**ISEA 2009 / Re: Transformative Creativity - Participatory Practices**

Transformative Creativity in the Expanded Digital Field

The idea that art may (can/will) transform ‘society’ is not a new one. Some would call it idealism - or an ideology, even – to have anything outside the market create transformation. But changes over the last decade, in the cultural constitution of the world’s global culture and economy, have changed the attitude towards art and creativity

It is an important fact, that the art-is-transformation metaphor is a very strong driving force in the creative development of new ideas in the growing alternative culture of transdiciplinary domain-exchange. Art, in this instance, is practice, the facilitator of movements across domains and the dialogue between different fields of competences. It is, also, the implementer of new aesthetic paradigms.

There are some good examples to give from the art world, but indeed very few where society is, in fact – if not transformed – then being moved in a new direction. The question I want to rise here is what is the status of ‘transformation’ as an artistic form of practice? What, indeed, do we understand by ‘transformative creativity’ today?

It could be possible to identify three trends of transformative creativity that were (and still are) active in the formation of modernity, and the modern society: The rationalistic (bourgeois) trend focusing on progress and creation of technologies of (re)production and pleasure; the subjective (protestant) trend focusing on the emphatic now and the creation of individual experience ; the aesthetic (formalistic) trend, focusing on existence transcending time and space, and the creation of the radical ‘new’.

The question is: does transformative creativity today add something new? Is participatory practices brought on by digital technologies inside or outside the complex of modernity?

By analyzing examples from new art-practices like the Augmented Reality Project by the danish artgroup Boxiganga and the digital art/archive project MAP – Media Art Platform (Jacobsen and Søndergaard), which is using reactive media as a participatory strategy to map to a navigating audience the media art collection of The Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde (DK), I will show that the modernistic trends of transformative creativity has changed dramatically. Instead of a division of (often) opposing trends, today technologies for (re)production, individual experiences, and the idea of the radical ‘new’ are all part of a transdisciplinary field, which I will call the expanded digital field.

The expanded digital field encompasses transformation of societal, cultural, political and individual creativity on three levels (my hypothesis): Technologies become reactive, hence reproduction of creativity becomes the standard for communication; Subjectivity enters into a dynamic exchange between opsis and optics (between the visual-as-system and vision) based on bodily experience; and, finally, aesthetic paradigms are augmented from the tactical to the meta-strategic level, exchanging the radical ‘new’ as style with radical new domains.

### The reproduction of creativity - Technologies are re-active

…for all we know, it may be that human creativity has dried up, and that in the future it will be the *non*human world which squirms out of our conceptual net. It might be the case that all future human societies will be (as a result, perhaps, of ubiquitous technocratic totalitarianism) humdrum variations on our own. (Rorty 351)

This is perhaps one of the most significant propositions ever made about creativity since it foretells the situation that we are presently engaging – in the hybrid art/technology situations in the expanded digital field: The transformation of creativity might not be an innovative process but instead, indeed, a reproduction of the idea of creativity as a human activity. The slightly dystopic overtone in the quote by Richard Rorty should not, however, be seen as a representation of undergang – of some sort of ‘intellectual’ decline of transformative creativity to mere repetition (albeit on different levels). It could, however, very well be seen as a sort of functional ‘closure’ brought on by the general system (or systemic theory) of society that we find in Niklas Luhman’s writings:

Art participates in society by differentiating itself as a system, which subjects art to a logic of operative closure - just like any other functional system… [m]odern art is autonomous in an operative sense....society imposes this form on all functional systems, one of which is art. (Luhmann 134-135)

This still feels reductive, however. The very idea that a creative process is part of a differentiation already established, and a system already there, however systemic, is a case of a theory that is both right and wrong.

Is the replacement of *mass consumption of commercial culture* in the 20th century by mass production of cultural objects by users in the early 21st century a progressive development? Or does it constitute a further stage in the development of “culture industry” as analyzed by [Theodor Adorno](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor_Adorno) and [Max Horkheimer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Horkheimer) in their 1944 book *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*? (Horkheimer, 1969 (1944)) Indeed, if the twentieth century subjects were simply consuming the products of culture industry, 21st century prosumers and “pro-ams” are passionately imitating it. That is, they now make their own cultural products that follow the templates established by the professionals and/or rely on professional content. (Manovich)

I would much more like to believe Nicolas Bourriaud when he describes participatory artworks as a situation where the viewers “negotiate open relations that are not pre-established” (Baurriaud 169-70). This, for me, is transformative creation in the making. It does not presuppose anything, and even though the result may still reflect upon ‘a systemic context’; there is still an open door. The functional closure is not complete… yet. Instead, we find something that Baurriaud calls an “intertstice”:

