

Looking Aside: Collective Constructs, Autarchic Assemblage

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a proposed electronic, art educational syllabus/methodology focusing primarily on, but not limited to Web 2 communal photography; one which aspires to translate Arthur Koestler's definition of creativity as a process of "thinking aside", into an educational approach which can be characterised as "looking aside"; of which, associative content, materialising as a confluence of text and image; as well as the layering and clustering of images, ideas and concepts into complex creative structures/systems are envisioned as the basic building blocks.

APPROACHING WEB 2.0 FROM AN ARTISTIC / PHOTOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

"A true Web 2.0 application is one that gets better the more people use it. Google gets smarter every time someone makes a link on the web. Google gets smarter every time someone makes a search. It gets smarter every time someone clicks on an ad. And it immediately acts on that information to improve the experience for everyone else".

Tim O'Reilly

"Read-write Web + People Using It = Web 2.0"

Dion Hinchcliffe

Web 2.0 communities distinguish themselves by high levels of communication between users as well as the ability to comment upon input of other users, and these comments and cross-references do indeed constitute the backbone of the sophisticated linkage system mentioned above by O'Reilly. Within this context, photography communities emerge as complex systems that seem to have engendered the creation of a particular form of associative content through the usage of tags and tag clouds, manifesting as powerful textual structures that nonetheless take their trajectory from the visual. Thus the single photograph is no longer an independent visual entity, but becomes part of a self organising system which is capable of manifesting expressive, narrative and interpretative abilities, as the materialisation of a non-sequential/non-linear, if not indeed multi-linear collective intelligence.

Web 2 photography domains simultaneously project an equally powerful capacity for individuated expression which, at first glance seems to present a contradiction to their prevalent "communal" characteristic: These photographs are mostly posted by amateurs and, as such, they rarely possess any of the glamour and intentionality / instrumentality present in professional photography; be it stock, advertising, journalistic or otherwise. As such, they bring to the fore the usage of photography as a tool of personal expression which, borrowing Lewis Mumford's phrases on the aesthetics of the ordinary, can be considered as the "elimination of the non-essential" that foregrounds "the naked quality of the material itself". Thus, Web 2 domains allow room for an idiosyncratic, non-customized photography genre which necessitates the discourse of an "aesthetics of the ordinary", as opposed to the ubiquitous and recursive aesthetics that prevail in professional stock photography. Since Web 2.0 photography domains are essentially self-organising networks a different process of abstraction

occurs from traditional stock photography domains: McGrew asserts that self-organising networks are capable of abstracting structure from data. They also have the advantage of not being biased by the choices of the observer, thus providing an excellent check on the abstracted structures. [1]

In Web 2.0 photography sites, most of the entries are photos taken by “amateur” photographers. Stock photos created by professional photographers can be considered more manipulative, in that it can be exploited for cultural disorientation. Barthes says; “the photograph is violent: Not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed.” In Web 2.0 photography domains, there is more freedom for the audience to create their own narratives. As the result of a natural lack of technical perfection in such creations, it is possible to end up with a more modest yet “truer” visuality. Because there is “presentation” instead of “representation,” “use” instead of “misuse,” “creation” instead of “re-creation.” This is a more ethical way of sharing cultures since intermediary parties are eliminated and a more flexible, open-ended and polysemic knowledge base is shaped.

APPLICATION AND INTERFACE

Although collage and assemblage predate Web 2.0 photographic domains by at least a century, it is still safe to say that these recent developments have put a new slant on an already existent process: Collage consists in reassembling pre-existing images in such a way as to form a new image answering a poetic need. Max Ernst defined it as "the chance encounter of two distant realities on an unsuitable level", a formula which is the happy codification of Lautréamont's famous proposition: "Beautiful as the encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table." It gives us a remarkable method of triangulation that does not provide measures, but brings to the surface unrevealed mental images. Aragon states that collage "is more reminiscent of the operations of magic than of those of painting". Everything hinges on the artist's success in persuading us to recognize as accurate the relationship now established between normally distant realities as well as in making us recognize their connection on the plane of poetry. Asked, "Do you think your collages are visible poetry?" Jean Arp replied "Yes, this is poetry made with plastic means". [2] And Jacques Brunius comments:

