreseen the rise of social media, or the organic growth of users placing massive volumes of their own content on their blogs, provoking comment board conversations in the process; and then new content in response

(A great example of this is:

<http://davario.livejournal.com/30861.html?page=17#comments>. – The user challenged people to draw themselves as teenagers. 511 people have taken him up on this in less than six months since posting. I'm not suggesting this is great art, but it is a telling moment, culturally speaking. One from which internet artists can learn.)

Yet Bourriaud makes an eerily prescient comment when he says:

**...the emergence of new technologies, like the internet and multi-media systems, points to a collective desire to create new areas of conviviality and introduce new types of transaction with regard to the cultural object. The "society of the spectacle" is thus followed by the society of extras, where everyone finds the illusion of an interactive democracy in more or less truncated channels of communication.
(Bourriaud, 1998, p26)**

This feels dead right, on the surface of it. Surely, though, an e-mail sent following up a long, in depth conversation is an excellent tool for clarifying or developing the theme further. A text message is one of the most intimate, and occasionally poetic, means of communication available to us, which is magnified by the fact that one can keep a text. These are not 'truncated channels of communication'.

Lev Manovich mounts telecommunication's defence:

Film, telecommunication, telepresence. Benjamin and Virilio's analyses make it possible for us to understand the historical effect of these technologies in terms of progressive diminishing and, finally, the complete elimination of something that both writers see as a fundamental condition of human perception – spatial distance, the distance between the subject who is seeing and the object being seen. The reading of the distance involved in vision as something positive, as a necessary ingredient of human culture, provides an important alternative for a much more dominant tendency in modern thought to read distance negatively. The negative reading is then used to attack the visual sense as whole. Distance becomes responsible for creating the gap between spectator and spectacle, for separating subject and object, for putting the first in position of transcendental mastery and rendering the second inert. Distance allows the subject to treat the Other as object; in short, it makes identification possible.

(Manovich, 2001, p17)

CONCLUSION

There's a lot of collaboration and participation flourishing online that doesn't have the art label. Much of it is dross. Some of it is fascinating. Why is this not being expressed in the art world?

Allan Kaprow says in his essay about video art in the 70s:

The problem came about because the artists felt free to program the physical surroundings but held off giving their subjects a program appropriate to those surroundings...

In general, when participatory art is shown in an exhibition context, both artist and viewer unconsciously expect it to be, and act like, a picture – discrete, and kept at a distance. When viewers are asked to become part of the art without further help or preparation, they feel put upon and become stereotypes...

Participation is a key word here, but in this experimental world of video, we succumb to the glow of the cathode ray tube while our minds go dead. Until video is used as indifferently as the telephone, it will remain a pretentious curiosity.

(Kaprow, 1974, p151-153)

This is deeply relevant to the problems faced by today's practitioners of internet based art.

Participatory Internet art is rarely framed and contextualised in a way that speaks to people about their own lives or draws them in toward any sense of immersion, a common side effect of a strong sense of agency.

Often little care is taken to present people with an opportunity to offer something of themselves. Instead, the audience is left with limited material for participation involving any real choice.

A clear framework is still needed. Countless blog memes and comments panels attest to the fact that people like to get involved with things if something catches their imagination.

Participation is often more successful if both parties are actively engaged. Artists need to be communicating more proactively with their public.

Until online galleries can learn from the above lessons and model frameworks from existing models of online participation, so that the art can be used with similar comfort and 'indifference' it will remain a curiosity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bourriaud, N (1998) Relational Aesthetics. Les Presses du reel, Dijon

I have quoted from four separate essays found in this book:

Bishop, C (2004) Participation. Whitechapel, London and MIT Press, MIT, Cambridge Massachusetts

These essays are:

Eco, U (1962) The Poetics of the Open Work

Kaprow, A (1966) Notes on the Elimination of the Audience

Piper, A (1983-85) Notes on Funk, I-II

Tiravanija, R (2004) No Ghosts in the Wall

Manovich, L (2001) The Language of New Media, MIT Press, MIT, Cambridge Massachusetts

Murray, J (1997) Hamlet on the Holodeck, MIT Press, MIT, Cambridge Massachusetts

Kaprow, A (1974) Video Art, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

I have also found the following unpublished essay useful:

Manovich, L (2008) The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life, <http://www.manovich.net>
The link is near the top right of the page under READ {LATEST ARTICLES}.