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Artist An Xiao at work

Man Bartlett's *#24hEcho* for the "Hostess Project" at PPOW Gallery

Screenshot of Man Bartlett's feed from *#24hEcho*

"SOCIAL MEDIA ART" IN THE EXPANDED FIELD
by Ben Davis

"Art and social media" -- this topic is all anyone wants to talk about these days. The discussion extends from the staid -- the National Endowment for the Arts released a report titled "Audience 2.0: How Technology Influences Arts Participation" -- to more spicy ruminations on what "social media art" offers as a new category, as in the artist An Xiao's recent three-part series for *Hyperallergic*.

On the one hand, this faddish obsession with "social media" is understandable. The Facebook Corp. has begun to wrap its fingers around every other aspect of life, so it is clearly logical to ask what effects social media might have on art-making. But at the same time, I find the chatter somehow sad, as if visual art's power to inspire passion among a larger audience is so attenuated that it has to throw itself on whatever trendy thing is out there, to win some reflected glory for itself.

So, the question for me is this: Is there any more interesting way to think about the topic than the loose and impressionistic manner that it is currently framed? Maybe it's worth noting that, of all the buzzwords of the present-day lexicon, "social media" is perhaps the only one that is more vaguely defined than "art." Let's begin, then, by clarifying terms to see if we can get to a more interesting place.

ART VS. SOCIAL MEDIA
By "art," let's say we mean the products of the traditional, professionalized art world, a privileged class of esthetic objects set apart from ordinary communicative acts, authored by a special person called an artist.

For "social media," let's say we mean all these new-fangled media platforms which are highly accessible, and based around enabling open-ended conversations between networks of participants.

The utility of this operation is that it lets us see that the question of "art and social media" actually involves *an opposition* between two different fields, with different logics: a relatively exclusive, closed-in type of expression vs. a relatively open, relation-based mode of operation.

This means that there can be no harmonious merger of the two terms, just various ways of navigating the tension between them. (The only thing that would be "social media art" in the full and genuine sense would be a social networking service actually designed as an art project, which would raise all sorts of questions.)

Once we have this clear, we can move on to a second move, which is to rethink the question via a handy "Greimasian Semiotic Square."

THE SEMIOTIC SQUARE
Invented by French semiotician A.J. Greimas, the Semiotic Square is one of the favorite intellectual toys of theory-minded art critics. In a legendary essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Rosalind Krauss

Painting presented online for Nic Rad's
People Matter

Guthrie Lonergan
Myspace Intro Playlist
2006

Debo Eilers
Twitterrific
2010
On Stellar Rays

used it to chart the different manifestations of postmodern sculpture as reactions to the opposition "landscape" and "architecture," though she uses a quirky version of the device; a much more satisfying and orthodox example is the way Hal Foster used the Square to illustrate the different positions within Russian Constructivism, as outgrowths of the opposition between "Art" and "Production."

Basically, the Semiotic Square is a way of visually representing a matrix of possible relationships generated by a given opposition. The idea is relatively simple: Any principal opposition between contrary terms -- between "a" and "b" -- can be expanded to include a secondary pair of "contradictory" terms, "non-a" and "non-b." These contradictory terms have a natural relation of affinity with the respective contrary terms of the original binary, thus allowing you to form a kind of map of potential relationships within a given presupposed opposition. (You get, in Krauss words, "a quaternary field which both mirrors the original opposition and at the same time opens it.")

A useful example for me is the opposition between "law" and "crime." It's not too difficult to see how this simple binary implies two additional terms that relate to the original terms, but are actually their internal negations. What you might call "non-law" -- people who act in the name of the law, but act unjustly (your corrupt cops, your dictators, and so on) -- is both a negation of what "law" stands for, but also has a clear relationship with the concept of "crime." And similarly, "non-crime" -- those who break the law in order to act in the name of justice (your Robin Hoods, your Rosa Parks) -- both contradicts the normal idea of criminality, and has an affinity with the sense of "law," as justice.

NON-ART/NON-SOCIAL MEDIA
We have our primary opposition, "art" vs. "social media." What, then, would be our contradictory terms, given this cardinal opposition?

Since we are talking about "art" in the traditional sense, as a designation reserved for a privileged class of object, I think "non-art" here is best thought of as amateur art production -- it may follow all the same rules as traditional work, and look a lot like it, but falls outside of its logic of exclusivity and privileged authorship.

