Cultural participation and digital platforms

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In the past few decades, citizen participation in fields as diverse as politics, economics, arts, and media has drastically increased on a global scale. From participatory democracy to a collaborative economy, from crowdsourcing to civic technology, these new forms of political, economic, and technological organization are currently changing our society, all the while colliding with opposing movements. Digital technologies have boosted this trend by offering new possibilities for expression and creation, and by functioning as a lever for innovation in different sectors. Furthermore, the distribution of digital culture, beyond the tools themselves, has confirmed a shift which now stresses the empowerment of citizens, made possible by digital technologies and the creative expression of individual freedom. In this spirit of “ubiquitous participation,” the arts and culture world has also been confronted with the phenomenon of rapid transformation and evolution based on participant involvement.

Beginning first with blogs and other Web 2.0 services, then with social networks and collaborative platforms, the Web has allowed pro-amateurs to share and circulate their work and knowledge among the greatest number of people possible, in new spaces that are based primarily on a mindset of openness and common goods, which might seem more conducive to democracy. Today, more than ever, digital contribution-based projects (whether institutional, commercial, or associative) are becoming vehicles for new forms of creation, engagement, and the spread of works and knowledge in the arts and culture field. Yet, at the same time, these projects raise ethical, legal, and sociopolitical issues.

As a matter of fact, this contributory phenomenon has grown year after year, attracting the interest of more and more participants in the cultural world. At first, this movement was spurred on by associations and informal communities, notably people involved in open source and digital commons, but also by knowledgeable amateurs, and by artists. In time, private actors also became interested in this new mode of
collaboratively producing works and knowledge; take, for example, reader platforms such as Babelio, writing platforms such as Wattpad, and content sharing platforms such as YouTube, Flickr, and Soundcloud. These collaborative platforms focus on three main types of practices: creating, documenting, and promoting cultural and artistic content.

More recently, cultural institutions (libraries, museums, and archives) have found in these participatory spaces not only an opportunity to gain visibility and attract new audiences, but also an opportunity to actively engage citizens in activities around their cultural research.

This issue of Hybrid, the Journal of Arts and Human Mediations, seeks to question the theoretical, empirical, and political framework surrounding relationships between digital platforms and cultural participation. Through a variety of perspectives focused on different disciplines, this issue looks deeper into the construction of these platforms, and the democratic and creative questions they raise regarding citizens’ relationship to the production of cultural and artistic objects.

We have decided to focus our reflection around two major themes, corresponding to the two halves of the issue. The first half delves into the stakes of platformization within cultural participation, offering a critical perspective around interactions between public and private actors in constructing democratic digital dynamics. The second half is chiefly dedicated to issues of cultural heritage-making that these platforms bring up, highlighting a variety of actors (institutions, amateurs, activists, etc.) who contribute to producing and conserving the traces of digital participation for future generations.

Several articles in this issue point out the difficulties and limits of participation on cultural platforms. It seems worth mentioning that, broadly speaking, this participation in the cultural sector will face three obstacles. The first obstacle lies in the fact that culture is essentially a supply market: a musician, a filmmaker, or an author creates a work, attempting to reach the largest possible audience with the support of middlemen. In this respect, digital technology does not greatly change the situation, except that platforms provide other intermediary forms. The second obstacle relates to a still rather Malruciyan vision of culture: cultural policies aim, above all, to give as many people as possible access to humanity’s most indispensable works. Cultural platforms supported by public authorities and their institutions often perpetuate this top-down approach, whereas platform development suggests a more horizontal approach when offering online cultural content. As for private actors, who often place the user at the center of collaborative platforms, a question of economic model leads us to the third and final obstacle: in order to finance the creation and development of expensive digital services, the platform operator, if offering his service free of charge, will be tempted to monetize both the users’ created content and the users’ personal data.

A handful of the articles in this issue thus keep to a critical perspective, while illustrating the limits of cultural participation and, specifically, its constructed, established, and preconceived dimensions—the latter which is carried out by the platform operator, who, because he creates and animates the platform, largely induces participation, and, to a certain extent, guides it. This movement falls within a broader
critique of collaborative platforms," dominant platforms in general, and the advanced forms of capitalism they induce.  

