# MyLife/SecondSpace: A "Web 2.0" paradigm for artistic and curatorial practice?

Since as recently as 2005, there has been an unprecedented surge of entrepreneurship and innovation – fuelled by vast speculative venture capital investments largely in Silicon Valley – concerning so-called Web 2.0 applications. A number of factors have fuelled this. Firstly, a paradigmatic shift in user experience – new programming styles have allowed websites to no longer be static lists of information but rich, dynamic, editable computing platforms with enhanced graphic interfaces. Secondly, the take-up of broadband and wi-fi hit a critical mass. And finally, there is the enormous commercial and competitive incentive to control the new business territory beyond the internet-as-shopfront, as, for example, the notions of a traditional broadcaster, advertiser, news operator, record label, film studio, telecoms provider, etc. have had to been entirely rethought. Everyone is playing catch-up to Google's move beyond search, and its vast acquisitive war-chest (most recently it hoovered-up the video-sharing site YouTube and its user base of 100 million people for $1.65 billion, and advertisers DoubleClick for $3.1 billion). The most watched Video on You Tube—a 6 minute clip of "inspiration comedian" Judson Laipply demonstrating his 'Evolution of Dance'—recent past 60 million views. So the capacity of these phenomena is formidable.

We've all heard of, and probably use, facilities such as YouTube, wikipedia, Skype, MySpace, flickr, facebook, and so on – but what are some of their common attributes? How can we look at them not necessarily as technology or new-media "things", but through their behavioural and functional uses? And how have these behaviours, in a very tentative and perhaps rudimentary way, begun to be reflected in artistic practice, curatorial practice – and the art industry? We are not talking about the dead-end of net-art, nor the literal-sclerosis of "web projects by artists". And we are not speculating about a structuralist media or hardware-jamming trajectory suggested by Nam June Paik. Instead perhaps, a semantic trajectory – that is, one based on meaning and knowledge-relations – suggested by this man, Tim Berners Lee, when he put the first web site online in 1991, and as he continues to develop the reality of the semantic web.
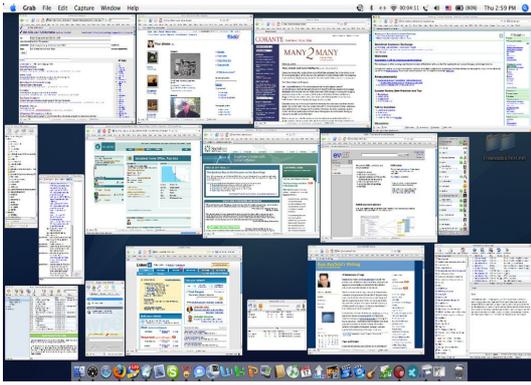
Alongside the similarities of enhanced user experience – where, for example, pages or documents become editable and sharable – web applications increasingly allow and encourage the customisation of the user's experience through avatars, and increasingly-importantly as a development and business model, through "widget-ising" – the ability to add-in third-party content, whether embedding a slideshow in a blog, or addingmodular blocks to a homepage – news channels, weather reports,calendars, and so on. This itself is an evolution of the notion of the "mashup" – a new functionality derived from two existing functions – for example, combining the data from a real estate site with that of a mapping site, to create a graphical way of navigating the property market of a city.

One of the main behavioural characteristic of web 2.0 concerns an extension of the functionality of wikis and blog-commenting in terms of user-generated phenomena: whether content itself, taxonomies, or popularity ratings. Replacing the algorithmic possibilities of machine-generated search – whether using a classic search engine to mine information – or the, "You liked this movie/book/song, how about this one?" model of Netflix,Amazon or Pandora, for example – web 2.0 destinations are often driven by user submission and ratings, community recommendations, navigation through tagging and so on. Thus social bookmarking sites such as del.icio.us or Reddit, and social news aggregation sites such as Digg, present a non-hierarchical, seemingly-democratic editorial system, and videos on YouTube – the web's 4th most popular site – themselves user-generated – get ranked according to popularity. Of course the democratic system is open to abuse, and popularity is certainly no guarantee of quality or interest.

MySpace (over 100 million users) and Facebook (over 20 million users) – besides aspects of functionality of the world's most popular site, Yahoo! – lead the pack in terms of the most hyped aspect of web 2.o, namely the social networking behaviour itself. This is characterised by decentralisation, freedom to share and an enhanced ability to connect or collaborate through personal profiles, group discussion forums,community tools and so on. More free University than Joseph Beuys.

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's project at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2004 entitled *Radio Re-volt* was conceived to, quote"re-think the power of the individual voice

within a community and to re-empower the medium of radio with the possibilities of radical experimentation."

