

VERSIONS, COMMENTS AND AUTHENTICITY

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When talking about representation and reproduction it is hard not to talk about authenticity. In this paper, I will discuss the changing meaning of authenticity, in which I will pay special attention to the influence of web2.0 strategies used by artists and museums. Questions that I will address: What does the Web 2.0 mean for art and authenticity? And, related, what does online participation mean? How do museums deal with user-generated content?

The Dutch/Belgian artist duo JODI are renowned for their reactions to the rules of the Internet and for posing questions about the limitations of coded communication. They have recently been particularly interested in the function of 'commenting' online. One of their latest works is *allyourvideobelongto.us*. The title is derived from the well-known Internet meme phrase, "All your base are belong to us," a poorly translated sentence from the opening scene of the Japanese video game *Zero Wing* (1989). In 2000, a video was made of the sentence that quickly achieved cult status on the Internet. The following year, when YouTube was temporarily shut down for maintenance, the site placed the line "All your video are belong to us" beneath its logo, as a joke. Many visitors to the site assumed it had been hacked and immediately phoned YouTube's office. The company was unable to handle the influx of calls and had to post further explanations on the site: "No, we haven't been hacked. Get a sense of humor," "Apparently we can't spel [sic]," and "Please stop calling the office, we're trying to work in here." The "All your video are belong to us" line was later used by YouTube's critics in the discussion about the rights that the site asserts over the videos of their members. This issue is what JODI is referring to with *allyourvideoarebelongto.us*. This project involved JODI transferring home videos of people imitating their favorite singer onto vinyl. The artists rewarded the singers by placing a video of the long-play disc with all the songs on YouTube below the original video as a video comment.

When talking about representation and reproduction it is hard to avoid the subject of authenticity. The term authentic stems from the Greek 'authentikos,' meaning principal and genuine, i.e., what is represented and reproduced is regarded as authentic. Something is authenticated through negotiation and as such it can be regarded as a social construction. [1] The word infers authoritative certification that an object is what it is claimed to be. In cultural heritage, it is most often used to refer to the 'original' state of a work. This is not to say that the authentic is static, as David Lowenthal reminds us: "What counts as authentic shifted continually from substance to form to process and to images and ritual performance. Indeed, the very quest for authenticity altered its nature, just as subatomic particles are affected by the act of observing them. Cultural relativity made authenticity a capricious will-o'-the-wisp, even a contradiction in terms." [2] Authenticity on the World Wide Web is further complicated by the ease and tolerance of replication. Although artists have employed this strategy for many decades, the speed and accessibility of the network means that communication, visuals, videos and sounds can be readily transferred and copied within seconds. So, does the notion of authenticity still function within the World Wide Web? If it can, what does it mean now? Finally, how are the traditional keepers of cultural heritage – the museums – dealing with these issues?

Versions and comments

In 2009, Petra Heck, Constant Dullaart and I organized the *Versions* exhibition at the Netherlands Media Art Institute in Amsterdam. We invited several artists, including JODI, whose practice centers on reacting to each another. For these artists, the Internet is the place par excellence to quickly launch ideas, respond to each another or adapt existing work and reuse it. Through this process, photos, animations or videos rapidly grow into more complex, aesthetic artworks. Sharing and commenting on each other's work leads to questions about the position and perception of the work both in the context of the Internet and beyond it. For example, to what extent can one speak of the uniqueness or the originality of these works? Who determines what can or cannot be done? What happens to individual identity within the group process? And, of course, what is the significance of authenticity, appropriation and agency in the era of 'comment culture?'

Like JODI, Constant Dullaart is interested in YouTube, but he focuses on a different aspect: its formal aesthetics. In 2008, Dullaart made the video series *YouTube as a Subject* in which he took the functional YouTube play button as the subject of a quest for design and its use on the Internet, using video animation to make the button do everything from bouncing around like a ping-pong ball to blurring into a smudge. In this way, Dullaart elevates the play button to the level of an icon. Dullaart uploaded the short videos on YouTube, where they provoked a series of new video comments. For *Versions* he created a sculpture of another YouTube icon, the circling dots that signal the loading time for a video to start. The foam circles were filmed by visitors using their mobile phones and put online, resulting in new video comments by others.

