

Express yourself – we own you!

Creative and authentic expressions within corporate and artistic frameworks

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In July 2007, I was invited to *Medialab Madrid* to give a lecture within the “First Inclusiva-net.org Meeting”. The theme of the event was “New art dynamics in Web 2 mode”, and I took this invitation as an opportunity to take a closer look at the relation between art and Web 2.0. The following text is an excerpt of my lecture.

Technical nomenclature and social dynamics

In the core of all Web 2.0 innovations stands the idea to separate form and content. Content is fed into a database and from there can be connected and displayed in manifold ways. Users no longer need to know coding in order to publish online, but can upload their content simply by using a browser. Technical innovations of Web 2.0 include server-software, content-syndication, messaging-protocols, standards-based browsers with plugins and extensions, and various client-applications. These differing but complementary approaches provide Web 2.0 with information-storage, creation, and dissemination capabilities—that go beyond what the public formerly expected of websites. Advocates of the concept suggest that technologies such as weblogs, social bookmarking, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds (and other forms of many-to-many publishing), social software, Web APIs, Web standards and online Web services imply a significant change in web usage.

The web as a *platform*—one of the key phrases in the field—means computing platforms serving web applications to end-users allowing the use of these applications entirely through a browser. “The creation of *network effects* by an architecture of participation”, another key phrase, refers to the fact, that any content may be enhanced by the way it is organized and categorized. Very often content is organized around a personal user-account which requires registration—although most users prefer not to reveal their real identity. Many users invite their friends in groups and thus share their favourite content, or the rating of the content creates links to other people with similar preferences. Another quality, which is ascribed to Web 2.0 is that it fosters ‘collaboration’ between users. The different ways of organizing content have an enormous impact on the social dynamics of a platform. Wikipedia says at this point: “Web 2.0 can also refer to a social phenomenon embracing an approach to generating and distributing Web content itself, characterized by open communication, decentralization of authority, freedom to share and re-use, and the market as a conversation”. The driving force of Web 2.0, the ‘content’, is provided by the users who either produce it themselves, or copy and paste it from other sources (TV).

‘participatory’ – ‘emancipatory’ – ‘revolutionary’

How does the arrival of Web 2.0 reformulate the relation of media and art? With this question Stefan M. Seydel from the Switzerland-based Internet platform *rebell.tv* started his interview [1] with Peter Weibel, director of the ZKM (Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany) in February 2007. In his answer, Weibel who is known to be a pioneer in promoting media art as a curator and theoretician—and who also worked as a media artist himself—puts Web 2.0 in a historical context when he states, that “... for the first time in history, the visitor [he is talking here about a museum situation] can act on the eyelevel with the artist. He can not only interact in a pre-determined way, let’s say within an interactive installation, but can contribute his own content.” From that, Weibel concludes, that Web 2.0 provides the tools for an emancipatory use of technology, and that the superior position of the artist will be deconstructed through these tools: “Artist and visitor are on eyelevel with each other.”

Interestingly, the location of the described ‘emancipatory’ use of technology is not the publicly accessible space of the Internet, but a museum, where the visitors interact with an art installation. This ‘machinery’ includes a software component (“algorithmic construction”) which is able to transform and display the images and videos the visitors have made themselves, e.g. with the help of their mobile devices, and then uploaded. The fact that visitors are able to interact with an installation, not only by selecting or changing pre-produced material, but instead, by generating and delivering their own images and films, is to Peter Weibel, a highly emancipatory quality.

In all Web 2.0 rhetoric, the term ‘content’ is said to be the driving force, but what is the actual role of the ‘content’ for a Web 2.0 based interactive art work? Does ‘content’ equal the art work? Certainly not, it is totally exchangeable, and according to the definition of Prof. Gerhard Pfennig, head of the German collecting society for visual arts, *VG Bild-Kunst*, ‘content’ means nothing but material to feed (fill) digital memory and transfer capacities.[2] The actual and unreplaceable part of the art work, of course, is the ‘machinery,’ the technical infrastructure which stores, administers and displays the content.

In fact, at the end of the above mentioned interview, Weibel compares Web 2.0 installations with the work of Andy Warhol when he says that Warhol’s work was not to create images, but to rework and recontextualize images. The comparison is interesting and somewhat accurate, although it is in contradiction to what Weibel had said earlier. In the same way, that Warhol’s appropriated images from the mass media were exchangeable and received their value through being integrated within an artistic concept/machinery, the material provided by Web 2.0 users serves as a lubricant for the ‘machinery’. However, the key difference here is that the users who produce the content are not at risk to find themselves in the role of—or on the eyelevel with—the artist.

But is it art?

