

Participation and cultural industries: drawing a way through collective and collaborative creation

Descrizione

Introduction

When we think about participatory culture, we are again debating the paradigmatic change in the way that people consume culture, but not only. We are also challenging the world of cultural industries to take a better look onto the *modus operandi* of the creative production. As opposed to the phenomena of the “prosumer”, the concept of participation is evidently not new – nevertheless, it still has not been discussed with enough clarity and detachment.

Not so long ago, the majority of the current cultural scene dynamics inserted three customized words into its main index: collective, collaborative and co-creation. The new “co’s” of the cultural world are progressively becoming the favorite flag of contemporary galleries, artists, cultural centers and collectives. It is very possible – in fact, very likely – that the achievement of innovation is getting shaped from these three trends. Nevertheless, much of what has been said stays floating in condensed gray shadows, since the concepts are easily switched around, or misunderstood, or even yet undefined. Even at this writing, Wikipedia includes only introductory definitions to those terms, and many on-line dictionaries wouldn’t even have it incorporated. What exactly is a “collective”, when it comes to creativity? Which are the boundaries for what we have called “creation”? What defines collaboration in a creative process? Although many articles encircle those questions and intend to offer grounded conceptual defenses to those practices, embracing guidelines without a clear understanding can become a threat to what is a promising tool for the future of creative production. Within this framework, and taking into account that the culture is always collective (Coelho, 2009), a few differences between those three concepts are analyzed and presented below in an attempt to bestow legitimacy to each singular dynamic.

Co-creation

Not surprisingly, the first theoretical underpinnings of “co-creation” emerged outside of the cultural sphere, presented by the marketing and business researchers C.K. Prahalad and Venkatram Ramaswamy in 2000. The article *Co-opting Customer Competence*, published in the *Harvard Business Review*, explained how technological convergence, globalization and the fast growth of the Internet have made possible a much more flexible relationship between producers, distributors and consumers, where the last can assume the functions of the first, and so on. Those changes would also result in a so-called “liberty of choice” of the consumer, which prompted companies to start strategies of connected activities between companies and clients and, most importantly, generated customization windows. When imported by the cultural sector, the practice of co-creation maintains its marketing roots (Banks and Potts, 2010:260). This understanding is vital to contra distinguish this from the other “co” terms, in such a way that, when applied by the cultural centers, the practice normally works more as a branding move than a way to democratize the creation or to convert the audience into authors (Benjamin, 1975). Take platforms like Flickr or Youtube, for instance, and we will face a market where companies benefit from products created by the audience itself. This logic escapes from the regular market system, as the rewarding system – to the authors, i.e. the audience – is almost never financial and frequently difficult to measure, such as reputation, recognition and positioning. This is not to say that there rewards are less valued by the participant.

Banks & Potts, after defining two ways in which co-creation could work in the cultural world – as a product of the association between incentives and existent institutions, or as the emergence of a new model of production (Banks, J.; y Potts, J. 2010) -, came to the conclusion that a third model would be necessary to integrate the market exchanges in the cultural production world. This model should be able to combine both the market logic (incentives, contracts, business models) and the cultural field (identity concepts, social development).

Today, we should understand co-creation as a process of interaction between institutions or organizations and its audiences, in which both parts create something together with equally divided power (Simon, Nina. 2010). If those conditions are respected, the audience will feel empowered, participate and rewarded, and the

cultural centers will benefit from it in both market and non-market indicators. If the power is not shared and the audience plays the role of the production only, acting under the institution's partial rules, the concept gets corrupted. Among the worst consequences, the participant can feel betrayed, victim of injustice or exploitation, and the relationship of trust, extremely necessary in every participatory process, is broken.

When writing *The Participatory Museum* (2010), one of Simon's biggest worries were whether or not museums and other cultural institutions, when promoting participation, are conscious of the type of participatory work they are asking their visitors for, and if they are aware of their own liabilities in the process.

Collaborative creation

The most spread of the three "co" concepts, collaborative processes have been helping amateur and independent producers achieve their creations in faster, cheaper and more innovative ways. Else than co-creation, where the institution is aiming for its audience's creative increments in order to achieve benefits while the audiences want the satisfaction resultant from participating, the collaborative creation finds its way in making possible a common goal. In this case, we are no longer speaking of the general public, but of a reduced universe of people. In a collaborative creation process, two or more agents meet around the same objective, debate about the steps and requirements of the development and agree on how each agent will contribute for it. Normally, the agents would act based in their own background knowledge, and the variety of profiles enriches the evolution, promotion and range of the process, likely achieving an outcome that wouldn't have been possible if they were creating on their own or in a limited, old-fashioned creational model.

