

Transactional Arts — Interaction as Transaction

Daniela Alina Plewe
Communications and New Media Program
National University Singapore
danielaplewe@nus.edu.sg

Interactive media, especially the internet, are often used in an economic context where interactions are actually transactions. We focus on artists, who apply or use economic principles and coin those works as “transactional arts”. We will observe that many accomplished new media works actually have transactional features.

The transactional component

A basic form of interaction may be defined as a kind of cybernetic loop in which two agents (machine or systems) reciprocally listen, speak and think. As an analogy, a simple transaction may be viewed as a circuit, in which two agents exchange some sort of value. In the artistic context the transactions may involve the artist, the audience, but possibly also subcontractors or contingent market-participants. The notion of value as the entity to be exchanged, often becomes the central issue of the artwork. The setting of the transactions may vary. Some may take place within the art world, others involve the commercial domain and some artists even create their own marketplaces. In this sense transactional arts stand in the tradition of art-forms taking place in the social sphere.

Duchamp as an early transactionalist

Marcel Duchamp may be considered as an early “transactionalist”. In 1919 Duchamp paid his dentist, Daniel Tzanck, a passionate art collector, with a hand drawn enlarged facsimile cheque as compensation for services rendered and as a piece of art at the same time. In 1924 he issued 30 “Monte Carlo Bonds” over 500 Francs each, and apparently raised funds from his friends in order to play Roulette at the Monte Carlo Casino promising 20% p.a. interest redeemable in three years. However, his gambling strategy did not beat the odds, but he did not lose either and paid only 10% interest, one year later. In purely financial terms, the purchase of the bond may appear as a loss, but considering the deal as the acquisition of an original Duchamp artifact (that even earned a 10 % return) it may be construed as a great buy. As with his ready-mades, the accomplished artist Marcel

Duchamp creates value by an act of declaration — here in the form of an amicable deal (a contract represented by an artistically designed and signed bond certificate) with his audience, i.e. collectors. Interaction becomes transaction manifested as a financial instrument, issued and authorized by a self-empowered artist who actually benefited financially.

Autonomy of art

Artworks with a transactional component tend to challenge a fundamental western aesthetic conception demanding art to be entirely separated from the economic sphere. So was Duchamp repeatedly accused of lacking detachment from material concerns, though he appeared to be mainly interested in the speculative and provocational aspects of his works. Does transactional art automatically violate the principle of the autonomy of art? If art today can reflect any subject and strategy of any context in society, then why not the economic transactions which ubiquitously surround us anyway?

Art as a give away

In many cases where a transaction happens between artist and audience, the artist deliberately wastes or destroys a potential gain. Thereby he apparently contradicts the central premise of modern economics assuming the “rational agent” pursuing maximal profit. Yves Klein sold void space in Paris for gold and threw it afterwards into the river Seine. Zoe Sheedan Soldana breeds plants as an online performance and gives them away at the end of the project. Happenings provided all sorts of amenities to the audience in the seventies. In the light of an “attention economy” where “eye-balls” are the currency, these transactions may appear less asymmetric.

Counter-economies entrenched with the real world

Creating counter-economies which are more or less entrenched with the real world is a strategy only few artists have the resources to do. The Dutch artist group

Atelier van Lieshout designed for their utopian state-like territory in Rotterdam a currency called AvLs, which are convertible at an exchange rate of 1:1 into beer. Entrenched with a real world are also many economies which emerged around virtual worlds and multi-user online games economies. For example, they provide support for players not only to trade players and virtual artifacts, but also facilitate the off shoring of labor intensive activities to low wage countries.

Mimicking and applying business practices

Many artists, especially media artists, have actually used and applied business practices. The art groups Etoy and RTMark not only mimic the organizational structure, appearance and rhetoric of multi national corporations, they also issue stocks in order to allow the audience to support their activities. Interestingly enough, these groups use capitalistic financing techniques in order to realize critical artworks with an anti-capitalistic flair. The transactions involved may be seen as some sort of commissioning or sponsoring which has become part of the artwork itself. The art-group “We make money and not art” uses Google ads to generate revenue from the hits on their website. For the digital activism project “Google Will Eat It Self” the group Uebermorgen designed a value chain as a closed circuit of transactions: they first generated profits by manipulating the Google ad-sense program and used these funds to buy stocks of Google.

The principle of division of labor has become part of the artistic attitude for artists like Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Mark Kostabi, who outsource parts of the creative production. Santiago Serra, by paying drug addicts in their preferred drugs to perform in his art, seems to convey a critical view on the nature of employment.

Relying on his expertise as a non-professional stock trader, artist Michael Goldberg played the stock market for three weeks from a gallery generating charts and other forms of data visualization as output. He had built

a kind of strategic interface to the online market in the form of a tower. Goldberg had raised AU\$50,000 from befriending investors, traded it without personal risk and closed with a AU\$1,000 loss.

Offering transactions

Christine Hill has chosen the form of a shop for her installation “Volksboutique” in which she initially sold objects. During her “Ebayday” performance curated artists could sell their work. So called “auction artists” use existing market platforms such as Ebay for highly conceptual artworks to auction off e.g. their time and availability (Carey Peppermint), private data (Jeff Gates), or their “body, with minor imperfections” (Michael Daines). Often artists experience no demand for these offers at all. Creating the potential of a transaction becomes a means of artistic expression, even if the transaction actually never happens.

The market as an art form

A. Galloway states that today’s internet protocols are “synonymous with possibility” and that the internet facilitates the economic form of market places. Media art has always been the creation, design, structuring and control of possibility spaces (the set of choices offered by non-linear media) and artists have attempted to continuously expand these. One transactional artistic strategy is the creation of market places itself. The artist may not participate in any transaction, but merely provide the platform for potential transactions.

With “Idea Futures” Robin Hanson created a market platform to bet on opinions and considered this online market a potential tool for collective decision making. The project “Open-Clothes.com” envisions a platform for all transactions and interactions around the design and distribution of customizable clothes. The art foundation Mediamatic offers a matchmaking service with special actions facilitating, e.g. encounters with “Russian Brides.” Christin Lahr offers a market for the exchange of personal data as a critical work on privacy issues in the internet.

For these artistic markets the principles of web 2.0 internet economy seem to apply. As the ideal media to match niche demand and niche supply, these markets become niche products themselves, often defying their lack of liquidity. Collages of transactional modules may be the meshed-up in this art form, similarly to the value chains of online businesses.

In the current globalized economy, with its decline of the influence of the nation state as some claim, market mechanisms seem to be more powerful than ever. Reflecting them with artistic means is a justifiable task.

Transactional arts — art with incentives

Transactional art operates with incentives which become part of the artistic material. Deals are constructed which appeal to the value systems and/or rationality of the participants. The values to be exchanged may significantly differ. The success of an artwork seems not be depended on a successful transaction. However, transactional arts are always situated within the contexts of economic resources and spheres of power.

Full text with references available under www.transacitonalarts.com and www.transactionalarts.wordpress.com, danielaplewe@nus.edu.sg



Marcel Duchamp. (American, born France. 1887-1968)
 Monte Carlo Bond (No. 12). 1924. Cut-and-pasted gelatin
 silver prints on lithograph with letterpress, 12 1/4 x 7 1/2"
 (31.2 x 19.3 cm). Gift of the artist.
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