

Weaving Encounters: Towards an Art of Participation

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Let us start from a concrete event: on the 22nd of March 2010, Paola Antonelli, senior curator at the Architecture and Design Department of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), wrote an entry (widely and passionately commented) in MoMA's blog entitled “@ at MoMA”² where she announced the acquisition of the @ typographic symbol and its integration in the Museum's collection. The paradoxical nature of this acquisition and the symbolism it entails seemed to me as a good starting point to this conversation held under the promise of the disentanglement of a complex and contradictory net of ideas expressed in the title of the session of today's conferences “*Untangle: The Future Past of Media Art.*”

In the already quoted text (that was reinforced on the 24th March with a new entry devoted to this theme and entitled “@ in Context: Criteria for an Acquisition”³), Paola Antonelli affirms that the acquisition of the @ sign “relies on the assumption that physical possession of an object as a requirement for an acquisition is no longer necessary, and therefore it sets curators free to tag the world and acknowledge things that ‘cannot be had’—because they are too big (buildings, Boeing 747’s, satellites), or because they are in the air and belong to everybody and to no one, like the @—as art objects befitting MoMA’s collection. The same criteria of quality, relevance, and overall excellence shared by all objects in MoMA’s collection also apply to these entities.”⁴

Presenting a brief history of the @ sign, Paola Antonelli marks the year of 1971 when Ray Tomlinson, an American engineer working for Bolt Beranek and Newman and collaborating with Douglas Engelbart⁵, develops the first email world system, allowing mail sending between users in different computers connected to ARPANET⁶. As Antonelli refers, the @ was a phantasmal and underused symbol in keyboards until, in October 1971, Tomlinson rediscovered and appropriated it and one of its meanings - that of localization - to start a new form of communication whose extraordinary impact he, himself, couldn't predict.

However, in so far as the @ sign belongs to public domain, its acquisition didn't have any financial cost to MoMA since the Museum acquired "the design act in itself"⁷ to be materialized in different typefaces (duly indicated and dated as it is canon in museological practices). Therefore, the integration of the @ in MoMA's collection, although in tune with one of the main missions of the Museum while institution - acquiring and preserving forms of emblematic artistic expression of its time - lies, above all, in a conceptual⁸ and also symbolic⁹ plan.

For now it is not my goal to deepen the multiple conceptual implications of this gesture, but I would like to highlight that we cannot avoid reading it under the light of the current consecration of a network society. The so called "Web 2.0" - a term coined by Tim O'Reilly¹⁰ in 2004 that marks the passage from the conception of the World Wide Web as a means of publication to a means of participation¹¹ - transformed "communication" in the nucleus of the WWW development. Companies as Flickr, Digg, YouTube, Current TV, Twitter, Facebook, among others, present themselves as "relational spaces", devoted to sharing, participation and commentary, based upon the fluxes of social networks.

Thus, with the digital convergence phenomenon and the expansion of the user-created content, the decrease of photographic and video cameras costs and the proliferation of laptops and wireless technologies, we witness today the emergence of a new media wave, of informal, personal, sometimes "minoritary" character, that potentiates fan and peer-to-peer culture. Considering this context, several questions emerge, namely:

- In what way does the phenomenon of "Web 2.0" and of the ubiquity of digital network relate to the museum as an institution and to the field of contemporary art?

- And, more specifically, under the scope of the theme that concerns us today, what is the impact of the "culture of participation"¹², which emerged of "Web 2.0", in new media art¹³, understood here as a set of artistic practices which involve experimentation with digital media and which are contemporary of the democratization of the personal computer (PC)?

Paradoxically, in a moment we could think of as being the climax and consolidation of the category of new media art here we come across an insisting crisis discourse from some of its most famous curators and critics, namely Andreas Broeckmann and Peter Weibel.

