

FROM MAY '68 POSTERS TO YOUTUBE VIDEOS: DIFFERENT EXPRESSIONS OF COLLECTIVE DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This paper points out the common elements between two processes of collective creation, in different time and space locations: the first one is about the collective production of posters of May '68 in France. The second one is the on going process of collective video creation based on a video hosting website, YouTube. The study of popular spontaneous collective processes is an important element for the development of enabling tools for participative design.

MAIN TEXT

First of all, I would like to point out the method that lies behind this research.

We can call it the *Spot the similarities* method: you can take two really different elements and then brake your head to find out a relation between them. Jacques Rancière uses this method in finding the correlation between Stephane Mallarmé and Peter Behrens in his *The future of the image*. Then he also writes: *Whoever looks always finds. He doesn't necessarily find what he was looking for, and even less what he was*

supposed to find. But he finds something new to relate to the thing that he already knows. What is essential is the continuous vigilance (Rancière 1991)

The feeling that keeps my vigilance high is the interest in collective design process especially when involving professional and amateur. Starting from a historical overview, I've been astonished by the amount of projects, writings and conferences with *participatory design* as key theme subject, produced in the '70s all over Europe and America.

In 1974, Washington D.C., George Rockrise asks the Second Federal Design Assembly, called *Design Reality*, a question: *Why not ask the user?* He proposes a vision of the user as an ameliorating force, part of a triumvirate together with designers and Federal agency.

Two years before, in 1972 a conference called *Design Participation* is organised by the Design Research Society in London. Participation is seen as an "educational approach" that implies a public participation to be present at the moment of idea generation not just at the moment of decision. From

Robert Jungk's point of view *people with lack of knowledge may be able to look at things in a more original, more creative way* (Jungk in Cross 1975).

Four years back again, we are in 1968 in Paris. The *Atelier populaire* starts its activity on May 14th at Beaux Art school with the first poster production: "Université-Usine-Union" a call for union between students and workers. The main aim of this working group is to support the workers' fights with simple communication tools as posters.

The only effective way to show solidarity with the worker and student movement, is to produce the graphic elements that they need urgently: posters, engravings and collages. Act! Less theory, more practice! You have to come day and night to the ex-school of Beaux-Arts. Comité d'Action des artistes (Wlassikoff 2008)

Students want to become an active part of society, they want to express people's voice with their work. The spontaneous and libertarian revolutionary fever gives birth to a strong organised creative production. The activity of Beaux Art's atelier is based on a strict process, especially after May 15th when an internal general assembly is constituted (Gasquet 1978).

The headquarters are where the evening debate takes place everyday. The first step is the political analysis (with the hope of the workers' presence) followed by the public posters proposal.

Then the assembly judges all the poster concepts and decides which ones have to be produced. The recurrent open questions are:

- Is the political idea right?
- Is it correctly transmitted by the poster?

The motivations concern the comprehensibility of the message and its relevance to current events. During the discussion all posters are hung on the walls. According

to most witnesses it seems that a lot of proposals were not accepted, but every public decision was strongly respected by designers and artists.

Pierre Bernard describes the experience as a "savage democracy" (personal interview, March 4th, 2011), everyone by the show of hands could approve or disapprove a project; the majority were students and professional but also common people joined the assembly. From his description we can feel the enthusiasm that stimulated this production. No one was working on his own, and if this happened, when the poster was posted, someone else could take it down to make some corrections. There was a fruitful competition that led to some of the most known icons of popular fight. All posters were hung up in the streets during the night.

I see this experience as a clear and successful application of collective creation.

Why has all this enthusiasm for co-creation disappeared in the following decades?

The interest in opening the design process to users was a widespread and important topic all over the Seventies. Do we have to think about participation as a nostalgic and non realizable utopia?

Where does popular participation express itself in 2011?

Let's analyse an up-to-date collective experience that produces 48 hours of video every minute (YouTube Blogspot, 2011, May 25).

YouTube is a video hosting website whose domain was bought in early 2005. The three young creators were moved by the need of an easier way to share videos on the web. The very first website version presents the simple interface that allows to upload, publish, view and, most of all, easily share a video. The main technological improvement is the algorithm that permits with a simple cut and paste to send the video

address to other web-surfers. Sharing is the key to success: YouTube runs mainly on the participants' will to share a video, comment it and reply at or remake it. In a virtual space, millions of people at the same time are enjoying other people's artefacts, or publishing their own.

YouTube happens to be called the *broadest repository of moving-image culture, an open-ended process of experiments* (Snicars, Vondeau 2009), a *co-creative community* (Potts et al. 2008), a platform for learning and knowledge sharing, a *dynamic cultural system* (Brugess, Green 2009).

