ETHICS AND PRAGMATISM: TECHNOLOGY, CONTEXT, AND COLLABORATION IN PUBLIC ART

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Abstract

As social systems evolve through networks of exchange and economies of relation the relevance of Art is increasingly dependent upon divesting its traditions of authorship. Artists concerned with the social and political function of art practice, those, who wish to ethically engage the complexity of social life, are developing new methodologies. These include, re-inventing ethnographic practices, employing models of complex systems, and exploiting information technologies. Information space is public space. Advanced communications technologies required to enter and act in that space can be made accessible and empowering to individuals who currently have no access or power through public art practice. Interface design in art practice, consumer media, and information culture position the subject on a sliding scale of political power between consumerism and collaboration. The one-way vector of communication between artist and audience can give way to "context-dependent" practices in which the artist generates a framework for collaboration with an "audience," that is meaningful relative to the audience's social environment. This approach to public art avoids representation and appropriation, and provide material contexts for direct political action. Its goal is to open dialogue within and between communities, facilitate productive self-expression, increase political awareness, and challenge social codes. This paper will examine the potential of "context-dependent" public art practices through a discussion of projects which use social strategies for the deployment of technology in an attempt to change the conditions of disenfranchised or marginalized communities.

"Interactivity is the biggest lie of all!"
Blam!3

In his online essay "Strategies of Interactivity" Dieter Daniels enlists John Cage (one of this author's philosophical heroes) and Bill Gates (thought by some to embody the anti-Christ) as representatives, respectively, of "open" and "closed" systems. This rather humorous comparison/contrast helps to foreground the serious social, economic and political implications around the distribution of authority in interface, software and systems design.

An interface is, to quote Webster, "A point at which independent systems or diverse groups interact". Within the social register the human computer interface can act as both a boundary and a bridge. My work as a public/net artist is a bridge building project -- an attempt at border crossing. The goals of this project include:

1) transferring the role of author and distributing authority over system design and/or self representation to collaborating communities and individuals…
2) addressing the special problems of communities with limited access to information technology and culture
3) building tools and transforming technologies for use by communities in their own empowering, authoring practices, in short, providing interfaces to agency.

Interface design in art practice, consumer media, and information culture position the subject on a sliding scale of political power. Media industry has rapidly and completely absorbed and co-opted the utopian vision of media-assisted interactivity in the service of that which it was supposed to overcome -- the hegemony of the media industry and the monolith of global information culture. In the cultural moment of globalized, distributed, information networks artists concerned with the social and political function of art practice, those who"… would wish to ethically engage the complexity of social life…"[i] are developing new methodologies, (De-)signing new interfaces, re-inventing ethnographic practices, employing models of complex systems. In what I call "context-dependent" public art practice the artist generates a framework for collaboration with an "audience," that is meaningful relative to the audience's social environment. In context-dependent art practice participants are engaged in a manner, which facilitates productive self-expression, increases social or political awareness, and challenges cultural codes. This form of "Public" Collaboration requires a commitment to exchange, communication, collaboration and mutuality, a recognition that productive and effective works of art are dependent upon relationships between people not the product of one individual, and a desire to function within the social fabric of the audience/participant's daily life.[ii] I will argue here that the ethical work of public art can be founded on respect for each individual participant's particular, subjective perspective and should support democratic individuality, not bourgeois individualism.

There are significant, political implications embedded in a shift in authorial perspective from 'audience-as-viewer' to 'audience-as-collaborator'. In his 1934 essay "The Author as Producer," Walter Benjamin challenges the artist to avoid colonizing, appropriation and (mis)representation, to change the technique of traditional artistic production, to become a revolutionary worker against bourgeois culture. For Benjamin the artist must not be a mere ideological patron to the community but must intervene, like a worker, in the "means of production." I share Benjamin's conclusion that what matters in art practice is not the "attitude" of a work of art to the "relations of production of its time" but what its"

position" is within them. Quoting Benjamin, "What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers -- that is, readers or spectator into collaborators…"[iii]. Information and communications technologies can be exploited and developed to this end. While digital technology makes a more balanced relation between maker and participant possible, real collaboration is often undermined by the authority of the artist, who retains control of the technology. The apparent autonomy given to a participating spectator is often a false front, simply a product of digital technology's ability to offer more varied, but still strictly controlled routes through a closed set of prescribed material."[iv]