In the text "Fragmentary Affinities. Art beyond the Media,"¹⁴ of 2008, Andreas Broeckmann affirms that we are in a "post-media" era, in which the mass media led to the informal, personal and participatory media, and "post-digital," since information and communication technologies have become ubiquitous and structural, gaining invisibility and transforming themselves in essential goods such as electricity or drinking water. It is important to stress here that this text was originally published in the

Media_City_Seoul catalog, at the time of the 5th International Media Art Biennale in Seoul which, as we know, is one of the most emblematic capitals of Asiatic technological development. Although Broeckmann doesn't write it explicitly, it is clear that the consecration of a digital infrastructure and its full and free use don't constitute, however, a global reality.

But let us go back to Broeckmann's argument. In the text "Deep Screen - Art in Digital Culture. An Introduction,"¹⁵ also from 2008, he reiterates the idea that as digital networks imbricate profound and integrally in our experience, one of the fragilities of new media art becomes evident. In his words: "It has been one of the grave misconceptions of 'new media art' to assume that the new technologies would break with the paradigms of representation, perception, and cognition to an extent that the effects of that break could exclusively be articulated by means of these very technologies."¹⁶

Therefore, for Broeckmann, the self-referentiality and emphasis in the techne of new media art would have dictated its crisis from the moment when digital technology integrated the quotidian, intimately inhabiting our experience. Broeckmann notes, however, that this (future) overcoming of the new media art represents a liberation of the artistic media and the surmounting of the conception that art that labors with technological media should have the element of technical experimentation as primary meaning. What Broeckmann reveals is what he considers to be the transitory character of the new media art and its progressive integration in the expanded field of contemporary art.

In the detailed and insightful chapter "The Cool Obscure: Crisis of New Media Arts" from the book *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture*¹⁷, Geert Lovink performs a thorough

autopsy of this crisis that, as he states, doesn't lie in the quality of the individual artistic work but in the precarious condition of new media art as an operative category for the delimitation of certain artistic practices and of its institutional representations. Praising the taste of digital art for critical and playful experimentation with technology, Lovink highlights the intrinsically hybrid character of new media art, its procedural dimension and participative and distributed nature.

On the other hand, Lovink points out some of the underlying factors to the precarious and fragile character of digital art. Namely:

- the digital formalism and its hermetic (obscure) character;
- the desire of fusion with science as a way of avoiding confrontation with the art market;
- the pulverization in diverse artistic practices and genres such as video, robotics, net art, bio-art, immersive installations, locative media, software art, games, etc. which make the constitution of a consistent critical apparatus harder to achieve;
- the lack of a critical dialogue with art history and with the contemporary art territory;
- And, finally, an insufficient investment in the relations with post-colonialism and, generally, with contemporary social movements.

In fact, for Geert Lovink, due to hundreds of millions of new World Wide Web and mobile phone users, the new media art has found difficulties in settling in the culture of digital ubiquity.

But Lev Manovich takes the problem even further. In his text "Art after Web 2.0"¹⁸ (2008), Manovich considers that both adversities and challenges are not restricted only to digital art but

also affect all professional contemporary artistic practices. In this text, Manovich equates the role and future of art considering the media's extreme democratization and the increasing tendency to consumption, commentary, sharing and remix of contents produced by non-professional users (amateurs).

Alerting for the danger in the acritical celebration of the user-generated content, Manovich states that "participation" cannot be considered as an intrinsic value being therefore essential taking into account the role and commercial interests that the industry of electronic equipment, of software and companies of social media have in this phenomenon¹⁹. Nevertheless, Manovich strongly emphasizes the innovative and creative potential of "participatory architecture" of networks and of the experience it convokes²⁰.

