

Digital Amateuisation and the Implications for Art Research

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Abstract

In recent years the Internet has facilitated the spread of simplified media technologies allowing everyday people access to modes of expression that have hitherto been out of their reach. There has been a massive increase in opportunities for the self-publication of writing, images, music and video outside of the mainstream commercial system that still provide exposure to a mass audience. This has led to what Web commentator Clay Shirky has called “the mass-amateurisation of everything.”

As a result of the ubiquity of blogs and streaming video on the World Wide Web, new challenges have emerged toward established ideas of value, quality and commerce, but also toward ideas of subjectivity, expression and materiality. The continually tested boundaries of art are again forced to negotiate the impact of new mediative technologies. These amateur practices operate on both the edges of the established systems of popular culture and art which provides an opportunity to question the nature of these edges and what they actually delineate.

This paper seeks to investigate some of the implications of this ‘mass-amateurisation’ for art practice, teaching and research. The main areas of investigation are the role of the amateur in the cultural appropriation of technology and the relationship of these amateur technologies to art and academia

Keywords: digital media, photography, amateurism

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In 2007 Andrew Keen published *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing our Culture and Assaulting our Economy*.¹ The book was basically an attack on the unchecked rise of amateur publishing systems that characterise what has become known as Web 2.0: blogs, MySpace, YouTube, Wikipedia, file-sharing platforms and so-on. The motivation for Keen's attack is the defence of older forms publishing and in particular the quality control measures that they necessitated. For example, it costs money to produce a paperback so, theoretically at least, there is a system in place that ensures the product possesses some degree of quality that justifies the money spent on its production.

Unsurprisingly Keen's argument was met with a high degree of hostility from the Web community; thousands of blog posts and forums and independent, or amateur, reviews emerged all carrying basically the same criticism of Keen: that he represents the conservative enemy of the open-source, copy-left, democratic, free-speech culture upon which the Internet appears to thrive. Keen's book was, perhaps intentionally, a lightning rod that forced people to take a position on a topic that has had very little critical attention outside of the post-and-comment realm of blogs and amateur journalism. And while it is important to bring this kind of dialogue off the screen, Keen's motivation seems to be based on the more regressive desire to maintain a binary logic that centres around, and reinforces the opposition of amateur/professional:

This blurring of lines between the audience and the author, between fact and fiction, between invention and reality further obscures objectivity. The cult of the amateur has made it increasingly difficult to determine the difference between reader and writer, between artist and spin doctor, between art and advertisement, between amateur and expert. The result? The decline of the quality and reliability of the information we receive, thereby distorting, if not outrightly corrupting, our national civic conversation.²

It is indeed interesting to wonder what Keen imagines is the topic of this "national civic conversation" and indeed, who it is between. But Keen's binary logic assumes that there is rightness, truth, morality, tastefulness and expertise on one side and fabrication, immorality, crassness and amateurism on the other. But importantly, materiality and immateriality or reality and virtuality are equally applicable binaries that are informed by the same conservative values.

In fact, it is this materialist binary that, consciously or not, underpins all other binaries that consistently emerge in discussions of digital media. The fact that digital media operates on the base elements of a binary code of zeros and ones is a tempting metaphorical explanation for this but a more accurate one is that binary systems are fundamentally systems of inclusions and exclusions. These inclusions and exclusions necessitate each other so that the balance and order of the existing hierarchy is maintained, and any transgression of that order or upsetting of the binary can be classed as a distortion or a corruption, to use Keen's words. Keen seeks to exclude the amateur from what he sees as his domain of expertise and professionalism in order to maintain the cultural value of these terms, but this argument contains echoes of those put forward by media theorists attempting to make ontological sense of digital media on the basis of the opposition of real and virtual. Cinema and its celluloid materiality, for example, is seen as the real that opposes the virtual immateriality of digital video. Here we can begin to see an alignment that sides the tools of the professional – cinema – with materiality and the tools of the amateur – digital video – with immateriality. Essentially the basis of Keen's argument and its motivation is based on a fear of the cycle of technological obsolescence and renewal, a fear that cinema, books and other cultural objects will eventually be replaced by inferior, immaterial, amateur-produced, digital versions.