On the other side, what would "non-social media" be? Since "social media" is a designation to distinguish a class of new phenomena from a more traditional kind of technology, "non-social media" will here be the variety of new media that could be confused with "social media," but aren't truly participatory in any meaningful sense, even when they present a modicum of apparent openness. A classic videogame, for instance, is *interactive*, and involves the user making choices -- but only within pre-defined set of parameters. Its logic is ultimately top-down in the "old," closed, non-social (asocial?) way.

We thus achieve a graph that would look something like this:

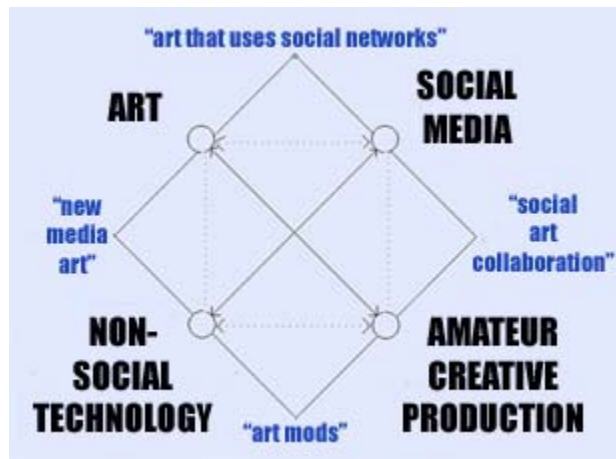Screenshot of Brian Piana's *Ellsworth Kelly Hacked My Twitter*

Wikipedia

Screenshot of the "Johnny Cash Project"

BobbyBobby's "Mona Lisa" Mii

"ART THAT USES SOCIAL NETWORKS"
With these basic definitions dealt with, we can now go on to imagine how the different axes on our Semiotic Square might suggest different ways of exploring the potential field opened up by "art and social media."

The top axis (Greimas called it the "complex axis") which relates "traditional art" to "social media," is the most obvious and basic way of relating the two logics: "art that uses social networks." Just as there is nothing that says that a traditional magazine can't make use of a Facebook page, and online *New York Times* articles -- which still speak in the voice of authority of the traditional, professional reporter -- include readers' comments sections, artists can use new-fangled "social" applications in a variety of ways, without substantially altering how we understand their creations as artworks.

Take a project by Man Bartlett, an artist known for his explorations of Twitter. His recent 24-hour performance at PPOW Gallery had him recite whatever people sent to him over Twitter, performing them for a camera feed. On the one hand, using Twitter as a channel to the public is integral to the meaning of the piece. On the other, the "work" is Bartlett's performance, plus the camera feed of him -- the Tweets are just a component that adds a new shade to a tried-and-true type of artwork.

An interesting note about work of this type: The opposition between "art" and "social media," as we have constructed it, closely mirrors (in rhetoric, at least) the opposition between a traditional, object-based paradigm of art and the more recent, process-based idea of artworks as "relational" -- that is, as incorporating or even being reducible to social interaction. Consequently, the paradigm of "social media art" that has begun to crystallize often takes its cues from the "relational esthetics" tradition.

Take Nic Rad's performance at Rare gallery, for which he gave away caricatures of media figures to people who "bid" for them by soliciting his attention via various social networks, posting their solicitations with the image online. *People Matter*, as the piece is called, might be read as a jokey, info-age update of the themes of Group Material's classic meditation on community esthetic values, *The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)* (1981) -- though Group Material, of course, was more engaged with the values of an actual community. (In fact, if you wanted to be sinister about it, you could say that such "social media art" represents the idealistic, quasi-utopian component of "relational esthetics" being farmed out to large, standardized corporate media platforms).

"NEW MEDIA ART"
Next, we move to the left-hand vertical of our Square (the "positive

Gender   Female
Head   Type: 3rd row, 2nd column
   Facial Features: 4th row, 3rd column
   Skin Color: 1st row, 2nd column
Hair   Type: 5th page, 2nd row, 2nd column
   Color: 1st row, 1st column
Eyebrows   Type: 1st page, 4th row, 1st column
   Color: 1st row, 1st column
   Rotate: 7 clockwise
   Size: 2 bigger
   Horizontal: 1 narrower
   Vertical: 1 up
Eyes   Type: 2nd page, 2nd row, 2nd column
   Color: 1st row, 3rd column
   Rotate: 4 clockwise
   Size: 3 bigger
   Horizontal: 1 narrower
   Vertical: 6 down
Nose   Type: 2nd row, 2nd column
   Size: 4 smaller
   Vertical: 4 up
Mouth   Type: 2nd page, 3rd row, 3rd column
   Size: 1 smaller
   Vertical: 10 up
Glasses   Type: 3rd row, 3rd column
   Size: 4 smaller
   Vertical: 7 down
Mole   Add a mole
   Size: 4 bigger
   Horizontal: 7 right
   Vertical: 8 down
Beard   Type: 2nd row, 1st column
Mustache   Type: 2nd row, 2nd column
   Size: 4 bigger
   Vertical: 5 down
Size   Height: 18%
   Weight: 100%
Nickname   Mona lisa
Favorite Color   2nd row, 6th column
Mii Creator   BobbyBobby

