VM503
AESTHETICS AND HISTORY OF NEW MEDIA

WEEK 14 CLASS 2

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The Immediated Now: Network Culture and the Poetics of Reality

by
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From http://networkedbook.org

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Reality Art and Media

- *Leaves behind **formal structure and deeper meaning** **for a heightened sense of immediacy***.

- This immediacy is **not** so much **authentic and present** as **mediated and dispersed**.

- The fascination with the real in "reality" media, be it reality TV, amateur-generated content, or professional "art" is **constructed around specific tactics**:

  - **self-exposure**
  - **information visualization**
  - **the documentarian turn**
  - **remix**
  - **participation**

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The Immediated Real

- 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.

- 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.

- Network culture **undoes any sense of history or theory**. What is left is an immediated reality that **eschews either legitimation or critique but just is**.

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The Immediated Real

- The **critique** of industrial society's homogeneity that was common in art under modernism and postmodernism is now **absorbed into management theory**, the alienated factory worker replaced by the *knowledge worker* with the **"freedom" of job flexibility** and the **privilege of self-expression** as a member of the creative class.

- As management theory has absorbed critique, **the market informs art more than ever**. What use is the symbolic capital of theoretical resistance when real capital could be earned? The **art of network culture**, then, operates within a culture that is rarely Utopian or oppositional but rather **more concerned with its own position within the vast game of the network**.

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Self-Exposure

- The immediated real manifests itself most clearly in the **reality television** show and the **webcam** (where it is at its purest).

- Like other webcam or lifestreaming sites, **JenniCam** manifested **key aspects of reality culture**: no narrative arc or any suggestion of a deeper meaning, but instead a glimpse into the private life of an individual hoping to expose himself or herself.

- Blogs, social networking sites, YouTube, and Twitter all offer platforms for self-exposure.

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JenniCam (1996-2003)

JenniCam coincided with a rise in surveillance as a feature of popular culture, particularly reality television programs such as Big Brother

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Self-Exposure

- Viral marketers and media producers (Lonelygirl15 or Little Loca) have embraced this appeal to reality as well, utilizing the **direct address to the audience** and the **amateur production** values of net video.

- *Even pornography has recently lost its sense of fiction, narrative arc, and profit*; it is increasingly being produced by amateurs.

- *In many ways this **culture** would seem to be **less a representational than a presentational one** (showing, willingness to submit*), where we are compelled to solicit the attention of others, act for unseen eyes, and develop new forms of connective intensity -- as if this were somehow the very condition of our continued existence, the marker of our worth.* - Crandell

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infoviz (Information Visualization)

- **Dynamic visualizations of quantified data** to represent a vision of reality; replace the self-referential new media art of the 1990s.

- infoviz **demands that artists get involved in programming**; claiming the ability to create new user interfaces, infoviz is often the purview of design firms or programmers and can be sponsored by venture capital. **It can be hard to tell the latest art project from the latest startup.**

- infoviz's **downfall is its spectacularization of data and faith in technology**; if it is the clearest inheritor of modernism, its origins are not the disruptive, avant-garde modernism of the 1920s but the modernism of the 1950s and 1960s.

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Moveable Type (2007)

Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen's project advertises the company's ability to control and efficiently extract information, turning it into an object of wonder.

