CONTEMPORARY CREATIVITY ONLINE:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ART AND VERNACULAR CREATIVITY ON THE INTERNET

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Given the vastness of creative digital content - from memes to remixes to collaborative fiction - being produced and circulated online, the boundaries between art and non-art on the Internet have become increasingly blurry. These distinctions are further complicated by the prominence of contemporary artists' digital appropriation practices (i.e. collecting, reframing and/or remixing user-generated content), as in Cory Arcangel's *Working on My Novel*, a compilation of other people's tweets containing the title phrase, or Eric Oglander's *Craigslist Mirrors*, a collection of user-submitted photographs of mirrors posted for sale on Craigslist. Moreover, in many cases, this indistinguishability is a core feature of the work, as in Joel Holmberg's *Legendary Account*, a series of profound philosophical questions posted among the otherwise banal inquiries on Yahoo Answers.

This paper examines the positioning of Internet art vis-a-vis vernacular digital creativity, interrogating the shifting boundaries between art and (what is traditionally considered) non-art in the online environment. If a work of Internet art and, respectively, of vernacular online creativity (such as a meme or a Youtube mashup) live in the same space, use the same tools and address the same networked audiences, where do the key differences between them still lie - and how is the relationship between them being complicated by sociocultural and technological factors? In view of the specific patterns of production and circulation that characterize the online environment, how might today's digital creative culture make us reconsider - or, conversely, reinforce - our notions of "art" and "artists"?

Two contemporary artistic practices that illustrate the complexity of this relationship between Internet art and online vernacular creativity are appropriation and, respectively, aesthetic mimicry.

The first trend refers to artists appropriating and reframing found user-generated content, with the goal of repositioning it and inscribing it with new meaning. In addition to Oglander's *Craigslist Mirrors* and Arcangel's *Working on My Novel*, mentioned previously, examples of this practice are Guthrie Lonergan's *Recent Music Videos*, a collection/archive of found YouTube videos that, as archetypal YouTube content, embody our contemporary cultural zeitgeist, or Penelope Umbrico's photographic installations made up of found user-generated content, such as *Suns from Flickr* or *TVs from Craigslist.* In some of these projects, the modification involved in working with the found digital material is substantial, as in Olivier Laric's *50/50*, where the artist painstakingly pieces together hundreds of different performances of 50 Cent's hit song "In Da Club" posted to YouTube, recreating the entire original song. At other times, it consists solely of collection or compilation, as in *Craigslist Mirrors* or *Working on My Novel*.

The second type of practice that illuminates the increasing interrelation between art and non-art on the Internet is stylistic mimicry, where contemporary Internet artists adopt the "subamateur" vernacular of the web (Halter, 2009). While these artists generally do not integrate found user-generated content in their work, their creations imitate - and thus comment on - the particular aesthetics of vernacular online creativity. This type of work is exemplified by Joel Holmberg's work on Yahoo Answers, Lorna Mills' animated GIFs, Petra Cortright or Alexandra Gorczynski's webcam videos, and Michael Manning's aptly titled Mirroring.net, which is a collection of clickable animations of mundane objects and popular culture characters, reflecting an already outdated Internet aesthetic.

Of course, these dynamics are not entirely new - there is an important tradition of pro surfer work (Olson, 2008) and embrace of amateur aesthetics in new media art (Greene, 2008; Tribe, Jana, & Grosenick, 2006). However, these practices - and the implications they hold for culture and creativity - are becoming increasingly significant and prevalent in today's digital culture, as the sphere of online media is becoming saturated and the volume of vernacular online creativity keeps growing, with more and more people producing more and more content online. As critics Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter put it, "in a world in which new forms of software have made the creation of music, images, video and new software easier than ever to master, and the Internet has fostered an unprecedented amount of activity in terms of showing, sharing, and remixing this work, how does the work of artists utilizing the same practices differ in any fundamental respect?" (Cornell & Halter, 2015, p. xxiii).

In order to address these questions and examine the complex interplay between art and vernacular creativity on the Internet, this paper looks at the key cultural mechanisms by which we designate creative activity as art – the ability to facilitate interpretations, to reflect the artist's intentions and to exist within an art world (Carroll, 1995) – applying them to the online environment in order to facilitate a better understanding of the relationship between Internet art and online vernacular creativity. Specifically, drawing on some of the key examples mentioned earlier, I analyze what kinds of aesthetic interpretations are facilitated by online art versus vernacular creativity and how these interpretations are shaped; how authorship is reflected in these works; and how the

larger context of exhibition, distribution, and criticism reinforces lingering cultural hierarchies in the online realm.

Ultimately, the key argument made by means of this analysis is that the rise of the Internet as a context and medium for widespread creative participation offers unprecedented opportunities – as well as challenges – in terms of the reassessing criteria for aesthetic evaluation in online contexts. In particular, Internet artists' appropriation practices, which comment on both the form and content of user-generated creativity, reveal a complex and complicated relationship between art and vernacular creativity online. While remix and appropriation are not new concepts specific to the digital age, there is a need to acknowledge the ways in which the Internet is making these processes more prevalent in the art sphere (Navas, 2012). Furthermore, it is also important to note that authorship is evolving in the Internet age, and becoming more distributed, modular and, often, more difficult to ascertain; as illustrated by this analysis, the impact of these cultural shifts in authorship are gradually beginning to be felt in the contemporary art world as well.

The paper concludes by surveying key implications for culture and creativity - particularly in regards to the changing nature of cultural development and authorship online - and reflects on the ethics of these practices of digital appropriation and aesthetic mimicry, as well as the impact they might have in terms of reassessing contemporary criteria for artistic evaluation.

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