In this cultural system there are different agents which are at play: big media companies that realise their channel (i.e. Universal Music Group), Web Tv companies (i.e. Sports network) and finally "ordinary users", *individual who are not representative of mainstream media corporate or other large institution* (Brugess, Green 2009b). For our finality we are taking into account the only production of this third group, people who uses YouTube as a free communicational channel.

Here starts the *Spot the similarities* game. Which are the common characteristics between the process of poster creation in May '68, and the process of video creation on YouTube today?

DESIGN PROCESSES

First of all both are design processes. Oxford America Dictionary define "process" as *a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end*. Both processes produce a communicative artefact, a man made realisation whose finality is to communicate with other human beings. Behind this production there is a project, this artefact is designed.

In the production of May '68 posters the process was clear:

- Description political and social events of the day
- Discussion on the subject
- Elaboration of possible graphical interpretations
- Discussion on the graphic proposals
- Posters proposal open vote
- Final design realisation
- Silkscreen printing
- Distribution
- Street posting

All these steps were daily achieved to produce 500 posters, in 45 days.

To produce a content for YouTube, the process is clearly different for every user but there are certain common steps. As we can see the majority of users uploads aren't simple video capture but contain more complex and edited contents. There are skills and tools that participants need.

We can imagine the process this way:

- Generation of the idea to be represented
- Physical or mental storyboard
- Setting and costumes definition
- Video capture (web-cam, screen recorder, phone camera, photo camera, camera)
- Video editing
- Creation of the user account (once)
- Uploading
- Web publishing
- Web posting throughout other social media

Both these processes produce an artefact which is exposed publicly. Posters are installed in the streets and on signs during the manifestations, videos are free of being posted on the web, on YouTube or in other web pages. [*We see more than 400 tweets per minute containing a YouTube link, and over 150 years worth of YouTube video is watched on Facebook every day* (YouTube Blogspot, 2011, January 26).]

COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

In May '68 poster production there was not an author policy. No poster had an author, no one could sign his drawings, the works could be changed by everyone if the community approved: posters were the production of a collective experience, also defined co-creation as *any act of collective creativity that is experienced jointly by two or more people*. (Sanders, Simons 2009). The discussion between participants was constantly present during all the process phases.

YouTube users participate in co-creation with more difficulties because the site architecture isn't planned for collaborative participation. YouTube hasn't furnished any tools to share editable videos or to reuse already published content. Users participate in the web discourse from different geographical locations; to face this problem the community has developed few innovative uses of the website. The most diffused example is the use of the comment function to readdress the original video that has been *detoured* (Brugess, Green 2009a). As Brugess and Green's research demonstrates, remixed video-blog and collective design contributions are a strong part of the most popular contents. The collective development of tools to overpass technical restraint demonstrates the will of creating a collective discourse more than an individual monologue.

PROFESSIONAL/AMATEUR RELATIONSHIP, AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

The Beaux Art equipe was made up by students, professors and professionals but also by workers. People who didn't know each other and with different skills. The collaboration between individuals from different fields of work has profoundly influenced poster design. The language used, the simplicity of the drawings, the clarity of the typography, are all outcomes of a collaboration which didn't leave any

space to graphical virtuosity. This language was also influenced by the printing technique, that all participants had to learn.

On the atelier wall, a hand-written poster says: «*La sincérité est préférable à la technique*» (Wlassikoff 2008), sincerity is preferable to technique.

The professional-amateur divide has been perfectly fulfilled by YouTube, where professionals pretend to be amateurs and amateurs ameliorate their technique every upload. The most interesting results emerge from the collaboration of users with different skills, when an exchange between ideas and capabilities is requested. Users that improve their skills usually want to share this discovery; this leads to the production of instructional videos. Instructional videos concern abilities in different fields for example music (the most produced ones), cooking or video editing. Many researchers believe in YouTube, and other social network's, potential in supplying institution with digital alphabetisation (Hartley 2009).

GENERATIVITY

We can define the dynamics of these artefacts as open (Fuad-Luke 2009), and generative (Zittrain 2008). The *open* and *generative* artefact invites people to take part in the process of creation, encourages to modify the output and suggests to take action. Design activism practice has its profound roots in the '60 and '70 art, theorised in Umberto Eco's *Open work*.

Denying a single privileged experience does not imply chaos in relations, but the rule that allows organisation of relations. [...] The solution is seen as desirable and actually anticipated, but it must come from the collective enterprise of the audience. (Eco 1989)

Generativity is defined as the *capacity to give rise to further content creation and distribution* (Zittrain 2008). Going back to our comparison, it is easy to find out this element in the experience of May '68 : *Act! Less theory,*

more practice! is the motto of Beaux-Art occupied school.