Radio Re-volt was based around workshops – during the 2004 president election campaign – in which participants could learn how to make and operate a one-milliwatt radio station: a small, portable Part 15 radio, named for the Federal Communications Commission law that permits these unlicensed devices. Considering also how the public might reclaim the airways in the light of the consolidation of commercial radio stations by the Clearchannel corporation, these radios could transmit user-generated radio shows within a one-block radius, giving individuals the power to micro-cast while offering micro-programming to their micro-community of friends and neighbours. The customisation of nearly 500 radios – basically a piece of circuit board with a mini-jack and a battery – was all part of the project, and micro-radios were incorporated into all manner of objects – bicycles, pumpkins, drinks bottles, etc. Alongside this, a sophisticated website was produced by the Walker New Media department. Incidentally, the Walker has a rich history of innovation in this area, including hosting and maintaining äda'web, the early web-art space curated by Benjamin Weil from 1994-98, and which includes works by Lawrence Weiner, Keith Tyson, Dominique Gonzalez Foerster and Jenny Holzer: the site is treated in the Walker's collection as an artwork by Weil and the designer Vivian Selbo. The *Radio Re-volt* website incorporated mapping functionalities to graphically search for micro-radio stations throughout the Twin Cities, as well as discussion boards and user commented information and articles about the workshops, the artists, user tips, programming information, and so on.

A few months later Rirkrit Tiravanija presented *Untitled, 2005 (the air between the chain-link fence and the broken bicycle wheel)* for the Hugo Boss Prize at the Guggenheim in New York, and here is a description of the project by Associate Curator Joan Young:

"For the exhibition, Tiravanija has created a self-built low-power television station, to demonstrate that individuals can be active contributors to their own media culture, rather than mere consumers of it. Using rudimentary electronic equipment, Tiravanija reveals how a broadcast can be transmitted over unused frequencies to a local

community, circumventing traditional media networks.Two rooms have been constructed within the gallery: A sealed glass vitrine holds a transmitter, and aplywood structure holds the receiver, or television. Isolated within the vitrine, the transmitter is deemed valuable—just as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regards the airwaves as valuable.While the First Amendment protects the freedom of speech, it does not defend unrestricted access to all mechanisms of communication, such as the airwaves. A program is broadcast from a DVD player via the transmitter to the television across unused airwaves by means of theantennae. To further demystify the broadcasting process,Tiravanija has surrounded the installation with texts describing the technology, its contentious regulation and instructions for building your own homemade TV station.

While a low-power broadcast could potentially reach viewers miles away, Tiravanija's transmissionhas been restricted to within this gallery's walls due to the many physical hindrances in New York City (for instance, the widespread use of cable and satellite television interferes with the signal) and the considerable legal and policy implications of broadcasting on museum premises. Through such a reality-based project, Tiravanija encourages our consideration of commonly held assumptions about methods of communication in the USA and issues of free speech."

Of course projects such as these have earlier precedents – for example Pierre Huyghe's *Mobile TV* produced in 1995 and 1997, for which he created a nomadic TV station – and a direct accordance with the discourse around *Relational Aesthetics*. Yet, taking also into account that Nicolas Bourriaud's book was written in 1998 – well before the widespread use of the web as a social networking tool – we'd like to sidestep considering this, or at least suggest that certain art practices have outgrown the usefulness of the relational label,and that web 2.0 provides a new lens and terminology to look at them.

Of course unlike music, whose native format of sound is perfectly compatible to the browser experience – and hence MySpace and iTunes revolutionising the way music is promoted, distributed and sold – the vast majority of art experiences simply cannot be adequately translated into the web medium without being fundamentally different things. Yet to return to the characteristic of the hybrid web applications or "mashup",there remain real possibilities for extending this analogically into exhibition practice, taking "channels" as the equivalent of curated content, and so on.
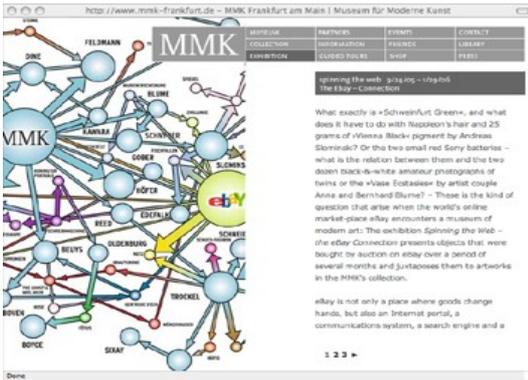
In 2005, MMK in Frankfurt presented *Spinning the Web – the eBay Connection* in which items bought over the auction site eBay were presented alongside artworks from the MMK collection.

