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Post Internet

Notes on the Internet and Art
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Performance

The democratic culture of the Internet (blogs, YouTube, Wikipedia, etc.) is increasingly a part of daily life. If somebody wants their voice heard, they can do it with a couple of clicks. However, as this democratic culture creates more instantaneously available media on a daily basis than anyone could possibly consume in a lifetime, a tension emerges in which each of these individual units of media is transformed into noise. In this scenario, both Proust and pornography flatten out in value to right around zero – each just a drop of water in a continuously expanding ocean.

Information theorists like Claude Shannon and Norbert Wiener discussed this problem in the early days of cybernetics research. Information is a ratio of signal to noise. The more noise – or entropy – in a system, the less clear the information. On the Internet, there is so much culture that it becomes like what Wiener, in a different context, called a “Niagara of entropy.” There are so many people shouting in the room that one voice cannot be heard clearly.

For a contemporary artist, this scenario poses an interesting problem. In prior models of media dissemination it was difficult for an artist’s work to reach large public audiences, critics, or curators without the artist being based in one of a handful of cities or receiving support from a commercial art space or a not-for-profit art institution. The democratic culture enabled by the Internet, though, allows for anyone and everyone with a connection to have their work viewed by both casual audiences and international arts professionals. This means that an aspiring young artist is now able to radically disseminate her work. The flip side of this situation, though, is that the meaningful value of this work becomes relatively minuscule because it’s now just one drop in an ocean of other works. As an artist uploads a work to the Internet, the chance that it will be viewed by more than a handful of people or reflected upon for more than a couple of minutes is minuscule due to the massive amount of other media through which it’s competing against. The artist, then, is left in a tangle: what’s the point of making anything if, at best, the work becomes a viral meme for a couple of hours and, at worst, is completely ignored by anyone other than the person that uploaded it? For some, I guess, this is the dream of the Internet in which the postmodern death of the author is made official and

all culture just swirls around as anonymous memes. For others, though, it may be frustrating.

One artistic stance in response to this question takes an ongoing, constructive approach to creating meaning on the Web. This stance sees that, if there is meaning in this context, then it is accrued through the ongoing performance of an artist making individual works through time – less the individual work and more the ongoing exhibition of multiple instances of work.

Before continuing, a step back in time:

Pablo Picasso began to consider the location of his art as residing in his entire ongoing practice – one action after another after another. Picasso wrote, “Paintings are nothing but research and experiment. I never paint a picture as a work of art. Everything is research. I keep researching, and in this constant enquiry there is a logical development. That is why I number and date all my paintings. Maybe one day someone will be thankful for it.” For Picasso, who pictured himself as a blind minotaur crashing his way through a labyrinth in many of his paintings, the work occurs in the cumulative effect of his ongoing search for meaning; each individual painting functioning as a piece of “research” conducted in the name of this search.

As Leo Steinberg demonstrates in his long essay “The Algerian Women and Picasso at Large,” Picasso’s medium is not even painting at the point in his career in which he made the “Algerian Women” paintings, but, rather, “the artist” – in this case, the artist performing an allegorical quest for a “realistic” two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional perceptual space. It is, for Steinberg, only through the catharsis of following this performed myth wherein the most powerful meaning of Picasso’s work is realized for his audience. As such, Steinberg takes it upon himself to critique the performance as a whole, subjecting Picasso himself to the lens of “the work of art.”

In re-constructing the historical drama of a myth surrounding Picasso, Steinberg painstakingly re-constructs the order of historical events, giving the viewer a sense of Picasso’s evolution. One can surmise that the essay was something of a labor of love for the author to construct due to, if nothing else, the raw amount of time consumed in traveling to see these dozens of works in dozens of museums and other collections all over the world.

And that's the wager of Steinberg's analysis – it operates on a highly privileged scale and, as such, describes things that are effectively impossible to view for anyone but an academic art historian with an expertise in that particular field. For almost anyone else, be they casual art fans or enthusiastic ones, access to Picasso's work is limited to the handful of art museums one has the ability to visit firsthand in the course of one's lifetime. Because of this limit, Picasso's audience cannot easily appreciate the work as an ongoing performance.

Viewed through the lens of the Web, though, this distance between dramatic stage and audience is dramatically squashed. When an artist uploads a work, anyone with an Internet connection can view it. Furthermore, the vast majority of work – from artists working both on the Web and outside of it (such as painters [even dead painters like Picasso]) – is now viewed in the context of the artist's chronological development as it is displayed on a Web page. That is to say, the idea which Steinberg is at pains to describe in regards to Picasso – the artist's self-authoring performance of the role of “the artist” in time – becomes, on the Internet, automatic.

The artist's website, as a publicly accessible database, may be followed by a public interested in the artist's work. As an artist continues to create work, this creation is knowingly performed – one views the drama of an unfolding practice in which each “move” is in dynamic dialogue with past practice as well as a navigation into future practice. If I encounter the work of the contemporary artist through their managed presence on the Internet and I do it again and again and again, then this managed presence itself becomes a performative work.

There are many examples of this type of approach to making work in the context of the Web. One of those examples is Poster Company by Travess Smalley and Max Pitegoff.

Poster Company is a Flickr page consisting of over two hundred paintings produced between July 2009 and May 2010. In this project, the artists, first, focus on collisions between automatic effects which read as either “painterly” or “digital,” and, second, shift the focus of their labor in the work from the production of the individual painting to the performance of producing many paintings over the course of months. As such, their work is in dialogue with the painter On Kawara's *Today* series and Josh Smith's influential painting project – each of which are meaningful when considered as reactions to the automatic reproducibility of images as well as an ongoing, long-form performance.

The question “what is *a* digital painting?” (a noun) is here better phrased as “what is digital painting?” (a verb). The significance of Poster Company’s work lies not in the individual compositions, nor in the volume of output (although these elements are undeniably crucial for the full execution of the work to occur), but rather in the *performance* of the work.

In many ways, digital technologies and the Web make life easier for those who use them. This ease, though, frustrates the sense of accomplishment and meaning involved in laboring over something. When everyone can easily broadcast themselves on the Web or create a modern art masterpiece with a few clicks of a mouse, these actions become meaningless. In the face of this quandary, some artists have conceived of art production less in terms of the creation of a single work and more in terms of the performance involved in creating multiple works over time which an audience may follow live.