Not all that connects is the Internet

Descrizione

There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to see what is reaching towards him, and to be able to recognize or at least classify it. Man always tends to avoid physical contact with anything strange. All distances which men create round themselves are directed by this fear.
Canetti, Crowd and Power, 1973: 15-16

The arts, whatever they do, whenever they call us together, invite us to look at our fellow human being with generosity and curiosity.
Ben Cameron

Today's world more than ever celebrates and glorifies the individual over institutions. The symptom or cause of this change is the ubiquitous use that society, in most of its manifestations, makes of the Internet. It is sufficient to look at all technological devices surrounding us: smart-phones, iPads, and many other instruments that have become a continuum of the human body and human actions. As a consequence, this technological advancement has enabled more participation and engagement of the individual. One can almost argue that the Internet, like the "Print Capitalism" described by Benedict Andersons in his book Imagined Communities (1987), defines the shape of today's global society. This also entails a radical transformation of the means of artistic production and distribution that have been democratized for the very first time in human history. This revolution both challenges and undermines the legitimacy of cultural traditional institutions.

The Internet is the most convenient, fast and accessible platform that people today use to carry out many social activities as communicating, sharing information and gathering in virtual communities to find and satisfy a sense of belonging that doesn't seem to be found in old fashioned institutions (e.g. nation-state, family and so on).

The Internet offers an unlimited space with no specific national borders to cross or any specific ethnic and national identities to conform to, and where everyone can participate and move freely. A space that is generating a world defined neither by production, nor by consumption but mostly by participation.

On the opposite side of the glorification of the Internet, Zygmunt Bauman sheds an interesting light on this issue in his work titled Liquid Modernity (2000). In the book, the chapter devoted to the analysis of post-modern communities is particularly interesting and related to a critique of virtual communities. The German sociologist starts describing “explosive communities” characterizing the liquid modernity landscape as ‘events’ or, using two of his metaphors, as “carnival communities” and “cloakroom communities” (2010). In more detail, both metaphors stand for community and post-modern liquid identity that tend to have a very short-life. This is the reason why cloakroom or carnival communities/identities need a spectacle, an event of short existence, in so far as it breaks the routine of an individual life. Ultimately “the illusion of sharing which the spectacle may generate would not last much longer than the excitement of the performance.”(Bauman, 2000:200). In such a respect, Bauman’s analysis of carnival/cloakroom communities perfectly suits to “virtual communities” as spaces where to “gather and march (virtual) shoulder to (virtual) shoulder” (Bauman, 2000:201) that don’t offer the experience of a real engagement.

The Internet and the empowerment coming from new technologies, such as social media, are more than appealing. It is engaging and almost unavoidable. The Internet is now crucial for the circulation, promotion, and engagement process for many art organisations. Nevertheless, one can argue that the reverse side of this highly participatory society ends up into the paradox when, as a result of the speed of information and input, to which we are daily exposed, we tend to passively react without really engaging with any cause or any interest. As a response to that, as stated by Ben Cameron: “We must seize and celebrate the power of the arts to shape our individual and national characters, and especially characters of the young people, who all too often are subjected to bombardment of sensation, rather than digested experience.”

In conclusion, although we cannot say that art organisation arts should live just by their existence as generating events that gather people together, it is also true that the Internet has shown not to be the fantastic marketing device able to solve all problems of sustainability in the world of art industry.

On the opposite end, technology seems to have turned to be one of the greatest competitors for creative industries. As Ben Cameron argues: thanks to the Internet and new technologies “[we now have] expectations of personalization and customization that the live performing arts — which have set curtain times, set venues, attendant inconveniences of travel, parking and the like — simply cannot meet”. However, despite the revolutionary moment that the world of art is witnessing, art organizations are called to respond to even a higher social mission than the one traditionally assigned to them. They are responsible for cultivating the emotional transport that brings people together to sit one close to the other, sharing emotions and the feeling of being part of a physical community.

The use of the Internet and all sorts of technologies is indispensable but it should return to what it was meant to be: the mean that amplifies our intentions, not the end that downplays and paralyses our actions. Artistic events have so much more potential to offer, in terms of ability to connect and sharing when compared to the so-worshipped Internet. To conclude as Ben Cameron says: “We are bound together, not by technology entertainment designed but by common causes”. The ability, proper to the Art, to emotionally connect and bring people together is needed now more than ever before.

You can listen to the inspiring talk done by Ben Cameron:
http://www.ted.com/talks/ben_cameron_tedxyyc.html

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