

Global Communications and the Rise of Social Media: The Future of International Cultural Engagement

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White Paper-Theme Four

Distributed in preparation for discussion at Salzburg Global Seminar

Session 490

Executive Summary

This paper reviews the path to creating a meaningful environment in which cultural exchanges can take place through visual and performance art.

Artists and the institutions that serve them are in an excellent position to take the lead on the shaping of the global culture and economy in what we call the “Imagination Age.” Artists are required to help society make sense of complex scientific ideas and to explore what it means to be human at a time when people and machines are becoming integrated.

The exploration of what it means to be human has always been the main role and higher calling of the artist. This will never change.

Talk To Me

In 2011, the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized an exhibition, *Talk To Me*,¹ to highlight the integration of art, technology and life.

“Whether openly and actively or in subtle, subliminal ways, things talk to us. Tangible and intangible, and at all scales—from the spoon to the city, the government, and the Web, and from buildings to communities, social networks, systems, and artificial worlds—things communicate. They do not all speak up: some use text, diagrams, visual interfaces, or even scent and temperature: others just keep us company in eloquent silence,” MoMA’s statement explained.²

1 Talk to Me: Design and the Communication between People and Objects, curated by Paola Antonelli
<http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1080>

2 Ibid.

The exhibit included myriad apps, gadgets and visualizations involving urban life, home life, street life, interactions between people, between people and objects, and even between machines, to make human life easier or more understandable. *Talk To Me* underscores that human life has been completely transformed by the combination of brains and technology.

Twenty-first-century culture is centered on interaction: “I communicate, therefore I am” is the defining affirmation of contemporary existence, and objects and systems are now also expected to have personalities. Contemporary designers do not just provide function, form, and meaning, but also must draft the scripts that allow people and things to develop and improvise a dialogue.

What is the role of the technological object as a form of cultural exchange? Artists, in this sense, have never been more integral to the functioning of society.

What kind of world will we live in, if we find a way to create it with our minds... together?



Figure 1: Kate Moss as Hologram from the Alexander McQueen show.

Techno-Magic

Art has been amplified by technology since the first cave painting was etched with a stick. Modern tools, however, allow far more than just a depiction of a fleeting reality. They offer artists and the institutions that serve them a chance to create the future.

Keeping current on the dizzying array of modern tools is hard enough. Cultivating the creativity to use them well is a massive challenge. The same way a printing press is only as magnificent as the books it enables, the Internet is only as connective as the content and networks we create.

The spark of imagination is what brings technology to life for meaningful human interaction, whether it is a stick or the Internet. There are many unique ways to create meaningful exchanges between human beings through technology.

The idea that digital media “replaces” physical interactions and objects is a short-sighted one. Google Art Project, for example, allows visitors to explore works of art that are physically housed in the world’s top museums. While some travelers may experience the pleasure of personally viewing these pieces, nobody’s eye can magnify each microcosm and brushstroke the way Google Art Project can, transforming a masterpiece into a personal experience.

Then there are the instances of mixed reality curation so fascinating that viewers cannot tell if what they are seeing is real. In 2006, designer Alexander McQueen stunned a Paris audience and later, global audiences, with “an astonishing feat of techno-magic,” as writer Sarah Mower described it in *Style.com* at the time.

“Inside an empty glass pyramid, a mysterious puff of white smoke appeared from nowhere and spun in midair, slowly resolving itself into the moving, twisting shape of a woman enveloped in the billowing folds of a white dress,” Mower wrote. “It was Kate Moss, her blonde hair and pale arms trailing in a dream-like apparition of fragility and beauty that danced for a few seconds, then shrank and dematerialized into the ether.”

This vision of Kate Moss was actually a state-of-the-art hologram. This was not just a visual stunt to mesmerize the audience with a feat of techno-magic, however. It was the most imaginative way in which the exhibition’s curators could display McQueen’s luminous gown of transparent, airy organza ruffles.

Whatever it is you are creating or curating, you can amplify it with imagination, enabled by the prism of technology.

Cool-Hunting

Back when a stick was used for cave paintings, only the people who lived in or around that cave would have ever seen the work. Eventually, some humans from the distant future, their world made smaller by mass transit and other modern technology, would come across the ancient sketch and photograph it, exhibit it in a museum, publish it in a book or post its digital likeness on the Internet, where billions of people now and for years to come might have a chance to glimpse back into the distant past to the origins of symbolic thought and art.

