

Conjectural Connectivity

by Felicity Tayler

This text is speculative. At the time of its writing, the works described here have been communicated through the means of digital images, email, IM and online video. This is where these works, and their material, existed – until their installation in the gallery. What is presented within the white walls is the output of a process, one that reflects the formal structures of online social networks (Such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter or YouTube), transposed into a physical space that designates this social process as visual art. Speculation is part of this process, an inherent element to the structure of social networks.

As an entry point for the viewer, both works can be considered through the traditional genre of portraiture as a representation of social status or of identity. In this way, the works function as a mode of storytelling, recording gestures that communicate individuality outwards to an audience determined by the scale-free power-law dynamics of online social networks. These networks expand continuously, and new additions tend to attach preferentially to people who are already highly connected.[1]

The large-scale portraits presented by Wojtowicz, are the output of a process of network analysis. Wojtowicz engineered the MySpace API to run an algorithm to select a group of Montréalers who have a high degree of connectivity in the social network. In *The Betweeners*, an allusion is made to Jean-François Millet's, 19th c. oil painting, *The Gleaners*, through a pun on the betweenness-centrality measure in network theory. As a painting, *The Gleaners* functions as much as a portrait as it does a social landscape. The composition juxtaposes the painstaking work of rural peasant women, gathering leftover grains in a field, to the landowner in the distance behind them, enjoying the bounty of his harvest.[2] In network theory, betweenness-centrality measures the flow of information that passes through a point (or person) in a social network, the higher the flow the more influence that person can exert over its transfer to others in the network.[3] For *The Betweeners*, their connectivity has a high potential to cascade chain reactions of information exchange. We might suppose that if you wanted to start a rumour in Montreal, these would be the best people to tell. Although seemingly unrelated, the land is to the gleaners what betweenness-centrality is to the participants in a social network.

Wojtowicz characterizes his photographic portraits, not as the documentation of an algorithm, but as a reference to a gesture constructed through the tools of our time. A few weeks before Wojtowicz began his analysis, Facebook withdrew the urban networks from their systems, Wojtowicz adjusted by using MySpace as an alternative. This shift may influence who his final portrait sitters will be, as there is some indication of divides in the representation of ethnicity and socio-economic status between different social network platforms, significantly between users of Facebook and MySpace.[4] If the users of these technologies tend to replicate offline class distinctions, we might ask how the role of peasant, or the act of gleaning, has transformed through technological paradigms and the century-long shift from an agrarian-based economy to one that trades in information.

With the character of Caroline, Hirsch creates a persona, a multifaceted portrait of a « camwhore » spread across different social networking sites (YouTube and Twitter, for example). For two years, she pursued the goal of « cewebrity », gaining cult status and recognition due to a fashion sense equally influenced by American Apparel and her mother's closet, and regular broadcasts of vlogged dance videos to indie music, associated at the time with hipster culture. Hirsch attributes Caroline's popularity to the dearth of indie music vlogs on YouTube (in May of 2008, she was the first to post a response video to Katy Perry's, *I Kissed a Girl* – a mainstream appropriation of hipster aesthetic – garnering over 100, 000 views within a month), and her awkwardly erotic frolicking before the camera (the use of female sexuality being an easy way to grab attention on YouTube).

Caroline's flirtatious nature alternates humourously between sexy, silly and repulsive; however, the apparent naïveté of her performance belies the self-reflexive exercise that Hirsch is engaged in as she negotiates female representation within the changing media environment of many-to-many broadcasting.[5] Caroline's sexuality is a remix of multiple female representations – influenced by traditional models, but also a composite of alternate modes she has seen filtered through vlogger culture. It is also genuine. Caroline and Ann Hirsch are confluences, Caroline is Ann is *Scandalishious*, as she is broadcasted through the lens of a webcam.[6] This might lead us to ask where the boundaries lie between online and offline personas, and how social networkers can influence their popularity through « enhanced, impersonated versions of themselves. »[7]

