

University of Pécs
Faculty of Arts
Doctorate School

ANDRÁS BAKOS

THE EVOLUTION OF ONLINE ART THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

**COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES
IN ONLINE ART**

SYNOPSIS

Ph.D Thesis

Consultant: Prof. László Valkó

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ABSTRACT

Participatory practices in art have been prominent since the second half of the twentieth century. With the arrival of the web 2.0 technologies and the Net.Art movement, more and more artists are embracing the benefits of online collaborative methods for the purposes of creating virtual artworks that potentially involve a large number of people as co-creators. The study aims to explore the creative potential of online participatory artworks as a way of creating creative communities, and their effects on the relationship between the artist, the institutions of art and the public/co-creators. The scope of the analysis is therefore extended from individual artworks to an entire art event (Guggenheim Youtube Play) and a community based art project (Marina Abramovic Institute). By understanding online collaborative art in the broader context of the art world, the study also highlights the issues concerning the quality and level of the participation of the public, the diminishing role of the institutions of art within the changed paradigm, and the problem of authorship within such art.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study is to deliver original contribution to knowledge within the field of media art theory by analysing the newest collaborative practices in online art and their effects on the relationship between the art institutions, the artist and the public. The quantity of literature accessible in both Hungarian and English languages about the topics of collaboration in online art is negligible.¹ Therefore one of the goals of the thesis is to introduce this phenomenon into the Hungarian discourse on the current trends in contemporary media art.

I start by examining the evolution of twentieth century online art practices (Net.Art) into interdisciplinary and participatory fields, and focusing on the most recent phenomena, the crowdsourcing and the crowdfunding methods as the bases for many contemporary collaborative art practices.

Jeff Howe originally coined Crowdsourcing, as a term in a Wired article (cf. Howe, 2006). It refers to a method for solving a complex task by an open call for participation. The task can range from identifying people on photographs (Amazon Mechanical Turk) to inventing new chemical processes for the pharmaceutical industry (InnoCentive). The open call is usually made via the Internet, through a dedicated online platform. Although crowdsourcing was originally invented as a method for harvesting the creative potential of the crowds by providing material reward as an incentive, possibilities exist beyond economic applications. Artists and creative professionals working in the fields of online art and interactivity have been embracing crowdsourcing as a means to engage the masses as co-creators or executors of creative concepts for minimal or no remuneration at all.

The study analyzes, how the recent changes in the role of the artist and the public in crowdsourcing and crowdfunding projects are the result of natural evolution of participatory practices that already existed throughout the second half of the twentieth century, most notably the happenings of Alan Kaprow, the events of John Cage (Fluxus) and certain participatory practices in the Surrealism movement. With the arrival of the Internet Art (1990s) and the enablement of the user via the web 2.0

¹ The only study in english to this day that focuses on the application of crowdsourcing in art is „The work of Art in the Age of Mediated Participation: Crowdsourced Art and Collective Creativity“ (Literat, 2012).

services the technological ground for participation changed radically from that of mid-twentieth century practices. This gave birth to new possibilities in art practices that exist upon previously unimaginable scale of participation. Building on the roots of interactive web-based artworks of the Net.art movement (1994-) the artists expanded the scope of participation by a large margin through social media tactics, which allowed them to tap into a larger, but not constantly accessible pool of individuals willing to take part in creating artworks.

The question whether the creative potential of the crowds can be used to add intrinsic value to culture remains relatively open despite the attempts of the artists to involve the online public in the creation of artworks. The unique aspect within crowdsourcing of combining a bottom-up, open, creative process with top-down organizational goals (cf. Brabham, 2013)² gives crowdsourced artworks the potential to benefit from the combined creativity of its creators while maintaining the conceptual integrity of the original idea. However, the semi-democratic practices of most crowdsourced art projects exclude the possibility of an open-source approach to creating online art and raise questions regarding authorship and control over the final artwork (e.g. the artists decision to sell the sheep images created for "The Sheep Market" - Aaron Koblin, 2006, p.29).

