

Meridians: Engagement and Collaboration in Physical and Virtual Public Space

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The use of collaborative online social media applications as tools of communication is increasing in contemporary society. Correspondingly, a number of contemporary artists are exploring online interaction in their material public art practice, as a new form of documentation, promotion and creative collaboration. Mapping and analysing these new forms of interaction provide a method to determine the scope of their contribution to new artistic knowledge. This paper argues that contemporary public art practice can be cognisant of both physical and virtual contributions as equally active participants in collaboration. It also identifies the convergence between artist and audience in virtual and physical space, and examines how this is affected by certain conditions and models of behaviour, which influence how a new collaborative creative discourse in public art can be constructed.

Meridians Shanghai 2010: Art & Sound in Public Space Project was an international collaboration between RMIT University (RMIT) and East China Normal University (ECNU) that created a suite of contemporary public artworks for Australia's contribution to World Expo 2010 (Expo) in Shanghai, China.¹ *Meridians* was used as a case study to document and examine the forms of collaborative behaviour that occurred within the relationship between the physical artwork created by artists and its extension into virtual space through online audience interaction. The applied methodology

mapped online interactions against three different communication models to identify collaborative behaviour between the roles of the artist and audience; the types of interactions between them in the conceptualisation of the artwork; and the openness of artists to incorporate virtual components into the collaborative aspects of their artistic practice.

Site/sight/cite

The differentiation between original work and reproduction, creator and collaborator, has long been an area of discussion. In the 1930s Walter Benjamin argued that mechanical reproduction removed the presence of “the original,” altering how art is experienced so that it is no longer bound to place and ritual, but judged and controlled by the mass audience and influenced by politics.² This paper examines perceptions of artistic collaboration, which are not restricted to concepts of the original and the copy, but rather they create an expanded field where the artist and the artwork can have numerous guises and exist simultaneously in physical and virtual space.

Recent advances in technology and communications are changing the way in which artists and their audiences view and interact with an artwork. Embedded in this technological and cultural shift is the use of online social networking-based applications (Web 2.0). Described as the “architecture of participation” Web 2.0 applications provide affordable and repeatable opportunities to use technology to encourage artistic participation and collaboration.³ The use of Web 2.0 also extends the potential of audience participation beyond basic viewing to encourage active interaction and the creation of new work, which is separate to, but cites or is inspired by, the artwork.

By observing and documenting audience interactions with the artwork online, and identifying the openness of artists to incorporate virtual components into the collaborative aspects of their artistic practice, *Meridians* provides a platform to examine whether physical and virtual collaborative behaviour can converge, transforming the scope and authorship of the artwork beyond its material singularity, to potentially create new artistic discourse.

Engagement models to map collaboration

Meridians activities were mapped against three different communication models, source-message-channel-receiver, concentric circle, and rhizome; to identify collaborative behaviour between the roles of the artist and audi-

ence; and the types of interactions between them in the conceptualisation of the artwork.

Communications theorist, David K. Berlo's, Source-Message-Channel-Receiver (S-M-C-R) is a fixed and linear model that acknowledges that both the creator (source) and audience (receiver) encode and decode information to create their own meaning based on their experiences, knowledge, and senses. The model allows for variation in interpretation, but does not provide a structure for exchange or collaboration between the receiver and the source in the creation of the message.⁴ The artwork is fixed and singular in its role and placement as a complete object. The audience and creator are also confined to predetermined roles that do not provide opportunities for active collaboration.

The Concentric Circle model structures the audience-creator relationship as interchangeable roles based on five concentric circles.⁵ First, those whom the work could not exist without—creator and collaborators; secondly, co-developers—shareholders who partake deeply in its ownership; thirdly, volunteers and performers—those for and with whom the work is created; fourthly, those who have a direct experience of the artwork; and finally, people accessing the work through the mass media and/or exhibitions. In this model, continuums of positions are represented and, as participants are able to move between the levels, the flexibility and fluidity of how these occur are fundamental.⁶ The audience has more active and varied roles in the creation and critique of an artwork; however, levels of hierarchy persist as the creator remains at the centre of the activity, and the work cannot exist without her/him. The conceptualisation of the actual work of art also remains fixed and is constructed as singular and centred.

