

# Realizing the Moment: Towards a Continued Role for Technology in Art

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In October 1966, 10,000 spectators at New York's 69th Regiment Armory witnessed the results of a landmark collaboration between ten artists and thirty engineers from Bell Telephone Laboratories (Dixon, 97). This unprecedented undertaking, ten months in the making, fused the creative vitality of New York artists with the ingenuity and technological sophistication of one of the world's premiere scientific labs, bridging the ostensible gulf between art and technology. The event, "Nine Evenings: Theater and Engineering," now known as 9 Evenings, left an indelible impression on the artists who participated and inspired many burgeoning artists in the audience.

Yet, while 9 Evenings represents a milestone in the history of artistic innovation, relatively few people were able to experience it first hand. In fact, documentation of the event was nearly lost to the pages of history until Barbro Schultz Lundestam, a Swedish filmmaker, undertook the task of reconstructing 9 Evenings in a series of films produced by Billy Klüver and Julie Martin. To date, two of ten planned videos, which document "Variations VII" by John Cage and "Open Score" by Robert Rauschenberg, have been released, assembled from a combination of original footage and interviews with the "artists, engineers and performers to illuminate the artistic, technical and historical aspects of the work." (Microcinema DVDs) These films are an important resource for any artist interested in the history of art and technology, and offer an incredibly thorough document of this pioneering event.

However, projects like this, which attempt to reconstruct the past from an array of fragmented documentation, beg an important question: to what extent can they effectively recreate the experience of the live event? While such documentaries certainly have merit as artistic projects in their own right, 9 Evenings artist Julie Martin believes we must acknowledge that watching a film about art is inherently different from experiencing it directly, and the

former cannot replace the latter (personal communication, April 16, 2008). For the work of art is valuable only in so far as it is "vibrated by the reflexes of the future," (André Breton qtd. in Benjamin, 249).

A live event engages its audience in a unique way, where each member contributes to its shape, actively participating in its realization. Importantly, the artistic event implicates its audience both as individuals and as a collective, and the experience thus becomes a dialectical one. Here, audience members engage with the artists and their creations in a collective elaboration of meaning. As critic Nicholas Bourriaud notes, "Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world... intersubjectivity... becomes the quintessence of artistic practice," (Bourriaud 22). This component of a communal development of meaning is an essential aspect of the artistic experience, as "there is the possibility of an immediate discussion: I see and perceive, I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time," (Bourriaud 16). With the diminished critical distance of direct artistic experience comes an increasing emotional involvement where the participant is immersed "in a 360-degree... unity of time and place," (Popper 181). The live event is thus a site of encounter and exploration. Each of these encounters is bound to a particular moment in history, and this context cannot be mechanically reproduced.

By contrast, the viewer takes on a much more passive role when experiencing an artistic event that has been translated into video documentation. Instead of providing a shared site of artistic communion, the video "refer[s] each individual to his or her space of private consumption," (Bourriaud 16). The viewer is excluded from the communal aspect of a live performance, and the documentary forces him or her to acknowledge his or her current context, separating the individual from the actual experience while allowing only mediated a glimpse of it. As a result, the documented version of the event lacks the dynamism of meaning one encounters when experiencing art directly. Of course art created

for presentation on the screen does not fall into this philosophical quandary.

A documentary essentially represents a predigested, one-sided interpretation of a historical circumstance different from the viewer who experienced the event. As American filmmaker Frederick Wiseman has demonstrated, film is unavoidably biased towards producing a certain interpretation of an event: each image presented is arbitrated through the critic's lens. Hence, the relationship between viewer and image is one of authoritarian promotion and reception in contrast to the more democratic communal elaboration of meaning described above (Bourriaud 24). However, art like that produced for 9 Evenings exists in time and space, and its reduction to mere image subtracts something essential from it, reducing it to a static object confined by the parameters of the viewer's screen. Bourriaud argues that artistic form can only be realized "from a meeting between two levels of reality. For [the homogeneity of a document] does not produce [art]: it produces only the visual, otherwise put, 'looped information'" (Bourriaud 24).

In order to allow an audience to participate actively in the creation of art and to broaden the compass of potential meaning, art needs to continue to be performed. However, its reperformance has been complicated by the unique challenges in interpretation and recreation posed by works that incorporate technology. For example, accurately reperforming 9 Evenings would pose a major challenge, as most of the equipment has since been relegated to junkyard heaps (J. Driscoll, Personal Communication April 20, 2008). In order to overcome such a fate, artists need to maintain the performance equipment and document their pieces as thoroughly as possible through means like circuit diagrams and descriptions of interaction. This cannot and should not replace the art itself, but artists should consider that "in music, the score, which theoretically precedes the performance, acts as a specification, with the explicit aim of guiding performances," (M. Puckette, personal communication, April 28, 2008). This type of documentation does not necessarily have to precede

the performance, but it can help to ensure that the art is accurately represented in future performances.

Ultimately, performed art is ephemeral, existing in the blurry chasm between some beginning and its end. Each performance of this type of art "exists in a particular moment with particular performance gestures and capabilities that can almost be seen as a snapshot in time," (J. Driscoll, personal communication, 20 April 2008). In order to realize fully its fleeting moment, art requires an audience. But the project of reperforming art does not represent an act of static preservation or refusal to acknowledge art's place in history; rather, it allows art to continually evolve and to respond to changing historical and social contexts. To conclude with a message from Toru Takemitsu, "The measure of the 'only performance' is the music each time it is heard, and that continues to be the measure for every performance" (Takemitsu, 48).

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