Similarly, great artists can now emerge from what would have formerly been an invisible darkness of obscurity. The emergence of unexpected, magnificent talent transforms the global arts scene by turning the entire digital culture into one museum with many side galleries waiting to be experienced or created by those who know how to participate in the environment. This “mixed reality” environment includes the digital culture and the physical world and most importantly, the people who occupy it.

Exhibiting traditional or known work in a new way is an exciting aspect of the emerging global arts scene, but an equally important part of the mission is to find truly avant-garde artists and curators. Sometimes, if you know how to look, you can find them on Twitter and Instagram.

The Ubiquity of Visual Art

In *101 Things to Learn in Art School* by Kit White, the author elegantly summarizes the state of visual art in the world today. “Hybridity defines the art process,” she notes. “It describes the cross-pollination of areas of study, disparate types of experience and the polyglot nature of the globalized world. To embody this glut of atomized experience, art incorporates multiple media and points of view, often together.”³

Twitter and Instagram are two of the platforms that incorporate multiple media and points of view. The idea that Twitter is “only 140 characters” and therefore an insignificant form of communication misses the point. The news media have well documented the many ways in which some of the 500 million Twitter participants around the world have used the platform to great advantage, though many powerful Twitter stories remain untold. A short tweet can include a link to a website, an image, a video, in other words, a glimpse of a previously unseen world, out there for anyone who seeks to find.

In “The Death of the Cyberflâneur,” a recent opinion piece for *The New York Times*, digital critic Evgeny Morozov asserts that in the early days of the web, the romantic notion of a thriving culture of cyberflâneurs—people who explored cyberspace as virgin territory like those who once drifted anonymously to capture images in urban environments—seemed inevitable. The title of his piece implies that this fantasy has not come to pass.

We disagree. It is no surprise that hundreds of millions of people use Facebook, for example, but that does not make it the most interesting or creative way to connect with people. The avant-garde is still at work.

That the Internet is a visual medium requiring great content and presentation in order to reach its full potential is only just now becoming evident. With 25 million users⁴ and more every day around the world, Instagram, a popular photo-sharing tool, is one of the digital platforms enabling this increasingly visual global perspective.

Created in 2010 by a young Brazilian emigré to the US, Mike Krieger, and his collaborator, Kevin Systrom,⁵ Instagram is an app that allows iPhone, iPad and Android⁶ users to filter their own images with special artistic effects and share them. People can look at and “like” each other’s photographs.

The implications of this seemingly simple idea are extremely significant. Cultural engagement was once brokered solely through intermediaries. Governments and the media instructed us on how to perceive and why to fear or accept other cultures. Only the most intrepid travelers, generally people with resources enough to treat diversity like an exotic novelty instead of a way of life, were able to create independent perspectives.

The digital culture has opened up a possibility for much greater connectivity, not just because we can experience the unfamiliar while remaining in our own daily lives, but

3 *101 Things to Learn in Art School*, by Kit White, October 2011, The MIT Press <http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=12600>

4 “Instagram appears to have passed 25 million users, adding up to 3000 more per hour,” *The Next Web*, March 2, 2012 <http://thenextweb.com/socialmedia/2012/03/02/instagram-appears-to-have-passed-25-million-users-adding-up-to-3000-more-per-hour/>

5 Wikipedia: Instagram <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instagram>

6 “Instagram for Android gets tablet, Wi-Fi, SD card support,” *CNet*, April 6, 2012 http://news.cnet.com/8301-17938_105-57410704-1/instagram-for-android-gets-tablet-wi-fi-sd-card-support/

because, in so doing, we become aware of the interconnectedness of life from the standpoint of a single global environment.

The value of being able to create a shared global snapshot with a click is so valuable that Instagram, a company with around a dozen employees and no revenue, was recently purchased by Facebook for \$1b.

The role of the artist has always been to illuminate in a unique way that which remains hidden, including the commonalities between “us” and “them.” Art is an act of creative imagination, and as technology and cultural relations evolve at a rapid pace, so too must evolve the artists who are called upon to help us make sense of the increasingly complex world in which we live.

Exhibiting and Selling Work to a New Audience



Figure 2: Double Fine Adventure raises over US\$3MM on Kickstarter. (Source: Kickstarter screenshot.)

Kickstart Your Art

In 2008, New Orleans artist Perry Chen collaborated with colleagues to try and find a way to help artists raise the visibility of their projects and get funding. The result was Kickstarter⁷ an online crowdfunding website for creative projects.