The rise of amateur cultural production in the Web 2.0 era does, as Keen says, present a challenge to the established institutions of art practice, education and research. But it is not at all a new challenge particularly when the main considerations are emerging technologies and amateurisation. The history of photography provides an informative model through which we might better approach the issues raised by Keen. There are several reasons for photography's importance as a touchstone for this debate. Firstly is the frequency of obsolescence and renewal throughout its history and secondly its relationship to the amateur is the inverse of the model for other media that Keen puts forward, that is, the incursion of the amateur into the domain of the professional. Conversely, photography, from its beginning and throughout its history, has struggled to establish itself as a fine art in the first place, there were constant attempts to pry it away from the grip of the amateur and elevate it to the level of the fine art respectability experienced by painting. The situation was not the same as the one that Keen is warning us about today where established forms of high art and culture appear to be under threat from amateurs because the tools once only available to professionals

are now available to them. Photography was very much an amateur medium in the sense that it was taken up very early on by “lovers” or middle-class hobbyists with no aspirations for high art acceptance.³ Carol Armstrong cites three figures from photography’s early years, Clementina Lady Hawarden, Julia Margaret Cameron and Gertrude Kasebier, as examples of what she calls the “Lady Amateur”. The nature of the individual practices of these photographers and their subject matter, Armstrong says, epitomised photography’s inherent attachment to amateurism and also therefore its paradoxical entrenchment in both private and public realms.⁴ The photo-secession movement represented the first conscious effort to establish conventions and rules to a particular photographic practice in order to distance itself from such amateur practices and establish a ‘photographic art’. Following the recognition that aping painting did not necessarily constitute innovation the f64 group laid out a different set of conventions albeit for the same purpose.

What was missed in all of these attempts to establish a fine art aesthetic for photography that was uniquely photographic was the fact that it was indeed amateur photography that embodied this aesthetic and, as Armstrong suggests, photography’s “medium-specificity”.⁵ As Roland Barthes states in *Camera Lucida*:

Usually the amateur is defined as an immature state of the artist: someone who cannot – or will not – achieve the mastery of a profession. But in the field of photographic practice, it is the amateur, on the contrary, who is the assumption of the professional: for it is he who stands closer to the *noeme [essence]* of Photography.⁶

For this reason several contemporary artists such as Thomas Walther, Joachim Schmid, Nan Goldin, William Eggleston, and Richard Billingham have used found amateur snapshots as art, or consciously adopted the look of amateur photography as an aesthetic and conceptual device in their work. Like Barthes, these artists understand that it is the amateur snapshot that exemplifies photography’s uniqueness as an expressive medium. Its unselfconscious connection to personal reality and capacity for inter-subjective dialogue sees the snapshot slip easily between the seemingly opposing domains of amateur practice to high art. A recent example of this is Fiona Tan’s work at the 2006 Biennale of Sydney *Vox Populi* which was a collection of personal snapshots sourced from residents of Sydney.

In the history of photography the binary logic of amateur and professional does not seem to fit as comfortably as it might first appear to. In fact, Barthes believes that in this context the amateur actually *is* the professional, problematising the very possibility of a binary. But it is at this point of problematisation that the issue becomes

important for art practitioners, researchers and educators. If, for example, we acknowledge the collapse of this binary, what does that mean for the value of our own discipline? How do we accommodate the rise of digital amateurisation in an academic context without compromising that context? And if we are the experts and professionals in our fields, is it, in fact, even possible to avoid that compromise without reconstituting the elitism of arbitrary taste-making, myths of objectivity, and regulated access to information that Keen appears to be advocating?

If, however, we permit a certain flexibility to Barthes' theory of the amateur in regard to photography and apply it to digital media the situation is nowhere near as drastic as Keen describes it, in fact the crisis seems to disappear altogether. Similarly, a productive way of overcoming the binary of material/immaterial through which digital media is most often ontologically differentiated, is to think of materiality in the sense that N. Katherine Hayles has put forward:

An emergent property, materiality depends on how the work mobilizes its resources as a physical artifact as well as the user's interactions with the work and the interpretive strategies she develops—strategies that include physical manipulations and as well as conceptual frameworks. In the broadest sense, materiality emerges from the dynamic interplay between the richness of a physically robust world and human intelligence as it crafts this physicality to create meaning.⁷

In other words if we think of materiality as an experiential factor unique to a medium it allows digital media to possess a positive materiality that is not defined against other (older) media. The biggest problem with the real/virtual binary is that it invariably pits media against each other with the new threatening the existence of the old, and the old always imposing its standards and conventions upon the new in a constant circular battle that can never be resolved without one medium being deemed better or worse than the other. But the new need not be a threat to the old, and the standards and conventions of the old should only be an option for the new rather than the rule. YouTube for example is unlikely to replace cinema but does provide the opportunity to re-evaluate some aspects of the cinematic experience. Little is gained from a comparative evaluation of the two in the same way that Barthes found little use for the traditional amateur/professional binary with photography. We do not expect to glean the same experience from YouTube as we do from the cinema, therefore we should not subject them to the same conventions of evaluation. In this sense, like the amateur photographer, the amateur creator of online streaming videos can be the assumption of the professional precisely because s/he stands closer to the essence of the medium, that is, s/he uses it in ways that exhibit a kind of indifference to boundaries or standards or

conventions, but in that very process begin to define exactly those specificities of the medium.

