Social Media Art: From Dada to TikTok

Social Media Art: From Dada to TikTok - an online course by Filippo Lorenzin, available at aos.arebyte.com

Lesson two transcript

Hello everyone, thanks for joining me today. This is the second lesson of Social Media Art: From Dada to TikTok, a course produced by Arebyte and hosted by me, Filippo Lorenzin. Thanks for getting in contact with me in the past few days, I will take in consideration your feedback and will do my best to include any subjects that may be of your interest.

If you missed the first session I strongly recommend you to watch it before this. Done? Brilliant. Last time I explained what "social media art" means in the broader context of art and not just the new media art niche. I introduced and discussed the incredible influence of Dada disruptive works in contemporary digital art, showing how their critical approach to mass production society is still relevant 100 years later.

Today I will cover three main subjects: Walter Benjamin, Situationism and Fluxus Art. They may not look as much linked to contemporary social media but what was the point of calling this course "divisive" then.

Lesson 1.2
Walter Benjamin

In 1936, Walter Benjamin wrote The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In this essay he establishes that the works of art developed in the past are different from contemporary works of art. To quote him, "During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organised, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well". Benjamin discusses the concept of authenticity, of being in accordance with fact, noting that ... "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be".

The original work of art is independent from the copy. The social-value of the exhibition of art progressed from the private sphere to the public sphere of life; historically, works of art were for the private viewing and aesthetic enjoyment of the owner of the artefacts (usually High Art); now instead works of art are exhibited in a public gallery, to provide the enjoyment of aesthetic pleasure to a greater number of people. Benjamin writes about the loss of the aura through the mechanical reproduction of art itself.

For example, have you ever visited the Louvre in Paris? I am sure you waited in line for 40 minutes (as I did) to see the Mona Lisa. Once there, what did you feel? After seeing it a billion times on books, tv shows and on the internet it must have been underwhelming. I remember there was a visitor next to me complaining because it was too small and certainly an important painting as that must have been much bigger - right?

As we saw in the previous lesson, the Dada confronted this problem and their works were the formalisation of this aesthetic and authorial revolution; when the object is mechanically created and reproduced infinite times, what remains is the mind that created it.

The aura for Benjamin represents the originality and authenticity of a work of art that has not been reproduced. A painting as an aura while a photograph does not; the photograph is an image of an image while the painting remains original. This makes us question what is the role played by a reproduction of a work of art? Is it still art or something else? Why? What do you think? Please write to me!

Benjamin writes about Dada, indicating how they aimed to annihilate the aura of their works; the concept of "aura" is fundamental here and needs a short definition. According to him, every element of reality has its own charge, determined first of all by the value of its hic et nunc, or its finality and uniqueness - values which in the world of bourgeois art constitute the social and economic power of the work but which in the era of technical reproducibility, according to Benjamin, lose importance to leave room for a new concept.

In other words, if in the past the work was created in such a way that it could be used only by few and for ritualistic reasons, in the years in which printing, photography and cinema become a collective secular phenomenon, it is emancipated from the purpose for which it was born: no longer for a select few, but for many indistinct. This leads to two consequences: the original work no longer has a sense of existence and there are more and more works designed with the purpose of being reproduced.

This is a very important concept for contemporary digital culture. If you make a work and upload it somewhere online you have to expect it will be copied and remixed to make something new. Everything can be used and edited, this is true for pictures and sounds as much as video clips and text. In recent years music and film producers learned how to take advantage of the people that reuse their products by making them more episodic, less tied to a self-contained narrative. No more albums but single songs - no more movies that start and end in one seat but products that need to be discussed online and whose lines can be used to make meme on reddit.

Artists who are aware of the discrepancy between the dynamics generated by the industrial reproduction of products and the conventions of the bourgeois system of art will create works so that they exploit the peculiarities of its serial reproduction.