The scale of a collaborative group or the number of agents is unlimited and changing, although small groups are more common, as it can be a real challenge to horizontally coordinate a big group of people in a process of creation. Most of these projects work with open source and free licenses philosophies, applying also concepts as vintage as "Do It Yourself", or as new as "makers". Similarly to the other two "co" concepts, the

main and more relevant part of a collaborative creation process is the process itself. We will get back to this in the next chapter.

Collective creation

In 1972, Theodore Shank began his writing “Collective Creation” (2013) with the following line: “collective creation is the typical focus of an alternative society”. The concept became popular in the theater world of the 60’s and 70’s, derived from the political conflicts of that period and emerged as an alternative working model that would promote higher personal interaction. Today it is becoming a recognized alternative method for creating culture, whilst it is still shaping its own meaning. In 2009, Teresa Marín formed a basic and objective definition of what collective creation is: a set of processes that permit carrying out a creative activity and achieving a common goal between several individuals, with shared motivations and experiences, independently of the established relation between them and of the structure of the organization (Marín, 2007:217).

That said, the main difference between collective creation and co-creation shines up: the independence in the organizational form established among the agents. The collective creation, as opposed to the co-creation, is not based on the hierarchical reasons that configure the business dynamics, and the participatory process tends to be opened to debate. On the other hand, it also differs from the collaborative creation mainly because the number of the agents involved. While the collaborative creation is a process for small-medium group or collectives, the collective creation is open to the general public: we are now speaking of multitudes. A more detailed and described analysis of each one of the “co” concepts can be found in the academic Master thesis “Collective creation and collaborative creation: towards a proposal for the design of participatory projects” (Ribeiro, 2013).

From concepts to practice: setting up bonds of trust and knowing your audience

A very crucial point when planning a project of creation “co” consists in understanding the characteristics and the main aims of the organization and of the project itself.

Almost every organization can opt from one of the forms above when planning its activities, and this choice will accompany the process in a much bigger scale than its plot. Cultural managers must keep in mind that those practices are only becoming more common, and that the presentation of the idea must be as clear as possible for the audience – which is now under the effects of the glam of the words “co”, but shall soon enough determine its own opinion about those. Every aspect -of both proposal and audience- must be taken into consideration and discussed openly and honestly and, when the debate is not possible, that should also be clear. By aspects I mean every directrix, from conceptualization to reward, from hierarchy to authorship. Let’s never forget that participatory projects are mainly volunteer and need the participant’s time, effort and – at times – money to result successful, and people just don’t like investing their time, money and knowledge in suspicious or blurry proposals. Not to mention when participants come to find out, in some point in the timeline of the process of creation, that their ideas are to be used in the construction of a product that will result financially fruitful for the organization, or that their participation is limited to labour hours following specific instructions because of the lack of connection between their expectations and the conceptualization of the creation.

All this may seem a matter of social impact only, but here I beseech a more careful reading. According to the sociological basics of collective intelligence, this (the type of intelligence) should be encouraged to overcome the ‘groupthink’ and achieve improvements in intellectual performances. After displacing the concept from its birth environment – biological sciences -, and relocating it in the cultural field, Pierre Levy (2004) affirmed that the collective intelligence is a constantly valued intelligence, real-time coordinated and leading to an effective mobilization of the competences. The collective intelligence is, therefore, shared by everyone, and merits to be valued. Moreover, to ignore, despise and disable the collective intelligence is, according to the author, a waste of experiences, skills and human richness. Levy also affirms that we are currently immersed in a new social environment described as the intelligent collective (Lévy, 2004:72). From Surowiecki’s writing about this same matter (2005), it is worthwhile to mention his concept of “wisdom of the crowds”, shaped to enunciate that the knowledge of a group will always be higher than the most specialized knowledge of one expert. Surowiecki would analyze and operate a series of experiments (from horse-riding to the organizational structure of Google) to get to the conclusion that the solution of a problem is superior (in quality terms) when it comes from a group than from a single person, even this person being an expert.

This means that the “co” processes carry the strength and potential of the collectives, but are hypersensitive to the conditions. It doesn't take much for them to get compromised. If this happens, the probability is that the quality of the process – and, finally, the result – will not accomplish any special marks. A series of interviews done with cultural managers and producers of collaborative and collective groups in Barcelona in 2013 has shown that, during group activities and debates, two profiles of participants are recurrently present: the “transgressor” and the “scared”. The first, fearless, is the participant who would bring up the most new, risky or unusual ideas to the group. This is the participant who will try to think of alternative ways and manners to complete the existing tasks, offering and supporting ambitious moves, and accepting the chances of resulting in either great innovation or complete failure. On the other hand, the “scared” profile is the one that will fight for the safe and normal strategy, or at least a strategy formerly tested in the past (and successful). This participant will likely finish all the tasks and deliver an average result, but will never take the chance of something greater – which would be ideal in other contexts but ends up being a holding back when talking about culture, arts and creativity.