In addition to individual approaches such as Dullaart's, increasingly more 'club sites' are emerging: *NastyNets* was one of the first 'surfers' clubs,' which are networks of people reacting to each other's postings by uploading new images and/or audio fragments characterised by their 'dirty' or 'trashy' style. *F.A.T. Lab* shares a similar approach; and there are many more examples.

The online is further recontextualized in galleries. A good example of this is the now famous work *Versions* by Oliver Laric (2009), with which he questions the notion of authorship. He does this not only by using existing visual material, but also by explicitly inviting others to supplement or alter his work. This complete denial of authorship seeks to create space for developing interesting things. At a certain point, *Versions* also moves into gallery spaces where it consists of sculptures, essays, videos and performances that exist simultaneously as equally valid variations on a string of thoughts. Although Laric claims to open up his work for everyone to play with and use, he seems most interested in having multiple versions of his initial ideas. So, how involved can the audience really be in works such as this? I wonder if this really constitutes participation or collaboration.

Collaborative and distributive practices

Some earlier online works deal with issues of participation, authorship and collaboration more clearly and directly. One example is the software *Nine* (2003) and its predecessor *Linker* (1999), both of which were developed by Mongrel (Graham Harwood). *Linker* allowed the user to easily store and link images, video, text and sound to other selected material within a grid of nine frames. These elements created a visual story. The *Nine* program works in the same way, but is an online tool rather than an offline one. *Nine* connects stories and facilitates exchanges between users. What is striking is that although the

hierarchical structure and system of accessing information are fairly rigid, they are visible 'on the surface,' rather than buried in the customary back-end solutions. This reflects the idea behind the project, which is to consider how structures are constructed and used. The network options offered are interesting because of this transparency, as is the way in which issues such as authorship and copyright are dealt with. When using other people's images, text or sound, the user cannot directly 'credit' them, but has to e-mail the author – not to get permission but to inform the author of their use. This allows the author to see how their material is used. In a similar way, an email is sent to the author when an existing 'word' (tag) is used. In this way, links between texts are semi-automated. As Graham Harwood explains, "*Nine* is software that is directly born, changed and developed as the result of an ongoing sociability between users and programmers." [3]

Another example is the website *Mouchette.org* (1996) by Martine Neddham. Mouchette existed on the Internet for many years, masquerading as a thirteen-year-old girl living in Amsterdam. She is the ideal imaginary friend who does and says things that many of us dream about but do not dare to do or say aloud. By turns seductive, cruel or sweet, Mouchette exposes the fantasies born from her dark imagination. She repeatedly triggers web users to participate: she answers e-mails that are sent to her, thereby reinforcing the notion that she truly exists. At a certain point, Mouchette invites visitors to her site to become part of the Mouchette Network. Once inside the network, they obtain a password and 'become' Mouchette. These 'Mouchettes' can upload texts and images to the website and use Mouchette's e-mail system – including to answer e-mails. In this way, several different Mouchette's came into being. Although the authentic work might still be visible, the authorial role is dispersed. This raises the question of what does and does not belong to the authentic work.

What is essential in these two works, what distinguishes them from those mentioned previously, is that they want to offer something to the participant, be it information, a platform, or a sense of belonging. What connects these two examples with the ones above is that they do not merely foster participation and collaboration in the sense of working with others towards a shared goal, but that they enable others to work with the material in their own preferred way; they are distributive, rather than collaborative, practices. [4]

Authenticity, originality and authorship

Artists who work on the Internet conceive of the authentic in a different way to those working with traditional media. Their work deals with iteration, versioning and repetition. The quest for originality is still important, but it is achieved in a different way, for example, by being the first to comment with a brilliant or funny idea. At the same time, commenting is a mechanism for establishing individuality, as participants combine shared meanings and play with the shared parameters of the group in idiosyncratic ways. Notions of authenticity are still relevant, but what form do they take?