... but "if it is feathers that make plumage," remarks Max Ernst, "it isn't paste [la colle] that makes collage." And indeed, it is quite possible to stick the elements of a "collage" together without paste. It is even possible to imagine work the elements of which would be left loose in a box with a transparent lid, and which would make up, as in certain games of patience or skill, a different picture each time they are shaken. [3]

While the interfaces and applications generated through Web 2.0 photographic domains do share a lot of the attributes of collage as described above, the geographic distribution of its participants can be said to enhance the creative process through the usage of telematic connection and a temporal dimension engendered through the impermanence of that very connection. John Berger argues that photography, contrary to expectation, is more concerned with time than space in that it primarily represents an instant, abstracted from a narrative event the spectator constructs. This temporal element is strongly present in Web 2.0 collages.

Photosynth is a way to view photos on a computer, which takes a large collection of photos of a place or an object, analyzes them for similarities, and then displays the photos in a reconstructed three-dimensional space, showing the relations of photographs of one to another in a spatial context. Photographs of specific locations have been located on Flickr to generate virtual 3D cumulative spatial representation of a geographic location through the usage of this technology. [4]

Jim Bumgardner built his time graphs by using over 35,000 sunset photographs, evenly distributed over one calendar year, harvested from Flickr by utilizing the Flickr tags. Bumgardner collected 100 photographs each day and by positioning each photograph horizontally according to the day it was taken and vertically according to the hour it was taken, he attained his huge graph which shows the approximate time of sunset for each day. Thus, as the year progresses the graph generates a dip which corresponds to the summer solstice and a rise which corresponds to the winter solstice. Through photographs that were taken by individuals that wish to capture one particular moment on one particular day, Bumgardner generated a visual entity which captures the duration of one entire year.

(Figure-1) Tag Graph, Sunrises by Time (1st version), Jim Bumgardner, 2006.

A prevalence for geotagging of images and a proliferation of applications using this concept led the authors to include the following into their survey of Web 2.0 based photographic interfaces. While Woophy [5] sorts and displays images based upon a world map, "flickrvision" [6] shows the images as they are being uploaded onto Flickr as a real-time animation. Woophy has an enriched zooming capability which upon proximity reveals a string of photographs as a side bar which registered users can then comment upon. Finally, "geograph" [7] is a UK based Web 2.0 application which works similarly to Woophy, however upon proximity to a location on the map a mosaic of photographs of that geographic location is revealed.

VISUAL NARRATIVE: ELUCIDATING PHOTOGRAPHY

In his book "The Act of Creation" Arthur Koestler defines of creativity as a process of "thinking aside". [8] Koestler creates an analogy involving "The Jester", in comparing creative activity to that of the processes of wit and humour; drawing upon the foundations that humour and creative activity share in the subconscious mind. Similarly, Carlson and Kaiser stress the importance of right brain activity, which is the area responsible for non-linear, intuitive intelligence in creative activity. [9] Given that tag clouds follow a non-linear approach in that they bring together widely dispersed content into visual proximity they can also be used...

In the collection of essays surrounding the topic of educating an e-designer [10] many of the writers repeatedly touch upon the issue of conceptualisation, the ability of the designer's expressing him/herself by text and narrative ability. It is of interest to note that these writers, all of them respected professionals as well as educators, place these abilities far above those of visual talent and skill, which would have been the ones emphasized only a few decades ago. Similarly, Efland [11], in his book on postmodern art education places high value on textual and verbal ability and narrative skill. While there has been concern over the dissemination of narrative capability in educational circles, there has been a concurrent revitalization of interest in narrative photography, as exemplified in the motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge known primarily for his early use of multiple cameras to capture motion and Duane Michals' photo-sequences examining emotion and philosophy.