On Kickstarter, artists post a description of their project and a financial goal. They have a fixed amount of time to successfully get funded by small micro-donations from many people. Contributors to the projects receive rewards (sometimes thrilling ones—including original works and one-of-a-kind experiences) for their support.

In three years, Kickstarter has consistently broken expectations and records. In 2010, 3,910 Kickstarter projects were successfully funded with \$27,638,318 dollars pledged and a project success rate of 43%. In 2011, 11,836 successful projects raised \$99,344,381.⁸ A video game producer just raised \$3.3 million for a game called

⁷ Wikipedia history of Kickstarter, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kickstarter>

⁸ Ibid.

Double Fine Adventure on Kickstarter.⁹ Since then two other game-driven art projects have raised over a million dollars each on Kickstarter,¹⁰ which brings together artists and new fans of art from around the world who support art at levels as accessible as \$1 per pledge.

In this way, technology connects artists to a new market and fan base.



Figure 3: Battery Dance International Cultural Diplomacy Toolkit, (Source: Battery Dance Company)

Meaningful Cultural Interactions

A few years ago, Battery Dance Company’s director was not sure how a performance art as visceral as dance could translate to the digital culture.

For 35 years, New York City-based Battery Dance Company has traveled around the world, performing symbolic choreography rich with opportunities for meaningful cultural relations. Recently, the U.S. Embassy to the Democratic Republic of the Congo hosted BDC dancer Carmen Nicole in Kinshasa for one month to work with the National Ballet and local dancers to create four original dance works dramatizing sexual and gender-based violence and encouraging respect for women and girls.

When we met Jonathan Hollander, Battery Dance Company’s executive and artistic director, he asked us how this very physical, face-to-face work could be represented in the digital culture. We took the question as a personal challenge. In 2011, Battery Dance Company commissioned us to collaboratively tell its story in multimedia, incorporating maps, blogs, audio, video, text and still images to document Battery Dance’s work around the world.

9 Double Fine Adventure on Kickstarter <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/66710809/double-fine-adventure>

10 “Double Fine Adventure’s Kickstarter Success Pumps New Life Into Crowd-Funded Gaming,” Forbes, March 30, 2012 <http://onforb.es/HnDgOV>

The resulting Battery Dance Company story, still ongoing, is shared on a digital map of the world.¹¹ A visitor can click on any place on the planet where BDC has been and telescope down to the story, divided into personal, artistic and practical details by Hollander. The point of the project is not just to promote the work of BDC (though the story map achieves that with tens of thousands of visitors), but also to create value for other organizations looking to learn from BDC's experiences.

For example, in the case of the Congo, where crime against foreigners is a serious risk, the BDC map includes detailed instructions for personal safety. In other cases, such as a trip to Mongolia, Jonathan explains how to troubleshoot on the fly if, for example, you arrive to find your performance space has no floorboards.¹²

This project was originally developed on a Google map, but later a specific site was created to build and display the story. While it is important to understand the available platforms for artists to share their work, it is also necessary to have a mindset that is platform-agnostic and instead takes into account the way in which people want to share and digest information. While technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace, so do humans. We are finding new and unique ways to communicate by shattering geographical boundaries.



Figure 4: Culturehub connects performing artists through Telepresence, (Source: Culturehub)

11 Battery Dance Company International <http://bit.ly/HnDpBU>

12 "Be ready for surprises," Battery Dance International, Mongolia <http://bit.ly/IdTxKU>

Telepresence

Performance art is becoming a mixed-media process, with companies like Culturehub at LaMama, in New York City, testing out new ways to connect with global performers and audiences through technologies such as telepresence.

Culturehub¹³ connects its own New York space with other performance spaces worldwide through multiple screens placed in both venues. This requires a lot of difficult work, from managing the sound to the visuals and ensuring that live streams to the Internet showing both sides are participatory and not just one-way broadcasts.

“As artists, we can look at our humanness in relation to technology and shape the future of how it’s used. We have the capacity to reach out infinitely across the globe and we should capitalize on that,” says Billy Clark, International Program Director of Culturehub.¹⁴

One of Culturehub’s early telepresence experiments connected live musicians in New York with counterparts in Seoul, South Korea. In New York, late at night, a traditional Senegalese musician played a stringed instrument in the way he had been taught by generations of performers before him. A video was shown of him playing the instrument while his many siblings engaged in a beautiful call-and-response song. In Seoul, where it was morning, a woman played a traditional Korean instrument.

