

Symbiotic Collaborators: The New Creative Subject in Postdigital Participatory Art

Gyung Jin Shin

Hong Kong Baptist University, School of Creative Arts Hong Kong
gjshin@hkbu.edu.hk

Abstract

As the Internet promotes participatory culture, contemporary network-driven participatory art, which I refer to as “postdigital participatory art” (PPA), has introduced additional revolutionary creative subjects. PPA induces a distinctive type of collective agency beyond mere collaboration among individuals by means of the participatory architecture of the web. These multiple participants distribute the authority power of creation throughout the network, transcending the limitations of time and space. In this paper, I attempt to theorize the attributes of these new creative subjects, which I refer to as “participant-superjects,” with the concept of superject serving here to indicate “power by modulation.” I outline the attributes of these diffuse creative subjects and gauge their radical possibilities in terms of the agenda of experimental art. I argue that, based on the new sense of relationality, materiality, and ontological perception associated with the postdigital environment, these unique creative subjects are able to open up a new dimension of creativity that differs from the modernist model, which emphasizes the creativity of the individual. I hypothesize that the fluid power driven by this new creative subject exerts a latent force in building new social relations outside the logic of the capitalist system.

Keywords

Postdigital participatory art, author discourse, superject, participation, collaboration, participant-superject.

DOI

10.69564/ISEA2023-29-short-Jin-Shin-Symbiotic-Collaborators

Introduction

With the death of the modern subject in the twentieth century, the divinization of single authorship on which modern art relied has faced challenges and slowly collapsed along with the notion of “open work,”¹ the postwar avant-garde of the 1960s, and author discourse.^{2, 3} Artists and theorists of the previous century attempted to undermine the traditional relationship between artist and spectator, arguing instead for open-ended interpretations. These developments spurred a renegotiation of the artist-spectator relationship and, in turn, the invention of new types of creative subjects. From this new perspective, the status of the audience, as a “viewer-turned-participant,” has become almost equal to that of the artist, and recent forms of contemporary art that are co-authored, collaborative, and participatory have inherited the preference for antiauthorship. Such forms of art, including “relational art”⁴ and “participatory art”^{5, 6, 7} have flourished since the 1990s as artists have attempted to distribute the authority power traditionally associated with the singular artist by encouraging the participation of viewers and envisioning new social relations.

In a hyperconnected environment that facilitates participation and collaborative creation, contemporary participatory art has become ubiquitous and heterogeneous, transcending the boundaries of online and offline. Recognizing that Bishop’s concept of “participatory art” overlooks the influence of technology, I seek to help fill the resulting conceptual gap by coining a new term, “postdigital participatory art” (PPA), to describe digitally mediated co-creation that relies on digital networks to encourage audience participation. This new form of digitally mediated co-creation reflects changes in the perceptions of time and space that have been described as “postdigital.”^{8, 9} In exploring PPA, I pay particular attention to the emergence of new authority power that is fluid and ephemeral. Though such unique participatory creative subjects are profoundly observable in recent digitally mediated participatory art, they have yet to receive careful analysis in terms of scope, motives, characteristics, and patterns. Accordingly, I consider here the manifestation and radical possibilities of this unique creative subject, which involves anonymous, networked participants mass-produced on networks.

As I conceptualize it, network-driven PPA relies heavily on collaboration among participants and often lacks a teleology. Creators, materials, artworks, and spectators, in the absence of a predetermined blueprint for object-making, *co-emerge* in the processing of inconclusive events. This development gives rise, in turn, to the distinctive characteristics of a new creative subject that is ephemeral and fleeting, untethered as it is to a fixed plan and, often, anonymous and unrecognized despite contributing significantly to the act of creation.

The Jogging (<https://thejogging.tumblr.com/>), an ongoing, network-driven project, exemplifies the attributes and modalities of these authors. [Figure 1] Utilizing a scroll-down thread on Tumblr that has continued over several years, anonymous volunteers on the network Photoshop, reproduce, and reblog the images associated with the original images uploaded by artists Brad Troemel and Lauren Christensen in 2009. Troemel described his role as “initiating” and said in an interview that “‘Jogging’ refers to a work flow, constantly moving, and not really focusing on any one thing, but rather to just continue forward.”¹⁰ Without an individual artist furnishing a predetermined intention or conclusion, such postdigital participatory projects are observable as the inconclusive, event-embracing agencies, networks, and raw digital materials (e.g., information or data) involved in a work.