The interstice is “a space in social relations which, although it fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail within the system**.”** (Bourriaud 161)

I will return to the representation of interstices in the latter part of this paper, but first I would like to ask, what is really going on in this transformation between systemic and non-functional expression? Maybe, it is that which David Rokeby has termed a “user interface for reality”? In order to get closer to an understanding of the parameters at play, Rokeby suggests “we need to look at how our experience of the real world is constructed. In other words, what is our user interface for reality?” (Rokeby)

The sense modalities involved in participation in the real-time mediating installations are both performative and experiential within the same acts of engagement, bringing an extended focus on the act of participation in itself. The participation can be seen as a sense of involvement, which articulates “the dividing line between observation and engagement” (Iles 178), expanding the engagement as a site of social encounter and self-reflective experience.

… the true challenge posed to art by social media may not be all the excellent cultural works produced by students and non-professionals which are now easily available online – although I do think this is also important. The real challenge may lie in the dynamics of Web 2.0 culture – its constant innovation, its energy, and its unpredictability. (Manovich)

### Enhanced Subjectivity – the renegotiation of competence in the expanded digital field

The global reach of contemporary media has greatly influenced social, political, and physical space. Indeed, we are becoming inhabitants of information space. (Weibel)

Instead of discussing art and media as something separate that collide suddenly in new media, creating the abstract notion of “interface”, I would like approach transformative creativity from the idea of reactive media that works within the transdisciplinary innovative experience paradigm in an experimental way.

The Danish media performance group, Boxiganga (Karin Søndergaard and Kjell Petersen) has been working with the practicalities of this paradigm in digital environments since the middle of the 1990s. Their “Augmented Reality Project, part 1-3” (1998-2008) is a project designed to do research into augmentation as a strategy within the category of reactive media where the focus is on the experiences that take place on the edge of our senses, as they put it:

In this project, visitors will come into contact with a series of staged and coreographed, high technology installations that can sense their presence. These “sensitive” sculptures are likened to pieces of furniture in a room.
But the installations, each in its own way, don´t only sense, they also react. Thus they promote relationships through experiences that may take place at the edge of the senses. (Karin Søndergaard og Kjell Pedersen)

This edge, the fusion of performing mind and technological body, is clearly visible in the practice and artistic strategy of the Danish media Performance group, Boxiganga - Karin Søndergaard and Kjeld Pedersen. In 1998, they formulated the principles of an Augmented Reality Project, which should create an environment for artistic research into the use of HCI in artistic/ performative installations. Building from a tradition of Nô Theatre and “classic” performance art practice in the 1980s, the Augmented Reality Project was to be realized in three parts: “Relational Mechanisms” (1998-2000), “Constructed Interactive Spatiality” (2000-2005), and “A Sensing Sculpture in Public Space” (2005-2008). The result of the first part of the project, relational mechanisms, was shown at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde in january-march 2000. Working with a network of Apple G3-computers, the basic principle was to place the computer and data-processing in the background; this is preconditional for achieving the illusion of reality in the human-computer interaction. Art, in Boxiganga’s sense, is conceived as a network of open systems:

We intend to develop relations-orientated multimedia works, which function in the social realm, in which we as people continually recreate and reinvent our existence — in relations between people. This is “relations technology” as opposed to functional or manifested technology; Open systems in which content and relevance are directly dependant on involvement. (Karin Søndergaard og Kjell Pedersen)

Augmented reality is a construction of physical conditions that should be present in order to be able to experience a *realistic* physical relation in space:

In our multimedia set-ups, the computer is relegated to a place where data is recorded, processed and transmitted. We can then be concerned with multimedia in a context of Augmented Reality, with creating spatio - sensory, perceptive and reactive constructs.
An interactive multimedia set-up is a world construct, in which everything consists of second hand impressions of different forms of processed transmissions — projections, sounds and reactions as interpretations and translations in a constructed reality. One is never in direct realization, but in search of meanings with one´s own physical presence, in which one´s own senses and actions can conquer, interpret and recognize. (Karin Søndergaard og Kjell Pedersen)

The Augmented Reality Project part 1 is organized in four complex, spatial constructions: *Smiles in Motion*, *Mirrechophone* (Mirror+Echo+Phone), *I think You — You think Me*, and *The Different Stories of a Bride and Groom*. Each spatial construction (or rather: augmented installation) play with the notion of constructing the preconditions for how we are experiencing actual phenomena and relations in physical space, through hidden data processing. Boxiganga works with specific strategies which uses the audience’s actions and reaction as a framework for the creation of an augmentation of reality. It is a pretext for making it possible to experience the construction of reality and by the same token enables the audience to reflect upon their interpretation of this experience:

In this way, the visitor also becomes involved in an augmenting of what is able to be sensed and is likewise brought to an augmented state of interpreting that experience. (Karin Søndergaard og Kjell Pedersen)

*Smiles in Motion*, the largest installation, clearly shows how Boxiganga works with bringing on the “edge” in the experience of the audience.

