NETWORK CULTURE, MEDIA ART: CULTURAL CHANGE DIALECTICS

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The emergence of Network Culture represents a fundamental paradigmatic shift in society.Networked connection replaces abstraction in terms of cultural production.This paper investigates the influence of Actor-Network Theory as discursive strategy that explicates public spheres such as the New Media art world creating a new form of Virtual social space.

 The emergence of Network Culture represents a fundamental paradigmatic shift in society, as it resituates the concept of mediation as a default condition, in everyday life and the art world. Here, networked connection replaces abstraction in terms of cultural production. Actor Network Theory redefines the relations of all elements in a milieu in terms of their effects on the system, and not on their base significations. This results in a heterogenous semiotics of symmetry, where the material, intellectual, and social effects of agents within a network differentiates their degree of agency. This can be seen in terms of Latour's systemic "artworld", consisting of a fractal aggregate of subordinate sites, such as galleries, festivals, websites, and blogs, as well as various overlapping social spheres of influence. This paper will investigate the influence of Actor-Network Theory as discursive strategy that explicates public spheres such as the New Media art world as creating a new form of Lefebrian social space, that of the Virtual. This will be done by considering two New Media art works, *Face to Facebook* and *Wikipedia Art* as examples of cultural production that utilize virtual space as site of social agency under the ANT paradigm.

THE EMERGENCE OF ANT

It has been said that with the rise of network culture, that the shift in focus occurs from the online community to that of the "smart mob"; that this represents a decentering of concentration from the concept of located/dislocated (place-based and place-less space) to that of a flat, relational network. In *Science in Action*, [1] Bruno Latour theorizes the concept of Actor-Network Theory, in which he deals with agents in a network of relations as being *mediated, symmetric, ubiquitous, and material-semiotic.* Ubiquity is assured in that there is nothing outside the network; once someone or something engages an ANT network, it becomes an actant and therefore part of the network. Material-semiosis relates to the actant's relevance having to do not only with its signification, but also with its material circumstances. For example, someone contrasting silk versus nylon hose as social intermediaries would not deal solely with its metomyny as signifying class structure. But taking both as mediators through the material circumstances of silk versus nylon and thus constructing meaning from this as well, these objects become relevant. This is merely to say that meaning in an ANT network is a constant state of socio-cultural mediation and negotiation and is dynamically dependent on the circumstances of the whole network and its architectonic of meaning, rather than merely with its base significations. Latour also states that elements within an AN are regarded as equivalent, or described in the same terms. This includes human, non-human, and material actants, and therefore creates a 'flat' space of signification, and *does* illustrate networks of equal actants, such as flash mobs or online communities (as in our examples), rather than systems that derive difference from less complex sets of criteria.

In terms of ANT, perhaps we could conceive of the network as an heterogenous infinitude of equivalent spaces, but it may be useful for us to consider the nature of constructed space within an AN in order to

consider artworks that engage networked culture. Henri Lefevbre, in *The Production of Space*, [2] posits a unitary theory the division of space into three types, the physical, the social, and the mental. These are derived from Aristotelian "Becoming" to Kantian space to contemporary epistemology as theoretical underpinnings of his construction of space. He critiques Chomsky and Derrida is not addressing the mediation of the "the abyss between the mental space on the one side and the physical and social spheres on the other." [3] In our case, we would like to suggest that, given the need to bridge this abyss, that we could theorize a fourth space; a Lefevbrian Virtual space as being the combination of the mental and the social. This is the space of our given artworks.

But what of the environment-net they inhabit? To construct an AN within which works like Face-2-Facebook and Wikipedia Art operate, we will look at Howard Becker's conception of an "art world." [4] Congruent with ANT, Becker asserts that the work of art is a system within a system which is the product of a set of a complex sociological propositions that are dependent upon one another, which we could consider as analogous to an AN. There is no homogenous "art world" per se, but heterogenous fields of spaces, milieu, individuals, and works. If we allow ourselves to extrapolate to the virtual space in our network, we can see that this expanded artworld exists as a series of overlapping and nested spaces (example, an exhibition is situated by being on a certain website or in a certain gallery, and is then contextualized by the curator and critics, and seen by the audience). There are not just overlapping spheres of museums, galleries, fairs, curators, gallerists, critics, patrons, visitors, but also social media, blogs, forums, maillists, and tweet feeds. Furthermore, our examination of artworld-as-network only denotes the mediated relevance of the milieu (spaces virtual and/or otherwise) merely as construct or our range of interest. The art world, per se, exists within the expanded fields of society, so stated not to imply it existing in social space, but art world as embedded in that larger environment. As such, we could expand the AN to encompass the globe, its societies, all objects, and their dynamic relations. For the sake of discourse, it is assured that this is beyond the scope of our inquiry, and we shall remain largely in the criteria of examining a limited art world network in a virtual space. But even so, we will see that our examples (Face2Facebook and Wikipedia Art) bleed outward from their points of origin into the larger Lefevbrian spatial landscapes.

