Chapter 16
Viral Art Matters:
Using Web-Based Artwork to Fortify Academic Efforts

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, an impactful phenomenon called virality (i.e., when content circulates via internet among an increasingly broad audience at an exponentially rapid rate) has developed. Not all information achieves virality, so the phenomenon invites reflection. Yet, the academic literature on viral artwork is quite sparse. This chapter helps fill a gap in the literature by demonstrating the academic significance of viral art through comparative analysis of three cases where web-based artworks went viral: Ten Hours of Princess Leia walking in NYC, New Beginnings, and McKayla Is Not Impressed. The author argues that viral art merits rigorous study because doing so could, first, augment existing research on other topics; second, fortify philosophy of art investigations; and third, establish aesthetic principles to guide audience engagement with viral artwork.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern era of Web 2.0, participation streamlines web applications; the more people use applications, the better the applications get (O'Reilly, 2005; Wyrwoll, 2014). Some high-tech entrepreneurs go so far as to say that software is "eating the world" (Andreessen, 2011, p.1; O'Hanihan, 2013, p.1). Now, content can be shared far, wide, and fast; moreover, individuals can play the roles of author and reader at the same time (Wyrwoll, 2014). From this context emerges virality, a phenomenon where information circulates via the Internet among an increasingly broad—often global—audience at an exponentially rapid rate.

The contrast between virality and virulence is sometimes lost in ordinary discussion. Since distinguishing the concepts could help sharpen future analyses, this author will do so outright. Describing something as virulent suggests severe, often harmful, effects; for example, virulent diseases are often

infectious. Virulence also attributes bitter hostility, as in the sentence, "It was a virulent attack on feminism." On the other hand, going viral is a matter of speed and spread. Viral content could, but need not, be virulent. In fact, most often the opposite is true.

Not all information achieves virality, so the phenomenon invites reflection. Yet, scholars have failed to address the topic; the literature on viral artwork is quite sparse. This does not indicate that investigating viral artwork would be fruitless. Rather, pursuing the topic could yield expansive results.

The purpose of this chapter is to help fill a gap in the literature by demonstrating the academic significance of viral artwork via comparative analysis of three cases where internet-based artworks went viral. This author will argue that viral artwork merits rigorous study, given at least the following three reasons. First, rigorous study of viral artwork can augment existing research on other topics. Second, studying viral artwork can fortify investigations in philosophy of art through extension to the online art-world. Third, scholars could outline aesthetic principles to guide audience engagement with viral artwork.

In what follows, this author will review existing contributions to the academic literature on topics related to viral artwork, including: virality; Internet communications technology; market research; net-art; and online community development. This writer will also point out examples of non-academic and academic investigations about viral artwork. Then, this author will suggest that the academic approach to viral artwork is insufficient; as this author sees it, academics have neglected a valuable subject of study. To test the hypothesis that viral artwork merits rigorous study, this author will analyze three cases of viral artwork, taking into consideration the implications of their respective fates: Ten Hours of Princess Leia walking in NYC, New Beginnings, and McKayla is Not Impressed. With these examples as guides, this writer concludes, as stated above, that rigorous study of viral artwork could: first, augment existing research on other topics; second, fortify investigations in philosophy of art; and third, guide the public toward engagement with viral artwork.

THE CONTEXT OF THE CONVERSATION

Academic Perspectives on Internet Communications Technology

Some academic research on Internet communications technology relates to issues surrounding virality. John Palfrey (2010) argued that state-sponsored control over the technology is not specific to authoritarian regimes. Liu Yangyue (2014) contributed to the dialogue by analyzing the differences in how authoritarian governments' policies – like those in Malaysia – extend to the Internet. Others have studied Internet communications technology used to promote revolution by residents of non-democratic nations. For example, Jason Abbott (2012) shed light on the Internet's broad socio-political impact among citizens of nations ruled authoritarian governments. Abbott argued that social media outlets are unique means for citizens to establish a public sphere, rather than mere communications tools (Abbott, 2012, p. 334). Further, he asserted that Internet communications technologies make political revolution conceivable (Abbott, 2012, p. 334). Still others have addressed how Internet communications technologies can be used for non-democratic efforts. For example, Ian Bremmer argued that there is nothing inherently democratic about the Internet because it amplifies a variety of perspectives, some at odds with democratic ideals (Bremmer, 2010, p. 92).

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