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Transformative practices: the aesthetics, ethics and politics of social relations

In this paper I'd like to suggest that transformative practices are those that give attention to processes of change, and that understanding processes of change is an intrinsically political, ethical and aesthetic set of activities. Above all, I would suggest that transformative practices are concerned with protocol and relationality: that they *enact* the social relations embedded in them, and enact the conditions/rules that inform how one entity encounters another. Some transformative work exposes these conditions/rules, subverting and mocking them. Other work is concerned with creating protective zones within which convivial exchanges can arise. What other approaches are there? Whilst this paper makes reference to particular artworks, it also attempts to articulate a context within which new transformative practices might emerge.

The rapid and unprecedented changes¹ effecting societies since the 1960s are having a profound effect on the production, dissemination, interpretation, documentation and archiving of cultural artefacts and events. Many refer to these broad changes as globalization, although other terms such as 'the post-industrial society, the information, network, disciplinary, control societies are also used (Thacker 2004: xii). The exact nature and extent of globalisation is fiercely debated and competing analyses are often rooted in claims and denials regarding epochal shifts, the decline or otherwise of the nation-state and corresponding transformations in social relations. Suggesting that the 'information society' perpetuates and promotes long-term capitalist relations enormously, social theorist Frank Webster declares that 'while there is undoubted change taking place, and this at a speed and with a reach hitherto unimaginable, it is for the most part a matter of the continuity, consolidation and extension of established relations' (Webster 2000: 70). Whilst acknowledging the significance of information, knowledge, advanced communications and computing technologies to these developments, he urges resistance to any consideration that these are the cause or indeed privileged factors in contemporary change. Instead, Webster identifies ongoing features of capitalism such as: ability to pay; market criteria, competition, private ownership over state holdings, wage labour and commodification of activities as markers of global network society.

¹ Theorists such as Juergen Habermas, Frank Webster support this view.

The displacement of social relationships with market relations brings about a proceduralisation of the everyday that is characteristic of what Juergen Habermas calls the 'colonisation of the lifeworld' in which rationalising systems infiltrate more and more areas of everyday life substituting informal modes of organisation for protocols and procedures. Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* is concerned with how increasingly rationalised contemporary societies create conditions within which 'communicative action' can take place. He argues that the lifeworld which affords individuals the possibility of reaching common understandings with others through mutual, face-to-face encounters over time is becoming disabled by 'non-communicative' fully rationalised systems. For Max Weber and Habermas, the archetypal manifestation of processes of rationalisation is the *bureaucratic* organisation. Weber defines a bureaucracy as: '[a] hierarchical organization designed rationally to coordinate the work of many individuals in the pursuit of large-scale administrative tasks and organizational goals'. Operating on an impersonal level with a well-established division of labour the bureaucracy is hierarchical and centralised with paid, full-time administration of officials that form a chain of command imposed by written and verbal rules and regulations. For Habermas and Weber it is through the bureaucratic organisation and the internalisation of its protocols and procedures that the lifeworld becomes colonised. But as the network emerges as the 'organizational form of the Information Age' (Castells 2000: 1) it replaces bureaucracy as the archetypal manifestation of rationalisation. It is into these established processes of rationalisation - enclosure and commodification - that new technologies insert themselves.

Although both network and bureaucracy are rationalising organisational forms, the distributed network differs to bureaucratic structure in that it has 'no central hubs and no radial nodes' (Galloway 2004: 33) to organise communication. It is a centre-less structural form that 'resembles a web or a meshwork (Galloway 2004: 5): it is 'a specific network architecture characterised by equity between nodes, bi-directional links, a high degree of redundancy and general lack of internal hierarchy'. (Galloway 2006: 317) Protocol organises interactions in distributed networks. So it is intrinsically relational. It is 'a set of technical procedures for defining, managing, modulating, and distributing information throughout a flexible yet robust delivery infrastructure' (Thacker 2004: xv). Protocol 'functions largely without relying on hierarchical, pyramidal or centralized mechanisms; it is flat and smooth; it is universal, flexible and robust (Galloway 2006: 317). It is not concerned with the content of what passes through the network, but rather with the facilitation and maintenance of communication between nodes. As Alexander Galloway suggests, protocol is fundamentally a technology of inclusion and openness; a fact that 'makes it especially difficult to speak about protocol in a negative sense' (Galloway 2004: 147). A concept of freedom is implicit in the flexibility with which Internet protocols 'enable thousands of diverse networks to link together, distributing control into autonomous locales (Galloway 2004: 142). At a