BobbyBobby's instructions on how to make "Mona Lisa" Mii, from www.miicharacters.com

Screenshot of StarAx Statosky's wand at work in *Second Life*

deixis"), the relationship between "traditional art" and "non-social media."

Given how we have defined our terms, this has a fairly straight-forward identity we can assign to it: A great many artworks that are simply "new media works" are falsely classified as "social media art," because they involve technology and take social media as subject matter.

A perfect example of this is Guthrie Lonergan's video-art project, shown at the New Museum's "Younger than Jesus" show, which involved a curated selection of "found" MySpace videos (remember MySpace?), as a reflection of how identity is constructed on the web. The work is "about" social media; it couldn't exist without MySpace; but it is not itself "social" in the least, anymore than Debo Eilers' combine painting, *Twitterrific*, presented in the current "Greater New York" show at PS1, is "social media art" just because it centers on an image of Twitter's happy little blue bird symbol.

It's also worth noting that there are art projects that actually involve social media but lack any meaningful "social" dimension. I personally was a big fan of Texas web artist Brian Piana's project *Ellsworth Kelly Hacked My Twitter*, a project that uses input from Twitter, transforming Tweets by people the author follows into blocks of color, to form an evolving, abstract grid pattern. Yet if you think of the two key characteristics of "social media" -- the ability for anyone to participate, and the facilitation of interactions between networks of people -- neither is part of the design of *Ellsworth Kelly Hacked My Twitter*. The work makes art out of social media, so to speak, by using it in a "non-social" way.

(In the wider world, Facebook Ads might provide a good corollary: Though they respond to their audience, they are still ads in a very conventional sense, just hopped up with Facebook's data-mining capabilities. They are a "non-social" aspect of social media.)

"SOCIAL ART COLLABORATION"
Things become more interesting when we consider what the relationship of the terms on the right-hand side of our Square might imply: the relationship of affinity between "social media" with "non-art."

This, I would say, is much rarer form of production -- but the internet does offer one monster example: Wikipedia. The crowd-sourced online encyclopedia is thoroughly "social," in the sense that its entire project revolves around the open exchange of ideas between a potentially unlimited number of people, and no single author takes sole credit for the final product. Formally, however, it is an amateur-written encyclopedia (quite literally the "contradictory" term to traditional encyclopedias -- it is putting them out of business!)

The paradigm of collaborative, "social" art projects seems to me to be a rich territory to explore. However, mass authorship and amateur participation both go against art-world norms (for reasons that are constitutive of the field of the visual arts as a sphere trading in luxury goods and based on intellectual prestige). Perhaps for this reason, the esthetic project that I can think of that comes closest to this paradigm is not a fine art work at all, but "The Johnny Cash Project," an online, collaboratively built music video for Cash's posthumously released *Ain't No Grave*. The website allows users to draw and contribute a frame for the film, tracing over an original, but also adding their own personal spin or departing from the original altogether. Then it sequences the results randomly together, to form a kind of flickering, crowd-sourced stop-motion animation for the single.

Friedrich Kirschner's *person2184*

Screenshot of Chris Brandt's *Dance, Voldo, Dance*

Users can rate frames from other participants, and have options to view the video according to "Highest Rated Frames," "Most Brushstrokes per Frame," "Random Frames," and so on (the project lacks only the ability for visitors to "curate" their own versions). It's actually quite amazing.

"ART MODS"
Which brings us, finally, to the lower rung of our Square (what Greimas called the "neutral axis," because it relates the two contradictory terms of our original pair: It is "neither S1 nor S2").

What would that be? There is indeed a kind of creative project that explores the tension between these two terms, "non-social art" -- new technology, minus the "social" aspect -- and "non-art," that is, amateur creativity, outside the art world proper. I'd call this the paradigm of the "art mod" (Philippa Stalker uses the term "non-interactive art mod" to describe certain "art video games"). This term doesn't encompass every single phenomenon I have in mind, but does capture the essence of a certain subculture of tech-savvy bricolage.