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They Rule by Josh On (2004)
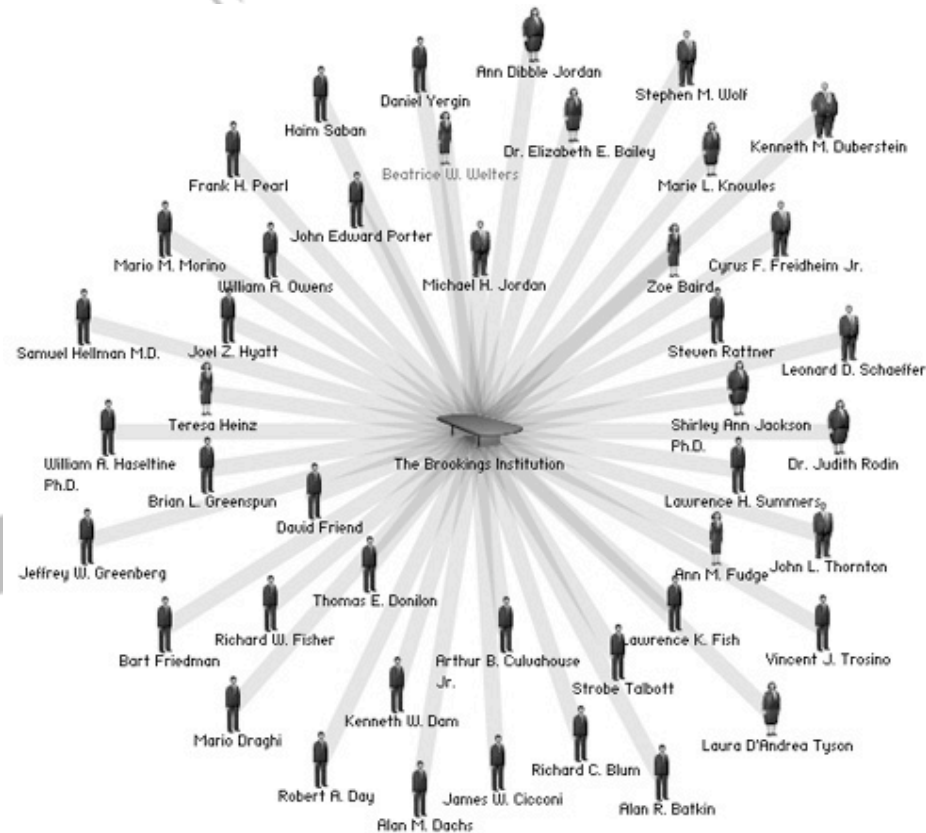
Tactical media activists have created works that aim to unpack the complex weave of network power; tend to reduce network power to mere relationships. Agency and intentionality may remain unclear while the work remains an object of fascination.

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Scott Hug (2009)

Personal Finance, State of the Nation, Consumer Mood, U.S. Perception on the Morality of Homosexual Relations, and Death Penalty

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The Documentarian Turn

- **Maintains narrative and coherence** as its hallmark.

- **Treats reality as something to script and manipulate, not just to take as given**.

- *Grizzly Man, Supersize Me, March of the Penguins, An Inconvenient Truth*, and *Fahrenheit 911* form a growing strain in cinema which are highly scripted interpretations of reality (Herzog's "ecstatic truth").

- **Confuse fiction and non-fiction** (fiction from autobiography, constructed realities that are photographed and presented as real, artistic investigations masquerading as research).

