

Co-curating: distributing art globally, enacting art locally

Kate Southworth

iRes Research in Network Art, University College Falmouth, UK

In 1968 the writer, activist and curator Lucy Lippard was in Argentina trying to organise an exhibition of dematerialised art in which all the exhibits fitted into a suitcase: the idea being that the suitcase would be taken from country to country by 'idea artists' using free airline tickets. In some ways Lippard's version of portable art - that can be accessed in diverse geographical locations easily and relatively cheaply - has been superseded by the online distribution and exchange of network art through social platforms. Valuable as these exchanges undoubtedly are, perhaps something of the specificity of the local is being lost in the process. Can another version of Lippard's concept of portable exhibitions and events be imagined and realised: one in which artworks are distributed globally and enacted locally? What does it mean if an artwork is 'distributed'? What does it mean if it is 'enacted' locally? What form does the work take, and which aspects of it are portable?

The network is the emerging form of organisation within capitalism; superseding centralised, hierarchical structures, and replacing protocol with bureaucracy. Alternative knowledge systems based on non-hierarchical models of organisation, emerging in tandem with digital media and network technologies are challenging and undermining traditional concepts about the relationship between artist, curator and audience. This shift from hierarchically ordered taxonomies and relations to those informed by the logic of distributed networks, is the context within which *protocological art forms* are emerging. Distributed protocol is a set of rules that organise both the behaviour of discrete elements within a network *and* which mark the parameters of that which can pass through the network. Each discrete element is an independent unit that via protocol can come together with other elements to form a temporary whole: it can be dismantled and re-used. Although distributed networks facilitate open, participative and collaborative processes and practices, they operate within an algorithmic logic controlled by protocol. Emerging art forms do not *represent* these conditions but directly *engage* with them: they do not accept the dominant logic often encrypted into network culture, rather they expose and examine the ethics, aesthetics and politics of protocol.

The genealogy of protocol in art reveals that from the early twentieth century artists were engaging through their work with processes of rationalisation within everyday life, together with a profound interest in the logic of computerisation. For example, attention to mathematical algorithms, geometry, rules and instructions, informs the work of artists making minimal, conceptual, relational, socially-engaged and network art: many of them emphasising processes of standardisation, modularisation, rationalisation, incorporation and automation. Describing the emergence in the 1960s of an 'ultra-conceptual art' that 'emphasi[z]ed' the thinking process almost exclusively' Lucy Lippard and John Chandler observed 'a profound dematerialization of art' that they believed could 'result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete' (Lippard & Chandler 1968: 46). Citing contemporary work such as: Carl Andre: *120 bricks to be arranged according to their mathematical possibilities* (1967); Sol LeWitt: 'non-visual' serial projects incorporating conceptual logic and visual illogic (1968); Yves Klein: 'empty gallery' show at Iris Clert (April 1958); Lippard and Chandler emphasised a shift towards 'art as idea and art as action'. They recognised particular attributes in this work that, superseding 'the anti-intellectual, emotional/intuitive processes of art making characteristic of the last two decades', marked a shift towards work that was planned and 'designed' by artists and 'executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen'. With attention to a particular 'thinness' 'both literal and allusive' apparent in 'such themes as water, steam, dust, flatness, legibility, temporality' they traced to Dada and Surrealism 'the process of ridding art of its object quality'. The Dadaists devised works consisting of verbal instructions in which, perhaps, protocol begins to emerge as a *medium*: that is, protocol (de)materialises temporal processes not as spatial structure but as relation. As the art object became an epilogue to the 'fully evolved concept,' the established organisational framework premised on relations between visible, bounded entities gives way: new artistic processes emerge that focus on the temporal and spatial 'relations, ratios and proportions between things' and people (Lippard & Chandler: 1968: 31). Explicit use of protocol - rules and instructions that facilitate, organise and, to an extent, control relations between entities – was inevitable. Just as a recipe details which ingredients to combine in order to produce a particular dish, so distributed transformative practices make use of 'protocols' to mark the parameters of performance and enable its dissemination. As the interactive gallery installation or participative online work becomes an epilogue to art practices that are enacted in one's own real time and place - away from the gallery and away from the computer - protocol emerges as a fully-fledged *medium*. Organisational frames premised on relations between visible, bounded

entities give way to organisational frames that facilitate *temporal and spatial* relations between things and people.