FIGURE 1

There are thousands of amateur videos of varying subject matter and quality on YouTube, and it even seems to have evolved its own kind of amateur star system. So the more antithetical a person is to the traditional notion of a star the more popular they are. One example is Tina Chen (or tinaecmusic) (Figure 1) who performs popular songs, requested by fans, by singing along to a CD in her bedroom. The complete absence of a conventionally adequate singing voice is her greatest talent. It is unlikely she would be as popular as she is if she did have conventional talent. Todd McMillan (Figure 2) and Daniel Mudie Cunningham (Figure 3), are two contemporary artists that have engaged with this phenomenon. Both of these artists have posted videos that involve the artist miming a song in front of a single static camera. Mudie Cunningham's is a re-exhibition of a work he had in an exhibition called *Funeral Songs* but does not seem out of context on YouTube where miming popular songs (or singing them aloud) is common practice. In fact copying in general is common practice in Web 2.0 culture. (One example is the practice of groups of school children performing shot for shot re-enactments of television shows but with no attempt whatsoever to look like the characters they are playing.) McMillan's mime video engages more directly with the conventions that are beginning to emerge with videos such as those of Tina Chen. The single shot, static camera, close cropping and even the unedited walk out of frame at the end alludes to the kind of unselfconscious awareness of the camera apparatus that YouTube users often exhibit. The camera shake and momentary elongation of limbs that occurs as users adjust framing and composition are often left in the final video not as artistic devices or even necessarily as accidents, but simply as natural elements of the process, or even as specificities of the medium.

FIGURE 2

FIGURE 3

With these emerging conventions being recognised, the amateur YouTube style video, and other Web 2.0 practices are gradually slipping between the domains of amateur practices and art. McMillan's video and others like them could perform the same

function for digital media that Ed Ruscha's banal images of gas stations, car parks and Sunset Strip buildings did for photography. Like Ruscha, McMillan engages both the domains of indifferent amateur and serious artist but never settles comfortably in either. It is a little too amateurish to be 'art' (especially in the context of his other quite sophisticated video work) but also a little too weird, or arty to be completely amateur (especially in the context of other YouTube videos). It may emerge, as we become more comfortable with these technologies, that this kind of amateurised practice represents something like their essence, or nature, in that the unique characteristics of the medium are being utilised and defined. Andreas Kitzmann, writing about blogs and other forms of web diaries, suggests that, "technology has within it a 'nature' that comes from its own form, its own internal dynamic which cannot be wholly explained or understood on the basis of existing cultural and social paradigms. Rather, paradigms emerge from it, mixing and mutating with modes of natural, material, and human existence."⁸ The paradigms of Web 2.0 technologies are still emerging but the binaries that are being used in attempts to understand it are examples of the "existing cultural and social paradigms" that prevent or confuse the emergence of new paradigms.

Keen's provocation that a "cult of the amateur" exists in Web 2.0 culture is actually correct but the effect of this cult need not result in the demise of existing culture and technologies. Rather it has the potential to provide an understanding of an emerging cultural landscape that challenges many existing notions of technological mediation and creative expression. In the recent debate over Bill Henson's photographs, there were constant calls for "experts" to tell us what was going on. The problem was that there were experts on both sides of the debate, probably best represented by the two open letters that were published at the time, one from representatives from the arts who attended the 2020 summit and the other from a group of social workers, psychologists and child-protection advocates. In this case these professionals stated their cases informed by their expertise and knowledge in their respective fields. But for all the expertise that was being exercised many experts were suddenly forced to become amateurs; artists became amateur social workers and psychologists and they, in turn, became amateur art theorists. This did not mean that the complex issues came any closer to being resolved but it did spark some interesting and important discussion. But if these kinds of issues are ever going to be resolved, a mature version of this kind of mutual amateurisation can go some way to facilitating it. This is especially relevant now in an age where interdisciplinarity is being encouraged in art

schools. There needs to be encouragement of some degree of amateurism in order to make this interdisciplinarity meaningful rather than just an economic rationalist buzzword that just means bigger classes. Amateurism should not be seen as the binary opposite of the professionalism or expertise but rather as part of the complex continuum of knowledge production and discourse through which we navigate the technological mediated world.

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Endnotes

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³ Carol Armstrong, "From Clementina to Kasebier: The Photographic attainment of the 'Lady Amateur'" *October*, Vol. 91 (Winter 2000): 102.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

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⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang), 98-99

⁷ N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 33.

⁸ Andreas Kitzmann, "That Different Place: Documenting the Self Within Online Environments" *Biography*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2003): 58.