Also aware of an "aesthetics of participation", Rudolf Frieling, in his text "Toward Participation in Art"²¹ (2008), which integrates the catalog of the exhibition *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, of which he was curator, makes a careful analysis of participatory practices in contemporary art, rediscovering them within an artistic genealogy that took shape with the tightening of the relations between art, technology and media. Nevertheless, as Frieling highlights, these liaisons were always problematic: "Since the introduction of technological systems into the arts, practitioners have voiced suspicion about the manufacturing of community and consent through art. Artists did not want to side with any technology that was spearheading governmental or utilitarian operations. Thus, no genre called participatory art (as opposed to, say, video art) emerged from these early discussions of conceptual art and technology."²²

Although not consolidated as an autonomous genre, experimentation with participation traverses the XXth century art,

and has intensified since the end of the fifties on multidisciplinary practices as the Happenings, Expanded Cinema and Performance and on artistic movements like the New Realism, the Neo-Dada, the Fluxus, the Situationist International and the Brazilian Neo-Concrete²³ movement. As a matter of fact, the figure of "participation" as practice or postulate plays a fundamental role in the self-criticism of the art institution, in the questioning of the author's figure, in the problematization of the category of the work of art, namely through the introduction of the concept of "open work"²⁴ by Umberto Eco in 1962, and in the dilution of frontiers between art, "life" and society, giving emphasis to the process, the quotidian and the communitarian²⁵.

"Participation", states Maria Lind in "The Collaborative Turn", "is more widely associated with the creation of a context in which participants can take part in something that someone else has created but where there are, nevertheless, opportunities to have an impact."²⁶ Therefore, "participation" reflects in the opening of the work to those conditions, places and participants that actively contribute to its attainment. We can, therefore, point out a set of operations that define the "participatory act," namely: inhabit, generate, change, contribute, dialogue, translate, appropriate, catalog. It's about a poetics of encounter that should retain its agonistic and singular dimension even when it permeates global digital networks.

Actually, at this moment when MoMA catalogs the @ sign as an integral part of its collection, it seems vital to me that new media art plays a determinant role in the critical reflection about the phenomenon of participation in the information and communication networks and our relation with technical images and devices that mediate in a progressively ubiquitous, intimate and invisible form, the relation between ourselves and our relation with the world²⁷. In

this way, digital art could not only deepen the dialogue with the field of contemporary art, contributing to embody a common project centered in participatory practices, but also intensify the connections to emerging social movements²⁸.

In times of crisis and social unrest, the future of new media art shall be played in its capacity of being implicated in the collective labor of the creation of new territories of encounter and also of critical debate and agonism. We need artistic activism, "affectivism,"²⁹ as Brian Holmes calls it, to elaborate, build, modulate, differentiate and extend new affective territories making them emerge intensively and in an untimely way from digital networks.

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² Paola Antonelli, "@ at MoMA", *Inside/Out: A MoMA/P.S.1 Blog*, March 22, 2010, http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/03/22/at-moma (Accessed June 16, 2010).

³ Paola Antonelli, "@ in Context: Criteria for an Acquisition", *Inside/Out: A MoMA/P.S.1 Blog*, March 24, 2010, http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/03/24/in-context-criteria-for-an-acquisition (Accessed June 16, 2010).

⁴ Paola Antonelli, "@ at MoMA", *Inside/Out: A MoMA/P.S.1 Blog*, March 22, 2010, http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/03/22/at-moma (Accessed June 16, 2010).

⁵ "Douglas Engelbart invented many of the defining features of the computer interfaces we work with each day, including the mouse, the window, and the word processor. He helped to establish the Internet, made the first serious investigations of computer-supported cooperative work, first demonstrated videoconferencing and mix text/graphic displays, created structured programming editors and used remote procedure calls in 1960s, and independently invented the hyperlink at the same time the idea has been hatched by Ted Nelson." Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, "From Augmenting Human Intellect: A Conceptual Framework", in *The New Media Reader*, eds. Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 93.

⁶ It was as a reaction to the launching of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957, that the American government created the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), which, as from 1962, came to be led by Joseph Carl Robnett Licklider, former Vice-President of Bolt Beranek & Newman, who would become one of the main mentors of the tightening of relations between ARPA and the academy, namely through the constitution of a computational network between universities

- the ARPANET. Although Licklider abandoned ARPA in 1964, his conceived network was materialized under the leadership of Lawrence Roberts and strengthened by Douglas Engelbart's extraordinary creativity, a real pioneer in the creation of the personal computer as we know it.

