When Artist Meets Programmer: A Talk With Lauren Cornell and Kristin Lucas

PSFK speaks with curator Lauren Cornell and artist Kristin Lucas about Rhizome's upcoming Seven on Seven event.

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Technology and innovation offer up many paradoxes for idea making. While the digital revolution gives rise to ideas that were previously unthinkable, the portablity and speed of distribution make awareness, proliferation and finally saturation–the life cycle of an idea–continue to accelerate. We're at the point where the economy of the good idea is a little schizophrenic–where all the avenues that allow creative vision to flourish also serve as obstacles and reminders of the past.

This is where Rhizome's Seven on Seven event, taking place on Saturday, April 17th at the New Museum, comes into play. Basing itself on the idea that a cross-disciplinary approach offers more latitude and direction, Seven on Seven pairs well-known media artists and technologists in their respective fields for a day to come up with an interesting idea.

We recently spoke with Lauren Cornell, executive director, Rhizome and adjunct curator, New Museum and participant artist Kristin lucas about how to prepare for such a project, it's cultural relevance and how that plays into Rhizome's overall programming.

Rhizome is a multi-faceted organization that encompasses exhibitions, residencies and events. However, forgetting that you are a media art organization, the website seems to have an invaluable presence in terms of exposure to non-media art audience. Can you speak about the programming of the website verses the offline events?

LC: Rhizome is a very hybrid organization; we have open forums, and curated programs, and present programming online, and off, mostly with our affiliate, the New Museum. I see the programming as case by case: it depends on the artist project. Some works are best online, or better as events, some are better installed in the gallery, or in public space. We are also very committed to a conversation around this field—we publish writing, criticism and reviews everyday on our website—but I always love public, in-person conversations, in all their potential awkwardness and productivity. With so much debate spouting online, its still important to get people together and encourage them to confront issues face to face.

Why a project like Seven on Seven? What's the cultural value of pairing the artists together with programmers?

LC: The fields of art and technology have a love/ hate relationship. They see value in each other, they creatively overlap, find inspiration in each other's innovations, but they also diverge. Technology moves forward—fast. Sometimes art's purpose is to slow things down, to be critical and reflective. Art moves sideways, not just forward—here is the disjunction.

Throughout history, art and technology have merged in powerful ways—think about the philosophy of the Bauhaus, which sought to integrate fine art with industrial design, or the founding of expanded education programs like CAVS at MIT or ITP at NYU, the work of early video artists like Nam June Paik who dreamed that the television would give every artist their own channel, or the 9 Evenings, an important 1966 collaboration in which artists, musicians, and engineers, like choreographer Yvonne Rainer, Robert Rauschenberg, and John Cage, as well as contemporary initiatives like Eyebeam's R&D in New York.

Rhizome's mission is to support artists engaged with the Internet and new technology, which locates us directly in this productive area of love/ hate everyday, with artists working with new languages like Processing, employing the participatory structures or user-generated content of the web in their works, or reflecting on the broader implications of new tools or media in a variety of forms, not all tech-driven. Seven on Seven emblematizes this mission, and intends to show how powerful it can be when the two fields connect. It also demonstrates a commitment to experimentation. The 'results' of Seven on Seven will be ideas-in-progress, not finished, saleable projects. Opening up that process of creation is very valuable.

What are the challenges of working on a collaborative project when people come from seemingly two related but ultimately different worlds? How do you strike a balance between concept and actual technical skills needed to achieve a project?

KL: Going into this, neither of us wants to continue along the same path we have previously been on. Averaging our ideas to the lowest common denominator may induce drowsiness for us and the event's audience. So how will we create criteria or a system of valuation for the unfamiliar? The uncertainty, the unexpected––this is what is fun about the process.

This may be a consequence of living in an information economy where knowing that you can do something takes precedence over knowing how to do something. That's why I'm looking forward to working with Kortina. I hope he knows how to do_something_, or we are screwed.

Some of the artists like Evan Roth have more technical abilities than others in the realm of programming? What was the selection process like, and how were you able to maintain that the artists were matched with the right technical practitioner and vice versa?

LC: The categories aren't discreet. Evan Roth is an open source programmer; and Ayah Bdeir is a programmer and also an artist, for example. This is reflective of the field Rhizome supports, and of the creative process in 2010 in general, where artists are incorporating technology, and vice versa. I worked with John Borthwick, Fred Benenson, Peter Rojas, all on Rhizome's Board, to select the participants and organize the entire event. They suggested the technology participants; I did the matching. I can't tell you if the matches will be 'right' but I tried to pair them over what I saw as shared passions and perspectives.

Besides being outstanding artists and technologists, I also felt we needed people who were flexible, generous with their ideas, and could rise to an unusual and demanding challenge. We are asking a lot from them: to break out of the normal way they work, and to try something new, and put it out there in the public almost immediately. That takes a certain kind of openness to risk.

So, will the collaboration play to each's skills, or will you each venture to step outside of your comfort zones?

KL: I tend to be uncomfortable in most situations, therefore I tend to be most comfortable without a zone. I'm not sure I recommend it but for the purpose of this interview, I think it answers your question nicely. Again an effect of the digital age, I have been made more aware of the construction of boundaries, and the fact that things might not be what they seem to be at face value.

Are you better suited for working in a "live" setting in a collaboration, or do you prefer to carefully plan projects?

KL: I prefer the live setting for collaboration because exchanges are more sustained––there are fewer interruptions and distractions. With all of the advancements in communication technology, there is something to be said for the live exchange. Physical presence activates the body and mind in a fuller sense, and brings about another kind of awareness. You can't filter out mumbles and shrugs. Power relations are negotiated differently. Arguably, one can more readily confront how an idea comes to life when talking face to face, more so than if its left to imagination.

But in person, you can't edit yourself before hitting the send button. You have to learn to communicate differently. Online communication tends to be clearer, leaving out body language and traces of identity, that can muddle the meaning of what is said, which can be good, but sometimes words need muddling.

Finally, at the 2010 Transmediale in Berlin, Aaron Koblin's *A Bicycle Built for Two Thousa*nd won an award; this project is essentially a user-generated recording of over 2,000 voices singing one note of the song *Daisy Bell*. Do you think media art projects can be easily confused with say viral marketing projects?

LC: All kinds of people, professionals and amateurs alike, are exploring new kinds of possibilities for gathering audience, and participation enabled by the web. Art, viral marketing, design, they run parallel, sometimes lifting each other's strategies, and that's OK. Confusion is productive, in my opinion. I don't think the boundaries need to be so defined, though sometimes the market compels them to be.

Seven on Seven

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