 1. Smiles in Motion.

First of all, it always takes at least two to have any experience in the installation at all: You exchange smiles in the chairs – through real time video transmission of the smile between the chairs; and through motion sensors that are activated by the laughs of the other person. *Mirrorechophone* is another way of researching the edge; here, two persons exchange faces – gradually, the different parts of your face is being transmitted to the other persons mirror-image; and vice-versa.



2. Mirrechophone

In fact, both installations are staging an augmentation of relationships, where the HCI is not so much about the interface itself, but about how relations occur and develop between human beings – how they react on eachother:

In fact, the basic function of the installations often requires that two visitors enter into a relationship and investigate an interpretation of the contents of that relationship. These installations then are situations for augmented relationships. (Karin Søndergaard og Kjell Pedersen)

The reactive edge of HCI-experimence is investigated further in the Augmented installation, *I Think You – You Think Me*. Here, the reactions themselves are staged by two rather aggressive computer-generated “personas” – Robert & Roberta. They react to any person entering their stage (looking a bit like a basketball field); first, by being mildly curious; but then, as you move closer to one of them, by showing more and more feelings of the more angry kind (at least that is our conventional interpretation of their reactions).

It is through the body´s organs that we sense and act. In this way our being interprets the presence of people and things and brings a certain reality to that presence. Augmented Reality involves the body through the installations presented here, and in doing so, proposes “conversations” at the edge of our normal means of sensing and communicating. (Karin Søndergaard og Kjell Pedersen)

The competences of traditional institutions and genres, indeed the epistemology of those competences, are on the edge... they are transforming. Instead, we get new domains and new competences – and an inversion of institutions and the public space. Reality, art and art institutions are under construction. In the middle of this construction-site we find the artist in a new role – as a mediator.

The examples that I have used in my investigation so far are “raw” in the sense that they only play a part on a partial level in my argumentation. They mainly represent thoughts, ideas, and strategies that constitute the practices of the artists as mediators. The examples are not by any means to be seen as in-depth analysis of all the artworks in question, nor do they constitute any elements of an “art history”. For them to be that would require that the field would be transparent in some kind of totality – or, even worse, that I would generate the notion that what I am examining is limited to the field of “art”.

I have wanted to point out how the artists as mediators are investigating and using the new domains and competences already preset in the public / political spaces of the new media culture, and which are challenging the cultural institutions of our society. However, there is no doubt that some of the new practices and new domains will also demand for new institutions – or something completely different that we have not yet seen.

That being said, I find that there are some key features of the concept of the mediator that should be mentioned here. First of all, there are precursors: Wark McKenzie investigates the “hacker” (McKenzie, The Hacker Manifesto) and “the gamer” (McKenzie, The Gamer) as the personas of digital culture – asking the very important question what kind of critical cultural production would follow after the novelist of the 19th century and the filmmaker of the 20th century? Where the hacker according to Wark Mckenzie is the radical and, dare I say, avant-gardist of digital culture, the gamer is the dreamer of a ‘reality’ with rules that (most probably) will never be. Other important precursors of the mediator: The “raw” (and the cooked) by Claude Levi-Strauss (Levi-Strauss); the “flaneur” that walks the pages as well as the real streets of Baudelaires books. The idea of the absolutely modern artist; even the notion of the “avantgardist”; all these could be seen as mediators of their time, at some level.

Recently, Boxiganga was part of the experimental project, MAP – Media Art Platform – focusing of the “digital archive experience” (Søndergaard). This was a transdisciplinary project that, intentionally, is based upon a dialectical “war” of very different competences. But that does not change the fact that this dialectical war is the backdrop of the MAP project, and an important one too. MAP, being a project based on dialogue between (very) different positions, was collectively based - with a production-process centred on a group of people sharing positions, ideas and differences. The group consisted of theoreticians, programmers, designers, curators and media artists – and inside the group everyone opened up their background and ways of working for discussion. This was challenging for everyone, but mostly, perhaps, for the artists.

The subject matter apart, the task facing the group was to make an art-collection, of which not one single work was, digital, into a digitally preserved, registered, accessible and tangible environment. In other words, the goal was to create a digital archive experience that combines the better of two worlds: the digital and the physical, the “old” archive culture and the new digital culture.