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Poll by Thomas Demand (2001)
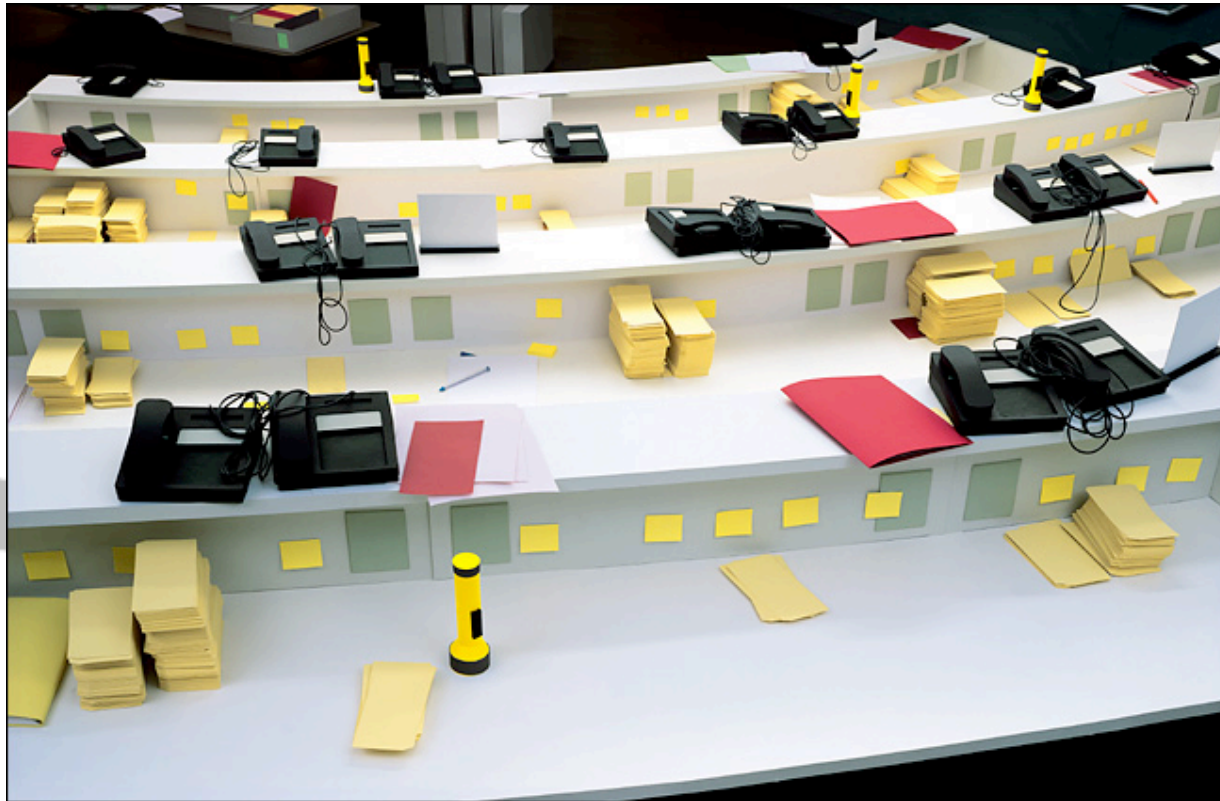
His handcrafted facsimiles of architectural spaces and natural environments are built in the image of other images. Once they have been photographed, the models are destroyed.

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New York Times by The Yes Men (2009)

Leads audience to question how easily media can construct meanings for the purposes of dominant power.

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Artist as Aggregator

- **Aggregation** (rather than interpretation) becomes the prime **strategy for dealing with information overload**.

- More than any testimonial or self-confession, **aggregation becomes a means of describing the connected self** in immediated reality.

- Under network culture the **artist as aggregator** increasingly **replaces** the earlier **artist as producer***.

- Curatorial (pro-surfers; relogs; list-making) works are an accepted part of art practice; artists understand consumption as a back-and-forth (producer and consumer both have agency) phenomenon and see **the market** not as **a place for** capital but rather for **human interaction** (p2p and trade sites like eBay).

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Random Rules: A Channel of Artists' Selections from YouTube (2009)

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Remix

- If remix thrives on using appropriated work, unlike postmodernism, it **takes appropriation as given**.

- Artists like Pierre Huyghe and Douglas Gordon no longer question originality but rather instinctively understand **artworks as objects constituted within networks**, their **meaning given by their position in relation to others and their use**.

- Artist, DJ or programmer **don't so much create as reorganize**.

- "The artistic question is no longer what can we make that is new?" but "**how can we make do with what we have?**" - Bourriaud (i.e. how can we produce singularity and meaning from the chaos of daily life?)

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"Relational Aesthetics" by Nicolas Bourriaud

- **Art:** Art is an activity consisting of producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects.

- **Relational Art:** A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure **the whole of human relations and their social context**, rather than an independent and private space.

- **Relational Aesthetics**: theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the **inter-human relations** which they represent, produce or prompt.

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Relational Aesthetics …

- The supreme "separation", the separation that affects relational channels, represents the final stage in the transformation to the "Society of the Spectacle" as described by Guy Debord.

- This is a society where **human relations are no longer "directly experienced,"** but start to **become blurred in their "spectacular" representation**.

- Herein lies the most burning issue to do with art today: **is it possible to generate relationships with the world**, in a practical field art-making traditionally earmarked for their "representation"?