A good example of this in the context of internet art is the practice of artist Tom Galle.
It is quite likely you saw his works on Instagram or Facebook in the past without knowing they were art works. This is because Galle took advantage of the social media mechanisms that push people to like, share and decontextualise funny or shocking contents. For example, Tinder VR got international coverage in tech blogs, art websites but more importantly in platforms where it is

almost impossible to track the origin of a content. Galle is among the few artists with an official page on Giphy, the most popular website for sharing .gif pictures, where he shares his works.

The public, accustomed for centuries to perceive a highly auratic work as "work of art", that is, finished, unique and not designed to be mechanically reproducible, finds it difficult to identify qualitative differences between an image printed hundreds of times on a magazine and a work reproduced as many times on the same magazine; art fits into the mechanisms of the industrial system by exploiting its characteristics and probably becomes something else, something that perhaps the masses are not yet ready for. Benjamin wrote that “The work of art becomes a formation with completely new functions, of which the one we are aware of, that is, the artistic one, is emerging as the one that in the future may be recognised as marginal”.

Walter Benjamin’s research was inspired by the critical approach of historical materialism born with Karl Marx and Friederich Engels almost 50 years earlier. According to it, spiritual productions such as philosophy, religion and art are defined by social, economic and technological structures; you can see that this was a deterministic doctrine, that is, founded on the belief that nothing happens by chance, that each event has very specific causes.

Walter Benjamin wrote that "the way in which human sensory perception is organised is not conditioned only in a natural sense, but also historically”. We find more details on his theories about the political role of art in another text by him, The Author as Producer (1934): according to Benjamin, one should not allow himself to be influenced by the artist's declared political sympathy when judging the social value of a work, but by the position held by the work itself in the production relations that are contemporary to it. He claimed that the work of art should actively provide a model that could allow viewers to turn into producers. He wrote that “this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, the more readers or spectators into collaborators”.

Lesson 1.3
Situationism

Let’s jump to the 1950s. Shortly after abandoning the visual arts for cinema and literature, a young student named Guy Debord delineated the theory of constructed situations, or participatory events in which behaviours are practiced so to interrupt the daily life promoted by the system. These initiatives pushed the public to actively participate and represented a turning point for political and artistic reflections on the involvement of unconscious people of the social and political framework within which they act.
In 1957 Debord defined the nature of these situations as the result of a concrete construction of a temporary life context: this would have happened with interventions developed by reflection on two fundamental factors: the material context of life and the behaviours it promotes. The central concept of this process is defined by him as "unitary urban planning", an approach to the construction of the context of life which makes the lively relationship between arts and techniques the cornerstone of its own phenomenology; this practice must take on both the creation of new forms and the détournement of known forms - such as architecture, cinema and poetry. Integral art, the one that directly relates to the lifestyle and context that creates and promotes it, can materialise through a dynamic approach, very close to the manifestation of daily behaviour: Debord pointed out that this critical and constructive attitude should not be interpreted as a generating

force of poetic and free forms, but of physically usable spaces such as rooms, corridors and streets - places, that is, connected to the behaviours that they themselves were predisposed to contain.

This approach seems perfect for artists working online. Social media and other platforms are used by people on a daily basis to communicate with each other and express themselves. With a critical and constructive attitude, artists can address online mechanisms and social etiquette by highlighting and changing some of their aspects.

The creation of these situations arose from a "psychogeographic research", that is, the study of the causes and effects of a physical environment on the emotional life of the individuals who inhabit it; this critical investigation consisted of two very specific moments: first of all the analysis of urban areas, of the real context, and then the formulation of hypotheses on the structure of a hypothetical situationist city. The progress of this approach depended largely on the accuracy of the data collected on the life of the people examined and on the actual experimentation with concrete interventions in the daily fabric; these interventions were promoted by Debord as if they belonged to a new ludic genre: the general aim was to reduce the mediocre moments of everyday life as much as possible and dedicate more time to memorable ones. Situationist play programmatically moved away from those traditionally understood, based on playful competition and on the separation between "moment of life" and "moment of play". Resuming practices born with Bertold Brecht and the Dadas, the situationists created games that were not clearly distinguished from serious activities, asking the public to make moral and philosophical choices. This approach arose from socialist reflections on the role of the ruling class in creating moments of leisure: according to Debord, it was the Masters who developed a vast industrial sector linked to entertainment, linking it to the concept of two qualitatively different contexts - the time of work and the leisure time. According to Debord, this dynamic was a formidable tool for the indoctrination of the proletariat, which thus found itself linked to false desires and purposes.