After each artist had played alone, they were invited to improvise. Audiences in both locations watched live and on screens as the two musicians struggled briefly to discover the immediate incompatibility of their two traditions before they found a way to play together. Tears streamed down the Korean musicians’ cheeks as they forged a new path together—a powerful moment of genuine, transformative cultural engagement.

Neither the performers nor the audience had to travel a single mile to experience the beauty that results from creating something truly new, and human, together.

Conclusion

As the global economy and culture continue to expand and intermingle, opportunities for artists will grow, not just to make sense of the abstract, changing world, but to help drive that growth. Data visualizations are becoming a critical aspect of communicating complex scientific concepts, for example, and artists are required to meet this demanding role.

The future requires artists in order to help us understand how to keep the thread of our humanity alive. Art helps make sense of the complexity of human life by giving us a glimpse beyond the systems that govern our ways of thinking. It is not just a matter of how artists use existing platforms, but also how art drives the future itself.

“Change is the process by which the future invades our lives,” wrote Alvin Toffler in his seminal book, *Future Shock*, “and it is important to look at it closely, not merely from the grand perspectives of history but from the vantage point of the living, breathing individuals who experience it.”¹⁵

13 Culturehub <http://www.culturehub.org/>

14 Source: Interview with the authors.

15 *Future Shock* by Alvin Toffler, Random House, 1970, Introduction.

These words were written in 1970 for the people of the future. You, the readers of this essay, are the people of the future. The shock Toffler wrote about is now upon you.

Museums, arts organizations and their digital assets are increasingly becoming global hubs for an interconnected network of curators, artists and a participatory audience. This service is an extremely important one in an interconnected world. Art is a visual representation not only of a nation-state, but also of a state of mind.

Creating the future we can imagine involves searching the world for the most visionary artists, developing the most imaginative ways in which to exhibit their work, and attracting an engaged global audience by giving people a compelling view and a chance to shape the mixed media reality we inhabit together. This requires an openness to the rapid rate of transformation in society, as well as a constant effort to creatively use available resources, whether of a digital or physical nature.

Resources and Further Reading

Google Art Project launches at Art Institute of Chicago:
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-ent-0403-google-art-project-20120403,0,1469391.story>

MoMA: Talk To Me:
<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/talktome/>

Start Your Project: Kickstarter
<http://www.kickstarter.com/start>

Double Fine Adventure on Kickstarter
<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/66710809/double-fine-adventure>

Double Fine Adventure's Kickstarter Success Pumps New Life Into Crowd-Funded Gaming - Forbes
<http://onforb.es/HnDgOV>

Kickstarter's annual giving rivals NEA
<http://www.artworldsalon.com/blog/2012/02/hey-friend-can-you-spare-150-million/>

Art and Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time and Light, by Leonard Schlain
<http://www.amazon.com/Art-Physics-Parallel-Visions-Space/dp/0688123058>

The Art and Technology Program, Los Angeles County Museum of Art
http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/MWEB/archives/artandtechnology/at_home.asp

Interactive Technology Program, NYU: archives
<http://itp.nyu.edu/shows/spring2012/>

3D printed heels
<http://www.theimaginationage.net/2012/02/hoon-chungs-experimental-3d-printed.html>

Kate Moss hologram for Alexander McQueen
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7z4Kkh7duI>

Instagram:
<http://instagr.am/>

The website and art of Angeliki Jackson
<http://astrodub.com/>

Battery Dance Company International cultural diplomacy toolkit
<http://bit.ly/HnDpBU>
Culturehub
<http://www.culturehub.org/>

Webstagram, Instagram web viewer
<http://web.stagram.com/>

Art in virtual world, Second Life
<http://secondlife.com/destinations/arts>

101 Things to Learn in Art School by Kit White
<http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=12600>

Artist Jenny Holzer on Twitter:
<http://twitter.com/jennyholzer>

Museu Picasso, Barcelona, Las Meninas
<http://www.bcn.cat/museupicasso/en/collection/mpb70-433.html>

This paper was written by Rita J. King and Joshua Fouts, who are collaborators on the Battery Dance and Culturehub projects mentioned within this document, both of which are funded by the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation. Science House has a global science art collection, exhibited at Science House in New York City.