The rhizome model is based on the concept of the botanical rhizome and was first articulated by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to describe types of non-hierarchical activity where people are connected without pre-given rules and predetermined connections.⁷ This model constructs relationships in an evolving, non-linear and non-hierarchical structure. The rhizome allows for multiple levels of engagement and removes the distinction between audience and creator. Its openness reflects the envisioned creative capacity of Web 2.0 applications, where roles and the creation of content are open and evolve unhindered or restrained as artistic expressions.⁸ This can equally be applied to artistic practice, where the creator is no longer the sole author of the artwork and the artwork itself is no longer a singular entity.⁹ Thus the rhizome model can be a particularly effective tool for analysing the forms of engagement offered by the *Meridians* project.

Virtual exchanges using well-known Web 2.0 applications

In order to understand collaborative behaviour in virtual environments, a number of existing Web 2.0 applications were examined for the *Meridians* project. The most commonly known and used applications using structured social networking platforms to facilitate engagement, Facebook and Twitter, were selected for further analysis. Facebook (www.facebook.com) users establish a personal profile. Interaction occurs by adding “friends” to share information via messages, photos, videos, and creating and joining groups.¹⁰ Facebook is currently cited as the most widely used Web 2.0 application.¹¹ Twitter (www.twitter.com) users create accounts to broadcast, “tweet,” information that answers the question “what’s happening?” in up to 140 characters and to “follow” other users.¹²

The examination identified that Facebook and Twitter predominantly operate in concentric circles models. Interactions are fluid between the creator and audience, but the creator remains at the centre of the activity. The conceptualisation of how and where creativity occurs is also fixed and generally singular. Facebook demonstrates some potential to operate in a rhizomatic manner but only when exchanges between users are administratively unrestricted. To test and observe the incidence of collaborative behaviour when consciously applied to an artistic project, a *Meridians* profile was established and actively managed on both applications.

To maximise engagement opportunities, the Facebook page, *Meridians Shanghai 2010: Art & Sound in Public Space*, was administratively unrestricted. Over the four month case study period, fan numbers increased steadily to 40 and, at the time of writing this paper, there were 60 fans. Fans interactions with the *Meridians* profile were predominantly through demonstrations of support for the project, such as voting for “likes,” and publicly posting comments on the “wall” (or homepage). These provided insight into audience perceptions of the project, but they did not extend to direct interaction with the artists in the creative process of making work. Consistent with the preliminary research, the *Meridians* page operated in a concentric circle model and collaborative behaviour was limited and did not transform the project or the artwork.

On the Twitter account, MERIDIANS2010, the more often tweets were posted, the more followers were attracted to the account because Twitter encourages people to follow other accounts. Following other accounts also increased the likelihood of reciprocal following. At the end of the case study period, the account had 38 followers and at the time of writing it had 62. “Following,” however, did not provide any form of engagement beyond identification. Like Facebook, it created no direct form of interaction be-

tween the audience (followers) and artists. Contrary to the preliminary research, the Twitter account acted as an S-M-C-R model with information broadcasted outward and no audience interaction or collaborative behaviour detected.

This analysis of structured applications (Facebook and Twitter) identified that behaviour is not automatically interactive, and may not result in collaboration, even when it is specifically encouraged through a creative project. This challenges the general perception and expectation of social networking on Web 2.0, which tends to emphasise it as being intrinsically interactive and collaborative. As one user comments:

Web 2.0 has had such a huge impact on the way we communicate, network, and create work; collaboration, contribution and community are the order of the day.¹³

The results of the *Meridians* study determined that the activation of minor interest, beyond basic audience observation, requires a significant ongoing investment of time and energy, to constantly update information and provoke engagement.

The most interactive result documented in the study was fans posting articles and links about other public art projects on the *Meridians*' Facebook page, making it a more expansive public art information portal. This activity reinforced the position that Facebook and Twitter accounts predominantly function as information dissemination points. Generally, the emphasis is on drawing attention—a “look at me” attitude—and gaining support, as opposed to creating an in-depth capacity to embed audience perceptions or contributions into the creation of the existing artwork, or to encourage independent creative behaviour. The Web 2.0 applications examined are, therefore, best suited for the promotion and exchange of information, emphasising mass reach rather than depth of interactions.

Virtual engagement and accessibility in China

Web 2.0 accessibility provides unprecedented capacity to engage with audiences on an international scale.¹⁴ However, this global interaction is not without limitations related to differing languages, legislation, censorship and local cultural practice. These restrictions can affect the availability and use of Web 2.0 applications and the capacity for virtual engagement and collaboration in basic communication, as well as creative and artistic exchanges between countries.

