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SOCIAL NETWORKS 2

Art as Creative Virus an Host in the work of Mel Chin

Glen Sparer on May 15 2001

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Employing art as insertionary idea within a social realm, Mel Chin compares his social artworks and their hosting organizations as a virus existing in creative and symbiotic relationship with the host-body. Mel revels in the analogy and multidimensional play of this relationship across fields as diverse as land reclamation, urban renewal, the virtual culture of video games depicting vanishing tribal culture, the tv soap opera Melrose Place, and the new San Jose Library. SWiTCh found Mel in North Carolina under the weather, with a virus of another kind. Perhaps, we may catch similar contagion from an art virus with, Mel Chin, as host.

Revival Fields

http://www.kuenstlerhaus.de/haus.0/PROJECTS/CHIN/chin_E.html

http://www.kuenstlerhaus.de/haus.0/PROGRAM/INFO_2000/nov00_E.html

City/San Jose State University Joint Library

http://www.ci.san-jose.ca.us/cty_clk/10_10_00DOCS/10_10_00_9b.htm

KNOWMAD/MAP: Motion + Action = Place

<http://web.mit.edu/lvac/www/WINTER2000/knowmad.html>

<http://www.frederieketailorgallery.com/2000Oct.html>

Mel Chin: How can we make a piece of sculpture that meets a requirement, the subtractive process of sculpture and collaboration -- that's the beginning of Revival Fields. To say that, is to say an art requirement becomes blurred. I was coming from a conceptual realm, understanding, well this is truly just a piece of artwork. You get a chance to transform this into this, this non-aesthetic, so to speak site, into this aesthetic site or living site. I use the word invisible aesthetic. You can't see it; it involves social process over time, politics, people, and all those things. So we're talking about a work. The first work in the world...you know that's how I thought. I was able to attempt an understanding of the technology that we were respectful of, that actually provides the first raw data, at that time in the world. From that point on, this whole field picked up that now is hustling and busting, as they say. That was a kind of liberating piece. I realized that, for number one, I could make a piece of artwork that was not dependant on the time frame of the immediate gratification that you get out of

traditional art from relationships, that in part, relationships that you might have with an audience, an object or ourselves. But it moves into a whole other world where cooperation is one thing and time you can commit to something that may potentially only be realized after you are dead. . But that's okay. Because we are part of a flow of ideas and generating ideas and enhancing a climate that actually has got you to thinking this way to begin with. You know what I am saying. So, even the Melrose Place project, inserting the GALA committee was essential not to have me be the key. It was essential having a team, so that we could work on the same level as producers and hidrs. The idea behind that was getting more and more obvious when asked to come out to MOCA to do a work, a social work that began to layer individualist work in the public realm. They wanted it to be in LA. Again. I am on a plane flying back to Georgia, where I am teaching at the University of Georgia, that's where GALA comes from, Georgia-Los Angeles. Yea, I'm teaching at University of Georgia and also, scholar in residence at Cal Arts, back and forth. But in the air I just said, "LA is in the air, and the same way I approached Revival Fields, well I said -- there is great poetry here". That's how I made my links with the art history world. Well they said okay, you have a number of social works of social critiques of something that has always been a living curriculum, for consumers the most powerful primetime airtime you have, but we have to work with that. We're not going as a person; it's totally not the right way to go. So look at air, here is in the air. We have this climate that's been critiqued by artists -- when are we going to go in. At the time, I was studying video games, as well as viruses and arcade snipers. I was thinking of psychology basically, and physiology, but I was looking at these snipers as these viruses. I said, well they insert themselves and replicate within the host, not necessarily to kill the host you see. But to replicate ideas, or their own form, but they always slightly mutate, but not exact. I thought, if I could transfer that to the world of ideas we would have the methodology, be as it is. And that would be over time.