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Relational Aesthetics …

- The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be **ways of living and models of action within the existing real**.

- **Art is a state of encounter**.

- Relational Aesthetics represents **a theory of form**. Form is a coherent unit, a structure which shows the typical features of a world; a lasting encounter. *Form is not immutable or inevitable. It is understood differently at different times.*

- **What is a form when it is plunged into the dimension of dialogue*?**

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Rirkrit Tiravanija

untitled (demo station no. 5), during a moment of stasis, in between moments of complete chaos.

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Rirkrit Tiravanija

His early installations involved cooking meals for gallery-goers.

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Felix Gonzalez-Torres

'Untitled' (Public Opinion), 1991 and 'Untitled' (LA), 1991

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Participation

- **Relational aesthetics** anticipates the development of **networked publics** and **Open Source culture** a decade later.

- Encountering **user-generated content** on sites like Flickr and deviantART, as well as commons-based peer produced software such as the Apache Web server, Linux operating system or Drupal content management system is **no longer unusual but rather is** **part of everyday life**.

- **Participatory art** at its best embodies the Utopian ambitions of Internet free culture and its invitation to anyone to participate.

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Sheep Market (2006)
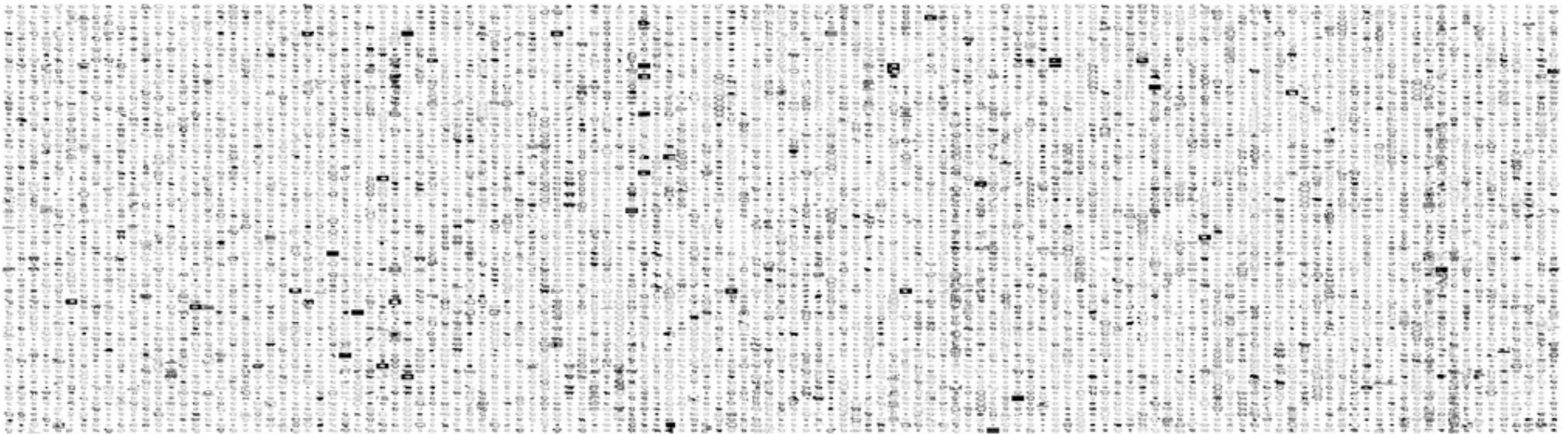
Aaron Koblin paid 10,000 workers ("mechanical turks") on Amazon.com
$0.02 to draw a sheep.

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Conclusion

- Sometimes Utopian or critical, **networked art** is little more than **a cheerleader for the technology sector or for the rise of knowledge work**.

- **A coherent vision of a socially progressive networked art** -- or even a socially progressive understanding of network culture -- **is still lacking**.

- If we are to avoid networked art becoming just so much bling, turning into endless stimuli for our rapt fascination, be it on the Web or in the museum, **a new critical perspective on this work is still urgently needed**.

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