

TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED PARTICIPATORY AND PERFORMATIVE ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS AS SOCIAL EDUCATIONAL TOOLS

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of participatory, performative forms of art that incorporate new media technologies as educational tools, in a wider social context. In particular, using paradigms from technology-based artistic performative and participatory expressions, the research underlines the importance of technology in diminishing the passive role of the viewers and focuses in alternative forms of educational experiences and social memory transmission.

Herein the historical continuity of participatory notions is depicted from primitive cultures to the contemporary paradigm of the work of Rafael Lozano Hemmer, and from the Brechtian Epic theatre to the ritual performances of Joseph Beuys. In this context educational theories are presented focusing on the acquisition of knowledge through the notions of interactivity, participation and the experience of social space itself. Furthermore, through Connertons' idea of performance as an act of ritual remembering, these kinds of events that represent artistic expressions are being regarded as ritual acts that interpret and transmit the knowledge of the past and the present.

The paper concludes that participation and performativity, which have emerged through the use of technology, transform these kind of contemporary art forms to *educational rituals*.

Keywords: *participatory art, performative art, technology, education, social memory.*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse technology-mediated participatory and performative forms of art and their cultural and educational implications underlining some of their features like *immersion*, also resulting in the transmission of collective memory. Even though arts' main purpose is not to instruct the spectator, we assume that these creative expressions engraved into different cultures and civilizations have clear educational implications as they propose to the audiences an aesthetic and critical response to their

surroundings and the construction of social narratives and the social space.

“Arts”, according to Bowers (1993), “represent the areas of future human growth and progress” They are inherently participatory since they enforce individuals to connect “with realities symbolically represented by other people”. In the wider context of community their participatory character renders them into “sources of challenge for reflecting on the kinds of experiences that could become the analogues upon which collective experiences are to be based” (Bowers, 1993, pp.173-4). Advances in technology are to challenge artistic and social expressions of humanity furthermore by providing new tools of remembering and connecting.

Participation and performativity: historical continuities

We may assume that the notion of participation is as old as humankind. Discussing the way all arts as a whole serve primitive cultures’ manifestations of collective identity, Bowers analyses how the notion of participation they expressed was rooted to a different form of individuality (Bowers, 1993, pp. 209-210). As Highwater explains, “individualism” expressed through the Arts “does not presuppose autonomy, alienation or isolation” but rather extends the relatedness of the individual to include all things of the world (Highwater, 1981, p.172). Accordingly, participation in arts may be defined as the collective expression of the individual.

At 1920, in Germany Erwin Piscator introduces new media to the stage production with the intention of relating drama to contemporary events. His still images and projected film on screen during stage plays provided an external comment on the play simultaneously with its performance, so that the audience was at once subjectively and objectively involved (Chambers, 2002, p.204). Piscator’s techniques later developed by Bertolt Brecht in the Epic Theatre one of the most significant theatrical forms of the 20th century that according to Benjamin “corresponds to the modern level of technology” (W. Benjamin, 1998, p.6). Brecht used projections and sound recordings to interrupt the flow of the story and alienate spectators from the representation of reality, thus to prevent them from confusing stage events with real life events. He saw this mediated by technology theatre as an educational tool by which he wished to assign audiences an active role and enhance them to think about and cause changes to their own lives (Brockett & Hildy, 2014, p.411). Hence the beginnings of multimedia usage within various aesthetic manifestations served as a mean to provoke and enhance participation, by stimulating arts’ power to elevate and transform individuals’ thought and consciousness. Piscator and Brecht were associated with the Dada movement.

From the avant-garde movements of the 20th century, Dadaists were the first to defy conventional forms of art introducing *performance*, a mix of poetry, music and visual arts (Munoz, 2016). More than any other artistic movement, they have “shaken society’s notion of art and cultural production”. They “questioned the myth of originality, of the artist as genius suggesting instead that everybody should be an artist and that almost anything could be art” (Kuenzli, 2006, p.14-16). In the early 70s, Joseph

Beuys expressed the same idea with his concept of social sculpture that also fashions everything into art and proposes that everything should be approached creatively. This idea places his work within a narrative of socially collaborative, participatory, dialogical, and relational art (Rojas, 2010). In his ritual performances Beuys located human body to the centre of a conscious sensory perception of the world, which is one of the basic ideas of performativity.

Contemporary forms of participation. Relational art

In contemporary visual and performing arts the term *participatory* refers to the active involvement of the viewer or spectator to the production process of the artwork (Almenberg, 2010). Technological advancements in the last decades stimulated new ways and forms of participation of the audiences in the arts and the wider cultural scenery. As digital media have been increasingly incorporated to art practices, those practises came closer to the notion of participation. Bosma (2004) argues that from all media artworks “some only create curiosity and wonder” while “others clearly aim at audience participation or even education” (Bosma, 2004). Within this context, technology becomes a new tool to the construction of immersive interactive environments and the formulation of participatory audiences.

Nicolas Bourriaud places this participatory feature in a new term which he defines as *relational*. In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud describes relational art as 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. The city becomes then a system of intensive encounters which end up producing linked artistic practices with “being together” as their central theme (Bourriaud, 1998, p.14). The artist is no longer the creator of context but he or she becomes the facilitator of social encounters which form the artwork.