The *Meridians* art project was physically created on-site in China. This created a range of cultural and material challenges for the Australian team,

including language barriers, internet access and censorship. The Chinese government has restrictive control over online content accessible to Chinese audiences. For websites that originate within China penalties and self-censorship are implemented to keep content “clean.”¹⁵ The government also restricts access to some websites originating outside China. This is referred to colloquially as the “Great Firewall of China.”¹⁶ For example, Web 2.0 applications Facebook and Twitter have been permanently unavailable in China since summer 2009.¹⁷ In addition, using e-mail and leaving messages are considered socially awkward in China, as people generally prefer live exchanges using mobile phones, short text messages and on-line discussion boards.¹⁸ Another issue that became apparent during the project was the differing attitudes to intellectual property and copyright, particularly sharing information. The downloading of files that may be subject copyright tends to be more socially acceptable in China.¹⁹ Due to these challenges, *Meridians* was restricted to English Web 2.0 applications and online activity that occurred outside of China.

Managing virtual interaction accessibility between China and Australia in *Meridians* demonstrates the potential challenges of virtual collaboration between multiple countries that have distinctly different usage habits and access to Web 2.0 applications. It also exposes some limits to the rhetoric on the potential expansiveness of the Internet. Collaborative international engagement in Web 2.0 environments, therefore, cannot be approached as universal. They require significant consideration into the habits and availability of each country.

Virtual exchanges and embedded participation in creative outcomes

In order to make a comprehensive assessment of Web 2.0 technologies and their influence on collaborative artistic behaviour, *Meridians* also researched additional social networking applications that have a more expansive functionality than Facebook or Twitter. A “ning” is a member-based interactive wiki (a website that allows users to add and update content) for people to create their own online social networks.²⁰ During the *Meridians* time frame, virtual interaction occurred unhindered within and outside of China on the ning because it was not censored. The ning allowed members to personalise their profile and create new social networks, which increased opportunities for rhizomatic model interaction.

The *Meridians* ning was created to facilitate the project team’s collaboration beyond face-to-face meetings by extending content production virtually and materially. Thus, the ning enabled the team to collaborate when

they were geographically separated between Melbourne and Shanghai. Using the ning the team uploaded video clips and photos of their personal interests and experiences, creating a visual tapestry of the collective *Meridians* experience drawn from multiple independent perspectives, viewable individually and en-masse. Operating in a rhizomatic way, the members' use of the ning virtually mirrored and advanced the team's physical collaborative activities.

People outside of the project team could also become *Meridians* ning members, but were vetted due to concerns about vulnerability to anti-China activity that could censor the ning within China. *Meridians* provided opportunities for non-members to observe the artists at work and interact in minor ways, but it did not embed opportunities for engagement in the creation of the artworks. It was observed that even though non-members regularly viewed the ning, they did not actively engage beyond demonstrations of support. The lack of capacity for direct participation is considered to have contributed to the low levels of non-member collaboration documented.

Team members' ning use resulted in high levels of active collaboration that influenced creative outcomes, whereas non-members had limited engagement. The marked difference between activity using the same application by members and non-members reinforces how a sense of ownership and direct involvement increases the likelihood of deep participation. This also highlights the significance of blurring the boundary between audience and creator to generate an environment where collaboration can occur.

The most dynamic virtual collaborative engagement between artists and audiences occurs when Web 2.0 applications facilitate an audience role that directly contributes towards the creative outcome/form of the artwork. An example of this is *Vectorial Elevation* developed by artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, Canada, where the audience designed virtual "light sculptures" that were then activated in physical space and on personalised websites.²¹ Similarly, John Baldessari's work, *Your Name in Lights*, for the 2011 Sydney Festival, presented by John Kaldor Projects, attracted 10,000 virtual participants who each contributed their name, which was then projected in lights for 15-seconds virtually on-line and physically on the Australian Museum's William Street façade.²² Both of these projects demonstrate an interchangeable role between artist and audience that requires high levels of collaborative behaviour, resulting in artistic outcomes that are centred in relatively pre-conceived manifestations in virtual and physical public space.

These projects indicate the potential for a new creative discourse that blends authorship between the artist and audience across virtual and physical creative activities, resulting in artworks that traverse virtual and

physical forms. However, although virtual audience participation in the creative process can result in less predetermined artistic outcomes, the dominant discourse on the creative process still remains focussed on sole authorship and predetermined outcomes.²³ Another potential angle that these projects suggest is the novelty factor some participation approaches provide, the demographics this can appeal to, and whether the potential outcomes are predicted or completely random.

Virtually focused work

As part of the *Meridians* project, Australian team members Greg Szopa and Clare Leporati produced a two-minute video-based work, “webisode,” as a specifically virtual artwork. This was intended to extend the consideration of the audience’s role in creative collaboration (which because it often largely involves viewing, can remain somewhat intangible) into an integrated part of the project.