If we refer back to Lowenthal's remarks on authenticity, one might say that authenticity has now become a process – more specifically a distributive process in which participation is key and the use of the works determine the appearance. Lowenthal also states that a claim of authenticity depends on who is doing the work. However, the notion of authorship is not always easy to determine, as we can see in Laric's work, which questions the notion of single or multiple authorship by explicitly inviting others to alter or supplement it. As Laric says, "There are endless versions of *Versions*. Sculptures, essays, videos

and performances all exist simultaneously as equally valid variations of a string of thoughts. *Versions* exists without a clear beginning and remains open end [sic]. It is independent of context and adaptive to site specifications. No single author holds copyright to any of the manifestations." [5]

'Authorial control' and 'audience participation' are magical phrases for the cultural sector, especially in relation to digital cultural heritage. Various types of participation are on offer, from active to reactive to passive: Do-It-Yourself (DIY); submitting your own content (creation); remixing existing content or working with others (co-creation); labeling existing content (tagging); making selections; exhibitions or tours using available content (clouding); exchanges within and beyond gathered or created content (sharing and networking); and pushing 'like,' or in some cases 'dislike,' buttons (clicking). In addition, connections are made with the world beyond the Internet by staging events that involve surprise, game elements and so forth; and this is just the tip of the iceberg.

From offline to online participation

What does audience participation really mean? What is possible? In what ways can this be compared to participation in the sense as referred to above; versions, commenting, etc.? The etymology of the word 'participation' starts with the Latin 'participare' (to participate), which derives from 'pars' (part) and 'capere' (to take). It infers action and the involvement of at least one direct object – something or someone who receives the action of the verb, i.e., actively participating *in* or contributing *to* a group. Taking this one step further, it can be argued that individuals should be involved in a group such that each of them participates in the group's activities, challenges and successes. It follows from this that participation also means that participants should feel that they are co-owners of the group process, the content and the product. The next question is in what way, or whether, the online experience has changed this notion of participation. It may be useful to take a detour here and look at how artists and museums dealt with participation in the pre-Internet past.

Seeking audience participation is nothing new in art practices: early Romantic-era artists formed groups that bemoaned the separation of art and the audience, [6] and these thoughts were underscored by Richard Wagner in his seminal essay, *The Art-Work of the Future (Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft, 1849)*, in which he states that artists should realize that the 'Folk', the people, are the true inventors and artists:

Not ye wise men, therefore, are the true inventors, but the Folk; for Want it was, that drove it to invention. All great inventions are the People's deed; whereas the devisings of the intellect are but the exploitations, the derivatives, nay, the splinterings and disfigurements of the great inventions of the Folk. [7]

Who, then, will be the Artist of the Future? The poet? The performer? The musician? The plastician? Let us say it in one word: the Folk. That selfsame Folk to whom we owe the only genuine Art-work, still living even in our modern memory, however much distorted by our restorations; to whom alone we owe all Art itself. [8]

Several radical art movements pursued Wagner's ideals, either by aggressively trying to provoke the public through staging events and collective experiences (the Futurists) or by more subtly addressing the art authority and the dissolution of artistic individuality and authorship (the Dadaists). However, these were short-lived movements that often ultimately became the victims of their own strategies as they rapidly lost their power to shock and provoke, and descended into repetition. Although these avant-

garde movements encouraged audience interaction, their inflexibility often led to their decline. Nevertheless, they did open the way for a rebirth of participatory art in the 1950s and 1960s: from the Situationists to Fluxus and Allan Kaprow's 'Happenings,' and from Andy Warhol's Factory to the present.