cultural level too, activities within distributed networks promote the benefits of collaboration, sharing and openness between participants. Yet Galloway identifies an inherent contradiction in networks and protocol: an explicit tension between freedom and control. He suggests that 'for protocol to enable radically distributed communications between autonomous entities it must deploy a strategy of universalization and homogeneity. It must be anti-diversity. It must promote standardization in order to enable openness. It must organize peer groups into bureaucracies [...] in order to create free technologies' (Galloway 2004: 142).

In theorising centralised and inflexible structures of bureaucratic organisation as synonymous with authority and control and because 'networks exhibit a set of properties that distinguishes them from more centralized power structures' (Galloway & Thacker 2004: 3) many artists and theorists imagined that distributed networks *in themselves* represented an organisational form that could resist control, and that could resist capitalism. Arguing against this position, Galloway suggests that rather than removing authority, 'distributed networks produce an entirely new system of organization and control, that while incompatible with pyramidal systems of power, is nevertheless just as effective at keeping things in line (Galloway 2006: 318).' In fact, he argues that it is precisely because distributed networks 'create new, robust structures for organization and control' (Galloway 2006: 318) that it is imperative 'to understand the nature of this new logic of organization' (Galloway 2006: 318). Although distributed networks facilitate open, participative and collaborative processes and practices, they operate within an algorithmic logic controlled by protocol. So, how are artists engaging with these conditions and working in this context? I'd like to focus on the different strategies used by net artists and relational artists, and then with reference to Sol LeWitt, briefly consider another potential approach.

From around 1995 until 1999 the highly conceptual phase of network art known as 'net.art' gave particular attention to the Internet and the properties of the web. Rather than aiming at 'beautiful or effective artistic expression, or at a convincing representation of an abstract principle' (Broeckmann 1997: 2) a number of net artists used 'the fact of machinic and interpersonal communication across the network' to 'amplify, mock or playfully subvert' the 'technological structure and functions of the network' (Broeckmann 1997: 2). Referring to those works that use 'only the radio buttons, pull-down menus, and textboxes found in HTML forms, Alexander Galloway described net.art as having 'unique protocological characteristics (Galloway 2004: 225).' Cornelia Sollfrank's *Female Extension* (1997) is one of the most sophisticated explorations of technical and social protocols of the network. Following Katherine Hayles' exploration of 'writing machines' (Hayles 2002: 25-28) as reflexive loops between the material apparatus of literary work and the imaginative world emerging from its semiotic components, it is possible to understand FEMALE EXTENSION as an interrogation of the technology that produces it.

Sollfrank foregrounds processes of making art in a network context; emphasising the ways in which such processes are structured by the materiality of the Internet. The form of the work, then, affects its meaning: strengthening connections between the structure of the work, the artist, and the production of art, she foregrounds processes of automation inherent in distributed networks. By designing and building not only the programme that automates the creation of 200 works of art by 200 'simulated' artists (as entrants in a net art competition) but the conceptual platform within which her simulated artists are able to interface with the competition, she uses protocol to devise rules of engagement via which others participate (even if 'others' in this case are simulated 'others'). The attention artists gave to devising the platform, conditions and rules within which others participate is, I suggest, an indication of the emergence of protocol as a fully fledged distributed medium.