The webisode was viewable on the project websites and Web 2.0 applications, including the ning, and was also physically screened inside the Australian Pavilion, Shanghai, and at Federation Square, Melbourne. The webisode is a multi-faceted view of the project incorporating the physical development and installation process, details of the material works, audiences’ engagement with the physical exhibition, and the contextual setting in Shanghai and the World Expo.

Analysis of the webisode and its relationship to audiences identified that the virtual audiences’ selection of the setting, timing, and frequency of their viewership is a form of engagement and participation because it contributes towards their experience of the webisode. However, as the webisode is presented in its complete form, ultimately the artist-audience interaction operates in an S-M-C-R model. While some concentric circle interaction is possible due to the virtual availability and platforms for feedback, these communication forms are not able to fundamentally transform the work. The *Meridians* webisode demonstrated that virtually-based creative works, due to their intrinsic need to be viewed, incorporate minor levels of interaction but do not necessarily require direct collaboration between the artist and audience in the creation of the work.

Existing networks

The case study also confirms the position that for collaboration to occur, in virtual or physical realms, sympathetic audiences that have an interest in the information being disseminated are most easily accessed through the

recommendation of existing networks.

The support of existing virtual contacts, or “friends,” on Facebook provides legitimacy, draws attention to, and encourages “non-friends” to become aware of and engage virtually with the project. Existing virtual contacts can also provide access to wider and potentially more random networks—through directly encouraging awareness, through postings about the project, and indirectly through observing other people’s activities through automated updates, such as news feeds. Virtual networks extended the project geographically, on a global scale. In the case study period, the combination of active and indirect support from existing virtual friends resulted in a substantial increase in the number of non-friends who then interacted with the *Meridians* page.

Information on *Meridians* was also sent directly from RMIT Alumni and Arts Victoria to their databases, which increased the number of physical visitors to the exhibition. Working with traditional networks provided validity and encouraged interest in the project. However, it also required more targeted and labour intensive planning. This resulted in preconceived communications being sent to selected audiences. For example, working with Arts Victoria resulted in a direct mail-out to segments of their existing network, people who would be interested in the project from the perspective of Victorian creative achievements on the world stage at Expo.

The project team’s collaboration with contacts from existing networks operated in a concentric circle model. The collaborative behaviour was less directly related to the project’s artistic outcomes, but did provide insight into audience perspective and perception. The research found that using existing virtual and traditional networks is the most effective method for expanding audience awareness and engagement. Activating existing virtual networks provides increased capacity to reach more random and unexpected audiences than using traditional existing network communication methods. Working with existing networks also provides a form of collaborative behaviour between the project team and the audience.

Interactions between the material and the virtual

Artists

The Australian artists, Cameron Robbins, Claire Tracey and Joanna Buckley, actively embraced and explored *Meridians*’ virtual components as both an integration and extension of their physical practice. Due to language barriers, and other intercultural complications, the Chinese artists did not engage with the virtual components of the project. The lead artist, Cameron

Robbins, created physical artworks on-site at ECNU. These works explored natural energy by creating mechanical outdoor drawing devices that produce works on paper (wind drawings) created by the weather. Robbins also ensured that opportunities were provided to access both the physical work and himself for the purposes of documentation and engagement with the online audience. These documents included interviews, photographs, and videos of the development and fabrication of the drawing machine and the creation of the wind drawings. These were then posted online, on the Ning and linked to Facebook and Twitter accounts, in addition to the project blog.

Within *Meridians*, the artists' use of virtual tools was concentrated on aiding collaboration within the project team based on a rhizomatic model, in order to extend their physical creative practice into virtual space. The artists recognised an increasing expectation that virtual documentation be embedded into their creative processes, and were conscious of how their physical activities could be translated through virtual means. The artists were also highly interested in the virtual feedback received about their work, but they did not demonstrate any interest in integrating audience perceptions within their conceptual or physical creation of the *Meridians* artwork. Ultimately, the "artwork," apart from the webisode, was conceptually confined to the physically completed work and the virtual components relegated to being part of the developmental process.

At the official launch of *Meridians*, the project team was particularly conscious of ensuring that the event was captured with photographs and video footage that was to be shared with the online *Meridians* community. This demonstrates an increasing awareness of the legitimacy of virtual viewership and a slow convergence of the boundaries between virtual and physical audience engagement.

