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Training Performing Artists in the Digital Age: The Performance and Interactive Media Arts Program as a Model

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The paper examines the changing culture of the arts in the digital age as the parameters of the artist expand, demanding diverse skills, flexibility, and an entrepreneurial outlook, focusing on how that impacts the training of the artist in an increasingly interdisciplinary, collaborative, technological, socially engaged environment, including a model for training the interdisciplinary performance artist employing digital media and engaging in community collaborations, the Performance and Interactive Media Arts Program at Brooklyn College. <http://wp.pima-mfa.info>

The parameters for the artist in the digital age are expanding rapidly as media becomes an important part of the artist's canvas and an intermediary in the artist's communication with the audience. This opening of parameters is not only due to the presence of computer generated art, which allows for a myriad of interactive environmental experiences, but also due to the reconfiguration of what performance and art signify in our time. Art has gone through many articulations throughout history from being part of the social culture in the form of ritual or religious expression to the cult of the superstar artist provided with extensive access to the public via private, commercial, or state sponsored patronage.

With the increasing accumulation of individual wealth in society and the establishment of private patronage and investment in the arts, the artist's appeal has been tied to a network of patrons and the potential of their art to accrue value in the marketplace because of its unique qualities that are valued by the arts establishment.

Students of the arts have sought instruction at schools or with established artists that they hope will serve as an entrée to the art establishment, with the hope that this training will develop their unique talents and lead to the recognition of their particular genius. Museums, theaters and concert halls have become star makers offering certain artist ongoing public exposure. Artists create art specifically for galleries, large theatre spaces, and the concert hall, in order to become enshrined in the private and public sphere as reflections of contemporary tastes and values, whether as purveyors of the status quo or manifestations of radical chique.

Film, still and moving, has offered the possibility of greater exposure to a larger audience, allowing art to become ubiquitous through infinite reproduction, making it available to as many people as the market will bear, accelerating the migration of the arts into the populist sphere, where art has become entertainment, evoking the pleasure associated with both beauty and shock value. Filmmaking and theatrical enterprises put emphasis on the collaborative process between diverse artists, which encourages cooperation and specialization. In the sixties, with the introduction of portable video cameras and Super 8, filmmaking became accessible to the general public. As well, mixed-media experimentations and group happenings of Dada and other modernist movements in the early 20th century, along with the ideas of immersive theatre proposed by Antonin Artaud, began to change the focus of art from the notion of the singular genius artist, prevalent between the Renaissance and Romantic eras, to the artist who bypassed the patron in order to experiment and

interact directly with the public, finding their genius and support within group endeavors.

For a time both the genius artist and the collective arts groups have cohabited, but as technique becomes more accessible to the masses and innovation can happen in any corner of the world, individual expertise has become reliant on group input and the internet, a speedy conduit for information sharing, has facilitated networking. Photography, which relies on technology and the ability to edit and construct, rather than skills built up over years of drawing and work with the brush or chisel, has usurped the classical emphasis on portraiture and landscape, freeing the artist to mix techniques and themes with the emphasis now on conceptual originality. The same is true for theatre makers, or storytellers, who, faced with the impossibility of creating yet another original story, or competing with the impact of documentary films, are now focused on telling stories in a unique way. This new original approach is often facilitated by group endeavors and the television and film world rely on a stable of writers, with diverse abilities, to turn out a script. Art students now explore a plethora of techniques through the various offerings possible in university settings, while the critical response, both in the classroom and in the art world, focuses on the ideas behind the work, with technique becoming more and more taken for granted as a facilitator of concept.

With the introduction of digital techniques and the interactivity of the internet and the growing availability of instruments of creation to the masses, the emphasis on genius as a property of the few has changed into the idea that everyone has the possibility of expressing their own particular genius. As well the dramatic change from a male to a female dominated educational culture, beginning particularly in the earlier grades, has changed the value system of youth from a competitive individualistic approach to a culture increasingly geared towards collaboration, sharing, and enabling in which the classroom becomes less and less stratified while the teacher becomes a facilitator rather than an authority figure. This has had a tremendous effect on the interests and preferences of younger artists who in general no longer carry the image of the romantic isolated artist but rather the socially engaged art maker working in collaboration with their community and facilitating the creative impulses of others.

The digital age and the internet has created a forum that promotes open access, which puts it in a dialectic with established institutions promoting art that is juried by “experts” and insiders. Though Museums and performance venues have expanded their public spaces and in some cases have become cultural shopping malls – one can walk through the MoMA and see a performance or

two as one goes up the staircase to view a myriad of galleries and special entry exhibits, as well as checking out three or four different bookstores, selling all sorts of luxury items, and eat at several different areas within the museums – these museums can only serve a fraction of the working artists seeking public exposure. A redefinition of art venues and communities and an expansion of arts interactions with the audience has provided the artist with the possibility of developing a career outside the establishment. And the internet, with its vast access to the public, has greatly facilitated this. Young artists augment their access to audiences through inclusionary tactics from social media to collaboration with other arts groups. As well young audiences often find non-traditional venues friendlier, less elitist, and more socially enabling, which are also more cost effective for the artists.

