

SOCIAL MEDIA AS ART AND VS ART

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WWW space has always been an attractive space for artists, providing a virgin area for discovery. Gradually it was filled with shops, newspapers, maps, advertisements and became everyone's daily routine. Where does the artist stand in this situation? As visitors' animator through the social web? In the compromise in order to be included to a new populous and commercial Internet? Or in the exploration of virgin areas on the edge of the WWW?

Introduction: From the Heliocentric System of Copernicus to the Google Earth

The heliocentric system of Copernicus, in the 16th century, modifies human thinking, by posing as a basic principle that neither the Earth, nor her inhabitants are the center of the world. In the era of Google Earth, four centuries later, the system of the World Wide Web (WWW), by embracing (webbing) the Earth, overturns the established Copernican perception of the world. There is not one central system – as western culture defines it- but a grid of central and non-central systems, interconnected in a dynamic way.

It's a new image of the world, even more complex than modern physics' spatiotemporal views. Apart from time and space, it involves concepts such as information in the form of metadata, real time actions, dynamic files, and complex actions of human-machine combinations.

In the era of the "Google-Face-Booking Earth", it is necessary to reconsider the problems of globalization refreshing the arguments of the last decade. It would be interesting to consider the argument of Peter Sloterdijk about the historical perspective of globalization [1] and to reflect upon the new situation that is shaped by the wide participation of people in the Internet Galaxy, through the Social Web. This new situation could be related to the prospect of a new artistic or philosophical view of the world. This is the point of the emplacement of the artist and the question that rises is whether this new situation has been formulated from the artistic perspective.

The Real Space of Web

In order to develop our view on the matter, it would be useful to have a thorough study on the environment in which it unfolds, namely the WWW. It can be divided into five periods.

FIRST PERIOD: EXPLORERS, PIONEERS, ACTIVISTS

The WWW from its very first days has been an attractive space for artists. It provided a virgin area of unknown characteristics, dispensable to be discovered, with anticipated adventure and new opportunities, an area that had not been mapped, therefore an open space for a new beginning. Artists, professional pioneers as they are (or addicted to the avant-garde), found interesting the exploration of the new

world (wide web) and fascinating the ideas of the (virtual) terra incognita. To those familiar with technology as an expressive tool, it was the perfect place to develop their artistic, conceptual or social behavior. It was a place in which they believed that, they could inexpensively build their own ideas and to set their rules.

It is from the world of Art that the first name and description of this new space (the web space) was given. It is to literature that we owe the term “cyberspace” (William Gibson Neuromancer 1984). It is also literature that mystified the new space to an extent that the artists, youth, and people who like adventures, consider it as their own space.

The first inhabitants of cyberspace, originating from the world of art, as well as programmers who considered programming as creation, were characterized as web or (Inter)net artists, and shaped the web’s initial form. Later came web designers, practicing an applied media art, related mostly with manipulated images, sounds and texts. The Web designers, drift from older techniques of design, tried to create an impressive picture, but soon the technological developments overcame the culture of printed materials: the internet was much more than a well-made layout surface.

SECOND PERIOD: THE RELOCATION OF THE COMMERCIAL REAL-WORLD ON THE INTERNET

Real explorers formed a community of cursed, adventurers, or romantic revolutionaries such as those of the 18 century, in the new American continent that formed the vacant and wild area in a utopian state. (The list of these people, artists, intellectual groups, various institutions... is too long to be fully mentioned.) Gradually the situation changed: Internet space was filled with shops, newspapers, yellow pages, maps, or even sexual or political advertisements. It became everyone’s daily routine. But the evolution of the new land was not easy to stop there.

THIRD PERIOD: WEB FOR EVERYONE

The WWW was not for the few and elected. Just like photography, characterized with the advertisement of Kodak "You press the button, we do the rest", every user-visitor could have their own environment in the WWW by effectively utilizing the new features of the communication digital space, as Manuel Castel states in [2]. It is something that the media industry did not achieve since it used the WWW only as “information highways”.

FOURTH PERIOD: PERSONAL MASS MEDIA

In the last decade we observe a crucial transformation of space, the details of which are of particular interest. The first tools for communication and people networking (the first generation social media like mailing list, forum, and chat) are transformed into powerful personal-mass media (facebook, youtube, myspace, etc). This new kind of media overcome the dynamics of information, as well as personal views and audiovisual content exchange, and approach the dynamics of large-scale decision making. From mass-media they turn into mass-opinion-leaders (for example, the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, etc, as well as the “movement of indignant” in Spain, Greece and other countries.)

FIFTH PERIOD: FROM THE NETWORK TO DIGITAL GROUND

There is another significant level of change beyond WWW: A new type of user is formed, which adds an extra dimension to the new environment. According to Malcolm McCulloch, [3] a Digital Ground is created and we live on it. In this way, the changes, apart from the structure and functioning of the WWW internal, impact also on its body.