Distributed art emerges with reference to the distributed network. It works a little like packet switching technology. Packet switching technology 'allows messages to break themselves apart into small fragments. Each fragment, or packet, is able to find its own way to its destination. Once there, the packets reassemble themselves to create the original message' (Galloway 2006: 318). Distributed art allows itself to be broken apart into small fragments: no longer organised by the picture frame or the gallery, each fragment is held in relation to another by protocol. The protocol is as much a part of the work as the content. An early example of distributed art is the 'Refresh Art Project' (1996) which linked together more than twenty World Wide Web (WWW) pages each located on different servers across Europe and the USA. Using the 'refresh' protocol devised for HTML – the language used to organise and design WWW pages - visitors were 'zapped' automatically from one page to another at ten-second intervals. Described by the originators as 'A Multi-Nodal Web-Surf-Create-Session for an Unspecified Number of Players' the project was an exploration of instability and unpredictability; it was 'poetic, [a] flow of electrons, feeling the universe, extasy [sic] of true joint creativity, hopping through space, countries, cultures, languages, genders, colours, shapes and sizes' (Refresh 1996: homepage). The viewer was invited to become a participant by creating his or her own web page and 'linking' it via HTML code to the existing pages. For Andreas Broeckmann, a curator working within net art circles at the time the work was produced, '[t]he project was exciting for those immediately involved as they could experience how the loop grew page by page, while they were simultaneously communicating and negotiating via an IRC [Internet Relay Chat] chat channel how to solve certain problems' (Broeckmann 1997: 3). Exploring the interconnective qualities of computers, the Internet and social networks 'Refresh' is, 'a genuinely distributed artwork whose experiential effect both depended on and transgressed the physical distance between participants' (Broeckmann 1997: 3). In challenging the orthodox notion that an artwork exists in just one place at one time, the structure of 'Refresh' facilitates the work 'happening' in more than twenty places simultaneously. It foregrounds the distributed structure of the Internet: its 'multiple sites of locality, many-to-many communications channels, and a self-organizing capacity (local actions, global results)' (Galloway and Thacker 2004).

Whereas this kind of distributed art worked with the technical infrastructure of the Internet, a non-technological distributed art form now seems to be emerging. It is with reference to the work that I make with Patrick Simons as *glorious ninth* that I am able to articulate my understanding of this shift. *glorious ninth* work produced between 2001 and 2004 was contextualised within a network art framework: produced, disseminated and consumed via the Internet. Each artwork comprises several elements constructed from digital sound, images and text, integrated together using authoring software packages, and then uploaded to a web server for online access. To each element is attached an algorithm: computer code that defines behaviour within a constructed set of parameters. The algorithms define properties such as gravity, speed, direction, and level of transparency. Patterns, rhythms and tempos emerge through the interactions of the different elements: together they map a spatiality of transformation based on pulses, expansions, contractions, ebbs and flows. With each element coded individually the *parameters* within which each movement and interaction takes place becomes the organising principle rather than the pre-definition of an overall composition.

The relation between individual elements and the overall work is highly significant as it enacts the shift from a centralised to distributed organisation of elements. In artwork that is organised centrally, the elements coexist 'all in one' (Schillinger 1976: 18) whilst in artwork that has a distributed organisational form the elements are developed individually and their interaction with other elements correlated via algorithms. Algorithmically organised work, then, does not need to exist for a pre-determined length of time as in film, but continues to transform continuously: its overall pattern is not pre-planned as in animation but emerges through envisaged and unexpected rhythms and encounters between elements. These early *glorious ninth* works enact the shift from centralized to distributed forms of organizations and are made with reference to the highly rationalized logic of the network.

