

The Web and the Avant Garde

Not an expert on the Avant Garde nor anything in particular.

But just about to publish book on the impact the web – web 2.0 – is having on culture and society. We Think. Say a little about the connections, links, tensions between web culture and the Avant Garde (AG).

The AG identified preoccupations that have stayed with us and which reflected in our discussion of the web.

- Culture is becoming ever more democratic, widening participation, opening up to new sources of energy not controlled by old elites.
- But the price of that is that culture also more commercial, bawdy, raucous, taking the idea of participation in many different directions.
- That in turn raising questions of taste, authority and control. The Ag debate about whether to engage in low art for the masses or remain a bastion of high art. Web debates about trust, knowledge, truth.
- The AG announced that they owned now. They had special insight into the new. A privileged position of a small group. AG slogan “only we are the face of our time” could equally be a rallying cry for web entrepreneurs. AG seeing a society in which change would become systematic, organised.

So certainly echoes of the AG in the way the web has been presented.

But may be more than that, some links between AG and the web generation.

Story of a handful of loosely connected people from the 1960s who played a critical role in the growth of cyber culture.

Doug Engelbart, Dec 9, 1968 computer presentation SF Brooks Hall – foreshadowed everything about the web. Influenced by counter culture.

Film by Stewart Brand, criss crossing between New York and SF, computer labs and communes. New AG artists in New York, Rauschenberg, Johns, Cage.

Brand had extraordinary influence on the web’s story about itself.

Set up Whole Earth Catalogue – itself a kind of AG publication.

Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link – early bulletin board.

Then Wired magazine bible of the new economy, founding editor Kevin Kelly Out of Control and Chris Anderson, The Long Tail.

Wired a kind of AG publication.

Typology, breaking the rules.

Constant call to revolution.

Manifesto – Kevin Kelly’s New Rules for the New Economy – entirely new economic laws to live by which impossible to understand from within the old paradigm.

Lists of what wired nor not, unwired. Like the lists the AG liked to draw up pitching elasticity, invention, multiplication of forces, invisible order against rigidity, methodical imitation, analysis, addition of idiocies.

Decorative unpractical uneconomic = ugly
Constructive, meaningful, economic = beautiful.

Wired produces similar lists.

When WEC closed party at Fine Arts Centre in SF, a happening, Golden Toad, tantric dancers. Brand’s give way.

Fred Moore – student protest to Homebrew Computer Club, against corporate domination of computers.

HCC long term chair Lee Felsenstein, created one of first attempts to use computers to record popular memory and imagination. Inspired by Ivan Illich’s Tools for Conviviality.

Illich like the AG very hard to classify politically and ideologically. A radical conservative, anti industrialisation.

Key to thinking idea that society of participation, doing more important than consuming, owning.

That theme of people becoming participants in creating meaning, objects, art one that ran through AG as well.

Benjamin 1938 art to be judged by degree to which it invites people to become spectators. Guy Debord Situationist Intl railing against society of the spectacle, empire of passivity.

YouTube and Facebook in their way echo these themes of participative culture, in mutant, bastardised form.

Now thanks to YouTube/Facebook we can all take part in the spectacle.
Very different ways to be participants: fans and hackers.

From collage to the rip, mix burn generation.

Happenings to flash mobs.

More prosaically looking back can see some of the AG as new media entrepreneurs, creating brands, look, great names, long before branding had a name.

So definitely echoes and even links between the AG and the web.

But also quite a lot of tensions and differences.

Web not just growth out of imagination of AG.

State vital role in funding: DoD, the information Superhighway.

Commerce and frictionless capitalists, venture capital, accumulation of wealth in SV.

Geek culture of web 2.0 peer to peer etc – very different from Blast, Ma, Die Action.

Those tensions more obvious but another which perhaps less obvious but also significant.

AG and web very different ideas of creativity and authorship.

AG a vanguard, a small group of special people, in special places, doing special things = creativity.

The web a far more everyday, social, distributed, domesticated kind of creativity.

The web's collective creations.

The web not bringing the AG back to life but something much older, a kind of folk culture.

Dorothy Noyes comparing the social process of creativity of oral tradition epic poems and open source software.

Many distributed contributors.

Working in parallel.

Sharing ideas by performing them, making them public.

Bringing them together, bolting together modules, to create something larger.

Web = digital folk culture.

Obviously connections between these two stories of the web as AG and the web as folk.

One is authenticity: search for outsider status, outside the establishment, real unmediated experience, untutored, not corrupted. St Ives modernists and Alfred Wallis. Now the amateur is cool.

Some in the AG called for a collective art of the masses.

Fundamental connection = both the AG and the web are amalgams of many different contradictory forces.

Web = post industrial, anti industrial, pre industrial, the geek, the rebel and the peasant.

What of their impact on places like this, libraries and books.

AG remaking the book but really breathing new life into it, beautiful new ways for it to work.

Web much more profoundly destabilising and creative for books, authors, publishers and libraries. Generative technology and generative relationships.

Only just begun and much more to come.