

Truly performative within a distributed network.

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ABSTRACT

The following doctoral paper investigates changing notions of artistic studio practices within a distributed network. Performative performance artworks have historically challenged art established contexts, while creating content within their framing that allow for audiences to experience a movement into a metaphysical space of critic. However, historical production of such works have traditionally involved a post-production style of development, whereby the artist creates their work to be displayed later inside a physical space. With the expansion of the web and mobile technologies, studio practices in this form of art have now become radically open, allowing for an artwork to be developed, researched, and displayed simultaneously on the Internet.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Movement and Computing** → Digital art; Social media; Interface • **Networks** → Semantic web.

KEYWORDS

Studio, Distributed, Performativity, Interface, Internet, Semantic web, Performance art.

1 INTRODUCTION

When thinking about the space for performance art, we imagine the confines of the gallery, museum, public space, or an alternative space. To this degree, this situation within the confines of the 'art' space, has produced a practice which is site specific, and in many instances allowed artists to play with performative elements of life [13]. With the introduction of the World Wide Web (WWW), the site for this art form extended to this new form of public space, creating extended depths for a performance context, promoting the non-local in favour of a new distribution system hinged on the site of the computer. Users could experience art from the comfort of their own home, while artists creating this new form of art could play with new strategies to collapse the boundaries of art and life, enact ideas such as Joseph Beuys' social sculpture through the systems need of participation, and extend the viewers spatial sense through interconnected interfaces.

Historically works by artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles or Ana Mendieta, challenged not only the establishment and its vision of what constitutes an artwork but as well, the everyday thinking of gender roles. In Ukeles' series *Maintenance Art*, the artist performed "literally on her hands and knees, washed the entry plaza and steps of the museum for four hours, then scrubbed the floors inside the exhibition galleries for another four hours," and in Minow Kwon's words had the conceptual by-product of critiquing not only the institution's hierarchical system of space, but as well "complicated the social and gendered division between the notions of the public and the private" [14]. In the latter example, Mendieta's 1973 series of work which focused on rape and violence¹ - in response to the publicised rape and murder of nursing student Sara Ann Otten that same year - consisted of documented photos of Ana Mendieta posing as a victim of rape. As part of her process she "invited her fellow students to her apartment where, through a door left purposefully ajar, they found her in the position recorded [...] which recreated the scene as reported in the press" [16]. Much like in the example of Ukeles, this work too challenged the notions of femininity and the perceived lack of by the judicial system which had failed to adequately prosecute anyone for the rape and murder of Sara Ann Otten.

In contrast, if we fast forward to the point that includes the WWW, and examine works, such as Cornelia Sollfrank's *Female Extension*, the level of play between art and life takes on a totally different idea. For this project, the artist created software in response to the Hamburger Kunsthalle open call competition for net art, which was the first of its kind at the time [27]. As part of the work Sollfrank's software generated hundreds of fake female net artists and entered them into the competition undetected - which saw the unaware institution use these false entries naively, proclaiming in press releases that the outstanding number of female entries was validity for their competition. However, at the close of the competition,

¹ According to the Tate this series of works consisted of three pieces: *Untitled(Rape Scene)*, *Untitled(People Looking at Blood, Motif)*, and *Untitled(Bloody Mattress)*; works such as *Rape Performance*; *Clinton Piece*, *Dead on Street*, and as well the performance *All Tied-Up Woman* are considered to be in relation to the first work in the series *Untitled(Rape Scene)*.

and despite the outstanding number of female entries, the institution selected 3 male winners – prompting Sollfrank to release her own press release to the media on her intervention. The outcome of this performance/intervention was the complete withdrawal of the Hamburger Kunsthalle from any new media association for years to come [27].

The contrast between the former performances to that of Sollfrank's recalls the thoughts of Judith Butler, who queried in her analysis performativity and its situational site of display:

“the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence. The conventions which mediate proximity and identification in these two instances are clearly quite different. I want to make two different kinds of claims regarding this tentative distinction. In the theatre, one can say, ‘this is just an act,’ and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real [...] On the street or in the bus, the act becomes dangerous, if it does, precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act, indeed, on the street or in the bus, there is no presumption that the act is distinct from reality.” [4]

In other words, the distinction in this comparison is the observation of performance in the ‘theatre’ (i.e. a space for art with the corresponding audience) to that of the performance on the ‘street’ (i.e. outside the confines of the art space with a non-art audience). The argument here is that the mode of dissemination, which dramatically changed after the introduction of the Internet, provides an opportunity for artists not simply to bypass museums and galleries to present artworks to audiences, but as well the chance to instigate truly critical performative pieces with real world implications. The introduction of the WWW created an environment where these types of performative performance works now have a larger platform, and further a global stage not exclusively associated with art, multiplying their critical power exponentially, which has only accelerated with the increased technological connection between the online and offline worlds.