FACE-TO-FACEBOOK

Face-to-Facebook [5] is a project by Paulo Cirio and Alessandro Ludovico that "stole 1 million Facebook profiles, filtered them with face-recognition software, and posted them on a custom-made dating website sorted by their facial expressions characteristics." Face-to-Facebook "screen scraped" various data (name, country, groups) along with profile pictures from which a mock dating site called http://www. lovely-faces.com/. The artists create a virtual function of agency by harvesting the million faces (social) and processing them to create relations between them (Mental), for a critical Website for wider viewing (virtual agency). Cirio and Ludvico make explicit the theory of agency relating to the idea that facial cues are chosen and used as markers for sexual attraction, although this is a basic metric of mediated relevance in the AN. On Face-to-Facebook, the faces are analyzed using facial recognition software and grouped based on arbitrarily categories determined by the artists, "climber", "easy going", "funny", "mild", "sly" and "smug". In Dan Jones' essay, "The Love Delusion," [6] states that "men typically overestimate the sexual interest conveyed by a woman's smile or laughter", grouping the faces creates a dialogue by implicit discourse of sexual attraction and explicit critique of privacy in social media. Cirio and Ludovico create a critical Actor Network in virtual space as critical device to explicate to make visible the cultural terrain created by social media. Furthermore, the impact of the site on larger networks is shown

by the degree of press the site has created, although this is only a visible indicator of the relational activity within this Actor Network construct.

WIKIPEDIA ART

Another project that plays with differing levels of agency in virtual space is Kildall, Stern, et al's *Wikipedia Art*. In *Wikipedia Art,* [7] Scott Kildall created a performative citation in virtual space as a combination of a mental statement (citation) in the social space of Wikipedia, creating a virtual gesture. It was placed on Wikipedia as "art composed on Wikipedia, and thus art that anyone can edit". Its header reads:

"Wikipedia Art is a conceptual art work composed on Wikipedia, and is thus art that anyone can edit. It manifests as a standard page on Wikipedia - entitled Wikipedia Art. Like all Wikipedia entries, anyone can alter this page as long as their alterations meet Wikipedia's standards of quality and verifiability. As a consequence of such collaborative and consensus-driven edits to the page, Wikipedia Art, itself, changes over time."[8]

This listing lasted for a full fifteen hours until its deletion from the Wikipedia site, but not without widespread discussion throughout communities like Rhizome.org, [9] Art Fag City, [10] The Whole9, [11] and others. The importance of Wikipedia Art was not so much the work itself but its gestural aspect as networked performance that questions the social networks of consensus.

If we could look at Wikipedia Art as an Actor Network, the project would appear as a series of subnets nested within/overlapping one another as a series of spheres of agency or influence. First, the initiators, Kildall and Stern, represent a home node in the network, with rhetorical conspirators (Sherwin, Coffelt and Lichty) representing another sphere. Socially, the project engages the Wikipedia community and the Beckerian art worlds of the Rhizome.org online community and Whole9 and Art Fag City blogs, which in turn have bled to many other venues such as the Transmediale festival and London's HTTP Gallery. Considered as a larger "art world" aggregate, this network influenced the larger society by invoking the rage of Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales, and gaining notice of the Wall Street Journal. [12]

DENOUEMENT:

While we have explored the concept of ANT, Lefevbre's division of space, and how the two contribute to the construction of "art worlds", the emergence of networked culture creates unique modes of artistic expression. These consist of taking a metacritical role in examining virtual (mental/social) space as medium through the intervention of social media. Face-to-Facebook, Wikipedia Art, Google Will Eat Itself and others probe networks of agency to critically show the shape of networked culture. The fact that it does have a tangible effect reveals the reality of modes of agency within the network, and reveals the critical landscape of the Actor Network.

CONCLUSION:

In closing, this essay has sought to explore Latour's concept of Actor Network Theory (ANT) to describe a paradigmatic shift. That shift is from that of locative/embodied discourse to that of purely networked

culture; that is, the shift from associating culture with places and things to purely that of symmetric networks of equivalent mediated agents. As opposed to the widely conceived hierarchical nature of the artworld, ANT conceives of "art worlds" as conglomerates of spaces, ideas, and social contracts that define milieus and works. Artworks described by ANT critique virtual milieu by engaging artworlds-as-networks, and as such explore a virtual Lefevbrian space by bridging the abyss between the Social and Mental spaces through engaging online communities. These critical pieces explore the relations between actors in social situations in context of "art worlds", with the tangibility of result of their agency being the response in the general audience or public sphere of the mass media. We can examine, using ANT, networked art such as Face-to-Facebook and Wikipedia Art, and as such, describe networked cultural production in its own terms, as demanded by ANT. The rise of networked culture has created a fundamental network shift within society, and ANT is a valuable tool in understanding the relationships created by art within networked social environments, and networked culture as it expands into the future.

References and Notes:

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