When addressing the distribution of authority in software and systems design there is an important distinction to be made between "interactive" systems and "collaborative" systems. Inter-actor, participant, and collaborator are fundamentally different subject positions. "Interactive" systems often, either intentionally or thoughtlessly, obscure the "mapping" of input to system output. For example, many contemporary computer-based works rely on sensing technologies that "average" input like gesture or population density within a space. Such systems appropriate the body of the viewer, typically called the "user", to drive the system. The viewer is reduced to mass or velocity, or trajectory within a prescribed sensing field -- often with no opportunity to know how her presence has effected her environment and no means with which to learn the system in order to produce results based on her own, as opposed to the artist's, intentions. This sort of "interactive" system uses the "user." While this type of interaction may provide a pleasurable aesthetic experience it does not produce an empowered subject. The technology is essentially surveillance technology and the subject position produced is that of the surveilled -- subject to the authority, control and use of the system.

Such Surveillance and Remote sensing technologies are the same tools used to control border spaces. The National Institute of Justice JUSTNET Border Research and Technology Center,[v] "works with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the U.S. Border Patrol, the U.S. Customs Service, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, the U.S. Attorney offices, and law enforcement agencies to "strengthen technology capabilities and awareness at the Nation's borders." The BRTC has recently developed methods for securing the storm drains in El Paso, Texas against illegal entry. These methods include video motion detection, micro-power range grated radar, sensors, cameras, and radio frequency link equipment. An impressive array of electronics for outfitting a drain pipe against the threat of trespass (and similar to technologies used for "interactive" spaces in both museum installations and the entertainment industry.) Does this type of electronic surveillance technology "increase awareness" at our national borders or in our cultural institutions? BRTC is building systems that will stop fleeing vehicles and is currently working on technology to detect the heartbeats of people concealed in vehicles or other containers. (Remote sensing for interdiction.) These are border technologies. The desire to create a remote sensor to detect the heartbeats of immigrant laborers packed into cargo vans and containers requires a particular set of political relations - an uneven distribution of power where use leads to abuse. How could this technology be productively re-purposed through art practice. How could it be used by those it is being used against? While the US/Mexico border is increasingly militarized and equipped with data gathering and remote sensing technologies for implementing the government's "war on drugs" and "war on terror" (both of which are essentially a single war of race and class) Enrique Morones, founder and director of the "Winter Stations" project, distributes weatherproof boxes stocked with blankets, food, emergency medical supplies and clothing to "aid stations" (poles topped with blinking lights) in the border mountains. "Winter Stations" is an effort to prevent hypothermia deaths among illegal immigrants crossing the border in difficult conditions. In the summer the project provides water in desert areas. INS agents are asked not to park near the aid stations so that they won't be seen as traps. According to Morones the stations are not contradictory to the INS mission of inscribing and protecting economic and political boundaries, the stations are merely intended to save lives. What might Enrique Morones accomplish with access to the technologies developed at the BRTC? I see "Winter Stations" as a public art project and wonder what artists engaged in technology-based and public art practices must do to end the separation between high tech development and political activism in art practice. Perhaps a further consideration of the ethics of interface design and the politics of technology development, technology transfer and technological appropriation or aestheticization among artists is warranted.