In this regard, there is a progression in the artwork's interface that allows for a greater degree of movement for the user/viewer during their experience of the artwork. This can be identified by the increase of performative realism induced by the transference of the audience member into a space where the dissemination of content truly breaches the boundaries between art and life. Yet, considering newer contemporary practices, can performances of this nature claim anything other than an interaction with the performative gestures their artists sought to highlight? This is not to denigrate any of the artworks, but a simpler question on the possibility of a truly performative gender piece that

crosses the art and life boundary (or in that matter any performative piece that interacts with life outside the gallery), that is situated inside the sanctuary of the art space, which has been historically its own bubble that is apart from the real world. The thoughts of this comes from Kwon's arguments on site-specific work, as a tool for interrogation and “the radical restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience” [15], or in other words a praxis that straddles the boundary between art and life. And yet, when attributing this thought to artworks that lacks a distribution system like the Internet, artworks such as *Maintenance art*, or Mendieta's series, and other works of a similar nature, is its situation inside an established art distribution context, which is still by today's standards an isolated event that seems separate from real life. Furthermore, early net art, while closer to a praxis that breaches the art and life boundary, was anchored to its site, the artwork's webpage [3], creating similar ecological dependencies for the presentation of the work, i.e. one that still relied on the documentation of the process for the dissemination of the works content to a wider audience.

After the Dot Com bust of the early 2000s, operations on the Web shifted from a fixity on a single individual's homepage to social networking websites such as Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube. This ecological conversion created a situation where accessibility to the network required less technical expertise, and saw artists begin to situate their work across several of these social media sites, as opposed to early net art [8, 23]. In this instance, the situation induced an environment where both audience and artist operated inside the same networking systems. Furthermore, Caitlin Jones has cited that within this contemporary situation there is this fundamental shift in artistic studio practice that is centred around the site of the computer [10], with many artists situating the development and research of their art in those very same networking sites. This creates the potential for a further progression in the artworks interface, one that through the combination of computing and network technology potentially allows for critical performative works to transport their audiences into a space where art is life.

2 THE DISTRIBUTED STUDIO

A possible causality for this changing situation is that contemporary artists operate very differently than the traditional ‘studio’ artist. In this respect, artist and researcher Maria Miranda has written about this change in praxis which sees more and more artists, “now leaving the studio, moving and working in public spaces, in a process that is both mobile and nomadic,” in a context where, “the Internet is now acting as one site of the work as well as another form of public space” [24]. Central to this thought is Miranda's identification of the public sphere becoming a mediated space, or in other

words an ecology where “the relationship between people and media [...] is transforming public space into a performative space of encounter” [25]. The plausibility of this scenario comes through the analysis of the transforming urban space into a *media city*, as well as the metaphysical effects of surveillance technology on our society, by Scott McQuire [20] and John McGarth [17], respectively.

Examining this contemporary digital landscape, the boundaries between the private and public spheres have dynamically changed with the increase of network infrastructure within our physical architecture, in other words the development of media cities. McQuire, who has written about the increasing amount of technology built into the fabric of our urban space, has observed that through this connectivity that we are experiencing “new spatial ensembles” [21]. These *new spatial ensembles* characterise what McQuire calls as *rational space*, which is described as:

“The condition of social space shaped by the simultaneous experience of radically different velocities [...] Rational space comes to the fore when the primacy once accorded to the stability of material objects is reframed by the variable relations established between different velocities. [...] Rational space is the social space created by the contemporary imperative to actively establish social relations ‘on the fly’ across heterogeneous dimensions in which the global is inextricably imbricated with the face-to-face.” [22]

Thus, the idea brought forth here on *rational space* is defined as an environmental condition on the contemporary situation, where “social relationships” have become “radically open” to a wider audience, via the increased connectivity between brick and byte.