The work of these two artists both use online social networks as their medium, albeit to different ends. Wojtowicz reveals to us the formal working of online social networks, through his references to network theory, and within the process of his network analysis. Hirsch on the other hand, demonstrates how these formal properties are put to use. Caroline gained her cult status because her dance videos were linked to through popular forums and blogs such as 4chan.com (the anus of the internet), HipsterRunoff.com, BuzzFeed.com and Portal of Evil (poetv.com) – thus betweenness-centrality is demonstrated as Caroline's popularity and influence grew due to association with sites that benefit from high viewer traffic. In both of these works the element of speculation plays a role, for Wojtowicz it is involved in the risk he takes when contacting the people he finds online and his overture to connect and capture their gestures through photography in the offline world. For Hirsch it is the speculation involved in building a presence through her differentiation from the infinite pool of YouTube vloggers in order to achieve cewebrity status.

Speculation is also present in both works as they reflect upon the role of the long tail in the valuation and distribution of creative works within the age of digital culture. The concept of the long tail was popularized by *Wired* magazine's Chris Anderson and explains the ability of specialized products to find a niche market online. Although this may seem initially promising for creators who may be able to reach a wider audience than previously thought possible, in reality it mainly benefits a small group of aggregators such as Amazon.com. For individual creators, this phenomenon increases the field of competition and drives down prices. Kevin Kelly (also associated with *Wired*) proposed the 1,000 True Fans model for creators who wish to escape the long tail

(gleaning an income of \$100,000 a year from 1,000 people who the creator has cultivated relationships with, through social networking, inducing each to spend \$100 each a year on merchandise).[8] In her performance as Caroline, Hirsh sought out the niche market for videos of girls dancing to indie music on YouTube and cultivated her fan base within this model of the 1,000 True Fans. Wojtowicz, on the other hand sees the long tail as analogous to saying « the rest of us » or « the rest of them, » depending upon which social position we are speaking from, positing that it may be within the long tail that we locate the peasants. One might ask how the transposition of these works into a physical gallery space might adjust their centrality as the connections are made to audiences in the offline world.

[1] « Networks expand continuously by the addition of new vertices, and new vertices attach preferentially to sites that are already well connected. »

Albert-László Barabási and Réka Albert, « Emergence of Scaling in Random Networks » (1999) in *The Structure and Dynamic of Networks*, Eds. Mark Newman, Albert-László Barabási, Duncan J. Watts, Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 349-352.

[2] *The Gleaners* caused some discomfort when presented to Paris society in the 1850s (not long after the 1848 revolution). Gleaning as proscribed in Judeo-Christian tradition states that a landowner must not completely reap his fields, but leave some of the harvest to his workers or the rural peasants. Wojtowicz sees this ethical frameworks as a reciprocal relationship between employee and employer that engenders mutual respect, and wonders how this process of gleaning can be transposed to more contemporary modes of economic production (such as the role of intellectual property laws in remix culture).

[3] Albert-László Barabási and Réka Albert, « Models of Scale-Free Networks », in *The Structure and Dynamic of Networks*, Eds. Mark Newman, Albert-László Barabási, Duncan J. Watts, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 342.

[4] See Dana Boyd's essay *Viewing American class divisions through Facebook and MySpace*. Apophenia Blog Essay, June 24.

www.danah.org/papers/essays/ClassDivisions.html (accessed March 4th, 2010)

[5] Hirsch sees the self-determination of many-to-many broadcasting (YouTube, Facebook, Reality TV) as a shift away from the one-to-many broadcast models of conventional media (film, TV, magazines) in which female representation was determined by a few and broadcast to a mass market.

[6] Caroline age 18, emerged when Hirsch was 22. Hirsch is now 24, but Caroline has remained 19. Hirsch lied about her age and name to get attention and to protect her offline identity, but as she points out, these are normative strategies on the internet.

[7] Sarah Cook discusses artists engagement with online video as « enhanced impersonated versions of themselves » in her essay « The Work of Art in the Age of Ubiquitous Narrowcasting » in *VideoVortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, Eds. Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer, Amsterdam, Institute of Network Cultures, 2008, pp.173-180.

[8] Kevin Kelly, *1000 True Fans* The Technium

www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000_true_fans.php (accessed March 14th, 2010)