You see the thing about a computer virus is about control. Where art viruses, if you were to take that, is the basis for language, or the basis for creativity, that actually does not control but enhances, or gives another opinion that can be layered within the existing host. Because it's a unidimensional issue of power, power of television to basically sell its products is the idea. That's how it became commercialized, it didn't always have to be that way but that's what it has become. But to add another layer of texture that is information based, yet it still relates to the host, because it's contextual to the characters, the script, because we are working directly with writers and producers -- that adds up to something. This relationship of viruses to the host, but on the creative level. You understand what I am saying. I call it insertion, rather than infiltration, insertion of product placement, because it is idea, it is conceptual placement and it is relationship -- relationship, because it may start overtly, but it is agreed upon by the host. I came out; I was invited by a museum, which is its own kind of host to do a piece about LA. I saw LA in a bigger field than television. I was convinced that in order to do this work you had to do it on primetime TV. Somewhere. It was not chosen specifically Melrose whatever, I wasn't even watching that kind of stuff. But when I accidentally saw it, we could make some parallels like 'Melrose - Selavy', a Duchampian pun. My names in it and all that, but that's not why. What's intriguing is that this is an opportunity to really bridge something. And by the way, it's an activist piece. It's not only because we made a socialist commitment to it. See, what we did is we made a coalition privately with the writers, producers, and lawyers of Melrose Place. We worked for two years, sixty shows. We entered successfully sometimes not, because it's collaboration. We had to get the scripts and get it approved by the writers, producers, and executive producers. We had a direct kind of linkage. It also had to have a kind of collaboration. In our minds it is not one person's idea, it was a collective idea. We'd sit around and conceive of these things and then hash them out, and then agreed to apiece. Meet production schedule. We were not paid by the production. Because we have an equal creative level, we bring our own money and our own time. We were paid by the Rockefeller Foundation, MOCA in Los Angeles, and PAIA Grand Arts in Kansas City, and any other trimmings that came in, out of pocket, whatever. But it was a way of having the freedom to talk ideas to this world about selling products with the creatives you see. And you go back, you know, say -- "I want to work with the King of Culture --who might that be", it may not be the President, it may not be the EPA director, but it could be Aaron Spelling, which controls a certain type of culture for more than a generation. You see what I am saying? To work with that, the current king of culture, to be not Goya but GALA, is appropriate. Now the GALA Committee was born out of the need for cooperation, a symbiotic relationship and a true concern for the host.

How can we make this unidimensionally, normally viewed as unidimensional, becomes a multidimensional factor. How can it be done quietly without fanfare so we have time for success, not reveal our relationship with the host until later. So you have a future object, which shows, in a museum, and they come in. We had mixtures of fantasy fiction where they are shopping at their opening of an art opening of our opening, before it opened and they aired it. After we had hung the art of what we did all year. You see what I am saying. It was the requirement of the writers and producers to

name the name of the show "Uncommon Sense", name the place the MOCA, and talk about art that they suggested at this level of cooperation they suggested an artwork to make the bombing of Baghdad, which is another commentary on television. All this related to the characters. It is the first time Art Forum had mentioned a soap opera. About art-life, poverty sucks that we looked over the scripts, you see. But that's one level. Then after that, having the show we had another thing, which is an auction. We had an auction at Sotheby's in Beverly Hills, when we sold all the work off, returning the whole thing back into the field of ideas. It is a whole circle of ideas; it is not just one interaction of television, but a consistent interaction of television, an exposure in a museum and then back to the marketplace in an auction house. Now the appreciation of the art world then was minimal, but is now growing slowly, and now we know that Vienna is thinking of having the show on television, they are thinking of rearing it. Melrose Place is popular there. We were able to do a lot of artworks and the Manchester Guardian in England talks about the subversive art of Melrose Place, just about four months ago. So even though it has been cancelled here, it plays in about sixty countries all over the world, and you see what we are talking about. You know -- it is over time. And it's a blueprint, doesn't mean it will work, it may remain dormant, but what we're saying is that it's a blueprint of how you do work in society.