⁷ Paola Antonelli, "@ at MoMA", *Inside/Out: A MoMA/P.S.1 Blog*, March 22, 2010, http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/03/22/at-moma (Accessed June 16, 2010).

⁸ As stressed by Rudolf Frieling: "Although visual experimentation has had a long tradition in literature since Stéphane Mallarmé (a fact reflected by one of Dan Graham's earliest conceptual works, the *Schema* poem from 1966), it was Sol LeWitt who legitimized the linguistic formulation of an idea as artwork, triggering a whole series of art-by-instruction pieces. Lawrence Weiner, who, like Huebler, was among the artists promoted by the New York gallerist Seth Siegel, started his signature text-based work after one of his early outdoor sculptures was destroyed by the public. His insight was that the idea was enough for him, and he consequently ranked the idea higher than any actual realization." Rudolf Frieling, "Toward Participation in Art", in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, ed. Rudolf Frieling (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 41.

⁹ Paola Antonelli determines an analogy between the @ and the performance *Kiss* by Tino Sehgal: "Tino Sehgal's *Kiss* presents interesting affinities with @ in what it is mutable and open to interpretation (the different typefaces one can use) yet still remains the same in its essence: it does not declare itself a work of design, but rather reveals its design power through use; it is immaterial and synthetic, and therefore does not add unnecessary "weight" to the world. A big difference between the two pieces is the price, which brings to an extreme the evanescent difference between art and design. Being in the public realm, @ is free. It might be the only truly free—albeit not the only priceless—object in our collection. We have acquired the design act in itself and as we will feature it in different typefaces, we will note each time the specific typeface as if we were indicating the materials that a physical object is made of." Paola Antonelli, "@ at MoMA", *Inside/Out: A MoMA/P.S.1 Blog*, March 22, 2010, http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/03/22/at-moma (Accessed June 16, 2010).

¹⁰ Tim O'Reilly, "What is Web 2.0: design patterns and business models for the next generation of software", *O'Reilly*, September 30, 2005, <http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html> (Accessed June 16, 2010).

¹¹ "(...) Many-to-many media confer a power on consumers that mass media never did: the power to create, publish, broadcast, and debate their own point of view. Newspaper, radio and television audiences were consumers, but Internet audiences were 'users' with powers of their own." Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 197.

¹² According to Henry Jenkins, the "culture of participation" is defined as a "culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content." Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 290. Establishing a distinction between "interactivity" (defined from technical properties of digital media) and "participation", Jenkins defines this last one as follows: "the forms of audience engagement that are shaped by cultural and social protocols rather than by technology itself." (Ibid.)

¹³ For an extensive development of the new media concept, see Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Andreas Broeckmann, "Fragmentary Affinities. Art Beyond the Media", <http://www.mikro.in-berlin.de/wiki/tiki-index.php?page=Fragmentary+Affinities> (Accessed June 16, 2010).

¹⁵ Andreas Broeckmann, "Deep Screen – Art in Digital Culture. An Introduction", <http://www.mikro.in-berlin.de/wiki/tiki-index.php?page=Deep+Screen> (Accessed June 16, 2010). Also published in *Virose*, e-zine vector b#20, June, 2008, http://www.virose.pt/vector/b_20/andreas.html (Accessed June 16, 2010).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Geert Lovink, "The Cool Obscure: Crisis of New Media Art", in *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 39-81.

¹⁸ Lev Manovich, "Art After Web 2.0", in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, ed. Rudolf Frieling (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 66-79.

¹⁹ As Manovich states: "This leads to another question: given that a significant percentage of user-generated content either follows templates and conventions established by the professional entertainment industry or directly reuses professionally produced content (for instance, anime music videos), does this mean that people's identities and imagination are now even more firmly colonized by commercial media than in the twentieth century? In other words, is the replacement of the mass consumption of commercial culture by users' mass production of cultural objects a progressive development? Or does it merely constitute a further stage in the evolution of the culture industry?" Ibid., 70-71.