Certainly, an ethics of interface design is needed. At minimum, interfaces should allow participants to understand how a system maps their input to its own output. The transparency of Input to Output, the accessibility of control parameters and the balance of open-to-closed data/information structures are limitations imposed by a system that either establish or undermine the collaborative role of the audience and, thus, express the artist's authority. Mapping is the kernel of inter-subjective communication in system and interface design. Two philosophies of mapping are common in current technology based art practice. I will employ a musical metaphor and call these phrase-based and note-based. Phrase-based mapping is assumed to "reward" the user under all conditions. This philosophy is based on the premise that the system should respond with aesthetically pleasing (as defined by the artist/designer) output regardless of the level of understanding or virtuosity the "user" develops in relation to the system interface. Phrase-based systems privilege the aesthetic control of the author of the system and merely allow the "user" to trigger or reorganize already aesthetically viable and vetted content. Note-based systems allow the participant to develop her own content based on her own intentions within the limitations prescribed by the system and its interfaces. This approach expresses a much higher level of respect for the subjective-perspective of the participant and, to varying degrees, abandons traditions of authorship and aesthetic valuation. When note-based systems are designed either to "learn" from the interaction of participants, to allow participants to contribute data to the system, or to reconfigure the system-as-such, they become "collaborative" systems. Interactive systems address "users" or "consumers". "Collaborative" systems establish communities and create "citizens".

In her essay "Storytelling as a Nexus of Change in the Relationship between Gender and Technology: A Feminist Approach to Software Design."[vi] Justine Cassells proposes a

productive strategy that addresses this problem. In "Feminist Software Design" authority is distributed to collaborating participants by allowing most of the design and construction to be carried out by the participants rather than the designer. The role of author, and in some cases the role of system designer is given to the participant.

This is the strategy of my practice of designing collaborative systems -- systems in which participants are given a framework for building a database based on their own experiences and the tools for structuring and interpreting that data themselves. I am also involved in developing a general set of tools that I hope will help distribute authority by allowing most of the design and construction of systems and interfaces to be carried out by participant/collaborators. I am developing, for open source distribution, a server with a content management system and simple database-authoring tool. Customized extensions of the Content Management system with plug and play scripts - and an intuitive, automated database design tool will make it possible for participating collaborators, without programming, design, or system administration skills, to build their own databases and display their content dynamically, online. I am currently developing and testing this system with students at the University of California, Santa Cruz. With the help of an undergraduate computer-science student, John Jacobs, I have set up the Zope Content Management System and developed a web-based authoring interface for a MySQL database connected to the Zope server. The Database tool allows our arts students to design their own databases. Using the student projects as prototypes John has developed Zope DTML templates that allow our non-programmers to design interfaces which allow participants to contribute, search and display data dynamically. The long-term goal of this development project is to build a server and set of graphical authoring tools that can be offered, free of charge to enable communities and non-profit organizations to design and build their own self-representations and their own information systems in public, online environments. I consider this development and dissemination project a work of public.

Public art practice has always presented the problem of a colonizing or utopian approach.[vii] The ethical strategy of Collaborative Systems is neither utopian nor colonizing. This approach to public art practice avoids representation and appropriation, producing a context in which to imagine something "other" - not organized into a representation assumed to be true for any and all contexts. Public Art should fulfill the Brecht's goals for the epic theater, "… alienating the public, in an enduring manner, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives.."[viii] While political and economic power are increasingly dependent upon access to and presence within the global information culture the voices of the culturally, economically, and technologically disenfranchised, are becoming less and less audible. This dangerous trend might be reversed if all communities of interest had the access and the ability to self-represent, publish and broadcast in information space. Public/Net/Media artists can become context providers, assisting communities, collecting their stories, soliciting their opinions on politics and social justice, and building the online archives and interfaces that will make this data available across social, cultural and economic boundaries. Context Provision is an exercise of agency, which can change the conditions of disenfranchised or marginalized communities.

As of 1998 at least one out of every 3 AIDS cases was directly related to injection drug use. There are an estimated 22,000 injection drug users in Oakland and Alameda County, California. A total of 37.8% of all AIDS cases in Alameda County are related to injection drug use. Needle exchange programs are a proven method of reducing needle-related HIV risk behaviors among injection drug users. In 1993 the Oakland City Council unanimously passed a resolution declaring Oakland a "City of Refuge" for needle exchange and declared an HIV public health state of emergency, which endorsed needle exchange.