It is important to realize that the concept of audience participation in these historical examples involved the audience in events that were strictly controlled by the artists – they retained authorial control. In most cases, this meant little more than the artist(s) and audience being together in the room where the happening or event unfolded. Contrary to Wagner's ideas, only scant attention was given to the role of the audience, and participation was not seen as a collaborative and consensual process, as we like to think of it today. Has the coerciveness of the historical attempts to interact with the audience been overcome? Wagner's notion of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (total artwork) can now be created and realized through technical means; but would he be pleased with the random clicking or the competition that can derive from the many Web 2.0 participatory tools? Again, we seem to be far removed from Wagner's vision of the individual who, regardless of class or education, seamlessly merges with the masses. Or are we?

Conclusion

In many ways, the nature of participation has not changed: online participation still involves working on social or other constructions, but now it is made possible by network and database technology. The result of the work (the construction) may be temporary or permanent, and may have a free or structured form. This structured form is the bottleneck and it highlights the shortcomings of the definition of participation in an online context. The minimum level of participation in this context requires nothing more than clicking on a button to trigger an action: for many people, membership of online communities or popular social networking sites such as Hyves and Facebook already constitutes participation. However, we may be able to shed light on the nature of participation by examining its goal: online participation is sometimes an end in itself but it can also be a means to another end. The focus may be on the event itself (the experience) or its product (data, information, knowledge). In the latter case, the product can be the final result, or it can be an unfinished product that will be used, or reused, in another construction. In this way, the participatory action becomes one action in a chain of actions (at times using FLOSS principles), sometimes even without the participant being aware of it – as is sometimes the case in museum online participatory games, where multiple authorship goes uncredited.

The target audience for online participation ranges from small, specialized groups to the broader, general public. In most cases, however, online participation (like offline participation) requires someone to instigate the construction process – a director or an orchestrator who can assume many roles. People need to be motivated to participate, which also leads to the assumption that participants will be 'rewarded' for their participation – or perhaps even penalized for not participating. The benefits of online participation may lie with the participants themselves, with the director, with third parties, or with all of these at once.

Online participation may be fleeting or it may be a collaborative creation or activity – or both at the same time. Furthermore, it can be initiated, (re)activated or passive. In this regard, online participation is similar to offline participation. The greatest difference lies in the fact that the goal of online participation is often not very transparent. There might be a need to redefine participation when it occurs online, with the crucial questions in this context being: what are the producers of the participatory context actually offering, and what are the roles of both parties in the process?

The claim for authenticity depends not only on what the work is, where it takes place and who is doing it, but also who is paying for it, how long is it meant to last, and how is it marketed, or, better, distributed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Virtueel Platform, V2_, Netherlands Media Art Institute, and Digital Heritage Netherlands for co-organizing the Online Participation expert meeting in 2010, an event that was part of a collaborative innovation program initiated by the Institute of Network Cultures, entitled *Culture Vortex*. <http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/culturevortex/tag/online-participation/> (accessed June 2011).

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References and Notes:

1. See also: Angela Matyssek, ed., *Wann Stirbt ein Kunstwerk? Konservierungen des Originalen in der Gegenwartskunst* (Muenchen: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2010).
2. David Lowenthal, "Authenticities Past and Present," *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* vol. 5, no. 1 (2008).
3. Graham Harwood's personal website, "Nine (9)," <http://www.mongrel.org.uk/nine> (accessed June 2011).
4. This way of working has a long tradition in music, where experiments with notation are aimed at re-use by making the system of production (notation) available to everyone. Live coding is one of the latest examples in this trend, where the material and the practice of production are available to others. See: Theresa Sauer, *Notations21* (New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2009) and Simon Yuill, "All Problems of Notation Will be Solved by the Masses: Free Open Form Performance, Free/Libre Open Source Software, and Distributive Practice" in *FLOSS+Art*, eds. Aymeric Mansoux and Marloes de Valk, 64–91 (Poitiers: GOTO10 and OpenMute, 2008).
5. Boris Groys, "A Genealogy of Participatory Art," in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, eds. Rudolf Frieling, et al., 19–31 (San Francisco: Thames & Hudson, 2008). See also: Claire Bishop and Boris Groys, "Bring the Noise," *TATEetc.* no. 16 (2009).
6. Richard Wagner, "The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works" in *The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works* (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993/1849), 80 / 205.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*