On the latter, surveillance technology, McGarth’s work on the topic introduces the idea of a space of surveillance, which again is classified as a contemporary effect on society’s mind-set. Using the work of Henri Lefebvre’s *abstract space* and *differential space*, McGarth carves out a comprehensive idea where *surveillance space* can exist alongside the ideological geometric space through the contradictory claims of transparency by authorities; “Surveillance space may be analysed as a field where differential space potentially emerges, carrying within itself simultaneous, linked and yet also irreconcilable aspects of the mental and social” [18]. To illustrate this point McGarth called on the case-study of the Rodney King trial, which is one of the first examples to introduce a widely-publicised surveillance video as evidence:

“Members of the jury were told that they needed to imagine the interior, intimate spaces which the tape could not show. The transformative capacity of the camera – turning private into public space – was also emphasized. These isolated events might look uncalled for in the public realm, suggested the defence, but the public has no knowledge of the day-

to-day pressures of policing in Los Angeles. The tape makes appropriate acts appear to be inappropriate. It criminalizes. Finally, the constative truth value of the tape itself was questioned by appeal to its performative qualities. The tape – has the effect, the defence implied, through mass television broadcast, not of constative description (the police beat Rodney King and I am describing this to you) but of performative uptake. Unlike any reports of a beating, this tape itself, this mass experience of watching the tape, has become a public experience of police violence. In the defence’s argument, this public uptake of the performativity of the tape bears no relation to the events of the night itself and must not be allowed to influence the jury’s verdict. The tape becomes an event, a space, separated from the beating, the evidence.” [19]

Thus, what can be taken from this example is the creation of a social affect – one where individuals begin to mentally transport themselves into other metaphysical spaces. Furthermore, these conditions are not limited to authoritarian surveillance – if examining self-imposed surveillance, e.g., the increase of amateur pornography from non-professional individuals/couples, or the interactions of individuals on social media, vlogging, etc., a situation is entered where life through this external/self-imposed surveillance becomes a constant stream of performativity.

Returning to Miranda’s idea of *mediated space*, if these contemporary conditions are paired alongside the increase in mobile communications, people, especially those with mobile devices, are beginning to create *telecocoons*² through this connectivity. To describe this *telecocoon* affect, it is “a virtual networked space created by young friends and lovers out of a constant, steady stream of conversation that keeps them in touch even when they are apart,” thus creating the feeling of, “intimacy at a distance” [29]. In this sense, the ideas behind place and space, which Marc Augé [1] described as space where one had an identity, as opposed to that of the non-place (i.e. a point in transition, thus a place of no identity) collapses, bringing the public and private into the same hemisphere through technology – while eliminating the idea of a non-place altogether [30]. Therefore, the example of Cornelia Sollfrank’s *Female Extension*, while more performative in its enactment than performance works that did not seek the Internet as a distributive outlet, still represents an art practice in transition. In *Rethinking Curating* [7] Sarah Cook and Beryl Graham’s analysis of curating net art in a distributive system, or broadcast environment – still emphasises a tilt toward a post-production style of exhibition making, i.e. the artist creates a

² The notion of the *telecocoon* was developed by Ichiyo Habuchi, in observation of the young Japanese people and their use of mobile technology. For further reading please see: Habuchi, I. 2005. Accelerating Reflexivity. in *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*. ed. Ito, M., Okabe, D., and Matsuda, M. Cambridge, MIT Press.

work and then it is displayed. This is true when examining other works with a similar nature to Sollfrank's. For example, *biennale.py*, by artists group 0100101110101101.org and *epidemiC*, as describe by Joasia Krysa [12] also emphasised this performative effect, similar to Sollfrank's, through the artworks uncontrollability, but again the conditions for the creation of the artwork constitute this traditional fashion of a secluded production for the work prior to its presentation. When Miranda described the practice of the *uncertain* artist, there is a stressed nomadic nature for the practice, which finds the artwork being presented and created simultaneously in the public spaces of the Internet.