Casa Segura/Safe House, an HIV prevention clinic and Needle Exchange program, is a community based organization that provides easily accessible services to promote health and stop the spread of HIV, Hepatitis C, and other drug related harm among people who use drugs, their families and communities. Casa Segura's prevention strategies revolve around a "come as you are" approach to healing and harm reduction. This approach is based on the belief that drug addicted people can help themselves live a positive more productive life-style if given the choice to change, the time, and the appropriate amount of support. Because Casa Segura provides needle exchange it is politically embattled and continuously attacked by its district city council representative and others interested in the "economic development" or gentrification of the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland, where it is located. Though critics claim that the needle exchange attracts drug dealers and users to the area, encourages drug use, and increases incidences of dealing and other related crimes, statistics show that this is not the case. The clinic actually serves the needs of all local residents. Needle Exchange and Harm Reduction clients at Casa Segura live in the neighborhood - some in housing and others in homeless camps or out of shopping carts. Undercutting services to the area's neediest citizens would disadvantage everyone. Casa Segura's clients are most at risk for Hepatitis C and HIV infection. By reducing this risk Casa Segura protects the health of the whole community. Many studies show that needle exchanges reduce HIV transmission and can serve as a bridge to drug treatment. They neither encourage drug use among program participants nor spread drug use throughout a community. The continuation and expansion of the existing needle exchange and harm reduction programs at Casa Segura is critical for the public health of Oakland. But, Casa Segura's existence is under current and constant threat. There can be no better example of this fact than the arson perpetrated against the SafeHouse on New Year's Eve in 2000. This horrible act of violence, thought by many to have been sanctioned, if not solicited, by the district city council representative, demonstrated how serious the misunderstanding is. Something must be done to foster communication between the SafeHouse community and its opponents.

Like The staff of Casa Segura, I believe that the pressure to move the needle exchange program out of the neighborhood is motivated, at least in part, by fear based on misinformation, disinformation and lack of communication. Together, we hope to establish an environment for dialogue and communication between Casa Segura and the community it is situated in order to develop community awareness and support for both the mission of Casa Segura and its methods. To this end I have initiated a collaboration with Casa Segura staff and clients to create a "distributed" work of public art --

safe house and its community and increase awareness and understanding of the crucial services offered there. The project, *Need_X_Change* is designed to help the staff and clients of Casa Segura attain social and political "voice", through dialogue with their local community and participation in the global information culture. Casa Segura's philosophy of "harm reduction" therapy and my own practice developing *Collaborative Systems* share a premise of respect for the "client" or "participant" and a recognition of the value and dignity of all individuals, their experiences and their perspectives.

The project which has been funded by the Creative Work fund, has three phases, Outreach, Voice and Education. A website and a series of billboards and bus boards will provide information about Casa Segura, its services, its staff and its clients, to the Fruitvale community. The website and public graphics will be created collaboratively by allowing staff and clients to tell their personal stories in their own words and participate in the visual design of the web-pages and billboards that disseminate their stories. The "voices" of the many individuals who both use and staff the center will be made "audible" to the public through the website and public graphics program. Each of these representations will be developed primarily from "first-person documentation." In order to collect this "first-person documentation" I am distributing inexpensive audio tape recorders and disposable cameras to selected Casa Segura Clients. These Clients are documenting their daily experience and taping their own stories in their own words. A small computer lab will be established at Casa Segura. The "lab" will provide an on-line authoring environment and training center for Casa Segura. Using this lab I will train participating clients in basic computer literacy and web publishing and engage staff and clients in a participatory design process. The "lab" will also provide e-mail and web access to Casa Segura clients. Basic computer literacy, e-mail and web access will assist clients in their efforts to find employment and or support services of various kinds.

I am currently working with Casa Segura clients on the development of their "first-person documentation." I meet with these extraordinary people during the Fruitvale Needle Exchange to discuss their progress and supply them with tapes and film. I have set up the project computer "lab" in Casa's administrative offices where I work, one on one, with participants to put their images, audio files and texts online. Most of the participants have never used a computer and, though they have heard about the Internet, have never been online.