Opening this issue of Hybrid, Yves Citton's article belongs to this critical perspective while going beyond it, evoking not so much the digital platforms of cultural participation but rather “the ruse brought about by commercial and governmental motives” which lie behind any cultural participation offering. The latter could be systematically exploited: either by the commercial world, which transforms an Internet user’s participation into a commodity (the only value being that of the consumer's attention, made valuable with advertisers), or by cultural institutions, which, even when detached from the need to make a profit, draw on visitors’ participation for a democratic legitimacy they find increasingly difficult to obtain. Beyond platforms, Yves Citton invites us to rethink cultural participation by following Fred Moten’s “jurisgenerative” approach, one which involves encouraging citizens and artists to develop alternative laws, both constantly and instinctively. 

Several articles in this issue enable us to clarify this critical dimension by analyzing different forms of participation on cultural platforms: four common points repeatedly occur across the articles. The first involves the communication dimension within the call for participation and the injunction to participate. Reporting on an ethnographic survey conducted across five exhibitions at the Grand Palais in Paris, Sébastien Appiotti shows how the institution strongly encourages visitors to be active by taking pictures (often of themselves) and sharing their images on social networks. By stimulating public participation, the Grand Palais seeks first and foremost to reposition its institutional image and to enhance its online presence and reputation. While museums have long banned cameras from exhibitions, those now strongly encouraging photographic participation are displaying an ability to keep up with the times, and adapt—even promote—new cultural practices. 

Secondly, several articles highlight the fact that the rhetoric around public participation in online cultural offerings often hides a “top-down” operation: the institution is the one in charge, and public participation is, to some extent, exploited. Nicolas Navarro and Lise Renaud, analyzing forms of public participation in visitor apps, confirm this power structure and the institution’s position of domination as it continues to loom large. One element in their work interprets this critical dimension with nuanced detail, showing how each application, depending on the institution’s project and the technical provider, positions public participation at a different level. In particular, they highlight an increased professionalism among cultural and tourism actors desiring to integrate real forms of public participation into their application proposals. 

Eva Sandri confronts a similar issue when questioning participatory devices in the museum context. Her text specifically aims to study the public’s role in producing the webdocumentary Femmes gitanes du quai des platanes, created by the Museon Arlaten (the Museum of Ethnography in Arles). To do so, she attempts to classify specific types of participatory museum devices based on the involvement of the concerned communities. Four types of devices are identified: consultative tools, visit-enhancing tools, collection tools, and collaborative writing tools. This classification allows Sandri to shed light on the complex workings within the participation underpinning the webdocumentary by describing a hybrid model that combines top-down and bottom-up approaches.
The third critical dimension in this issue of *Hybrid* concerns user-generated content (UGC). By analyzing the strategies and arguments of two platforms committed to teaching literary writing, Nolwenn Tréhondart shows how authors’ and beta-readers’ work is used by the platform operator. The latter adopts an entrepreneurial or military rhetoric, piggybacking on the hopes of professionalization among writers and readers.

Fourthly and finally, several articles underline the rhetorical effect of public participation, which appears to be an obligatory part of every online cultural offering, but which often struggles to truly take shape within the suggested devices. The example of alternative video-on-demand subscription platforms, analyzed by Valérie Croissant and Marie Cambone, illustrates these difficulties. While highlighting their desire to involve subscribers in platforms that are presented as cinephelic alternatives to the dominant American platforms, the offerings of Tënk, Mubi, and LaCinétek do not escape classic film curation, chosen by programmers or film professionals. Here as well, a participatory promise is hard to keep.

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Whether institutional, amateur, or commercial, contributory platforms generate voluntary and involuntary digital traces. On the one hand, contributors’ actions aim to build and share cultural, heritage, and memorial objects: archived documents, literary reviews, stories, photos, etc. On the other hand, any practice of construction, appropriation, mediation, editorialization, and documentation that intersects with these devices will produce traces of individual and collective participation which in turn become inherent digital objects in themselves. The second half of this issue aims to delve deeper into these phenomena, and more specifically to question the cultural and heritage value within these traces, and the necessity of their valorization and conservation. The six articles that comprise this half illuminate a variety of practices and queries that give rise to patrimonialization through online cultural participation today. These texts offer new scenarios that go beyond institutional issues in constructing heritage, by broadening the perspective to include those of different actors: community participants, commercial actors, and activists.

The first text, by Antonin Segault, presents one of the most well-known online cultural participation projects, the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, and more broadly, Wikimedia Commons, the free media library. His article provides an analysis of the contest Wiki Loves Monuments, held since 2009, during which participants are invited to photograph works of art from partner museums and upload their pictures to Wikimedia Commons. The purpose of this study is twofold. First, Segault describes and questions the dynamics of communal activity during the ten years of the contest’s existence by examining its sustainability. Secondly, he highlights the importance of the traces produced from the online initiative: the analyses presented in his article are indeed based on data extracted by Wikipedia’s API, and on numerous statistics made available through the platform. This first example emphasizes the importance of these participatory traces, which in themselves constitute a memory in need of preservation.