From the «home» computer and internet «cafes», in other words from an architectural space in which the user must be physically present in order to use his/her digital extensions, we pass on to an extension of the user's body, connected to the Digital Ground (smart phones, gps, iPads, etc).

In order to accomplish this description it would be interesting to mention some of the results.

FIRST RESULT: THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF ITS "DIGITAL" REPRODUCIBILITY

We refer to the field of the traditional industry of art and entertainment, subject to devastating consequences:

The public manages for its own self what it wants to hear and see, disseminate or collect: The "see and hear" becomes "download and upload". In other words, we observe a new industry of spectacles, which is shaped by its own base (the public) and is at its infancy: Musical vanguard influenced by technology, after the playback of 60s, the synthesizers of 70s, and the samplers of 80s, now with myspace and youtube, shifts from the creation to promotion, presentation and sharing of artworks. The aforementioned procedure does not stop to the collection of artworks from the internet, but to a special production: hybrid machines telephone-cameras, and cheap or hacked software programs of sound and image editing contribute to the development of a digital folk art. Young people, amateurs, pensioners, but also artists use the network for promoting their work. [4]

SECOND RESULT: THE WORLD OF DIGITAL GAMES

The field of digital games is a field under rapid development and affects the areas of entertainment, art, artistic education and further on the overall status of the artist.

Digital games industry is already ahead of film and music entertainment industry. Thus two important new situations emerge that will significantly affect, apart from many other things, the evolution of art itself: the first is a new generation of artists of media industry type (a creative team of writers, designers, artists - technicians, musicians, etc. that are all working on a project) with all its implications (development of schools, festivals, theoretical analysis, etc.). The second is the development of extremely powerful tools of low cost that literally reverse the technological structure of research and production (i.e. the kinect sensor of Xbox).

Social Web as Art and vs. Art

It has already been mentioned that artists from every field of art followed, experimented, and used the constantly evolving digital environment (WWW).

At the same time web users (amateurs, young people or students), succeeded in changing important parts of industrial art (music and audiovisual expression), concerning the distribution of artworks and the promotion of new talents.

But do the artists feel the need to redefine once again their status by exploring virgin areas that are situated on the edge of the Internet and social media?, or will they follow (as most people do) the demands of social web?

Hasn't the artist yet managed, as Velázquez in *Las Menina*, to capture the "fourth wall" and himself/herself in front of it and outside of his artwork?

The answers can't be impressive because the construction of the "fourth wall" at the new space, in other words the creation of an extra surface which may - at the same time - produce the image of the creator, open a dialogue for self-awareness, and present the artwork itself, has not been created yet. The creation of such an infrastructure is neither easy nor impressive.

However, has this WWW utilization produced something new for artistic expression or is it just supporting old existing forms? Are the artists pioneers inside this space or are they just following the needs of the market that push technological developments? What is the difference between the "digital" folk art developed by the public with very cheap equipment (e.g. a mobile phone with camera) and the professional artist? Is it sufficient to present experience as art in the intangible world? Is the Web a "side" space, that only assists artistic expression in the real space, or is it an autonomous space of artistic innovation?

Has the opportunity of the internet to be a common utopian homeland for artists - researchers been lost? Is it possible that the physical and national boundaries of the homeland of every artist or cultural center do not confine the freedom of the artist? Does the artist himself request for that freedom? There are only a few individual cases of artists who reacted in an activist way beyond boundaries.

The artist, his/her laboratory, or the artist's work is hosted by virtual spaces. But more often the same process is repeated.

The Next Step: Is It the Creation of Art, or Is It the Creation of a Special Space for the Artistic Creation?

The role of the WWW should not be restricted only in communication and information archiving, but it should also include information processing. To serve that purpose work of the artist on the WWW should not begin from the artwork itself, but from the environment and the structures that will host the artwork; it could be the contemporary laboratory of the digital artist. [5] In this way, the artist moves one step forward from the existing tools, creating the new tools for the new creation.

References and Notes:

1. Peter Sloterdijk, *Bulles: Sphères I* (Paris: Fayard/Pluriel, 2003).
2. Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
3. Malcolm McCulloch, *Digital Ground: Architecture, Pervasive Computing, and Environmental Knowing* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).
4. Manthos Santorineos, *De la Civilisation du Papier a la Civilisation du Numerique* (Paris: L' Harmattan, 2007).
5. Manthos Santorineos and Stavroula Zoi, "A Proposal for a Digital Art Laboratory that Meets Contemporary Educational and Experimentation Needs" (paper presented at the 5th Annual Edition of International Technology, Education and Development Conference, Valencia, March 7-9, 2011).