LOCATING THE ARTIST: A DIY-WANIA

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ABSTRACT

The concept of 'location' is a central concern to socially-engaged practitioners. Breaking from a focus specifically on the physical and social geography of participatory projects, artists and researchers Alexia Mellor and Anthony Schrag suggest the need to examine 'locating the artist' in regards to cultural policy-making, the institution and ultimately as facilitator of dialogue and change within the physical and online communities in which they work. Our research takes as a starting point the Artist Placement Group and their pioneering projects of the 1960s and 1970s that located artists directly into governmental institutions and businesses and looks at the social, digital and political contexts of socially-engaged practices today: How are artists working within these settings? What do these institutions demand in return? How does locating creative thinking from within structures create space for transformation to a general public? And, in a digital age, how can artists explore the tensions between the specific and the global locale? Included in this scholarly paper is an analysis of the authors' public, participatory and context-led intervention specifically developed for ISEA2014 that explores these ideas further.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps seemingly unrelated on the surface, critically Socially Engaged and New Media practices are closely linked through a shared lineage of artistic practices that challenge the ways that art is made and how and where it is experienced. This paper explores parallels in both practices as they relate to important shifts regarding how practices respond to and reflect current changing institutional frameworks – technologically, economically and politically. Both practices share ideologies of direct participation, D.I.Y. methodology and the ability to permeate interdisciplinary boundaries. We argue that Socially Engaged and New Media practices' ability to work within and across traditional boundaries is their strength and it is this that facilitates an important platform to discuss critical questions around the role and location of the artist in contemporary society.

Linking historical, social and political functions of Socially Engaged practices to contemporary New Media contexts we look at how both forms of practice challenge the notion of the autonomy of art, traditions of authorship and the authority of the institution. This highlights the complex relationship these two practices have with institutions that fund, exhibit and support them and asks critical questions about the location of the artist within a variety of institutional structures. We will explore these questions via an analysis of contemporary artists' workings, as well as our own practices, including our contribution to ISEA's Site Responsive & Specific/Unique Session: *DIY-wania*. *DIY-wania,* which derives from the 'Dewaniya,' originally a Kuwaiti place of gathering and discussion with roots in Bedouin culture, takes the form of a portable tent structure that is placed into public spaces of Dubai and activated by participation. The intention is to create an open and informal space where notions of the location of the artist can be presented and discussed by both art professionals and others. *DIY-wania* serves as a working model of alternative forms of social collaboration, aimed to engage ISEA participants and the Dubai community in conversation around the challenges and potentials of Socially Engaged and New Media practices.

CONTEXT OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED AND NEW MEDIA ART PRACTICES

While both Socially Engaged and New Media practices fundamentally challenge traditional notions of artist/audience relationships, are process-focused rather than object-based and present difficulties to traditional art institutions when it comes to how the work is not only presented but also evaluated, perhaps the most important similarity for our purposes is their demand for a shift from simply understanding the aesthetics of an artwork to understanding what the artwork does. In considering the potential of what the artwork can do, we must also look at where the artwork and the artist, reside: physically, culturally and politically. At the core of Socially Engaged and New Media practices is a desire to reposition the artist and the work, pushing the boundaries of traditional systems. Working with existing communities and creating temporary ones on and offline, these artists question the autonomy of art and the very authority of the institutions that determine how and which art is experienced. It is no longer necessary to cross the threshold of the marble staircase, but rather one can directly participate in the making and content of the work in one's own backyard. We are experiencing an amazing cultural shift in which DIY practices, including user-generated web content, citizen science movements and even craftivism practices are decentralizing power and ultimately changing the look and structure of institutions. One could argue that despite the ongoing omnipresence of corporate monoliths, DIY and digital culture have contributed to the rise of individuals as the new form of institution. Companies are no longer run solely in boardrooms, but also from kitchens, coffee shops and hot desks across the world. Socially Engaged and New Media practices understand and build upon this way of working and thinking, creating opportunities for individuals to not just interact with, but co-create the content of work which has the potential to mirror, challenge and rethink the socio-political systems at play.