The study hypothesizes that in case these limitations could be eliminated it could lead to an open, horizontally organized structure of creating virtual art where the role of the artist would be more the catalyst of the creative community rather than the project leader and conceptual owner. This tendency already exists in some of the artworks where user engagement is key from concept to execution, which in turn poses the question about the conceptual clarity and artistic quality of such "open source artworks".

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

Artworks created by the interaction of the artist and the public have been a fairly established paradigm since the second half of the twentieth century. Bishop, (2006,

² E-Book, no page numbers. Chapter: „What Crowdsourcing Is and Is Not—Strictly Speaking”

p.10) coins the term collective creativity in relation to public participation in performances. The artistic value of crowdsourced art however is not yet established in art theory (cf. Literat, 2012, p.2963). The problem with crowdsourced art is usually the unclear relationship between the participating audiences in relation to the artist. In most cases the artists are the creators and owners of the concept, responsible for the execution and it varies greatly how much knowledge regarding the final artwork is shared with the public. This results in limiting the creativity of the public's contribution, sometimes restricting the individual to solving tasks in an almost mechanical manner (cf. Koblin, 2010). The true potential in crowdsourced art is the possibility to build virtual communities interested in creating artworks based on open collaboration, where the organizational structure is less dependent on the artist as conceptual owner, rather on the community as co-creators.

The phenomenon also affects the institutions of art, either in the form of exhibitions organized around material provided by a virtual community (Guggenheim YouTube Play) or in the form of virtual communities that both collaborate with artists and provide monetary support for her projects (Marina Abramovic Institution). This changes the classical scenario where the artist presents the artwork to the audience usually mediated by a museum or a gallery, and receives monetary support also through institutional mediation. Engaging the audience through social media channels is a method of direct communication, that opens new possibilities for creative professionals, however it also poses a risk to the quality of the final product, as the artist introduces an element of uncertainty through mass participation.

Finally, the ephemeral nature of virtual artworks makes it increasingly difficult to archive them, as the code does not only have to be maintained but also constantly updated to be viewable on modern systems. The temporary nature of online works of art developed its own aesthetics, mostly based on partially reused elements and constantly changing code. It is impossible to determine therefore at which state the artwork is considered as “completed”.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the study is to contribute to an understanding of the actual status of online collaborative art as well as its wide scale impacts on the structure of the art world.

Specific objectives are:

1. To give an overall picture on the development of online collaborative artworks in relation to twentieth century movements (e.g. Happenings, Fluxus, Surrealism, 20th century Net.Art). The literature on crowdsourced or crowdfunded art is generally missing in Hungarian research papers.
2. Analyse the contribution of different crowdsourcing projects to the possibility of creating open-source culture with bottom-up initiatives in art.
3. Analyse the effects of virtual collaborative artworks on the expert paradigm (cf. Walsh, 2003). How does crowdsourcing affect the relationship between artists, curators and the public? How are the institutions of art affected by the change?

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of the study were:

1. While the study points out the importance of the link between crowdsourced art and other participatory art practices it does not focus on analysing non-collaborative or offline participatory art practices.
2. The study does not aim to give an overall picture of crowdsourcing including its commercial uses, only some examples are used as a description of the method.

3. While the study concludes that the existence of open-source culture is the possible next step after crowdsourcing in art, it will not aim to hypothesize the details of how such culture could work.
4. Drawing exact conclusions on the future of crowdsourcing in art would be difficult due to the unpredictable development of online art methods. Only patterns can be identified. It is beyond the scope of the study to give a clear prediction of future online collaborative art practices.

METHODOLOGY

Given the limited number of contemporary collaborative online artworks and their diverse approaches in using the social media tactics, quantitative analysis of the subject would not yield sufficient or homogenous data for analysis. The thesis therefore employs a qualitative approach to analyse each and every artwork based on factors like level of engagement from the public, the role of the artist as concept owner and (if applicable) the role of art institutions in order to determine the project's significance in creating a virtual open source culture. The case studies were collected based on literature describing online participatory art practices and the websites of the artworks themselves. In addition, as artist I created my own collaborative art project, where the goal is to write an unstructured, open ended interpretation of artworks, that I organized into a tree-structure visualization as part of my doctoral work. The project employs crowdsourcing as a way to enhance public engagement in interpreting art.

