Chapter 17

We have a Situation!
Cyberformance and Civic Engagement in Post–Democracy

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ABSTRACT

"We have a situation!" is an ongoing political performance project that uses cyberformance (live online performance, also known as networked performance) to provoke conversations around urgent contemporary issues. Through heterarchical co-creation processes and real-time online events, temporary networked communities emerge and engage in creative problem-solving. The fifth "situation," created at Multicidade Festival in Rio de Janeiro in November 2015, addressed the problem of water pollution in the context of the approaching 2016 Olympic Games. This chapter chronicles the process of creating and presenting this event and proposes that cyberformance fosters an intimate proto-political form of online engagement as a positive alternative to increasingly commodified activism in commercialised internet spaces. The author, who is the lead artist of "We have a situation!" concludes that networked arts projects - in social, artistic and educational contexts - have an important role to play in the post-democratic reconfiguration of civic engagement, agency and activism.

INTRODUCTION

Digital and online media offer new opportunities for civic engagement and activism. The general public engages in and through online technologies and tools such as petitions, discussion forums, instant messaging and social media (Earl & Kimport, 2011; McCaughey & Ayers, 2013; Tatarchevskiy, 2011). For example, social media platforms provide virtual gathering places for communities of interest where information can be rapidly shared, contributing to an apparent increase of agency for the masses. The widespread use of such technologies in recent political upheavals has given rise to such a term as "Twitter revolution" (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011) and positions the internet as a powerful networking means for citizen activists who can have real influence on political decision-making (Deibert, 2000; Jagoda, 2008; Kavada, 2012). This is based on the assumption that each individual has a voice that counts, therefore making our voices heard will lead to real political change.

However, this rosy vision of grassroots activism powered by benign technologies assumes a truly democratic context. The reality is that since the 1970s, Western democracy has been steadily eroded and replaced with an ideology of neoliberal individualism that actively obstructs any form of collective or democratic endeavour (Crouch, 2004; Gilbert, 2013). Political debate has become "a tightly controlled spectacle" and "[t]he mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them." (Crouch, 2004, p. 4). In this context, online activism is arguably little more than a panacea for the people, allowing us the illusion of agency and a guilt-assuaging mechanism without actually altering the status quo that underpins our consumption-based lifestyle. Anastasia Kavada (2012) warns of the superficiality, individualism and commodification of social media platforms. Tatiana Tatarchevskiy (2011) asserts that "consumption philanthropy [...] champions those causes that stabilize the current system" (p. 302). She suggests that "[...] creating a brand out of a social problem may in fact stifle the political and critical debates" (p. 302) and questions the potential for agency when our understandings of citizenship are framed within commodified online spaces. Zygmunt Bauman (2016) observes that people use social media to create networks within their own comfort zone, "[...] where the only sounds they hear are the echoes of their own voice, where the only things they see are the reflections of their own face." Despite promoting an idea of empowerment, commercial platforms withhold significant ownership and self-determination from their communities. All interactions are tightly controlled within the design and functionality of the interface (the most obvious example being Facebook's simplistic "like" button) and within existing political and corporate structures (Kavada, 2012; Loreto, 2013; Tatarchevskiy, 2011). There are the constraints of regulations, authentic identity and censorship; data is algorithmically manipulated; and, as Edward Snowdon's leaked revelations about the USA government's PRISM project showed, such technologies can be used against citizens just as easily as by them (Greenwald, 2014).

Activism thrives nevertheless, hatched in bars and bedrooms and realized in the streets, and independent online spaces exist despite neoliberal efforts of control. Artists, programmers, hackers and activists run websites, mailing lists and forums (e.g. Furtherfield, Chaos Computer Club, and Rise-up), employ encryption techniques and provide resources to assist others to do the same (e.g. Tactical Tech, Telecomix, and physical hacklabs), share information that is ignored by mainstream media (e.g. Indymedia) and develop alternative and independent technologies (e.g. Tor Project, Linux, open source hardware and software projects). Artists operating within these networks facilitate a crucial space of interaction between activism and the wider public. Just as arts practices have traditionally assisted society in adapting to new ideas and technologies (Kockelkoren, 2003), today's digital artists are fundamental to the development of critical thinking about digital technologies - how we use them, how we are used by them, and their impact on society and the environment. As an artist working in this space of interaction, I employ digital and information technology tools to address contemporary issues through cyberformance - a form of networked performance that uses the internet as a site for real-time artistic/theatrical participatory performance (Abrahams & Jamieson, 2014; Jamieson, 2008; Papagiannouli, 2011). My work functions in terms of content, form and technology: creating dialogue around issues; experimenting with and evolving an emergent artform; and adapting/hacking existing technologies for creative purposes - demystifying new technologies and promoting alternatives to commercial technologies. Content, form and technology are interconnected in my work and practice. I choose open source software and hardware wherever possible and acknowledge the politics, privileges and paradoxes that surround digital technologies by speaking about them within my work.

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