The construction of the situation began thanks to the modern collapse of the idea of theatre: if this was both a cause and an effect of a traditionally passive and alienating fruition, the revolutionary cultural experiments had to start with an openly active and inclusive approach. The makers of the situations had to be the first to live them, without leaving room for passivity. What resulted was an event in which people came and went seamlessly: they were initiatives that constantly changed, challenging the concept of eternity of culture.

According to Debord, technologies designed for the reproduction of visual, sound and textual materials would have allowed the infiltration of the situationist message into the daily context by interfering with the official communication. He wrote about the unitary concept of life experience: not continuous and uninterrupted, but made up of many small situations that must find meaning through situationist practice. In a classless society there would be no more painters, but only situationists who, among many activities, also paint pictures.

Lesson 1.4
Fluxus

Starting in the late 1950s, a cultural phenomenon was created which was largely based on Marcel Duchamp's research and identified under the term "Fluxus". This community of artists and

intellectuals was more than the result of the sum of the individual participants, free to enter and leave the group with the same ease.
The first trace of this movement can be traced back to 1961, when George Maciunas and Dick Higgins began to develop the project of a magazine entitled Fluxus: their plan was to provide an alternative structure to the traditional system of distribution and promotion of artistic ideas. Thus they began to contact artists who could participate in the drafting of the materials to be published, who in turn invited others, thus developing a first network. This first group reflected on the space of art and on randomness as a means of expression which are still fundamental to frame many of the artistic practices that we will analyse in the next lessons.

They rejected the idea of a romantic and transcendent art, the result of professional and exclusive activity: they generally wanted to involve as many people as easily as possible. In this way art became a social act “because of its participatory nature, and transformative as well, because of this very same inclusionary stance”.

A work that clarifies this approach is John Cage's famous 4'33 "(1952), in which the ambient sound becomes part of a dynamic that leads it to become a work itself: Cage had written almost twenty years before that “wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. [...] We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments”. The organisation of sound is what, according to him, should replace the traditional way of composing music and also affect areas that are not purely musical. Roy Ascott wrote about this in 1966 proposing that interactive works should get rid of the modernist ideal linked to the perfect object, concluded and defined in itself.

A very important point to define most Fluxus projects is the technique with which they were often made: the materials were very low cost, available to anyone, and the works were produced with almost trivial procedures, such as offset printing. A fundamental aspect is the way in which they conceived the projects: not literary, musical, visual or performative, but all together, in an experiential unicum that went against Clement Greenberg's modernist reflections on the specificity of the supports.

The works by Daniel Spoerri represent the perfect example of this approach to materials. He is best known for his "snare-pictures," a type of assemblage in which he captures a group of objects, such as the remains of meals eaten by individuals, including the plates, silverware and glasses, all of which are fixed to the table or board, which is then displayed on a wall. At the end of the day those works are what remain of specific events and act as both documentations and creative twist to the readymade formula.

The practice of Happening was conceived by Allan Kaprow and was an art linked to theatrical practice, since it was performed in a defined time and space. Kaprow studied art when Abstract Expressionism was the most important art movement in the United States. He was not much fascinated by the paintings but rather by the act itself of making them. The shared environment is a fundamental aspect to understand how Happenings took place: they promoted the indivisibility between art and daily practice by avoiding the use of materials and procedures that could be linked to traditional art practice by the public.