CONCLUSION

The new technologies that power the Internet allow for online editing and sharing information thus they have the potential to support a virtual community of creators, curators and spectators. The study examines the creative potential and artistic significance of the virtual crowds by analysing the most recent prominent examples of collaborative artworks and art events. It concludes that once the technical and

legal limitations of crowdsourcing can be eliminated it could pave the way to an open-source approach to culture (an early example of such approach would be the Creative Commons license), which would empower the crowds to express their creativity in virtual community based projects. These communities are either supported by the institutions of art, or forged together via one or more artists, who mobilize the masses but do not control extent of their contribution.

Currently however the locus of control is almost always in the project initiator's (artist's) hands, and this limits the crowd's rights to the artwork. It is unclear if the future points towards a more open involvement of the public in the creation of art, but the Internet as a platform will remain a strong medium for participation within art projects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Participatory Model of the public sphere prominent in the normative theory of Jürgen Habermas (e.g. Habermas, 1989, 1992, 1998; Calhoun, 1992). Gerhards and Schäfer analyse the Internet versus traditional media as an effective medium for participation (Gerhards and Schäfer, 2009).

Stallabrass (2003) explains that the internet, as a medium blurs the lines between artistic and commercial uses. According to his analysis, art builds upon commercial content more directly in the online scenarios. Surowiecki (2004) in his study "The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations" outlines the potential of crowd participation in solving complex issues given three factors are present: The group has to be independent, diverse, and in some ways decentralized. Surowiecki's hypothesis on the effectiveness of the crowds in solving problems partially builds upon the existence of Pierre Lévy's theory of collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997) which hypothesizes that distributed knowledge, in case it is part of a real-time growing network of knowledge, can amount to a greater quality of collective intelligence which is the aggregate of all involved knowledge. Brabham (2013) analyses the phenomenon of crowdsourcing based on its potential to create

the aggregate of knowledge in solving problems that would be difficult and costly via traditional methods. The power of crowdsourcing compared to traditional research and development methods is the possibility of engaging participants with radically different backgrounds, thus providing multiple (often unconventional) viewpoints that may lead to a solution faster than a group with homogenous background (cf. Howe, 2006). Literat (2012) introduces the topic of collective creativity in relation to crowdsourced artworks based on Bishop's definition (2006, p.10) of participatory culture, and differentiates artworks based on level of user engagement. The author's study is so far the only comprehensive document on crowdsourced artworks and their categorization.

The use of crowdsourcing methods in contemporary art supports Borriaud's theory of Relational Aesthetics (Borriaud, 1998), which describes society as the context, where art is created, and the role of the artist as the catalyser rather than the exclusive creator of artworks. Mesch (2007) points out that Joseph Beuys already suggested expanding the concept of art into the realm of everyday creativity. Shulgin (1999) - one of the first artists focusing on the internet as a medium - has questioned the quality of user participation in interactive artworks that "make the user click on buttons in the name of the artist", thus introducing the notion of autonomous action in participation versus following patterns created by the artist.

Based on Lévy's concept of Collective Intelligence Peter Walsh (2003) formed the theory of the change of the "Expert Paradigm", in other words the devaluation of our traditional concept of expertise in the light of distributed knowledge. The expert paradigm compared to the collective intelligence requires the experts to undergo years of formal studies before they master a field of knowledge. The distributed knowledge operates by linking traditional expertise and non-expert points of view in order to create a more complete pool of knowledge. The idea of freely distributed information in culture manifests itself in the Creative Commons licenses created by Lawrence Lessig (Lessig, 2009) the goal of which is to allow public use of online material (photos, music, videos and text) and circumvent copyright law that would stop the creative reuse of existing culture. The license aims to allow for the masses to participate in remixing culture and become engaged in creating cultural content.

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