Whereas *net artists* critically engaged the new information and communication technologies emerging in the 1990s, with some forging a vibrant lifeworld based on democratic and participatory communicative action, curator Nicolas Bourriaud described how many others felt "meagre and helpless when faced with the electronic media." Describing the instrumentality of life in contemporary society, in which "[t]he social bond has turned into a standardised artefact" (Bourriaud 2002: 9) he locates processes of rationalisation within the new and emerging technologies themselves, rather than within the network as organisational structure. Critical of the communications technologies that plunge 'human contacts into monitored areas that divide the social bond' Bourriaud identifies a range of non-technologically oriented artistic activities that engage the realm of human relations and which have 'to do with interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts' (Bourriaud 2002: 8). In *Relational Aesthetics* a series of essays produced from curatorial and theoretical collaborations with artists such as Liam Gillick, Vanessa Beecroft and Felix Gonzalez Torres, Bourriaud (2002) identified '[t]he possibility of a *relational* art, 'an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space' (Bourriaud 2002: 14). For him, relational art 'is a state of encounter' (Bourriaud 2002: 14) in which 'including the other [...] turns out to be [...] essential to the formal understanding of the work' (Bourriaud 2002: 52). In *Crazy Tourist* (1991) Gabriel Orozco puts an orange on the stalls of a deserted Brazilian market. In *Hamoc en la moma* (1993) he slings a hammock in the garden at MoMA in New York. Bourriaud suggests that both these works operate 'at the hub of "social infra-thinness" that minute space of daily gestures determined by the superstructure made up of "big" exchanges, and defined by it' (Bourriaud 2002: 17). Orozco's photographs are 'a documentary record of tiny revolutions in the common urban and semi-urban life (a sleeping bag on the grass, an empty shoebox, etc.)' (Bourriaud 2002:17). For Bourriaud these works produce micro-communities within which individuals come together in momentary groupings. Art 'strives to achieve modest connections'

that opens up obstructed passages so as to 'connect levels of reality kept apart from one another' (Bourriaud 2002: 8) and contributes to the emergence of places in which non-commodified social relations can exist and in which the subject is not 'reduced to the condition of a consumer of time and space' (Bourriaud 202: 9). However, I suggest that whilst Bourriaud, and the artists working with him, don't engage the materiality of the technology, they do engage the materiality of the network as organisational form.

Protocol is the medium of relational practices. Artists devise the protocols that mark the parameters of performance and participation. Just as technical protocols organise and control the activities within an electronic network, so here, artists use protocol to organise the activities of others. I suggest that social relations are embedded in protocol, and an historical example is useful here. For Sol LeWitt for whom the emergence and liberation of the 'idea' was the most important aspect of conceptual art, the use of 'principle' or protocol meant that he could make work to be executed not just by himself but also by other artists, students or draughts-people. Exploring the relations of production embedded in Sol LeWitt's work, Lawrence Alloway (1975: 97) suggests that 'provided [LeWitt's] ideas are capable of being transmitted and obeyed, he can dominate work done in his absence. In his hands, Conceptual art is executive control' (Alloway 1975: 99). Here, LeWitt's work determines the activities of another human being. Perhaps speaking to the intensification of processes of automation and commodification that the emerging network society engendered, LeWitt's work precisely engages the mechanisation and standardization characteristic of processes of rationalisation. Lawrence Alloway identified a correlation between the procedures devised by LeWitt and old schoolbooks such as *The Rational Elementary Arithmetic* of 1899 that instructed pupils to: 'Draw: A line one inch long. A line twice as long as the first line. A line three times as long as the first line. A line twice as long as the second line. A square with each of its sides the length of the first line' (Alloway 1975: 97). Yet for all their explicit attention to the rational, and the use of protocol to define the social relation between himself and another human being, are LeWitt's works subsumed by that logic or do they in some way fragilise it? Rosalind Krauss suggests that LeWitt's ideas, 'exist on an entirely different order than that of the mathematical, the deduction, and the axiomatic. If one uses the "idea of error" to generate a work, one has done something quite different from illustrating an order that is ideated or Ideal, the order LeWitt's critics keep insisting on associating with his art'. She goes on '[t]he kind of idea he inevitably uses is subversive, addressing itself to the purposelessness of purpose, to the spinning gears of a machine disconnected from reason.' (Krauss 1985: 255). Robert Smithson, spoke of this when he wrote, "LeWitt is concerned with enervating 'concepts' of paradox. Everything LeWitt thinks, writes or has made is inconsistent and contradictory. The 'original idea' of his art is lost in a mess of drawings, figurings, and other

ideas. Nothing is where it seems to be. His concepts are prisons devoid of reason” (Krauss 1985: 255)

Extending Galloway’s theories of protocol as *the* mechanism of control within the distributed network I suggest that protocol is a medium via which contemporary transformative art practices communicate and transport the parameters of the work. By definition, protocol is relational: it prescribes and communicates the parameters of exchange between entities. It is synonymous with the network itself and therefore, as Galloway (2004) argues, there is no escape from it. How we engage the politics, ethics and aesthetics of protocol is what matters now.

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