Participant-Superject: The Unique Authors in the Network

Artie and Brad and Haley and Jesse
and Nathan and Lauren and Brian
and Zachary and Spencer
thejogging@gmail.com
[submit a post](#)

previous:

- MacCA TV Videos (2014)
- Pierre's announcements (2014)
- @Jogging (2013, 2014)
- Matthew Berry • Jogging a Die for
Top Magazine (2014)
- Scott at THE SHIPHOUSE (2013)
- Phenomenological Materials for a New
Court by Jogging & Brad Hill
- The Straydog at Boston Free Art
Festivals and Open Air Festivals
- Jogging & Co. by Chris for Die
Magazine (2013)
- a Jogging Code (2014)
- Brad at Free (2014)
- Re-Memory presented by
STAYUP (2014)
- Art of Politics at MassArt (2014)

JOGGING



Alive In Chains Discography, 2014

digital

1:30 pm • 29 August 2014 • 3,795 notes



Zivbaste This Time, 2014

memorial

6:00 pm • 25 August 2014 • 208 notes



1. Brad Troemel and Lauren Christensen, *The Jogging* (2009-),
Source: *The Jogging* website, <https://thejogging.tumblr.com/>.

From Author-Subject to Participant-Superject

This new material variability in postdigital participatory art thus entails a reframing of the traditional notion of author-subject. In a digital environment that strengthens temporality rather than spatiality, digital participants have the potential to become temporally modulated subjects, or *superjects*, bearing latent *power by modulation* rather than the power of individuals. As the antithesis of the author-subject status, I coin the term

participant-superject to describe the diffuse creative subjects that result from the blurring of the artist-spectator boundary.

The concept of the superject, which refers here to “power by modulation,” has proved useful in describing the special modalities of multiple agents that exist digitally when they are involved in PPA as opposed to the modalities of physical participation. Deleuze adopted Whitehead’s concept of the superject in the 1990s to illustrate the shift in subjectivity accompanying the rapid advance of digital technology at the time.¹¹ According to Deleuze, a subject, when perceiving an object that is continually changing, can be defined as *a point of view* that is likewise in a state of variation rather than fixed or determined in advance.

The superject implies a “plural” subjectivity that cannot be fully described using the concepts of a *constant I* and *we* and, instead, implicates a new status of the subject, a *temporal I* and *we*. The superject, in Deleuze’s language, is an inherent multiplicity folded into a collective unity.

The Three Phases of the Participant-Superject

Before gauging the radical possibilities of the *participant-superject*, it is useful to consider the concept’s unique characteristics. Following Whitehead, Deleuze, and Savat, I describe the three main phases of the superject as 1) *temporal*, 2) *affective*, and 3) *condividual*. The *temporal phase* relates to the *eventual* nature of the superject. Referring to this phase, Deleuze described the superject as an event rather than an essence. Adopting this view, Savat explicated the specifics of the temporal aspect of the superject in the context of his analysis of digitality. According to him, under the new temporal and spatial conditions of the digital environment, a superject exists as what Deleuze called a “dividual,” an event that is ceaselessly modulated as a code, in contrast with an embodied or spatial “individual.”¹² In this context, the manner of existence becomes continuous, fluid, and momentary.

The second phase highlights the *affective* nature of the superject. Whitehead envisaged this facet of the superject in an attempt to separate the subject *per se* from its experience of the world.¹³ Thus, he proposed, the superject simultaneously emerges through the intake of “data” in the form of sensory perceptions that precede consciousness, unlike the subject that accumulates data. In this context, feelings mediate

superjects and their associated data. This aspect of the superject focuses on the moment of affective experience shared throughout the network.

Third, the superject implies the consolidation of collective agents, that is, *condividuals*. To be specific, unlike the individual, which retains distinctive characteristics, the dividual tends to connect with other similar components and combine with other dividuals to form *condividuals*.¹⁴ Existing as metadata or data in the digital milieu, the dividuals can be used to build superjects in the network.

The participants in PPA, or participant-superjects, embody these phases of the superject—again, *temporal*, *affective*, and *condividual*—which overlap and are interrelated. Rather than being constrained to a physical venue for performance or exhibition, the participant-superjects appear temporarily, take part in the creative process, and disappear in an instant. As the sequence of the action does not “take place,” the actors rely heavily on temporality rather than spatiality. Further, the participants in PPA tend to manifest momentary feelings or emotions rather than the conscious experiences inscribed in a work. As *The Jogging* well shows, the intuitive and improvisational responses of the participants manifest in such functions as liking, retweeting, and sharing on social media. Lastly, these participants, as dividuals, merge easily and unite readily with others thanks to the anonymity and easy access that the Internet affords.