Art's purpose is not to tell you the whole picture but to provide the elements to make your own picture. I feel that art is part of the picture that stirs desire or even visual desire and that's good enough. We'll start there. And you do it in a way that provokes the memory. You have one hand in the culture and one hand in We have tribal rugs a remapping of a whole area Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Caucasus all the areas that were traditional tribal rug cultures. In Nomad, I thought well here is a culture dying, many tribal cultures are dying because of national limits. What it is a driving game? We created a whole installation for the traveling exhibit. Basically we took each one of the rugs and laid them out on a grid of 36. A road, a highway and you drive to each tent. Each tent, each world, or room has been developed from one rug. All the activities and design must come from that one rug. All the animal patterns have created a personality, room or a maze. Created from that one piece. So the patterns are there, floating around doing this thing, and you're driving to get to the pomegranate. If you get the pomegranate you get 45 seconds. If you get 45 seconds you might get enough time to solve the next rug, the next tent. You have 36 levels all mixed within it. You're memorizing patterns and things. You're learning patterns and seeing patterns. So someday you're walking down the street you pass an antique store. You look at a rug and you say, "Hey, I've seen that - that's that crab creature thing in that game!" You look at the rug, it's not a crab thing its a pattern that was woven a hundred or a thousand years ago -- we just forgot. So that may be an ideal situation. How we like to show it, created a tent, took over an Atari driving machine stripped it out, put in our own CPU and all that, put in our own controls. Reupholstered everything. Put it in the middle of a gallery, found a tent to shine light through and we borrowed tribal rugs surrounding it. So as a kid, or you walk in it, you're playing the game driving it you finish it, you say, "well, I'm real bad!" you walk around, right around you is reality, you see what I am saying. So I am paying homage to, the game, this culture of driving and the one that is dying. So that is where NOMAD comes into play. We're saying that - you know you play video games -- I don't play them much, but I started looking at a lot of them. The design features, whether they are Laura Croft or Doom or Duke Nuke 'Em, have some strange feature that came from the Dungeons and Dragons. They always seen dungeon like or alot of them do...even in natural landscapes. They have this configuration or file. That is a file that has been developed that is successful to make me escape. I 'm just saying that there's another blueprint. There's so much to design from, so much to be inspired by that I decided to do this really psychedelic looking thing, made from the oldest pattern making, one of the original digital technologies with women who took colored wool and knotted these beautiful things digital. The original digital is remapped in the modern digital.

Well that's where I'm coming from with NOMAD. It's a fun game, too, in respect that it's not all arty or not too high faulting... It's a real simple driving game. You know -- go get the ball dude! You know. So that's what that's about. Art's job is to provoke -- "Well I've never seen these things, where did they come from?" What's going on here is that we're making space again, we're clearing our hard-drive, or our ram, to re-associate. It opens up an opportunity to see things again. It might make one person dizzy, but another person might walk away saying, "God -- I just saw this rug -- What is that about?" And from there you go to reality, you finally get back to people, back to humanity. "Wow, I didn't know the Kurds were being persecuted", I might have started with rugs, then I go to games, but in the end I end up learning that there are tribal women, that have been doing this for thousands of years that are already dead and gone. It makes me think -- well, there will never be another rug like this. So why is that? Because of our relationship with nationalism, because my relationship with politics. There are always other things to be aware of-so book learning or history can be boring or you can be stimulated to action, conceptual action or active passion. One thing we'd like to do with games is to go into the distribution you can always put aside something for some organization that supports women in that part of the world. So

always remember where you're coming from. You're coming from a culture that may be the host, it may be other people that didn't survive -- it might just help somebody to survive.

Again in the San Jose Project, that's the politics of insertion or the angle of insertion, as we used in Melrose Place, exactly the same, except this is in a physical space. A lot of different pieces that were co-created with students from Joel's class, [Joel Slayton, head of Cadre Program at SJSU, C5, & Executive Editor of SWITCH], that are already artists in those pieces and we all tried to do it Melrose Place style, GALA style. Some are in and out some are just not practical now, but they will be practical later, because we want to come back here, to reinvent more. Art can be made in honor of a book. Again, nature of making it is anonymous. I want no labeling in any of the pieces -- we agreed to this -- so you discover it on your own terms. If you're on the fifth floor you can find something, you look at it, and then you look on the shelf and you might find that article, or that book that it is related to. They can make up what it means for them. It can be just a cool stone table to break up the monotony, or it can have a direct relationship to a book on Olmec culture and the book on archaeology on the shelf. You see-aha! - I discovered!" You see when you discover it on your own terms, if it's on your own terms, you have the possibility of owning that idea yourself. And that's why I like kids. It's sort of like, you can have it told to you, or you can figure it out yourself, and there's no rush -- it's there for you to see. So again I am thinking more over time. I think the fourth dimension has a lot to say in our understanding of ideas. And I say let me be the mnemonic devices that allow for, not only memory, but some humor, and sometimes meditation can be serious, not all just for fun because they lead us into other areas. Our meeting with the Biblioteca is where we came upon Underground Books. We worked with six older Hispanic readers and scholars. Here we think that we are in a Chicano kind of situation and we'll come up with a Latino based idea. We talk about books and contributions, and we ended up with something completely different, executive underground Books. That came out of that meeting with these really cool people from the Latino community. It became a piece that was universally applicable. That was a wonderful session. [Underground Books: twelve subterranean shelves, to be discovered beneath bookshelves throughout the library. The Underground Shelf will be covered in glass and contain books, which have been banned, burned or censored from existence.]