Arguably, the evolutionary parthenogenesis that spawned the two practices lies in the Italian Futurist Movement of the 1910s with its obsession for technology and for reformatting its relationship with a passive theatre-going audience. Seeking a new relationship with art viewers Marinetti and his ilk developed participatory events that included such things as selling the same ticket to 10 different people or leaving glue on the seats in order to enrage

audiences or intentionally insulting people.[1] While none of it sounds very nice, it was their very intention to shake the audience to respond in collaborative and active ways, using new technologies such as Luigi Russolo's *'Intonarumori'* instruments. These were hand-cranked, noise-generating, large-scale boxes with megaphones attached that played various *'noises'* in a precise (technological) musical composition, conceivably being the first '*synthetic-music*' orchestra. This single presentation caused outrage and screaming matches between the players and the audiences, much to the delight of the Futurists who were, as mentioned, seeking a new and active relationship between performer and receiver.

Compare this to current Hacker Art/Hacktivism and the shared lineages and the shared belief in the role of the artist as someone who reformats relationships to governing institutional structures become apparent. While further connections between the practices can be traced via the Dada and Fluxus movements, the Happenings of Kaprow and Lebel, as well as Performance Art, perhaps the most useful group to discuss in regards to relocating the artist is the Artist Placement Group. The Artist Placement Group (APG) was initiated by artists John Latham and Barbara Steveni in the 1960s and aimed to explore the place of the artist within non-art institutions. The cultural landscape of the UK at the time – indeed much of the Western World – saw most artists operating within the closed system of the gallery/museum complex, producing and exhibiting work within the confines of the studio and White Cube. APG was quite a revolutionary experiment. It aimed to work in opposition to the normalized model of an institution commissioning an artist to produce goods for consumption within an art setting and rather "*operated on the inverse principle of pushing the artist out into society*," in the form of 'artists-in-residence.' [2] By placing an artist as an 'Incidental Person' i.e., someone independently observing and working within industrial and government institutional contexts including British Steel, British Airways, The National Coal Board and Hille Furniture Company, APG investigated the potential of process-focused, long-term impact on both the institution and the artist's practice. [3]

Many of the APG projects were experimenting with the place of the artist not as a maker of elite objects, but at the heart of industry and government; that the purpose of their placement directly within the industrial institution was not to provide rarefied cultural objects, but as Bishop suggests: "*art [had] a useful contribution to make to the world and that artists can serve society – not by making works of art, but through their verbal interactions in the context of institutions and organizations*." [4] This challenged the very foundations of the object-based art world.

APG was part of the revolutionary context of the 1960s in which artists sought to have direct impact and closer relationships with wider public, giving rise to the Community Arts projects of the 70's and 80's, as well as the subsequent Relational Aesthetics/Socially

Engaged of the 90s and current Participatory Practices. Similarly, artists like Nam June Paik explored the potential of repositioning 'new media' of television and video in ways that gave rise to our current New Media practices. As Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook state in their book, *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media*; *"[…] new media technologies are used for commerce, education, social communication as well as for art and the distinctions between the uses of media in these fields is often blurred*." [5] June Paik explored and exploited this intertwining of the television medium and its use in various commercial and non-commercial fields with his work, including *Good Morning, Mr Orwell* which was presented on New Year's Day 1984 as an international satellite installation that placed broadcast into the hands of artists. With direct access and interaction with participants/audiences, the autonomy of the institutions that control the airwaves was challenged. The work blurred the lines of that media's existence as a commercial object and appropriated is as artistic 'object.' This is not dissimilar to APG who took art out of the gallery and into the workplace. Whereas June Paik took the medium of television out of the hands of the corporate few and into the eyes and hands of the many, APG inserted artists and art processes directly into corporate and government entities. In both the case of New Media practitioners and Socially Engaged practices like APG, the artist's position as 'Incidental Person' creates a unique vantage point both within and outside the institutional framework.

SHARED METHODOLOGIES

In regards to interrogating the artist's current relationship to institutions, we argue that New Media and Social Engaged works share three major processes that posit these practices at the heart of re-visioning the role of the artist: fostering direct participation, embracing DIY methodologies and possessing the ability to permeate interdisciplinary boundaries.

Direct Participation:

By inviting direct interaction from participants, both in the final 'work' and often in the working process, Socially Engaged and New Media practices attempt to decentralize, redefine and challenge the traditional systems at play – technological, social and political. In doing so, they examine and open these systems up to critique and potential re-visioning. Our value systems are brought under scrutiny, our understanding of the relationship between artwork and audience is challenged and a focus on co-creation is brought into the critical light.

Fig. 1. *Five-A-Side-Tug-of-War*, 2011, Anthony Schrag, socially engaged work © Anthony Schrag.

