

A Reformation of the arts

Written by Alasdair Foster



Economic, social and cultural paradigms continue to change with increasing speed. The shift in emphasis from the creation of real concrete products to a virtual world of images and ideas means that now in Australia (to give an example that's local for me) there are more people employed in the storage and retrieval of information than in the whole of agriculture and industry put together. Meanwhile, burgeoning online communities have evolved that bring hundreds of millions of individuals into personal interaction whether it be through social networking sites like MySpace and FaceBook, through the sharing of images and video clips via Flickr and YouTube

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or immersed in complex virtual societies such as Second Life and Entropia Universe.

These changes are fundamental. It is not simply that old modes find new means. By opening up lines of communication to the direct access of the individual there is an increasing democratisation of opinion and culture. With the rise of technologies of mass production and distribution in the last century culture became divided. On the one hand there was popular culture delivering lowest-common-denominator products on a vast scale to mass markets. On the other was fine art delivering rare or unique objects and services to a tiny specialist market with values (cultural and monetary) jealously controlled by an even smaller taste-making elite. The role of the home-made in everyday life and the amateur in art became sidelined. The 20th-century mass markets and art industry were both controlled by a rigorous division between producer and consumer underwritten by the belief in the creator's enduring rights over what was created.

The technological developments of digitisation and Web 2.0 have had two significant effects on this duopoly. The mutability of digital data and its ability to be copied and reformed without loss of quality has opened up the possibility of ripping and mashing – the continuous recombination and reforming of cultural material as an alternative to the passive reception, acquisition and preservation of immutable art objects. In the area of reproducible culture such as photomedia, the focus of art is beginning to shift from objects to processes. The mode of artistic production has diversified to embrace both the virtuoso individual and the creative community action.

Meanwhile, the means of dispersion of digital entities has expanded radically. The two-way flow of Web 2.0 has opened up the possibility of reaching a wide audience at little cost without the need to accommodate the taste of a mass market or corporate and institutional hierarchy. The result is a plethora of small niche groups, unconstrained by physical geography, that actively participate in both the production and consumption of new forms of art.

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I have for some years sensed a coming dissolution of the hard and fast division between active producer (artist) and passive consumer (audience) in the (visual) arts. It has brought me to the conclusion that we are witnessing the beginning of a reformation of the arts analogous to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th-century Christian church. [1](#)

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<http://www.wisconsin.edu/cultural/enc100/january08.html>