Participation in Contemporary Art

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Abstract

This presentation aims at providing a better understanding of the role, origin and evolution of participation in contemporary art with a specific focus on technology and participation. It will also provide an overview of participative art models developed in the last decade and the trend they created.

Keywords

Participation, participative art, collaborative art, relational aesthetics, creativity, creative, process, models.

ACM Classification Keywords

J4. Computer applications: Social and behavioral sciences.

Definitions

Participation: All forms of arts require participation to some extend. After all, experiencing art (observing, listening, watching etc..) is also a kind of participation. Artworks have very rarely been created not to be experienced by a public (ie, Antique Greek representation of Gods).

During the second half of the 20th century the relation between artists and the public has profoundly changed. The public has become a component of the creative

process and participation has become a new territory to explore.

Participative art: It is important to distinguish between the concepts of participative art and participatory art projects. The latter describes artworks in which the artist uses participation as a component of art making. In participative art projects however, participation IS the project and the artist creates the framework allowing for participation with no pre-conceived ideas of the outcome. As in participative democracy or participative management it is not so much the fact that people participate that matters but rather the fact that participation is the main principle governing human interactions in such models.

Historical Context

To better understand the meaning, purpose and evolution of participative art models it is useful to replace them in the historical context of art creation. For a large part before the Quattro-Cento, art was dealing with the relation to God. The Renaissance created a new focus on the relation to the physical word – in other words to the Object.

During the 20th century the focus of art has shifted and a new paradigm has emerged placing inter-human relations at the center of contemporary art creation (post-modern art) thus creating a fertile ground for participative art to blossom.

The Origins of Participation in Contemporary Art

During the 60s, Conceptual Art has shown the way in freeing art from the object: "in conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work…

all planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes art." (Sol LeWitt).

As a result artists have focused on the modus operandi of artwork creation and invited non-artists to be part of the art making process. In that context participation has become as a new tool to give a form to the concept created by the artist.

Some artists have explored participation further creating conceptual scripts as artwork. Spencer Tunick works can be included in such scripts – as well as "Dreams & possibilities" by the Praxis studio and many other works. The participants are asked to follow some guidelines resulting in the creation of the work. The artist acts as the director of the work process.

In the 80's and 90's artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija have developed art projects using participation as medium. In that perspective the artist creates the conditions for the gathering of participants and documents the meeting or event as it unfold, often being a participant himself.

That latter form of participative art projects brings a new dimension to participative art through the blurring of the line between the participants and the artist. The artist is also a participant.

Participation and Technology

As defined by Nicolas Bourriaud, relational aesthetics refers to the 90's art movement that focused on creating projects based on inter-human relations. Because of the very nature of the Internet technology rapidly grew as a new field of exploration for artists –

such as Net artists – to create projects based on virtual connections and adventuring in this new form of anonymous relation between humans.

Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have elaborated a complex analysis of rhizomic connections and multiple entry levels concepts which offers new ground to a better understanding of the rapport between technology and inter-human relations.

Typology of Contemporary Participative Models

As often contemporary art trends are elusive and in order to better understand the models of participation in art creation used today by artists it is useful to study some examples of recent works.

Using Nicolas Bourriaud's work on relational aesthetics, it is possible to identify three main categories of participative models.

Connection and Networking

Traditionally artworks last and can be seen or experienced at any time. Contemporary artists have explored time sensitive artworks that can only be experienced under specific conditions or at a specific date and time.

Robert Barry - Sent a message to let the public know that "This morning half a cubic meter of helium was released in the atmosphere". The artwork only exists through that message and the connection it created.

Christian Boltanski - Mail-art. Sent a vague and alarming letter to his friends and acquaintances and documented their reactions.

On Kawara - Sent numerous telegrams to inform his public that "he is still alive".

Liam Gillick - Designed a conference room in 1999 with geometric furniture and specific walls configuration. A real symposium was held in the room as part of the installation.

Karen Kilimnik - Created a series of drawings are based on her address book thus creating connections between people on many levels.

Meetings and Conviviality

Artworks can also work as machines generating encounters or meetings of all kinds. Here are a few examples:

Braco Dimitrijevic - "Casual Passer-by" a series of giant advertising posters based on photos of anonymous passer-by and giving the status of celebrity to unknown and unaware individuals.

Sophie Calle - Most of her work is based on meeting with people she doesn't know: followed passer-by, hired as a maid in a hotel she searched hotel rooms etc..

Philippe Parreno - Organized a party at the Consortium exhibition in Dijon France. His project aimed at using time rather that space during the art fair. The "party" generated meetings and conviviality.

Rirkrit Tiravanija - In one famous instance, in a Cologne gallery, Tiravanija re-created his East Village apartment, where he cooked and served food for 24 hours. In another instance he created a relaxation space for artists during an art fair.

Contract and Collaboration

Other contemporary artists have explored contractual relationship and collaborative art processes.

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster - "Welcome to what you believe you see" (1988) the artist documented his relationship with various gallery owners he worked with.

Noritoshi Hirakawa - Created forms based on chance encounter – for a show in Geneva (1994) he placed an ad in a newspaper seeking a travel companion to Greece. Documenting the travel was the material of his artwork.

Alix Lambert - Wedding piece (1992) – got married four times in six months as part of her exploring marriage relationships.

Maurizio Cattelan - Designed a costume of a rabbit for gallery owner Emmanuel Perrotin who had to wear the costume in his gallery as part of the project.

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