Of course, leading groups is not an easy task and cultural managers who opt for collective and collaborative forms of work will constantly be under the risk of getting the average result mentioned before – specially if they fall in the consensus “trap”. Achieving a consensus should not be the goal of a collective or collaborative process, as those tend to float in the medial line. Again, this will always depend on the type and objectives of the project, and it also has its caveats: if the main goal is related to social conquests or impact, identity or regional issues, the medial line will not be an enemy and the consensus might work to spread equality and set up a satisfactory result. However, if we consider cultural industries and its need for innovation, the medial line can bring mediocrity by the hand, and end up squandering great potential.

Challenges when putting together collective and collaborative creation projects happens mainly because the management methodologies are still being explored, and no single formula can possibly deal with the infinite variants of the types of the groups all at once (number of people, level of experience, expertise, cognitive maps, grade of

interest, disposable times and many others). Also, there is a chance that social and anthropological methodologies might be underrate by the managers. At this time, many of the existing cultural, artistic and technological groups who promote practices of collaborative and collective creation base their methods in scientific studies of bees, zebrafish and other animals who behave naturally in collective forms of organization.(1) The biology-based studies offer a very interesting approach and can certainly benefit the organizations, but it still leave many issues untied. For as much as it allows the research of stimulation and collective behavior, it leaves aside anthropological and emotional characteristics and, most of all, it doesn't contemplate cognitive maps and individual universes.

Assuming the social relevance of participatory practices

If life in communities has always been shared, why has participation become so important in the past few decades? What would justify the inclination of experts, companies and cultural organizations to promote participation and networking? Why are we trying to motivate people to assume a more active attitude with respect to culture and development?

A fulfilling cultural life not only makes possible a better understanding of being or a more evolved practice of citizenship. It also makes easier to individuals to be happy, develop deeper relationships with others and accept itself in a more honest way. Bauman (2010), when defining the contemporary life as the liquid life, delates the superficiality of the interpersonal relationships and affirms that to foment the sense of belonging is essential in a moment when no one is sure of anything and everybody needs to reaffirm themselves by belonging to something. In this scenario, life's broken parts look like a mosaic of disconnected impressions, and cultural life becomes a basic requirement for the mental health of individuals and a facilitator to overcome the globalization discomfort (Stiglitz, 2002).

Participation rises as the most relevant value of cultural life and one of the most relevant of development efforts (from cultural politics to low-high culture definition dilemmas). Participation is also one of the few activities allowing individuals to tone up

their voices, fortify their passions and approximate themselves to a new way of personal satisfaction – whose discovery, in liquid times, becomes increasingly difficult(2).

Final thoughts

Among the biggest threats of the mistaken use of collaborative, collective and co-creation, is the malicious marketing that has been applied by some cultural equipments, who will practice crowdsourcing(3) and hide it behind “co” terms. Although crowdsourcing is also a valid and common practice in the industry, it needs to be critically analyzed when it comes to participatory cultural production – if not, projects will be under the risk of resulting disappointing for the participant. This is specially problematic, since the role of the culture should be precisely to restore ties, to weak the individualistic thinking and to strengthen relationship practices.

Collective and collaborative projects are an affluent source of the multidisciplinary knowledge that resides in people. We know from postmodernity studies (Jameson, 1985 and Bauman, 2010) that the contemporary moment is filled with individuals affected by the hyper individualism – consequent of late capitalism – and who are trying to resist by being eager to learn and take part in as many social interactions as possible. Digital convergence (Jenkins, 2006) and technological revolution allow individuals to become experts in a specific subject after a few hours of autodidact learning from forums and tutorials. Creation processes have great potential to become the main scenario in which this knowledge finds action and an occasion with multiple resources, synchronized timing and, most important, reconnection with personal qualities and cognitive maps, as opposed to the high-consumption era problems that we have been facing for the past few decades.

Endnotes

(1) For more about this matter, in the published book *Insect Media, an Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (1976), Jussi Parikka gives a valuable perspective on how modern media technology and insects’ forms of social organization are interconnected.

(2) The importance of participation was already debated by Walter Benjamin back in 1934, in his writings *The Author as Producer*.

(3) Crowdsourcing is the process of gathering ideas, services and content by soliciting volunteer contribution from large groups of people. It has been consolidated as a very effective manner to execute problem-solving. In this specific context, the critic directs to the hoax of using the word co-creation to process in which the participant will provide content on a one-way process.

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