

**Social Media and the Arts** — *a conversation on art, social media, and participation*

Philadelphia Live Arts Festival

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Hello,

My name is Jo-Anne Green (1). I'm a visual artist from South Africa who has lived in the US since 1983. I grew up in a very different time and place, isolated from black South Africans and from the rest of the world because of Apartheid. Our isolation, as a nation, meant that we could not participate on the international stage, including cultural events and, most distressing to the majority of South Africans, the Olympics. We did not get Television until I was 17; and until Apartheid ended, the sole broadcasting corporation was under strict government control.

Under Apartheid, literature, film, and the visual arts were censored. For some reason, this did not happen to theatre. Playwright and director Barney Simon (2) co-founded the The Market Theatre (3) in downtown Johannesburg in 1976, the year I graduated from high school. It became the hub for experimental art and culture; it was there that many of us learned about the social, political, intellectual and psychological ramifications of Apartheid on the black population; and it was there that Simon developed his collaborative production techniques, in which cast members – who were more often than not amateur actors, or not actors at all – co-wrote scripts based on collective autobiography. Rather than represent fictional characters, the actors presented themselves.

The function of many South African plays during the 80s was education and mobilization. Because citizens were banned from congregating in public, The Market Theatre became a safe space in which communication between people of all races, religions, and ethnicities transpired. It engendered participatory democracy.

My own artwork evolved from passive contemplation to active engagement, with both my country's internal struggle and my audience. Pressured to declare my political allegiances, I chose, emphatically, to interweave personal and social narratives in my multimedia books and

installations. I sought immersion and empathy from my “viewers” and hoped for a dialogue with my audience, even though I lacked the tools that might have made this possible. The Internet was completely unknown to me, as was the case with the majority of us in the late 80s.

Twenty years later, I am now a co-director of New Radio and Performing Arts, Inc. (4) a two-person not-for-profit that commissions networked art for its world-renowned website Turbulence.org (5). The genres “net” or “web” art don’t begin to describe the myriad media that make up our 13-year archive of more than 160 works; they range from simple HTML hypertexts and animated .gif narratives to 3-D, immersive environments and browser cinema. Recent examples include works that aggregate data via RSS, explore Lifelogging, are installed in Second Life, and reside in social networks. Most are interactive, to varying degrees. Some that are participatory in design have not fulfilled their promise.

Commissioned in 2005, **Grafik Dynamo** (6), by Kate Armstrong and Michael Tippett, juxtaposes a live flickr stream with random texts. It takes the form of a comic strip, a nod to Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein; it also alludes to Andy Warhol’s Factory: flickr.com -- a free platform for everyone to share their photographs -- is its factory, though its “workers” are unwitting participants in that, to my knowledge, they are unaware that their photographs are being used. **Grafik Dynamo** does not allow interactivity, but it is up to each viewer to construct the narrative unfolding before her. She becomes both writer and reader. Armstrong extended this work into **Why Some Dolls Are Bad** (7) on the Facebook platform in 2007; there, users who subscribed to the custom built application could save “pages” and organize them into personal “books.” Unfortunately, every time Facebook undergoes software upgrades, the application breaks and has to be re-configured.

**ItSpace** (8), a 2007 commission by Peter Traub, is a network of musical, household objects on the MySpace platform, and invites other musical objects to become its friends. To-date, **ItSpace** has no friends.

In contrast, **The Saddest Thing I Own** (9) (by Matthew Belanger, A. Elizabeth Mikesell, and Marianne R. Petit) -- a weblog that invites the public to “share the saddest thing they own” -- has

averaged 10,000 visits a month since it launched in 2006. There are well over 300 contributions, many of which have hundreds of comments.

**IN Network** (10), also a 2005 commission, was an extended cell phone, life-art performance about distance, communication, intimacy, telepresence, and living together while apart. During the month of March, Michael Mandiberg (New York) and Julia Steinmetz (California) performed their relationship via a blog, including photographs, podcasts, text messages and several live audio webcasts of the artists sleeping together on their cellphones. Inspired by the growing phenomenon of social media (MySpace, 2003; Facebook and flickr, 2004; and Youtube, 2005), **In Network** was an exercise in what Kazys Varnelis calls “Self-Exposure.” (11)

In “The Immediated Now,” Varnelis writes: “Today’s self emerges from the network, not so much a whole individual as a composite entity constituted out of the links it forms with others, a mix of known and unknown others it links to via the Net. As its ground, instead of *immediate*, lived experience, the contemporary subject relies on the *immediated* real, a condition in which mediation is a given and life becomes a form of performance, constantly lived in a culture of exposure, in exchange for self-affirming feedback.” (12)

Self-presentation platforms have developed from the personal homepage and weblog, to social networking profiles and lifestreams. The search engine is the central point around which these identities are indexed. Together, the platform, engine and user construct what Anne Helmond calls “Identity 2.0,” an identity “always under construction, distributed and persistent.” (13)

Participatory Art in digital networked environments is fundamentally social. Though it incorporates interactivity, participants’ individual agency is more expansive in that they are often collaborators rather than mere interactors. Works that successfully harness creative input from participants have to be open (rather than complete), and allow substantive contributions that may often take the work into unforeseen territories.

Participation in art is a strategy that has been around for almost 100 years. In often appropriating social forms, it brings art closer to everyday life. It suggests a democratic, non-hierarchical structure but does not always achieve it.

In the age of BITS, BYTES and the Web 2.0, much has been written about the binaries artist/audience, active/passive, producer/consumer, but the real revolution brought about by social media is, in Clay Shirky's words, a new ecosystem of mass amateurization. (14) Social media, open source, and free software allow millions of individuals with no professional training to participate in this new ecosystem. Writing about theater in "The Emancipated Spectator," Jaques Rancière said, what is needed are spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators. (15)

Perhaps, social platforms such as YouTube and Facebook will, one day, be considered the greatest artworks of our time.

## References

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