Right now I am working in Detroit, another project called SWING, Sustainable Works Involving Neighborhood Groups. For about a year and a half, I have been making frequent visits to East Side Detroit, called the "Devil's Night". And in Devil's Night is where we saw in the news and on video, Detroit burning on Halloween. Take that image of a house burning and neighborhood. In my read, the poor people, whatever, I don't know if their poor or rich, I know one thing ----- Detroit is one scary hell of a place. People are irresponsible. They burn their homes. That was my reading I got it every year. It did happen about every year in Detroit. Now it's only...this time on Halloween only two houses burned. But rather than humanity driven to perhaps some level of frustration, that this is where that expression has come to. But even not judging it, I went there at the invitation of some people that had established themselves out there trying to make art that was not there, and convert. And saw that there was this green. People are planting, growing fruit, vegetables, and food because food is so high, it is hard to get to. There are no corner stores in East Side Detroit; just look around you got a liquor store and a lotto store. And you see people committed to this re-greening of their inner cities, after the fire, after their houses are demolished and abandoned. And I said -- I'm inspired by this. And then you read reports that the one thing most people fear is abandoned houses. So this is where this idea comes about. We're going to take a whole house. We got this whole house. We're going to put one quarter on a spindle -- on a pivot. The whole house can move aside and underneath, we're raising earthworms to sell to the fishermen. Devil's night crawlers we can sell to fishermen, all over the Great Lakes to create an economy based on this thing, that you have no power, no light, and no water, except light for the worms. We also take a whole abandoned unit and change it into a work of art that is also architecture. And it is surreal in a landscape that is devastated. Give it another identity. And don't try to bring it back to habitation, because it is too far-gone. It has already been taken over by the icon of poverty and fire. So let's do something else with it. Take another house-deconstruct it. And not paint all the structural rafters, grind up that wood, boil it up, grow gourmet mushrooms out of it. Sell that! Okay. Walk up, see this artwork, what it is -- is a roof sitting on the ground, alright. "What is that - what's up with that - why is it there?" -- you know. You go to another house. It's been cut up like a quarter amount of cloth. It's been reconnected twice it's size, like a big balloon, floating in the air with glass in between -- I'm just imagining this -- like a balloon framed house, balloon realty, and inside is enough filing for the community center they wanted on the West Side of Detroit, you see. And while SWING activism is saying, this going to the East Side of Detroit, is also a cultural racism just to go there. So SWING wants to go from one side of Detroit to the other, finding all these abandoned properties and homes, negotiating with the owners, letting them keep the house. Let us do something with it. Let us make some icon out of it that is worthy of some kind of

attention, and let's plus, make it serve you, whatever you might want it to be. You see? So that's another idea. That's what I'm working on now.

I am into the action. I like bringing the work into reality. I don't like it just sitting there, you know, just as an idea. I think it has to prove itself in society a bit. It has to be made. We have to try at least...Don't you think? It may not be art -- but you find out where art fits within that realm. Where is the art here, where could it be? It's not just my idea that I want to put in front of your face...you know...Let me look at that video game, why am I judging it so hard? Let me look at that rug again. You see what I am saying? Just look at that devastated landscape that everybody is scared to walk on. Could that be just like marble? Sorry for making that parallel.

It's a challenge to live...the world. You have to give something back, if you really want to find it. You see what I am saying?



::CrossReference

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