The subsequent two articles by Irene De Togni and Benjamin Barbier show how the issue of trace preservation not only concerns institutional and associative actors, but commercial actors now as well. Irene De Togni’s article presents the Inducks platform. Born out of an initiative led by amateur volunteers, this platform is today the main
indexing and cataloguing service for open access Disney comics on an international scale. This text aptly demonstrates how the editorial group’s staff contributes to and relies on this participatory knowledge base, in order to build their own professional practices. Amateur and professional knowledge fuse in the system, making Inducks an editorial and heritage space that goes beyond commercial dynamics and authors’ rights.

Benjamin Barbier’s article focuses on the world of video games, illustrating a universe similar to that of Inducks, one which mixes commercial projects and amateur initiatives. This article directly confronts the problem of participatory trace conservation, looking into all the ephemeral spaces of player discussion destined to disappear. By advocating for the necessity of trace conservation, Benjamin Barbier relies on the intangible cultural heritage category, established by UNESCO in 2003, in order to acknowledge all of the oral practices that elude a classic heritage paradigm based on materiality. According to the author, all of the traces produced and recorded by the players themselves through different contributory platforms—even through the implementation and maintenance of their own gaming infrastructures—must be safeguarded as intangible heritage.

The next two articles examine a third type of player, activists, and the traces they produce through participation. Lucas Fritz’s article focuses on the cause of neurodiversity and its possible patrimonialization. As in Benjamin Barbier’s text, the concept of intangible cultural heritage seems here to be the most effective way to valorize these intangible practices. In particular, Lucas Fritz proposes a research-creation project, based on the Reddit platform, which aims to facilitate the production of the community’s activist traces linked to neurodiversity, in order to advocate for the recognition of this phenomenon as heritage. Similarly, Viviana Lipuma is interested in participatory online activist practices. Exploring the use of social networks in the context of Russia, she uses the concept of “artivism” to describe the work of two very active collectives, rodina and Rebra Evi. These case studies allow her to return to one of the central themes of this issue, the relationship between cultural participation and democracy, and to question the perception of digital tools as catalysts for democracy.

The issue closes with a research-creation project that questions, as with the previous article, the relationship between participation and artistic practice. Célin Jiang conducts a comparative analysis of fembot pop stars in Asia and the West through a creative approach. The fembot popstar is a virtual influencer now famous in the music industry. The author emphasizes that the very creation of these avatars is a participatory process, putting the audience at the center as it combines art, marketing, and technology. This different take on cultural participation, interpreted in her article as “marketed collective techno-creativity,” contrasts with other viewpoints in the issue, and provides an ideal ending that once again highlights the richness and complexity of this object of study.

In conclusion, with its variety of approaches and disciplines, this issue of Hybrid has two major objectives. First, it seeks to develop a reflective outlook in order to interpret cultural participation, by focusing on both the actor’s motivations, as well as on forms of knowledge (of an object, of oneself, of others), and on the production of that
knowledge generated within online participatory frameworks. Observing online participation practices specifically in the cultural sector allows us, in fact, to ask ourselves questions of an epistemological and political nature, bringing us back once again to a classic question, that of the relationship between participation and democracy. This issue seeks to go beyond the vision of digital technologies as tools for cultural democratization by illustrating the operating models in all their complexity, a complexity which collaborative platforms often hide. In this respect, as a second objective, this issue aims to highlight the blind spots within cultural participation. This section not only focuses on the phenomenon of platformization, and the legal and ethical concerns associated with digital technologies, but also sets out to evoke any event arising out of a discrepancy between technological priorities (interoperability, standardization, access to data, and its durability) and the requirements of social actors, both in terms of expression and emotion (the right to be forgotten and to privacy, zones of opacity, resistance strategies, dynamics of resistance, etc.) In particular, we have sought to shed light on issues related to valorizing informal participatory traces that emerge from non-institutional actors (activists, artists, and also commercial figures). Finally, we would like to thank all of the authors who contributed to this issue, as well as the peer readers whose observations helped strengthen the quality of the texts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

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7. See no. 140 of the journal Culture et recherche, dedicated to cultural research and participatory science.

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