Asked why people become injection drug users Rand Corporation Sociologist Ricky Bluthenthal, who has contributed to several studies of Oakland needle exchange sites, answers "For most folks it's a pretty tortured path, and it certainly isn't based on the fact that you have a program that's taking used syringes from current users and replacing them with clean ones. I'd be interested to meet the person who said they started using because there was a needle exchange program in their neighborhood." The Need_X_Change collaborative team wants the Fruitvale Community to "meet" the clients of Casa Segura. We believe that if Casa Segura clients' stories can be heard then the community will no longer misunderstand or fear Casa Segura or the impact of its presence in the community. The

program will initiate this "meeting" and encourage dialogue, which will lead to better understanding, empowering and "giving voice" to those concerned who currently have little power and no "voice".

In public art the artist must serve as an agent or operator, in Benjamin's terms, "not to report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but to intervene actively "[ix]. For example, "A-Portable," designed by Atelier Van Lieshout in collaboration with Dr. Rebecca Gompers, is a refurbished shipping container that functions as a mobile gynecological clinic. "A-Portable" was built so women from countries where abortion is illegal can terminate their pregnancies safely and legally in international waters. The text, which accompanied the exhibition of A-Portable at the Venice Biennale last year, begs the question of agency. *"To understand the work one must move from ontology, (what is art?) to pragmatism, (what can art do?). Herein lies a possible revival of avant-garde politics - no longer historically "ahead", nor operating through shock and estrangement, but rather producing works that make things possible right now...".*[x] Instead of representing or illustrating the political issues they engage from a monolithic or uni-vocal perspective A-portable, and Need_X_Change, make possible new practical and political realities for the individuals and communities they engage. Each contribution that is made in through a Collaborative System interface is part of a conversation - a negotiation between individuals, and communities who are ready to take responsibility for representing their own subjective experience, social position and political perspectives. By engaging communities of interest who have limited access to information technology, and developing tools and interfaces specific to their needs, I hope to provide contexts for self-representation, communication, and education that will effect direct and substantive change in the political and material circumstances of their lives and the life of their communities. In the historical narrative of social and political systems local exchanges proliferate as global states - nothing is inevitable.

[i] Strathern, Marilyn. Property, Substance & Effect. London: The Athlone Press, 1999.
[ii] Cork, Richard, Et. Al. *Art for Whom?* London: Serpentine Gallery and Arts Council of Great Britain. 1978.
[iii] Benjamin, Walter. ""The Artist as Producer," In *Reflections*. ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovih, 1978.
[iv] Kelly, Jane. Variant | issue 4 | Stephen Willats: Art, Ethnography and Social Change, www.ndirect.co.uk/~variant.
[v] http://www.nlectc.org/brtc/
[vi] Cassell, Justine. "Storytelling as a Nexus of change In the Relationship between Gender and Technology: A Feminist Approach to Software Design." In *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, Edited by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.
[vii] Danto, Arthur Coleman. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial." In *The wake of art : criticism, philosophy, and the ends of taste*. Arthur C. Danto ; essays selected and with critical introduction, Gregg Horowitz, Tom Huhn. Amsterdam, The Netherlands : G+B Arts International, c1998
[viii] Benjamin, Walter. ""The Artist as Producer," In *Reflections*. ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovih, 1978.
[ix] In "The Author as Producer" Benjamin gives Sergei Tretiakov as an example of an "operating" writer who, "provides the most tangible example of the functional interdependency that always, and under all conditions, exists between the correct political tendency and progressive literary technique…Tretiakov distinguishes the operating from the informing writer. His mission is not to report but to struggle; not to play the spector but to intervene actively…" Benjamin, Walter. ""The Artist as Producer," In *Reflections*. ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovih, 1978.
[x] Allen, Jennifer. "What? A-Portable," 2001. in Biennale Di Venezia 2001, Catalog copy provided courtesy of Biennale Di Venezia.