In 2010, Anthony Schrag was invited to develop a public/ participatory artwork with Hackney City Council, (London) responding to different immigrant groups in the area – Turkish, South Asian, Eastern European, Afro-Caribbean, as well as an 'indigenous' Caucasian group. I met with representatives of Hackney Council and Shoreditch Trust to discuss the scope of the work. While the brief did not directly call for anything specific, during the meeting the phrase "*make everyone get along with each other*" was uttered several times.

Schrag was interested to explore how 'making everyone get along with each other' was an impossibility within a pluralistic democracy and to have the intention 'make everyone get along' seemed to stem from a policy that denied the multifarious cultural identities of the locale. Schrag therefore developed a project in which the differing and opposing ethnic groups from the area came to 'fight it out' via the tug-of-war mechanism, aiming to *reveal* and highlight the diversities, rather than eradicate them. The form of this work was a *Five-sided Tug-of-War* and due to the physics of the competition, there could be no 'winner' but there could a 'loser.' The game became about navigating/forming alliances and breaking/forming relationships to defeat a stronger opponent. In this sense, the game acted to reveal the wider social interactions that were occurring, both giving form and spectacle to the pre-existing tensions. The choices of which tensions should be addressed and which should be strengthened were literally placed into the hands of the citizens. The work aimed to involve participants in a questioning a top-down cultural policy and to give a form to critique governmental systems that engineered a society for specific ends.

Fig. 2. *Lokönenie*, 2010-2012, WRMC Collaborative, multi-media socially engaged work © Andrew Y. Ames and Alexia Mellor.

WRMC Collaborative – Lokönenie

Whereas Schrag's piece gives evidence of a Socially Engaged practice facilitating direct participation from a site-specific community, WRMC Collaborative's (Alexia Mellor and Andrew Y. Ames) *Lokönenie* experiments with participation linked only by a virtual site. Using new media technologies and drawing upon art movements such as the Situationists and Fluxus, WRMC Collaborative created *Lokönenie*. Meaning 'place nowhere' in Esperanto, Lokönenie is a multi-platform project that challenges notions of place and belonging by creating a portable country on and offline, whose only fixed location is its URL. Integrating aspects of corporation and government with open source principles, this project suggests the possibility of creating a culture and place of one's choosing. With installation art, performance art and digital art components, WRMC Collaborative builds a nation whose citizens are active online and off.

Lokönenie aims to offer an alternative to the encroachment of corporate entities into public space by creating a 'citizen-led' nation-state that takes the dominant governing principles of corporate culture and subverts them to create a parallel culture; a physical and virtual subculture. Through interventions in public space created with the physical component of the project: 10' x 10' tarps that can be made with templates modified and downloaded from the project's website, WRMC Collaborative places both the project's artists and the project's participants at the center of activating the project and deciding how it interacts with and responds to space. Citizens are 'shareholders,' responsible to and for the conditions of the nation and those belonging to it. Citizens of *Lokönenie* moderate all aspects of the nation: from how and what is governed, to establishing a framework for political freedoms and 'civic duties.' *Lokönenie* provides citizens with a space to govern and act as they see fit, provided they follow WRMC Collaborative's one rule: changes must be for the benefit all citizens. What is deemed 'best' is up for interpretation by the project's participants.

DIY METHODOLOGY:

The widespread trend of DIY that is assisted by digital technologies is powerful and here to stay. The DIY ethos of decentralizing power is core to both New Media and Socially Engaged practices. Because practices seek a methodology that is not based on formal systems, but rather responsive to the context, using available materials and resources, they reflect contemporary models of making and promote the redistribution of resources and power. Could these practitioners be seen as our modern day tricksters?

Craftivism

'Craftivism', is a term coined by Betsy Greer that combines 'craft' and 'activism' to highlight the potential of craft practices as a political voice. Perhaps more than fine art practices, craft has been seen as belonging to everyone; a creative expression rooted in the everyday. As such, it is often perceived as being more

accessible than fine art practices that are relegated to the ivory towers of art and academic institutions. Craftivism might entail a 'yarn bombing' of public space or anti-war cross-stitched tapestries. It might be a subtle gesture or covering a military tank in crocheted squares. Ultimately, craftivism is a tool for artists and non-artists alike to spark opportunities for dialogue, change the way we view public space and our relationship to governing bodies. Similarly, Socially Engaged practices aim to bring opportunities for dialogue and the re-visioning of governing ideologies into question by relocating the art into the public sphere. That is not to say that Socially Engaged practices are more democratic, but rather that their aim is to challenge *where* the vital conversations and critique occur. By facilitating these conversations and encouraging direct participation, both craftivist and Socially Engaged practices call upon the individual to actively explore their own role within governing systems. Craftivism also has a direct relationship to media-based hacker culture, offering the opportunity to creatively reject the mainstream by quite literally taking systems into one's hands and forming one's own replacement.

