

# TOWARDS CO-AUTHORING COMMUNITAS: CONSIDERING THE POTENTIAL OF DIGITAL ART PROJECTS WITHIN PLACE-MAKING AS A PROCESS OF BECOMING

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Digital technology, particularly the internet, "a natural environment for liminality" (Waskul 2004,40) in conjunction with open source software / culture are considered as tools for the creation and production of liminal phases / liminoid spaces. Could such digitally produced spaces produce *communitas* and if harnessed within place-making, encourage a process of 'becoming' both for the project participants and place involved.

Aristotle's belief that humans were a mix of matter (constant) and form (constantly developing) contributed to his understanding that humans have an "innate capacity for action: to change the world to his or her whim (*techne*), the ability to move from sheer possibility to actuality." (Brommage 2005,11) This process of change from a lower level of potentiality to the higher level of actuality is known as becoming. Maslow referred to this process as self-actualisation, or to become more and more of what one is, or capable of becoming. Within Jungian psychoanalysis self-actualisation can only fully occur once the process of Individuation is complete.

Individuation is the transformational process of integrating the conscious with the personal and collective unconscious (Jung, 1962, p. 301). Through Jungian psychoanalysis, a period of reflection and transformation is undertaken during which, the essential personality of the person, their individuality can emerge. Jung believed this resulted in a profound healing effect on the person (Jung 1962, p. 433). This process often occurs within a particular context or setting separate from but in parallel with the mundane, everyday life of the individual, a context, which could be referred to as liminal.

The term Liminal derives from the Latin *limen*, or threshold and was first used by Arnold Van Gennep (1909 translated to English in 1960) in *Les rites de passage*.<sup>1</sup> Here Van Gennep discusses three stages that accompany the 'movement from one cosmic or social world to another' (Madge & O'Connor 2005, 93), separation (preliminal), transition (liminal) and reintegration (post liminal).

During the pre-liminal stage an initiate is separated from their usual social environment and what has been their way of life and its related beliefs to date. They then enter the liminal phase, which signifies for Van Gennep, a ritual space of transition. Here the initiate's pre-conceived ideas and beliefs are challenged through the extra-ordinary experience of initiation, followed by the post liminal phase. Within Van Gennep's rationale, during the post liminal phase the individual and their initiatory knowledge is re-integrated into the general society.

The anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) in his often-cited text 'The forest of symbols' picked up on Van Gennep's ideas and re-defined them within the context of 1960s counter culture to develop a new anthropological perspective on liminality. Turner, argued that in order for the process of becoming / self-actualisation to take place the dissolution of the normative values or understanding of one's self and

context is necessary (Turner 2008). For Turner, this dissolution, occurring during a liminal phase, although initially destabilising, could create an environment conducive to the individual's values and normal modes of behaviour being reflected upon and transformed.

For both Van Gennep and Turner the liminal state signifies a time of transition albeit manifesting differently, a 'time out of time' where one is 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1967,) not only social status but also social mores and beliefs. Where Van Gennep discusses the phases as part of a ritual process, Turner deviates, taking the idea of the liminal into secular contemporary societies; spaces he identifies as liminoid. Turner proposed (1982, 32) that liminal spaces could not be applied to 'modern societies' as they are for the most part secular. Liminoid spaces have similar qualities and functions but are not part of a spiritual or initiatory journey with no rite of passage. It is Turner's evolution of the liminal into liminoid, which holds fertile potential for digital arts practice to contribute to a process of becoming through the practice of place-making.

Place-making is a community-driven process of people making a place and strikes a balance between the physical, the social and what could even be considered spiritual qualities of a place. (PPS 2011). This process, returning to Aristotle's understanding could be re-considered as a process of becoming, 'moving from sheer potentiality to actuality'. If we employed digital media/technology as part of this process, this could also be an opportunity for self-actualisation. The creative use of digital media / technology could be used to deconstruct an understanding of a location, a reflective and transformative process by residents, which could manifest as an essential personality inherent within the location.