A lot has been recently written on the enabling capability of web technologies, also called generative technologies: the creation of new contents and their publication make the collective heritage grow. The participant is moved by *a personal joy to be had in building something* (Zittrain 2008) but he takes advantage also from the community emotive support (Jenkins 2006). The community is waiting for users content to be upload, shared, discussed and remade. We can speak about a *collective 'activism'* (Potts et al. 2008) as constitutive characteristic of YouTube.

GRATUITOUS PRODUCTION

These two processes are both gratuitous in the double meaning of the word.

They don't respond to a primary need of individual and they are non remunerated, money is not present in any phase of the processes.

May '68 posters process of creation can't be resumed in political party poster creation, first of all because there was no political party who guided the production or financed it. Individual printers gave the students ink for free and paper was donated by newspapers and book publishers (Wlassikoff 2008). Students, professional and professors decided to start this production to give sense to their work, to sustain an idea, a movement, a protest.

YouTube as a video hosting website gives the possibility to publish and share users' content without any cost. It doesn't mean that no one is trying to benefit from this platform: the entrepreneurial use of YouTube has been largely analysed (Burgess, Green 2009), but the main use of YouTube by single users (not corporate or big media) remains a question of *working for nothing*, expression used by Lev Grossman to describe the "You, social network user", 2006 TIME's person of the year.

Participants are involved in a free, emotional, immaterial conception of labour. From videos descriptions:

We give you permission to send this to a friend or family member that is feeling down, we know it will help them feel better. jays838

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFJ8o2H_FVA)

once agian just playin songs and showing friends how i play to make em laugh. esjavi87

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=r99jA6YN6hI)

POPULAR CULTURE OUTPUTS

May '68 posters are the output of a popular culture, a process carried on by people with no political parties or institutional contributions. This production is now an important part of public heritage and it is conserved by important institutions as the BNF Bibliothèque nationale de France: the importance of these popular artefacts has been recognised.

For some researchers YouTube could be seen as the archive of contemporary popular culture, where every citizen has the possibility to charge his contents, to express himself and to take part in the public discourse. Unfortunately, also in the Western countries, the right of web access is not at all assured for every citizen, there's a participation gap that governments and institutions should try to solve.

Users' generated content is present in all YouTube categories as any public discourse. Videos are full of short quotes of something just happened in real life or in other media channels, on television or at the cinema, something amazing that people cannot but share. That is the same feeling that makes us speak about a book we finished the day before, describe the movie we have just seen or a city where we've been on holiday. It is something that already exists in culture, a practice we are used to. By posting their favourite scene of Huge Grant's last movie, users are practising on the

web what they were used to do at the pub or at school during the break. Movie producers (as music ones) should not be so scared about the copyright issue: this free appropriation of content will not compromise the number of movie viewers, maybe it will increase it. Professionals should look at this free cultural creation as an inspirational source, amateurs are offering original and more creative remakes of their work. A clear example is the ludic interpretation of movie scenes, as is happening for *Pop goes my heart*, a fictional music clip performed by Hugh Grant in the movie *Music and Lyrics* in 2007. This clip has more than 700 remakes by users, usually teenagers who are experimenting video editing. In at least half of the videos users learn the choreography, design costumes, elaborate creative alternatives for set elements and simulate the editing. In all this operation we can retrace abilities that users learn by themselves or recreating something. This quotation character of YouTube videos implies a self-educational approach. Even if the ludic content is predominant in the users' contents, bloggers use this media also for more serious aims: the confessional formula permits minorities to have a space in which they publicly speak about delicate questions that big media ignore (Burgess, Green 2009).

CONCLUSION

We have here presented two realised utopias. The poster production of May '68 is still in our memory for the high quality of the created artefacts. Instead the primary ludic or ephemeral YouTube content makes someone think of YouTube as a pure entertainment channel. We have to look at YouTube video production, as at other web sharing platforms, as an incubator for new methods of participation. By using web technologies to express themselves and create new communities, participants are working on the

elaboration of new tools for participation. We have to encourage and study this popular collective process because it has in itself a procedural innovative methodology that so far has been missing. In this way, these collaborative practices could be applied to different contents as politics and common good. This will fill the gap that citizens nowadays feel *between being informed about civic issues and feeling able to influence [political] local decisions* (Couldry et al. 2006). What has happened in May '68 was successful for the output but didn't develop any methodology due to a lack of technological tools. We have to keep in mind that example as inspirational to start developing new collective practices from popular experimentation. With the spreading and diffusion of digital alphabetisation we believe that web technologies will become an instrument to realise other collective and democratic processes of creation that will deal with different contents. This might happen if people want to be active part in the decisional political process to create the society they want. For the time being we can encourage this participative trend and believe participative collective processes are still possible.

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