Hacktivism
The history of Hacktivism can obviously be traced to notions of 'hacking,' and is, at base, the process of breaking into a formal system with the intention of disrupting its normal flow. The intentions of most Hacktivists lies in political or socially-motivated reasons and while there is a diversity of politics, they all share a desire to interrupt pre-existing architectures. In the tangible world, this is analogous to breaking into a building and physically changing the structure, forcing those who use the building or those who own the building or those who require specific things from that building or those who designed the building to see it afresh and to re-assess their relationship to that structure. The same is true with Hacktivism within the digital universe of the Internet.

Importantly within the context of this paper, while the similarities of its intentions (disruption) can be said to link all hacktivists, the shape of those disruptions is not based on a formal code, but is rather responsive, using DIY methodology that draws from different technological, philosophical or ethical frameworks, depending on the individual desires of the hacktivist and the object of their disruption. In other words, they do not follow a formal, institutional path that is based on traditional systems, but rather forge and develop new paths that are more responsive in nature. This is intimately tied to New Media art practices.

ABILITY TO PERMEATE INTERDISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES:
In a time in which we are experiencing the need to collapse the silos that exist around disciplines, Socially Engaged and New Media practices suggest the potential of reformatting the distribution of artwork (i.e. outside traditional contexts) and pushing against disciplinary boundaries. The work itself might look more like a government institute, a science experiment or even a knitting club, but they offer keen insight and imaginative responses to contemporary local and global issues.

Tania Bruguera - *Immigrant Movement International*
In 2011, Tania Bruguera used an $85,000 grant from New York's Creative Time to develop *Immigrant Movement International,* a long-term socio-political or Socially Engaged, project based in Corona, Queens, New York between 2010 and 2015. The purpose of this work is described from its mission statement:

IM International is a community space where practical knowledge is merged with creative knowledge through arte útil *with a holistic approach to education open to all regardless of legal status.*

IM International is a think tank that recognizes (im)migrant's role in the advancement of society at large and envisions a different legal reality for human migration.

IM International is a lab practicing artivist tactics and new tools for communication in the public sphere to access political dialogue in an effort to transform social affect into political effectiveness.

IM International is an educational platform formulating sustainability systems and creating alternative economies based on a culture of reciprocity not economic advantage. [6]

More importantly, *IMI* raises questions about who is defined as an immigrant and challenges political systems and cultural dynamics around this issue. For this project Bruguera herself lived for a year with illegal immigrants and set up a space that hosted slogan writing workshops, protest planning, educational projects, developmental opportunities, counselling services, language lessons, legal advice, as well as long term goals for immigrants, including creating sustainable models to expand programs supporting women's health and small businesses.

This project problematizes the notion of art's 'function': Is it activism? Is it political action? Is it a dialogic process? Is it community building? Is it cultural exploration? Most importantly, the project problematizes art's and the artist's 'place' as it does not exist within a single institutional boundary, i.e., 'a gallery' but rather transverses educational, commercial, legal, developmental, medical and social contexts. It repositions itself as something that can move through any and all boundaries to achieve its social and aesthetic goals and the distribution of the 'artworks' exists on multiple levels: one-on-one conversations, documentation of protests, the construction of banners as aesthetic objects, the legal and cultural challenges it takes, to name but a few.

Like Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International* project, Simon Farid's daring *Being Mark Stone* project looks at contemporary issues of identity and otherness. Farid was interested in the idea of 'identity squatting,' taking over former identities created by police and other government agencies for the purposes of undercover work. What happens to this identity when the undercover assignment finishes? What is the legacy of these

identities, both socially as well as in the form of the digital traces that still linger? Could these now vacated identities actually be 'squatted'? Farid speaks of the work being, *.".about the shell identity Mark Stone itself. Through this, what I have been doing is investigating the limits of identity and the interaction between technology and our understanding of our administrative and social selves. It has also been an investigation into the extent of the police's fabricated identities and a look at the traces these identities leave behind in the systems they operate within.*" [7] Farid was aware of and walked the fine line between disciplinary and ethical boundaries in an attempt to understand just what forges identity in the 21st century. From an email account, to postal addresses, to NHS and passport numbers, Farid uncovered, reactivated and transposed information publicly available about Mark Stone. Subverting existing systems and placing himself as the artist in Stone's administrative shoes and digital footprint, Farid questions the impact of these identifiers on our social identities. Could 'he,' the shell identity that was Mark Stone, actually be reactivated, almost like a modern day Lazarus? What does this mean for the rest of us?