Turner when explaining the essence of liminality stated it was "found in the release from normal constraints" adding that; liminars were individuals who had the power to "reveal the freedom, the indeterminacy underlying all culturally constructed worlds, the free play of mankind's cognitive and imaginative capacities" (1969 161). Contemporary cultural theory reconsiders Turner's notion of limen or threshold within the notion of the border. Indeed it has been argued, (Rosaldo, Ortner et al) that Turner's vision is somewhat Utopian and in fact that rather than being re-integrated into the status quo the individual may in fact seek to change it. Turner identifies "Ritual Liminars or Edgemen" who "possess the 'radical potential of cultural critique, indeed of deconstruction,'" (Turner 1969, 128) yet for the most part Turner's ideas lean towards re-integration to society in a similar vein to Van Gennep.

Weber considers the liminal phase to be simultaneously "culturally dangerous but culturally creative," (1995, 526) a place of action. As the cultural beliefs are challenged and broken down any re-integration may include an inability to conform to the previous value system, yet this may in turn contribute to the creation of new systems.

Digital technology, particularly the Internet, "a natural environment for liminality" (Waskul 2004,40) and open source software / culture can be considered as tools for the creation and production of liminal phases / liminoid spaces where a constant cycle of de / re -construction takes place. Technologies often referred to as new / digital Media, in particular the Internet / cyberspace have as defined by Flew (2008) the following characteristics; they can be manipulated, are networkable, dense, compressible, interactive and are perceived at least, as immaterial. It is these qualities, that create the in-between or threshold states, reminiscent of the liminal phases Turner and Van Gennep referred to, the liminoid spaces that could be utilised within the the processes and practices of place-making.

Projects that use these technologies in particular the internet or cyberspace can be considered from this perspective of in-betweenness or threshold space as any activity undertaken cannot be separated from

our pre-liminal understandings or connection to our embodied experiences and practices. Whilst we can transcend the physical limitations of time and space momentarily, we enter this space from a corporeal position and always return to our corporeal world and all that entails.

Pratt 2002; Walmsley 2000 highlights this in noting that 'communities and forums that exist online are still rooted in place and space whether that is a physical location or a space of shared interest, being human they can be rooted no other way. Whether as the creation of bits, the use of the Internet, either through social media, virtual worlds or simply searching for information, the virtual and corporeal are all part of the online virtual experience. We cannot separate from our physical world and the disruptions of presence / absence, mind / body on and offline are all part of this dualism.

This dual nature has social, cultural and political implications with geographers increasingly examining what Kitchin refers to as "the role of space and place in a distributed social space that lacks physicality" (1998a, 393). I propose that it is this very lack of a fixed physicality and the momentary transcendence or disruption of physical limitations that can be exploited for the deconstruction or undoing of understandings of place and a co-authoring of *communitas*. The identity of a place is not fixed, with individuals having a personal, subjective understanding of a place and knowledge that could be viewed as assets for change and evolution, personal and locational.

Turner's relating of Van Gennep's ideas to a secular contemporary world incorporated what Weber (1995, 527) calls "the shifting unfolding, processual, dynamic dimensions of cultural change: the shifting relations among liminality, *communitas*, and structure." The dictionary definition of *communitas* refers to "an unstructured community in which people are equal" or "the sense of sharing and intimacy that develops among persons who experience liminality as a group." (dictionary.reference 2011) The etymology of the word stems from the Latin *communis*, meaning common or public and is therefore often used to denote a sense of community, public spirit or a willingness to serve one's community. Turner distinguishes between three types of *communitas*; existential or spontaneous *communitas*, the transient personal experience of togetherness. Normative *communitas*, *communitas* organized into a permanent social system and ideological *communitas*, which can be applied to many utopian social models. (Turner 1969: 132)

A participatory digital art project's potential to produce *communitas* can be considered from a number of perspectives in relation to Turner's definitions. Firstly the life cycle of the project through the nature of shared experience and achievement offers an opportunity to develop existential or spontaneous *communitas*, which Turner and Van Gennep argue occurs within a liminal phase / space. The community of the project exists temporarily, although some longstanding relationships maybe established and extend beyond the lifetime of the project. If working well will evolve, "an equality of relations, a comradeship that transcends age, rank, kinship etc. and displays an intense community spirit. Thus people from all social groups may form strong bonds, free from structures that normally separate them." (Madge and O'Connor 2005,93)