As MMK described: "eBay is not only a place where goods change hands, but also an Internet portal, a communications system, a search engine and a global network. Once you're logged in, you can move by entering key words from one article to the next, just as if you were looking things up in an encyclopedia. This was the path taken for selecting the objects for the exhibition, too: Depending on the variation and combination of key words, items relating to individual artworks were found as were artworks to fit the respective objects on offer in eBay. Some are clearly connected to each other, while for others the link is more a matter of association, but in all instances the new configurations bring added meaning to both the objects and the artworks. In other words, a track is laid that the viewers can, but must not necessarily, follow – and as you move down it, repeatedly new individual forms of signification can arise."

This notion of the exhibition as networked channel leads us also in a more literal way to CAC TV, the initiative of the Centre for Contemporary Art in Vilnius, a TV program about making a TV program which airs every Wednesday for half an hour on TV1, a commercial channel in Lithuania. As they state: "It dreams of turning audience members and spectators into an active public possibly even producers. It dreams of inducing wakefulness and tapping into the inherent power of the multitude to counter the sleep inducing nonsense that often passes as entertainment. Activating the creativity and critical skills of the viewer while still remaining watch-able."
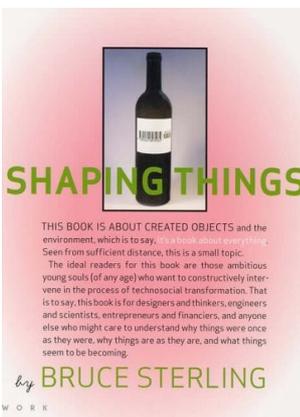
In *Shaping Things*, sci-fi author, futurologist and design-thinker Bruce Sterling outlines a series of transformations – different classes of objects – that might help explain "why things were once as they were, why things are as they are, and what things seems to be becoming". They may also help us indicate how we might procede and what might be at stake for artworks and exhibitions in this discussion. Artifacts are simple artificial objects made and used by hand – operated by hunters and farmers. Machines are powered complex objects requiring special support and finance – within an infrastructure of

customers. By Products he means widely distributed objects, uniformly manufactured in large quantities with non-artisanal, assembly-line techniques – the realm of consumers. The advent of a Product technoculture being around World War One.

The Gizmo emerges around 1989. Gizmos, as Sterling describes, a mobile phone, a laptop, for example are no longer stand-alone objects but, quote "highly unstable, user-alterable, baroquely multifeatured objects ... the remote adjunct interfacesfor a larger, fully-coded communication system". People within an infrastructure of Gizmos are End-Users.

Sterling uses the example of bottled wine to illustrate the transition of design from Artefacts to Machines to Products to 'Gizmos': comparing a wine that Socrates might have drunk from a clay container from a local Greek vineyard thousands of years ago to a supermarket-sold,imported, machine-labeled, mass-produced wine in an industrial glass bottle,with a barcode, health warnings, webpage, serving suggestions, winemaking notes and where the drinker has become, no longer a customer, or a consumer, but an 'end-user' offered a huge stew of designed information that appears to lure and reward and require an opinion. The comparison with the increasing proliferation of information and interpretation arounda museum visit is obvious.

Clearly projects such as those by Allora & Calzadilla and Tiravanija,or the *Spinning the Web* exhibition, are dealing with a fundamentally different class of technosocialobjects, with a different class of users or viewers, than for example, a Nam June Paik sculpture.

During the GAMEC discussions, Dan Cameron described his discomfort with the museum as a 'refuge' in the face of the bombardment of entertainment media. He also described his mixed feelings in witnessing people's eagerness to interact with aJackson Pollock by photographing their friends in front of it with their camera phones, rather than simply looking at the painting. Such a familiar anecdote and apparent mismatch provides ample evidence for this fundamental shift in user experience in common with evolving orders of technosocial objects and media relations that may or may not concern art. Of course the Pollock-painting artefact is no less a painting,as sure as a wine bottle still contains wine. What's changed is expectations of behaviour where we are now more used to being tinkerers, customisers,modifiers or what Sterling calls 'wranglers' of unstable objects.

In conclusion – whether talking about artworks, exhibitions or discourse – we would argue that

web 2.0 offers at least a framework for thinking beyond technology as a "thing" and instead as a behavioural trope or a usefulness. Rather than being hung-up on the necessarily-"new" of "new media", there might be an approach that considers production in the light of the notion of the channel, and as a phenomenon of the ever-evolving field of the technosocial.

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