Nevertheless, the idea of democratic and participatory media production has a long history in the arts. Starting with Berthold Brecht’s radio-theory in the 1920s, the video

artist Nam June Paik [3] took it further to the level of video and TV production, describing the scenario of a participatory TV production for the purpose of “integration and mutual understanding, a television made from everybody for everybody,” in 1972. He was talking about a “broadband communication revolution” already 35 years ago, thus anticipating *YouTube*’s [4] slogan: “Broadcast yourself.” In 1992 the art television project “van Gogh TV” offered an open platform during the 100 days of documenta9. This was the first experimental implementation of bottom-up Television within an art context, while a lot of community radio and TV stations had been established in the 1970s, mainly for local audiences. Meanwhile, Paik’s dream of an information super-highway has become reality, and the Internet offers a wide range for all kinds of media production. But is Web 2.0 the truly emancipatory platform the pundits claim it to be?

According to Kleiner and Wyrick [5], Web 2.0, first of all, is a business model. In their article *InfoEnclosure 2.0* they state, that this business model means the private capture of community-created value. “No one denies that the technology of sites like *YouTube*, for instance, is trivial. The real value of *YouTube* is not created by the developers of the site, but rather it is created by the people who upload videos to the site. Yet, when *YouTube* was bought for over a billion dollars [6] worth of Google stock, how much of this stock was acquired by those that made all these videos? Zero. Great deal if you are an owner of a Web 2.0 company.” Kleiner and Wyrick conclude that this “private appropriation of community created value is a betrayal of the promise of sharing technology and free cooperation. With all of the emphasis on community created content and sharing, it’s easy to overlook the other side of the Web 2.0 experience: ownership of all this content and ability to monetise its value.”

Contributing to an art installation within a museum situation, or contributing to a Web 2.0 platform structurally is the same: the technical infrastructure is not under the control of the users and content producers, which is the opposite of an emancipatory or even revolutionary situation of owning the means of production. The rhetoric, which has been borrowed from the political left only serves to obscure the actual power structures within a profit-driven business or art environment. The user is seduced to share his/her work for free, while the owners of the machinery do not even think of sharing their profits. That is why Web 2.0 platforms are hardly used by professional artists. The platforms are amateur environments, where work does not get paid, where the producer stays anonymous (with no cultural capital being added to an artist name/brand), where the aesthetics are “low”, quick and dirty, due to cheap and easy-to-use means of production. In general, Web 2.0 is not about high quality content.

Many of the videos on *YouTube* however show intriguing similarities to the performance and radical self-portrayals of the 1960s and 1970s actionist and fluxus art. The potential of video as a personal means of expression has arrived in an unexpected dimension, and one might ask, if these aesthetic expressions have the potential to democratize or even replace the elitist art system? If art would be about self-expression, then yes. If art would be about reflection and contextualisation, then no. The art world always knew, how to integrate and thus neutralize serious attacks, and it still knows how to make use of and exploit naive self-expressions in order to stabilize its’ hierarchies [7]. And within the

corporate platforms, the user-generated contents mainly serve to market commercial goods.

The Italian artist group 0100101110101101.org, aka Eva and Franco Mattes, has carried the corporate exploitation of users in online environments to perverse extremes. Their work ‘portraits’ is a selection of the 13 most beautiful avatars in Second Life [8] which captures perfectly the desire of people for beauty and eternal youth. In an interview, the artists also relate their work to Pop Art, explicitly to Andy Warhol. Like him, they claim to borrow from popular culture, but it is not only the aesthetics they borrow. Like Warhol, the work of 0100101110101101.org is extremely smart, turning corporate surplus into the surplus of the artists. However, ultimately this is a cynical art project that uses only the tools available and does not attempt to support or explore the emancipatory potential of new technologies, which undoubtedly does exist.

And what is this emancipatory potential and how can it be developed and utilised by artists? As Kleiner and Wyrick point out: “The real hope for a genuine, community enriching, next generation of internet-based services is not rooted in creating privately owned, centralised resources, but rather in creating cooperative, P2P and commons-based systems, owned by everybody and nobody”. Instead of working in the interest of the new info-landlords, this could be a challenging field of work for artists—beyond the traditional art world.

[1] <http://tv.rebell.tv/10-uhr-nachrichten/peter-weibel-zkmde-4-rocketboomcom.html>

[2] *Museum und Urheberrecht im digitalen Zeitalter*, (Museum and Copyright in the digital age), Gerhard Pfennig, Wiesbaden, 2005, p. 167

[3] *Media Planning for the Postindustrial Society – The 21st Century is Now Only 26 Years Away*, in: Nam June Paik. Werke 1946–1976. Musik – Fluxus – Video, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, 1976.

[4] *YouTube* is a website for hosting videos where users can upload, view, and share video clips, founded in February 2005: <http://youtube.com>

[5] *InfoEnclosure 2.0*, <http://www.metamute.org/en/InfoEnclosure-2.0>

[6] One year after it has been founded *YouTube* has been sold to *Google* für 1,65 Billion \$

[7] A good example for this tendency is Nam June Paik. He started out to revolutionize communication system and turned into a video artist who built huge, commdifyable installations.

[8] *Second Life* is an Internet-based virtual world which has been released in 2003. It became widely known in late 2006 and early 2007 when mainstream news media reported about it. In traffic ranking is holds place no. 1791, and after the extreme hype about 6 months ago, now, the hype slowly peaks off.