Fig. 3. *Being Mark Stone*, 2011-2014, Simon Farid, participatory and new media
© Simon Farid.

ALEXIA MELLOR AND ANTHONY SCHRAG – DIY-WANIA

In an effort to explore the merging of aspects from Socially Engaged and New Media practices and therefore the potential to challenge how we locate artists, we have developed *DIY-wania.* This project exists as a synthesis of all three processes previously mentioned as critical to both Socially Engaged and New Media art practices. Our aim is to create an alternative space to the closed academic structures in which many conferences take place by directly involving participants – ISEA delegates and members of the public; art and non-art professionals – in dialogue by demonstrating a DIY methodology that could be applied to creating new social spaces transgressing disciplinary and place-bound boundaries. *DIY-wania* temporarily claims space and creates an open platform for participants to engage on their own terms.

During the iteration of this project in Dubai, two-way participation is created between The NewBridge Project project space in Newcastle upon Tyne (UK) using everyday technologies. The resultant interactions are archived on the project website,

broadening the discussion and potential for participation, making use of the space and outreach that the digital affords. By relocating the dialogue, both on and offline, this project aims to create a space for new concepts to emerge, illuminating local and global issues.

Fig. 4. *DIY-wania*, 2014, Alexia Mellor and Anthony Schrag, socially engaged artwork
© Alexia Mellor and Anthony Schrag.

Fig. 5. *DIY-wania*, 2014, Alexia Mellor and Anthony Schrag, socially engaged artwork
© Alexia Mellor and Anthony Schrag.

CONCLUSION

The art most recently known as 'new media' changes our understanding of the behaviors of contemporary art precisely because of its participation in the creation of a cultural understanding of computational interactivity and networked participation. In other words, art is different after new media because of new media, not because new media is 'next,' but because its behaviors are the behaviors of our technological times. [8] In today's context, the digital realm of the Internet and public spaces exemplify territories that both government and corporations are vying to control. Public space and the Internet are to contemporary Socially Engaged and New Media practitioners, what heavy industry and bureaucratic agencies were to APG artists of the 1960s and 70s. Ours is the legacy

of twin histories that relocate the artist to the heart of new technological, social and political constellations with the aim to offer opportunities to critically reflect and mirror both the problems and potentials of these institutions. We exist in the center in order to look outwards, that is our political, technological and social imperative. Could we utilize our unique position to relocate ourselves not only in and around institutions linked to our practices, but in terms of challenging policy? Could the artist potentially become the ultimate consultant, drawing upon our unique experiences?

The potential of this reformatting of the location of the artist is currently challenged by the institutions which aim to recuperate these transgressions to their own ends, presenting process-based and politicized works as commercial and aesthetic objects. [9] There is an additional problematic situation, especially within the UK, where Local Governments and other publicly-funded institution now implement artist-in-residence projects in order to instrumentalize the artistic process towards hegemonic ends. This highlights a dilemma that many artists, particularly with process orientated practices, face. Where needed, paid opportunities are provided and directed by the very institutions against whose walls the artists are rattling. The challenge we then face is not to be co-opted into the institution, but rather to resist the ways in which institutions try to place and locate artists and find – or create – new locations of our own.

ENDNOTES

1. Bishop, Claire. Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. (London: Verso. 2012), 43 - 45.

2. Bishop, Claire. Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. (London, Verso. 2012),166.

3. For more information see Barbara Steveni in conversation with Emily Pringle. "Repositioning Art in the Decision-Making Processes of Society" Arts Council England. 04 Oct, 2004 - Available Online - http://www.interrupt.org.uk/symposia/educator/repositioning-art/

4. Bishop, Claire. Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. (London: Verso. 2012), 166.

5. Graham, Beryl and Sarah Cook. Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press. 2010), 3.

6. http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress/mission-statement/

7. http://simonfarid.com/identitysquat

8. Graham, Beryl and Sarah Cook. Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press. 2010) Foreword, Steve Dietz, Executive Director, Northern Lights and Artistic Director, 01SJ Biennial.

9. "Then when they realize that there is no transgression that cannot be recuperated, they also conclude that art can no longer play a critical political role" (Mouffe, C. Art and Democracy: art as an agonistic intervention in public space. (Rotterdam, NAi Publishers. 2008)), 107.