The work that we have been making since 2004 translates this understanding of algorithm and generative work to the realm of human relations. The *Tending Triptych* (2004) brings together two aural-visual artworks *Flowers* (2003) and *Rationale* (2002) and a durational performance *Tending* (2004). The two aural-visual works were made following a similar method to that used in net art pieces: scanned flowers and leaves collected whilst walking were manipulated in imaging software; tagged with algorithms and integrated with other elements in authoring software. The performance involved planning the planting and growing of flowers throughout four

seasons, and over the year tending with care a place replenished with fresh flowers. As the work developed through the enactment of everyday performances of caring and tending the plants, it seemed that we were creating an 'intimate place.' From a notion of 'place' as a geographical concept aligned to landscape, space, site, location and territory, a rather different understanding emerged in which place was time, relation and process. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes between space and place, suggesting that 'When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place' (1976: 73). And for Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar '[p]lace is something known to us, somewhere that belongs to us in a spiritual, if not possessive, sense and to which we belong' (Dean and Millar 2005: 14). For them, time is embedded within place, becoming one of its dominant characteristics (ibid). Now, the sacred becomes a place of transformation within which to re-connect to the movements of life by witnessing growth and change: intimate place becomes a relation with the other.

The durational performance marked a new way of working involving two distinct yet highly related phases. The first was a series of activities that we devised and refined through repetition over time: the second was the communication of those actions in such a way that participants could enact them in their own environment and in their own time. A separation (typical of network logic) of content and protocol seemed to present the most effective way of communicating the parameters of the performance to others. In thinking protocol as a medium that transports the rules of engagement without concern for the content itself, the parameters are communicable whilst at the same time the intimate aspects of the *individual enactments* of the performance are beyond documentation and beyond incorporation in to the protocols.

Artworks that *glorious ninth* has made since *Tending* have developed further the use of protocol as a medium and extended the performances to include locally organised collective events. *love potion* (2005) is a set of protocols for a durational performance in which participants grow the herb borage over several months, make a magic potion that nurtures feelings of compassion and forgiveness, and host an event at which they share the potion and distribute borage seeds to their guests. *November* (2006) is a set of protocols for a performance to celebrate Halloween and the seasonal change from summer to winter. Participants grow garlic to eat during their performance. *Cultural_Capital* (2009) is a set of protocols for a transformational artwork in which a sour-dough starter is created and grown from the bacteria generally present in the air of the gallery, and is cared for by the curators.

dematerial (2009) is a work in progress: an experimental platform that disseminates the protocols of distributed transformative practices, such as those just described, and which attempts to find ways to document and archive such work with sensitivity to the politics, ethics and aesthetics of protocol and to the actual enactment of rituals and events. Protocols that mark the parameters of rituals and events are distributed online. Co-curators in diverse localities are able to access, re-frame, re-interpret and re-conceptualise the protocols to host rituals and events that specifically engage participants within their local communities.

References

Broeckmann, Andreas. "Net.Art, Machines, and Parasites" posted to *nettime* 8th March 1997.

Galloway, Alexander R. "Protocol" in *Theory Culture Society* 2006: 23; 317-320

Dean, Tacita and Millar, Jeremy. *Place*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2005.

Galloway, Alexander and Thacker, Eugene (2004) "The Limits of Networking" posted to *nettime* 25 March 2004.

Lippard, Lucy R., and Chandler, John. "The Dematerialization of Art." *Art International*, February 1968.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and place: the perspective of experience*. London: University of Minnesota Press (1976) cited in Dean, Tacita and Millar, Jeremy. *Place*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2005: 14.

Schillinger, Joseph. *The Mathematical Basis of the Arts*. New York: Da Capo, 1976.

Online Sources

glorious ninth (<http://www.gloriousninth.net>)

Refresh Art Project (1996) downloaded from <http://sunsite.cs.msu.su/wwwart/refresh.htm> on 26th November 2008



05 Posthumanism