The shift away from understanding audience engagement as only being with completed work on-site, towards the increasing awareness and acceptance of the audience as virtual witnesses to the creative processes, demonstrates an emerging form of collaboration. The cognisance of the artists to the virtual audiences' gaze, both conscious and subconscious, suggests that these audiences are participating in the creative process, indicating a potentially changing discourse in terms of the scope and participation of the audience in physical artistic production.

Audience

To provide a point of comparison, interactions between the physical audience and the artists at the on-site exhibition were examined. The project team spoke to exhibition visitors to discover their impressions of the art-

works. The audience was impressed that the Australian artists had not followed the more common practice by visiting artists of bringing a pre-made work to a project, and they admired the fact that the artworks consciously responded to the Shanghai environment. People were also intrigued to learn that the artwork materials had been sourced locally, including the re-use of discarded objects in the making of the wind machines.

The artists only engaged with the audience after the artworks were complete and installed at the exhibition site. However, while the dialogue that occurred at this point offered insight into alternative readings of the work, interactions with the on-site audience did not result in any form of collaborative behaviour or impact on the creative process. Interactions with the physical audience were also fleeting and, unless recorded by the artists, could only be referenced from memory. The lack of documentation also meant that these audience perceptions were almost exclusively personal and did not provide opportunities for cross-audience interaction, as is possible in virtual environments through message boards, walls and blogs.

Physical interactions with artists and their artwork have distinct differences to engagement by virtual audiences. *Meridians* demonstrates that physical audiences more commonly engage with the completed artwork on-site and do not generally have the same capacity for ongoing access to the developmental process. The scope of the audience was also limited to the on-site location with less potential for diverse demographics compared to virtual audiences.

Conclusion

The research conducted in *Meridians* suggests that a significant portion of Web 2.0 interaction currently operates in a concentric circle model; and, while this can provide opportunities for collaborative behaviour, it generally results in artistic outcomes that are predetermined and ultimately controlled by the artist. Although the use of a rhizomatic model was proven through the study to result in the most dynamic forms of artistic collaboration between artist and audience across virtual and physical realms, it is currently a less popular model outside of established collaborative teams.

The *Meridians* case study demonstrates that a number of factors directly impact on the capacity for Web 2.0 applications to result in creative collaborative outcomes between artists and audiences. The study identified that a significant ongoing investment of time and energy is required to provoke audience engagement and that this does not guarantee that collaboration will occur. It also found that established Web 2.0 applications, such as Facebook and Twitter, promote the exchange of information, which

tends to encourage mass rather than in-depth interactions. The project's location in China and Australia also demonstrates that international engagement in Web 2.0 environments cannot be approached as universal and require consideration of the virtual habits and accessibility of each country involved.

It is also evident that a new creative discourse is emerging, which blends authorship between the artist and audience across virtual and physical creative activities, and has the potential to result in artworks that traverse the virtual and physical. However, *Meridians* also makes apparent that virtual audience participation in the creative process needs to be encouraged and facilitated by the artists themselves, in order to avoid seeing the artwork as only existing in its physical form. The *Meridians* webisode demonstrated that virtually-based artworks, due to their intrinsic need to be viewed, incorporate minor levels of interaction but do not necessarily require collaborative behaviour between artist and audience to develop or execute the creative idea.

The *Meridians* project demonstrates a growing awareness of and interest in including virtual participants in creative processes. More expansively, the recognition by artists of the “audience-participants,” and of their potential to influence the conceptualisation of the work, indicates a conceptual change in the understanding of the scope of audience participation in physical artistic production. There is a new creative discourse emerging for public art practice that converges virtual and physical collaborative behaviour. This new discourse is subject to limitations and conditions, as discussed in this paper. While having the potential to transform the parameters of “the artwork” and definitions of “the artist” beyond physical specificity and singular authorship, this discourse has the potential to generate new knowledge about artistic collaborative behaviour.

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NOTES

¹ The project team of researchers and artists included: Clare Loporati, Geoff Hogg, Zhou Chang Jiang, Tammy Wong, Cameron Robbins, Wei Tienyu, Zhang Langsheng, Rupa Ramanathan, Claire Tracey, Wang Kai, Joanna Buckley, and Greg Szopa. For more information about the project see also, Minister for Industry & Trade Media Release, “Art Fosters Strong Ties Between Victoria And Shanghai”,

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- ²³ The project's research into other public art projects that integrate virtual activity observed that generally artists who utilise virtual interaction as part of their creative practice continue to focus the results within predefined parameters and attribute themselves as the sole authors of the work.