One of those artists is the Mexican –Canadian Rafael Lozano Hemmer. Placing his art in the intersection of performance and architecture, Hemmer, uses multimedia technologies in his large-scale installations to provoke participation in an immersive way. The spectators are bodily involved to the creation of the artworks, which outcomes are depended on their interactions. Hemmer incorporates technology to his installations to transform the main narratives of a building or public space and modify the existing behaviours, including the audience’s relationship with the urban environment. This practice defined by Hemmer as *Relational Architecture* is routed to previous methods of ancient civilizations to preserve social memory: Simonides mnemonics, a method of memorization through visualization, or the art of memory in Chinese traditions where architecture was used as a depository of memories (Hemmer, 1999).

Participatory art procedures and educational “schemata”. Hemmers paradigm

In *Under Scan* (2005-2006), in order to modify existing perceptions of reality, Hemmer uses the shadows of the spectators’ bodies as a background to project new information

to the spectator's cognitive patterns. The activation of thousands of video portraits taken in various cities of England within the form of the projected shadows defines a space of encounter, an apocalyptic view of the other, while at the same time establishes a private space inside the public space where the owner of the shadow, the spectator, may reconstruct his or her own reality using a combination of differentiated social and personal narratives.

In his theory of cognitive development, Piaget (1936) describes a process of organizing knowledge occurring through interaction with the environment, in *units* which he defines as *schemas*. These *units* may contain plots, information, knowledge, mental representations, an arrangement of behavioral patterns "which we use both to understand and to respond to situations". *Schemas* are stored and apply when needed during the process of adaptation (or adjustment) to the world (McLeod, 2018). Reflecting on Hemmers' work and the example of *Under Scan*, we may recognize the visual representation of *schemas* in the form of the shadow. Here the work of art functions as a tool to the learning process, as it offers a form a *unit* (the *schema*), a visual space to project, understand and adapt new collective perceptions of the world.

Some other educational practices like *social constructivism* and *critical pedagogy* share a common ground with performative participatory interactive artistic procedures. Social constructivism (Lev Vygotsky, 1978) has a primary focus on how learners construct their own meaning from new information, as they interact with reality and with other learners who bring different perspectives. Constructivist learning environments require students to use their prior knowledge and experiences to formulate new, related, or adaptive concepts in learning.

Critical pedagogy as expressed by Paulo Freire (1970) considers education as the means by which, humans deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their own world. "Pedagogy is a moral and political practice that is always implicated in power relations" according to Henry Giroux (2004), one of the latest contributors to this theory. "It offers both a particular version and vision of civic life, the future, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our physical and social environment" (Giroux, 1985, p.33). Therefore, space may be one of the basic components of educational practice and an effective tool to the organization of meaning.

The educational character of space is also underlined by David Gruenewald (2003) and the concept of *Place-Conscious Education*. "Space is the medium through culture is reproduced" (Gruenewald, p.629), and as such it is considered as inherently pedagogical. Gruenewald, believes that education should increase awareness on the social construction of public space and help individuals to reveal the invested meanings in it, so that they become active participants to its production. This idea recalls Beuys' concept of social sculpture.

Performativity as a tool for social memory transmissions

According to Maurice Halbwachs (1992) memory is generated and sustained within groups, such as those based on religion, class and kinship. In *La Memoire Collective*, he argues that memory is social, collective and *lived*. For Halbwachs, a distinction between individual and social memory is meaningless, since people acquire or construct memory not as isolated individuals but as members of a society.

In order for social and collective memory to cohere it is crucial to communicate and transmit it across generations. For social anthropologist Paul Connerton (1989), the responsibility lies with the members of a social group, who should not neglect to transmit the representations to the younger members of the group: “if we are to say that a social group, whose duration exceeds that of the lifespan of any single individual, is able to remember in common, it is not sufficient that the various members who compose that group at any given time should be able to retain the mental representation relating to the past of that group” (Connerton, 1989, p.38). The key here is in commemorative ceremonies that are performative, enacted in ritual and incorporated in the body as a form of *habit memory*.

In particular, according to Paul Connerton, these bodily practices provide a particularly effective system of mnemonics. He argues that memory can be transmitted, not only through textual and cognitive ways, but also through performance and incorporating practices. With this holistic approach Connerton presents performance as an act of ritual remembering and subjects the human body to social forces, shaped by the cultural norms. In this point of view, performative and participatory events that represent artistic expressions can be regarded as ritual acts that interpret and transmit the knowledge of the past and the present enacting social memory through habitual practices (Connerton, 1989). Within the same context, Assmann (2006) describes cultural memory as a type of *working memory* which is continuously constructed and performed by individuals and groups who become involved in various forms of memorial activity, such as commemorative ceremonies, artistic representations etc., and through various media, such as images, places, gestures, rituals etc. Rituals in particular, have a fixed timeline, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance. They are also connected with all forms of art, through which a group of people communicate its shared beliefs.

Similarly to rituals, several technology-based artworks are repetitive, performative, participatory and strongly engage their audience in an immersive environment. Specifically, interactive digital installations in public settings result in the collective construction and reconstruction of cultural meaning and knowledge, through the shared experiences that are newly created and the ones that are being replicated.

Conclusion

Technology is so much incorporated to our everyday practices, that it changes our

perception of reality. A reality that no longer should be ignored by formal educational systems, but may be used instead as a tool to generate innovative educational practices. Enhanced by the interactivity and the opportunities for co-creation provided by technology, all these notions of performativity, participation and memory transmission may coincide with several *educational demands* for social change and the formation of a critical creative and self-conscious individual.

The usage of multimedia technologies provokes and enhances the participation of spectators in the fields of art and education practice. Simultaneously technology itself becomes a tool of connectivity and communication as well as a repository of social memory. In conclusion, we assume that, due to their participatory and performative character, contemporary technology-based artistic practices generate new knowledge in an experiential multisensory level and accordingly could be regarded as *educational rituals* in the wider social context.

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