Symbiotic Collaboration Among the Participant-Superjects

This new creative subject of PPA has the potential to fall into the trap of capitalism or to support resistance to it. Stiegler used the term *pharmakon* to describe the aspect of technology that intoxicates and cures, and postdigital participation has a similar “pharmakonic” effect, serving as simultaneously toxin and remedy.¹⁵ In the 1990s and 2000s, the expectation was that the participatory environment of the web would promote widespread self-awareness, the formation of grassroots communities, and co-individuation by connecting individuals without respect to age, location, or gender. Since the network has also been viewed as an arena for the fulfilment of capitalist desires, however, the participants in it found that they were treated as consumers and unpaid labourers. Most of the major social networking platforms have reverse-engineered the very structure of the participatory web to produce profits from the databases generated as a by-product of

the daily behaviours of online users. Moreover, governments and internet giants alike use the network as a source of big data for analysing superjects and recognizing and forecasting social trends.

Regarding the paradoxical loop of postdigital participation problematized above, I argue that the modulatory power of the participant-superject could radicalize the agenda of experimental works by altering the form that power takes. This new form of power, again as Deleuze pointed out, refers to the modulation of dividuals.¹⁶ For Deleuze, of course, such power deserves criticism, but it also serves as a positive starting point for the arguments presented here. Considering the dividual a latent power of struggle, Raunig claimed that the dividuality emerging as self-division in contemporary social media could promote new forms of dispersed resistance against machinic capitalism.¹⁷ In the same vein, Savat insisted that a new mode of politics involving the dividual, which he called the “politics of fluids,” has become a more critical field of participation than the modern “solid politics” involving individuals.¹⁸ Thus, he affirmed that the potential inherent in “fluid action” can be utilized and realized in constructive ways because dividuality represents individuals’ ways of being in the network.

Following Gaunig and Savat, I affirm that the fluid power of the superjectification seen in PPA—again, in contrast with the solid power of individuals—exerts a latent force in terms of inventing social relationships apart from the logic of the capitalism that finances and reifies human bodies and even social relations. The characteristics of superjectification—being temporal, dispersed, affective, and condividual—are more radical and effective in terms of “pre-empting” the looming problems associated with this logic. Furthermore, the unique sense of affinity helps dispersed cognitions cling together contagiously, in turn affecting real politics (e.g., Ushahidi software, the MeToo and Occupy movements, and the activist group Anonymous).

Thus, PPA projects tend to encourage affinity-driven co-individuation outside the context of the labour system and manipulative relationships on the web.¹⁹ *Public_Public_Address: A Nationwide Virtual Protest* (2020-), for example, is an ongoing virtual protest for which Jason Lazarus, Stephanie Syjuco, and Siebren Versteeg have been accepting submissions of selfie videos of individuals holding protest pickets in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. [Figure 2] The participants include those who had been marginalized in society and those unable to protest in person because of a disability. The artists integrated the video submissions into live-streaming on YouTube and

simultaneously in the window of a New York gallery in 2020. Seemingly marching toward the viewers, the images of these anonymous participants have been incorporated into a bizarre new form of space-time. Rather than isolating, separating, and pixelizing the agency of the participants in the network, this project reveals the aesthetics of fluid power that the superjective participants generate in the postdigital environment by transcending the online-offline binary.



2. Jason Lazarus, Stephanie Syjuco, and Siebren Versteeg, *Public_Public_Address: A Nationwide Virtual Protest (2020-)*, Source: the bitforms gallery website, https://bitforms.art/public_public_address-2020/.

Conclusions

As the exploitation of participation in the network becomes increasingly sophisticated, PPA has the potential to offer space in which to imagine new social relationships by questioning freely the dominant logic and weaving together digital objects, technological materials, and human agency symbiotically. In this regard, art systems centred on individual authorship fall short when it comes to describing a new dynamism that embraces the energy, matter, force, objectiles, and superjects that digitally mediated co-creation can bring about. In the consistent flow of the network, the conventional binaries of matter and form, subject and object, physical and digital, and artist and spectator co-emerge, co-concretize, and intra-act. Then, the new creative subject of PPA, or participant-superject, having emerged in the context of the shift in digital materiality and subjectivity, can radicalize the author-subject model and re-envision the agendas of open-ended and participatory aspects of art.

Superjective authors, then, with their mutual resonances, cause events and collective experiences to proliferate and add further from the postdigital environment. These authors are omnipresent and already part of humans' ontological status. As Literat

observed regarding many cases of online crowdsourced art, however, "the crowd is still a crowd, not yet a community" because the digital fibres and technological structures that mediate digital encounters can hinder efforts to achieve artistic collaboration or build a sense of community.²⁰ Thus, further studies are needed to assess the potential of PPA to invent meaningful communities apart from the profit-making algorithms of the various online platforms.

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Acknowledgements

The overall structure and conception of this paper draw on my PhD dissertation published in June 2022