If the project is embedded within the practice of place-making then the process of *communitas* becomes one of collective power and production and the shared personal experience of the place-making could be a collective response then integrated into the processes of planning and regeneration. In this sense the inclusion within the system utilises the rules and power relations of the social structure simultaneously, to constrain and enable human agency as being closely involved in the reproduction. This would most closely resemble the post-liminal phase and if we think of communities as being based on

the shared experience of living in a location rather than more romantic notions then normative *communitas* is more easily identifiable. The concept of place-making as a process of becoming through the co-authorship of *communitas*, at once is more achievable if considered as the shift from the potential of the city and its inhabitants to a higher level of actuality.

For Turner (1967) the liminal phase was important as a 'threshold' space that held the potential for *communitas* given the intimacy and commonality of shared experience evolving through the liminal phase of an initiation or rite of passage. The rituals and activities undertaken within the liminal phase provide an experience of where the status quo appears to dissolve. Although initiates re-integrate into society their understanding has shifted. Using Turner's secular re-interpretation of Van Gennep's theories, digital art projects function as liminal phases / liminoid spaces through offering "time out of time" or Turner's concept of "betwixt and between" while being parallel to the everyday existence.

Digital art projects focussed towards the practice and process of place-making provide the time and space to represent more voices and experiences to expand residents' understandings of place and in turn disseminate this knowledge. Pred (1984) states the "character of unknowing in a place constrains the cultural and social projects that eventually may occur" therefore the importance of having new shared understanding of place, or knowing is necessary for the purpose of becoming and any shift from potential to actuality. Through experiencing this process, an intimate shared experience enables the participants of the project to explore different ideas and possibilities and ultimately create different solutions or outcomes for a location.

The 45s series, an on-going series of audio-visual projects, that exist both off and online and offer opportunities for continuous remixing, explore these ideas. Once the physical aspects of the project are complete (motion sensor installations, films, psycho-geographic workshops, projection events etc.) the films and audio mixes live on line with all the samples available for re-mixing. These common lands of digital data enable the contributors to create an on-going co-construction of the area through the virtual galleries and submitted portraits after the initial project is completed. This continues to encourage counterfactual re-presentations and conditions by a multitude of voices. Through the "posing of possibilities beyond what is assumed to be the case," Macleod 2005, the on-going project activities lead to a conscious re-fashioning of their 'place'.

The 'legacy' of the projects, a co-authored *communitas*, reflects and enshrines the community's self-directed, heterogeneous self-image. The 45s series enables the process of place-based learning and re-learning evolving an intimate relationship with place and in turn the location's other residents. Enough compatibility is generated to enable communication and a more expanded experience of place and ultimately learning. Through the intimacy created within the shared experience (*communitas*) of the project and the deconstruction / reconstruction that Turner refers to during liminal phases / liminoid space, a transformative process equitable to individuation "integrating the conscious with the personal and collective unconscious" can occur (Jung, 1962, p. 301).

This process reminiscent of Jung's process of individuation extends the *communitas* of the project through a process that potentially enables diverse groups made up of strangers, to interact with people whose opinions, values and culture are different. The project contains the group giving them enough commonality to begin to feel comfortable with their difference. These emerging relationships can then be capitalised to develop and evolve the places we live, conducive to our well-being with the legacies of the 45s projects include networking activities, campaigning forums and sustainable community activity.

Such persistent challenges to given understandings of place through the constant re-presentation of multiple identities and understandings, ultimately offers, processual re-tellings of the story of that place, the location of individually felt meanings and values expressed coherently as its personality and uniqueness – its individuality. Returning to Jungian psychoanalysis Jung believed that this process of reflection and transformation in which, the essential personality emerges has a profound healing effect. The liminoid spaces that are created through the digital art projects may offer a contemporary opportunity to undertake activities that within a secular existence to experience aspects of the liminal phases of ritual many no longer engage in.

Perhaps in the steps towards co-authoring *communitas* through the use of digital art projects within the process/practice of place-making, the places we reside and ourselves may undergo a process of becoming. In reaching a higher level of actuality, we may go some way towards fulfilling our potential, manifested and tangible in the places we make.

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