France, where there is a tradition of the week-end artist, and the informed amateur, has been instrumental in expanding the notion of the artist, the audience, and the venue. The poet Baudelaire articulated the idea of the *flâneur*, the artist-spectator of the modern urban landscape, who leaves the isolation of the studio and “enters into the crowd as if it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy” (Baudelaire, 9) strolling through the city with an aesthetic pleasure, passionately engaged, yet incognito. The *flâneur*, is both reader and artist as his/her observations determine the art. This notion evolved with the Dadaists and Surrealists who took a more active approach using chance to establish a relationship with the street by following certain arbitrary signposts. Marcel Duchamp turned the *flâneur* into an establishment artist by bringing found objects of the urban landscape into the museum. The Situationists took the *Flâneur* a step further by suggesting a conscientious analysis of urban geography and its distinct attractions (Debord). The artist no longer needed to access a traditional venue, they could now use the urban landscape as their studio and stage.

This opening up of artistic practices, pulling the artist out of his private preoccupations into social engagement, collaborative endeavors, and expansion of techniques, has taken over a century. The ubiquitous urbanization of the landscape, the easy access to a virtual global crowd, 24-7, and the plethora of accessible creative tools has changed the artistic landscape irrevocably. The question becomes how to prepare the emerging artist for this new territory. Most models of arts education still focus on the creation of the individual genius, providing an education that banks on the artist succeeding through a unique aesthetic achievement that sets them above the rest, though the odds are remote for most artists, even those of exceptional talent. The market place is volatile and the public interest quick to change. In a world full of

entrepreneurial artists, those who focus on their own particular genius, in isolation, will generally stay there. Today the working artist is in general flexible, crosses styles and disciplines, spends as much time networking as creating, and often has an easier time getting funding for collaborative, interdisciplinary work, integrating technology, and including social engagement. Using social media and building an image through industry standard promotion is also important. Most importantly is the ability to conceptualize how these diverse potentialities can come together to articulate a single vision. However there are few arts education programs that offer a training that encourages all these qualities.

Ten years ago several Brooklyn College faculty began to imagine a graduate program, Performance and Interactive Media Arts (PIMA <http://wp.pima-mfa.info>), based around interdisciplinary practices in which collaboration, performance, and interactive media would be a core part of the training. It brings together theater makers, musicians, dancers, sound artists, visual artists, software programmers, poets, etc.. All projects in PIMA are created collaboratively. In the first semester, students are given general assignments, with a loose set of objectives to provide a focus towards creating weekly collaboratively generated performance projects, approximately ten minutes in length, as well as longer end of semester projects. Collaborative group members rotate weekly in order for class members to work with everyone in different combinations. Feed-back is ideally conducted under a framework developed by dancer Liz Lehrman, in the 1990s, in which the point of the feed-back is to support the goals of the group and avoid critical responses that impose an external vision. In the second semester projects become semester long endeavors and are usually performed off campus.

PIMA students are introduced to Max/MSP software in their first semester, integrating the technology into their weekly creative work. During the course of study, the training seeks to introduce various softwares and digital tools such as Arduino, Adobe Creative Suite, Protools, Projection Mapping, Isadora, Processing, Abelton, and Audacity, with the goal of giving students a large digital palette from which to work. As well, everyone is required to do physical training towards attaining performance skills, with an emphasis on Viewpoints, a method that fosters collaborative dynamics and an awareness of the demands of composition and dramaturgy as part of the creative process. PIMA students are expected to be ready to be of service to each other in setting up projects for viewing and take-down. A spirit of collegiality and mutual support is necessary for the successful realization of the program. A core course, often pivotal in terms of a PIMA student's evolution within the program, is the PIMA course on social

engagement in the second semester, in which students work with communities outside the college with the goal of creating an event that reflects an authentic collaboration between community and artist. PIMA training includes a knowledge of the contemporary history of performance and theories associated with a deeper understanding of 21st century performance techniques, as well as effective practices in creating collaborative community actions, and theory often informs concept and process. There are also courses in pedagogy, as well as self-producing.

The year long thesis in the second year must be done off campus and the students take responsibility for all aspects from creation to finding a venue, fundraising, enlisting outside collaborators as necessary, and publicity. The collaborative approach to creating performance breaks with many of the expectations set up by the professional theater, which include defined roles, specialization, and individual credit for work done. Having no designated director to navigate the creative process, each member of a PIMA cohort is expected to take on the responsibilities of that role, sharing in the leadership of a project. Hierarchy is avoided and flexibility is encouraged. Everyone takes on the responsibilities of conceptualization and realization, including the roles of producer, designer, and performer. One of the challenges of a collaborative process is the continual communication demanded of its participants and technology is enlisted in facilitating discussion, with online conferences and idea sharing.

In this structure, individual ownership of ideas is harder to establish as discussions are not about who did what but more focused on the how and why of the project content. This free-wheeling creative process translates into events where participants and audience interact directly, as well as through technology, including using cell phones in various creative ways or triggering interactive sound and video installations. Immersive actions or Situationist *dérive* encounters with the urban landscape are also incorporated providing controlled and spontaneous audience participation.

As to professionalization and the job market, there is no specific career expectation in the program, knowing that the artist of the future will have to be flexible as the expectations and interests of a new generation of spectators change at an increasingly rapid rate: social, aesthetic, conceptual, producing, pedagogical, and technological skills, provide the graduates the ability to enter a variety of professional activities in the arts from performance making and digital design to producing, curating, scholarship, social engagement, and teaching.

References

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