Burak Arıkan's "interactive photo-stories" project lets people build their own stories by uploading their own photos and/or using already uploaded ones. All photos must carry keywords (i.e. tag clouds) in order to exist within the pool and users can link photos randomly through these keywords. Furthermore, stories created by one user can be modified / appended to / continued / re-shuffled by subsequent users, thus creating chains of never ending non-linear narratives.

(Figure-2) Interactive Photo-stories, Burak Arıkan, 2002.

Movie Assembly [12] is a collaborative internet film making-new media project, the aim of which building short films through the usage of creative commons images on Flickr. An algorithm has been generated which uses Flickr tags to shuffle the images into sequences which then generates the video clip. Movie Assembly is an open platform through which anyone can participate in the creative process.

(Figure-3) MovieAssembly, Gokhan Okur, 2007.

VA329 PHOTOGRAPHY AND EXPRESSION

This class is given to 3rd year undergraduate students from an interdisciplinary background. While the majority of the students come from the art and design program students from diverse disciplines ranging from cultural studies to computer sciences also register. The concept of instruction is to enable the creation of photographs that tell stories, create moods or provoke impressions. The course also focuses on collaborative projects and those that concentrate on creating narrative content through the usage of photography. Thus, writing skills and the ability to translate abstractions into images is a requirement of the course. The following two project descriptions have been taken from the syllabus of this class.

Project 1: In this project students were asked to go to the flea market and/or second hand book sellers and obtain a minimum of five and a maximum of 20 old photographs. They were also asked to pay attention that no two photographs would be from the same series and all photographs have different subject matter. What was important was the concept of "scavenging" and the idea of the "found object". They were then asked to write a story based upon a collection of photographs that were found, i.e. not their own. They were free to crop and resize the photographs and also to use one photograph on more than one occasion, thus creating flashbacks within the narrative. The final output of the project was the creation of a video of which the material was the photographic sequence, an accompanying narrative either typographic or aural as well as sound, motion and transition effects.

(Figure-4) Clieve Vazro, "found object" movie made of photo stills, Emrah Kavlak, 2006.

Project 2: In this project, students were asked to go to a specific location and take relational photographs from that location. These photographs were then subsequently brought together through panorama stitching software to create vast communal panoramas. Students were asked to observe the object / subject / space of interest as an entity with relation to their surroundings and end up with particular life forms of their own kinds which turn out to be the synthesis of individual forms. This unique narrative can be extended to cubist works and Ottoman miniatures where unrealistic multifaceted

descriptions can be observed, or reminds us of Piranesi's drawings depicting complicated interwoven three dimensional worlds. When you photograph multiple images and stitch them together in order to widen the perception area, you obtain an entity that brings multiple instances of a particular sphere / world together in one image: A world that is invisible to the naked eye at one instance of time, an augmented perception.

(Figure-5) "Construction", panoramic photograph stitched with AutoPano Pro v1.3, Sarp Suerdas, 2007.

FROM WEB 2.0 TO WEB 3.0

Looking into the future, the authors are already aware of the implications of Web 3.0. Berners-Lee defined the semantic web, which predicted to play a large role in future web technologies, "... as a dream in which computers become capable of analyzing all the data on the Web – the content, links, and transactions between people and computers." [13] When asked on Web 3.0 Berners-Lee talks about an "... overlay of scalable vector graphics - everything rippling and folding and looking misty - on Web 2.0 and access to a semantic Web integrated across a huge space of data, you'll have access to an unbelievable data resource." [14]

However, what is of great interest to us is the emergence of a 3D web within the context of Web 3.0 as well as non-browser applications that work in conjunction with the internet. One such precursor is Second Life. Photography as well as video is already a much practised field of creative endeavour within SL, as the existence of over 500 photography groups in SL will attest to. Photographic activity in a 3D virtual environment brings with it an entirely new set of challenges and a whole new discourse of aesthetics. Thus, photography education will need to take these new challenges and discourse on board and incorporated into the future curriculum.

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