This, directly, links the task to much greater issues. The issue of creating a digital archive experience is challenging the modernistic idea of the museum, and hence the very ideas of modernity itself. It is pre-formulating, even, a new domain for art and the archive – that of the expanded digital field. Finally, it is also a question of thinking the idea of transformative creativity in completely new ways, which encompasses radical new modalities of organization and strategy in a project where the mind-set is predominantly transdisciplinary. In that situation, practice is focused on negotiations of different competences and ideas. The difference in ways of doing and thinking is the key to a radical transformative element in the creative process: A space-producing practice; a practice that augments the levels of reality into an information space.

### Metastrategic domains – the aesthetics of the transformative urban information space

Sociologically, ubiquitous computing may mean the decline of the computer addict. In the 1910's and 1920's many people "hacked" on crystal sets to take advantage of the new high tech world of radio. Now crystal-and-cat's whisker receivers are rare, because radios are ubiquitous. In addition, embodied virtuality will bring computers to the presidents of industries and countries for nearly the first time. Computer access will penetrate all groups in society. (Weiser)

A city could be said to exist at two levels: A lower level (buildings and streets), and a macro-level (the Urban). However, what is going on *in* the city, the life and practices, as well as a production of relations and value, takes place *in between* those two levels.

… at the sharp end is the population, for which one could attempt the production of an *appropriated* space… (Lefebvre)

According to Henri Lefebvre, the interference of the *Urban* into the lower level of the city is a central mechanism in the transformation of a public space into a social space It is at this *sharp end*, that the production of a space that can be populated and lived in takes place.

To exclude the *urban* from groups, classes, individuals, is also to exclude them from civilization, if from not society itself… (Lefebvre)

We may ask, then: What happens when we infuse art into that process of producing an appropriated space?

Is art that which comes out at the end of this creative process, or is it part of the process?

Does it exclude itself from the level of population, or does art have a practice at the sharp end?

According to Kerstin Bergendal, there is no doubt about where art should be: At the sharp end! Here, the artist becomes a player in the production of an appropriate space, a space for living relations:

Entering as a player concerning public space and the urban areas thus is a political act. This also concerns the role of the artist and the possible mandate for visual art in public space. It is a political role, and a political mandate. A new way of seeing the world, insisting on heterotypical aspects of human everyday life.” (Bergendal)

The artist at the sharp end, then, has a vocation. He/she is committed to a production of a space that is appropriate to a living situation and at the same time can contain the differences existing in a heterogeneous city.

The introduction of the concept of the public space into art criticism shatters mainstream categorizations of public art. … the public sphere excavates other distinctions that, neutralized by prevailing definitions of public space, are crucial to democratic practice. Art that is “public” participates in, or creates a political space and is itself a space where we assume political identities. (Deutsche)

Art, then, is activating the public space, making it a political space where exchange of ideas takes place – but also the place where the appropriate way of life and behaviour is negotiated, constantly.

The public space… is the social space where, in the absence of a foundation, the meaning and the unity of the social is negotiated – at once constituted and put at risk. What is recognized in public space is the legitimacy of debate about what is legitimate and what is illegitimate. (Deutsche)

Thus, art is strategy – a practice of reclaiming the right to express oneself in the public space… and create a framework, where we may agree as well as disagree:

The right to the city … signifies the constitution or reconstitution of a spatial-temporal unit, of a gathering together instead of a fragmentation. It does not abolish confrontations and struggles. On the contrary! (Lefebvre)

But all this is mere theory, if it is not manifested in a practice. Real Transformative creativity does not happen without practice.

There is no doubt, however, that for art to get to the sharp end it has to go through some tough and difficult phases. Most artists may not even get there. That goes for art institutions, too.

An expanded democratic space demands an expanded notion of art and art institutions (and vice versa). In the public space, before it becomes a social space – which, incidentally, may only occur on rare and short-lived occasions – art and art institutions have to negotiate with a wide range of players that are not necessarily interested in art (or have time for art) at all.

An appropriated space grows from not controlling the environment, but enhancing the possibilities at the sharp end of creativity. Again, we return to the question of reality and presence – in the words of artist Walter Riedweg:

For me, it’s a question of choosing … I’m not interested in power, but in conversation. In this sense, it is a political question, one that has nothing to do with everyday politics but rather with the way we establish our presence in the world. (Dias)

To appropriate urban information space takes time – and is in need of time. The appropriation of democratic spaces – and life at the sharp end – is critically short of time.

…our manner of working consisted precisely of detaching ourselves, little by little, from the artistic field […] There is the experimental side, but there is, above all, a method, a collective aesthetic exercise. We try to speak not of social function but of an encounter with the other, an encounter with a collective sensibility. (Dias)

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