²⁰ In the final paragraph of his text Manovich writes: "Perhaps, however, the most sophisticated forms of conceptual innovation may be linked to the development of Web 2.0 itself – namely, the new creative software tools (Web mashups, Firefox plugins, Facebook applications, etc.) designed by individuals and small collectives as well as large companies such as Google. Ultimately, social media's true challenge to art may not be the excellent cultural production of students and nonprofessionals that is now readily available online. It may lie in the very dynamics of Web 2.0 culture: its incessant innovation, energy, and unpredictability." Ibid., 78.

²¹ Rudolf Frieling, "Toward Participation in Art", in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, ed. Rudolf Frieling (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 32-49.

²² Ibid., p. 36.

²³ Focusing on relational objects and the group therapy situations of Lygia Clark and the "creleisure" and the "parangolés" of Hélio Oiticica.

²⁴ Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work", in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; London: Whitechapel, 2006), 20-40.

²⁵ Presently, the figure of participation traverses critical discourse in contemporary art, namely in what concerns the contributes of authors like Nicolas Bourriaud (and his concept of "relational aesthetics"), Christian Kravagna (and his notion of "participatory art"), Grant Kester ("dialogical art"), among others. For further discussion of these concepts, see Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002); Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Christian Kravagna, "Working on the Community: Models of Participatory Practice", *Republicart*, http://republicart.net/disc/aap/kravagna01_en.htm (Accessed June 16, 2010).

²⁶ Maria Lind, "The Collaborative Turn", in *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, eds. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind and Lars Nilsson (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 17.

²⁷ Reminding the words of Vilém Flusser in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: "It seems that what one is seeing while looking at technical images are not symbols in need of deciphering, but symptoms of the world they mean, and that we can see this meaning through them however indirectly. This apparent non-symbolic, 'objective' character of technical images has the observer looking at them as if they were not really images, but a kind of window on the world. He

trusts them as he trusts his own eyes. If he criticizes them at all, he does so not as a critique of image, but as a critique of vision; his critique is not concerned with their production, but with the world 'as seen through' them. (...) The uncritical attitude is dangerous because the 'objectivity' of the technical image is a delusion. They are in truth images, and as such they are symbolical." Vilém Flusser, *Ensaio sobre a Fotografia: Para uma Filosofia da Técnica* (Lisbon: Relógio d'Água Editores, 1998), quoted in Geert Lovink, *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 62-63.

²⁸ Such as Maria Lind emphasizes in her text "The Collaborative Turn": "The longing for another type of society, based on sharing and cooperation, which has been forcefully expressed by the 'new media critique' since the mid-1990s carries on some of the pathos of the post-1968 'new social movements' when new means of communication began to be generally reasonable, even cheap to acquire. It has been said that movements around open source and open content have thereby created new production paradigms which counteract the type of mandatory collaboration and imposed self-organization that, for example, post-fordist working conditions often entail. These movements have at any rate produced a lively discourse on, and concrete practice of, various collaborative methods, for instance 'open space technology', which allows for a mild protocol for self-organization." Maria Lind, "The Collaborative Turn", in *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, eds. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind and Lars Nilsson (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 19.

²⁹ Quoting Brian Holmes, in his "The Affectivist Manifesto": "The backdrop against which art now stands out is a particular state of society. What an installation, a performance, a concept or a mediated image can do is to mark a possible or real shift with respect to the laws, the customs, the measures, the mores, the technical and organizational devices that define how we must behave and how we may relate to each other at a given time and in a given place. What we look for in arts is a different way to live, a fresh chance of coexistence. How does that chance come to be? Expression unleashes affect, and affect is what touches. Presence, gesture and speech transform the quality of contact between people, they create both breaks and junctions; and the expressive techniques of art are able to multiply those immediate changes along a thousand pathways of the mind and the senses. An artistic event does not need an objective judge. You know it has happened when you can bring something else into existence in its wake. Artistic activism is affectivism, it opens up expanding territories." Brian Holmes, "The Affectivist Manifesto", *Continental Drift*, November 16, 2008, <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/>

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