When someone builds their "Mii" character for the Nintendo Wii, she or he is creating something using a virtual vocabulary that they don't get to determine. Some of the resulting creations are clearly more creative than others -- there was even a brief rage for people styling themselves "Mii Artisans" -- and the criteria by which one instinctively judges which of these creations are particularly interesting stems from how the user works within the given constraints to eke out something unexpected.

A better example comes from the hokey online role-playing world of *Second Life*: The case of StarAx Statosky, the avatar name of a particularly legendary *Second Life* artiste. In addition to a variety of cartoonish in-world sculptures, Statosky invented a "magic wand" which exploited a flaw in the game's graphic-rendering system, allowing users to transform their character dialogue into whimsical, living illustrations. He actually sold copies of the virtual item to other players, and StarAx's Wand was called "possibly the coolest single thing you can own in SL" by the CEO of Linden Labs, the company behind the game. (Alas, an update to *Second Life* eliminated the flaw, and the wand is no more.)

The canonical example of the "art mod" paradigm, however, is "machinima," fan films made by appropriating bits of video-games, a phenomena that has its own robust subculture (it got an outing at the "World of Warcraft" show at the Laguna Beach Museum last year). Back in 2005, Friedrich Kirschner, for instance, took clips from the game *Unreal Tournament* and reworked them into a kind of abstract, melancholy noir film, *person2184* (watchable either as a film or inside the game itself). On a more light-hearted note, a minor classic of the genre is Chris Brandt's *Dance, Voldo, Dance*, a "machinima dance video" created by recording a synchronized routine between characters in the fighting game *SoulCaliber*.

In such works, the fact that the medium is closed ("non-social") is part of the point, since the whole fun is in doing something by manipulating the world's pre-given signifiers. But it's also important that this form of creativity represents a subculture of amateur production ("non-art") -- it's a fan-oriented phenomenon, existing at a reflected second remove from mass culture.

SYMBOLIC CLOSURE
With this, we have arrived at a basic state of symbolic completeness, at least with respect to our original pair of "art and social media." But what does it mean to consider "art mods" as the counterpoint to "social media art"? In fact, the existence of the former does offer

something like the unconscious truth of the whole "social media art" discussion, helping to explain the exaggerated art-world investment in it.

"Contemporary art" defines itself as a special sphere, not just different but better -- more sophisticated and smarter -- than other media phenomena. The problem with this self-image is that the contemporary world is ruled by technologies that are vastly more technically sophisticated than anything within reach of the conventional art world -- a gulf separates what is taught at the most sophisticated art school from what is taught in the most basic computer engineering class.

Generally, the art world either responds to this conundrum by retreating to art-historical tradition and ceding the field, or engaging with technology in an ironic, deliberately primitive or critical way, in order to carve out its own intellectual space in relation to it, and project a purpose. The sincerity -- the nerdiness, really -- of "art mods," as manifestations of a subculture truly invested in inhabiting the language of tech phenomena from within, *as a fan*, stands for everything typically arch art-world explorations of technology are not.

What is the promise of "social media art"? It allows contemporary artists to tap easily into a vein of technological excitement, puts them on the same plane as everyone else, and offers a space hospitable to gestures already familiar from "relational esthetics" art. In this sense, our complex term, "art that uses social networks," offers an imaginary resolution for the contradiction of the visual arts in a world ruled by technology whose sophistication and complexity transcends them.

OUTSIDE THE BOX
The Semiotic Square has served us here a way of carving out some initial boundaries, distinctions and points of reference, and of pointing out tensions and affinities between a variety of phenomena. Let's not take it too seriously though. For the purposes of real analysis, such a structure does not by any means exhaust the meaning of a given creative gesture, which may well draw on all kinds of other material. (Greimas: "nothing permits us to assert that a semiotic manifestation is dependent on only one system at a time.")

Indeed, the fact that the device is as clarifying as it is with regard to present-day "social media art" is probably the result of the formative state of the field. Present discourse is primitive enough that the opposition between the two terms is still *itself* the primary content of many of the artworks produced under the banner of "social media art" -- the thrill of the trendy new association is the primary interest.

In this sense, our Square is not a map of absolute possibilities. It is a chart of different possibilities to be explored and exhausted. It's not a frame to think within. It's a box that needs to be escaped.

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