In Caitlin Jones' essay on the contemporary studio space, she emphasised that while the idea of a 'post studio' practice has been present since the 60s, "The emergence of the Internet account for probably the largest divergence between a physical studio and the laptop studio" [10]. Furthermore, this shift in studio practice for Jones, enhanced by the commercial push over the last few years to increase mobile technologies, had fostered "The image of the solitary artistic genius," to be "replaced by a more collaborative mode of production" [10]. While also creating an open situation where the accessibility to a workspace (i.e. the laptop, or other networked forms of media), materials of research, access to the work itself, all became intertwined due to network connectivity. Finally, through this open forum, audiences also became entangled in the process, becoming active participants in a process that mirrored the development, research and exhibiting of the artwork simultaneously. In this regard, Jones' *post studio laptop studio* fits into Miranda's notion of mediated space and artistic practice. This condition in turn, is the stimulus for an emerging contemporary practice where the artist's studio becomes a public space where the artwork thrives on real world performativity, yet as well, completely visible from the onset of its creation.

3 EXAMPLES OF DISTRIBUTED PERFORMATIVITY

Artist Angela Washko's project *The Council of Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft* [31] presents an alternative to this secluded artwork development. The body of work ranges from recorded in game videos available through Vimeo, a WordPress site, along with live performances in front of an audience. To describe the work, Washko, who is a veteran player of World of Warcraft (WoW), enters the game-world and begins to converse with other players on their thoughts and understanding of feminism. In this fashion, Washko's performance exposes several performative traits of ingrained ideas of gender, which is only possible through the location of her practice. In an interview Washko describe the WoW community as "geographically diverse," with a range of "17-year-olds to 60-year-olds, people in the military, people who are college professors, people who

work as nurses" [11]. Thus, while she might conduct several of these performances from the seclusion of her home or studio, the fact that her work involved an Internet community produces the result where her praxis creates uncertainty in the boundaries of art and life, where the artwork resides, while creating a progressive research practice that changes the artwork with each iteration.

In other examples, we have the case of artist Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* [28], and Ann Hirsch's *Scandalishious* [9]. In both we find this development of the work in real time, with an actively engaged audience that is ambivalent to the fact that the content they had been viewing, was in fact an art performance. While both artworks use very different media outlets (i.e. Ulman through Instagram, and Hirsch through YouTube), both reveal through their performance a general biasness towards women and the idea behind gender representation on the Internet. In both cases, the reception works were oriented as a visual blog, documenting the lives of female characters each artist had witnessed around the Internet. In the case of Hirsch, she noted that:

"There was the woman whose face you never saw, she wouldn't speak, and all she did was booty dancing for the camera; she was a sexual object with no identity. Then you would have the girls who would talk to the camera but they would never be sexual. My idea for that online identity was to combine those two things, be a person you could see and also dance and be sexual for the camera, which at that time you didn't really see." [26]

For Ulman, the inspiration for her female character came from, "the Korean schoolgirl Instagram accounts which had a notoriety for generating interesting, personal narratives in the attempt to gain more followers" [2]. In each case, the participation with the audience was represented in each posting's comments, and in the perspective of this paper, is where the true performance took place. Much like Washko's interaction with WoW gamers, it was through the comments and the active dialogue the artists maintained with their audiences that transformed both pieces into active entities, which is all together a live studio practice, artwork, and progressive research project.

4 FINAL REMARKS

The fact remains that artists are operating in different manners, and regardless for the reasoning (i.e. economics, politics in art, etc.), our contemporary situation is producing more and more works of art that activate scenarios where performativity can be truly critiqued in a real-world situation, which is absent of the white cubes safety. This create situations where art and life is synonymous, and where institutional critique has evolved from examining the art institution - to one which critiques life itself. In terms of

movement, this increase in mobile technology has allowed for computing to further enact the effect of art on its audience. Whereas, earlier forms of performative art pushed the boundaries of what counted as a work of art, the contemporary situation has the advantage of transporting the viewer/user to a space where art and life coexist, creating situations of confusion. Moreover, these misperceptions, induced by the artworks situation, become a catalyst for critically beautiful pieces, which are staged live, and shaped not only by the thoughts of the artist, but also by the various parties interacting with the artwork. In this sense, ingrained social performative gestures and biases are revealed in public space.

For a final note, the next steps of this doctoral research are to investigate the changing notions of artistic practice on the web, and their impact on current art making processes. A specific focus will be on the art platform, or interface, to develop a theoretical body of work that can be assessed through practice-led research. This will be realised through the development of several Internet platforms, created specifically to interact with the current extension of the web, *the semantic web*, developed by the WWW's creator Tim Berners-Lee [5, 6], to better understand how to operate within curatorial practice when approaching this form of artistic operation.

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