For example, *Yard* (1961) was a Happening inspired by the dripping style of Jackson Pollock. Kaprow wanted to recreate the same energy driven by chance that led Pollock's hand in a bigger scale. He scattered tires in a yard and asked the public to interact with it - they could walk in it, seat or move the tires however they wanted. It is important to note how the happening works: the artist creates a context, the public is made aware of it and then can interact with whatever the artist prepared for them.

Happenings were usually introduced by the distribution to the public of instructions regarding what would happen shortly thereafter, in order to make it truly participatory; as Kaprow himself pointed out, "to assemble people unprepared for an event and say that they are participating if apples are thrown at them or they are herded about is to ask very little of the whole notion of participation". The desire to inform the public of the actions that would be implemented was also born from the mutual respect relationship that Kaprow wanted to establish with the participants, that if they had not been made aware of what was about to happen they would have been nothing more than "dead space". Kaprow avoided professional talent, because the actions that took place during a Happening were taken from everyday life. The best participants were, according to him, those who had never had experience in the field of art or performance because they acted on the basis of their daily practice. In short, attempts were made to involve the greatest number of unskilled people with approaches that almost completely eliminated the barrier between art and life.

The instructions played a fundamental role in many of the actions implemented by the Fluxus artists. An exemplary exhibition in this sense was "Art by Telephone", held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in the last months of 1969: thirty-six artists were invited to instruct the museum staff about the contributions they should have put into practice on their behalf. Many of the artists involved provided directions for creating objects and installations, while others attempted to make communication itself the actual work.

The Fluxus were intrigued by playing activity that "produces nothing: neither goods nor works"; this fascination is evident if we think about how it is governed by rules that clearly define what is part of it and what, instead, makes it cease. Happenings occurred on the basis of rules made explicit before their actual start - rules that everyone had to submit to, otherwise the suspension of reality ended. In short, Happenings took place in ways similar to those of playful activities; Roger Callois defined the game as a free, separate, activity in Man, Play and Games (1961)

- "free: to which the player cannot be forced without the game immediately losing its nature of attractive and joyful fun ". As we have seen, Kaprow wanted the participants not to be forced to participate to Happenings - otherwise they would have lost their strength.

- "separate from the routine of life, occupying its own time and space". Happenings were scheduled to take place at a precise time and location, they didn't happen by chance.

- "uncertain, so that the results of play cannot be pre-determined and so that the player's initiative is involved." The instructions given at the beginning of the Happening did not define what would happen as a script, but rather represented a sort of track or guidelines to follow. The result was important but not essential for the success of the work.

- “unproductive in that it creates no wealth and ends as it begins”. According to this definition, many of the practices I analysed today and in the previous session fall within the scope of the game. We have seen that Happenings and in general all Fluxus works were not intended to create objects, but rather a shared space to communicate and experiment collectively.

- “governed by rules that suspend ordinary laws and behaviours and that must be followed by players”. I mean… hundreds of tires in a yard.

- “It involves make-believe that confirms for players the existence of imagined realities that may be set against 'real life'”. Here we see a substantial difference between Callois' definition and the Happening; if according to the first, the game "is essentially a separate occupation, scrupulously isolated from the rest of existence", for Kaprow the Happenings aimed to superimpose daily practice with the moment of art until eliminating the differences. Participation was promoted to such an extent that the rules of the game break in daily life.

What made Happenings so special and revolutionary is still present in many digital art projects, from online video game performances to archives of contents produced by other users.

Now, I can see you asking: “Ah, now eventually you do plan to have computers on your, on your digital art tour, right? Hello?”. Well, I am glad to let you know that we will finally talk about artists actually using computers to make art in the next lesson. What we covered in the two first lessons will be helpful to understand much of contemporary digital art and in particular the one taking place on social media.

This is all for today, please please please don’t forget to get in touch with me and Arebyte for any questions and suggestions. Alla prossima, ciao ciao.