

The Mythology of Minimal Infrastructure, Maximum Flexibility: The Open Source Phenomenon.

Katie Hargrave
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“I’m not a programmer, but what I understand is that the code is made public which allows for extensions or revisions of its functionality. A program like Linux has a basic function (an operating system for computers) and a language (the code) and a community of programmers (those involved in editing or revising the program). This system has elements of democracy—transparent structure, open dialogue. It also has chaotic/random/statistical elements more akin to an evolutionary model—the revisions with most functionality, greatest efficiency, etc. persist through time.”—Josh Ippel, OPENSOURCE Art Board Member, in discussing the name of the alternative art space and its aims.

OPENSOURCE Art is a non-profit community art space located in Champaign, Illinois, a small city of approximately 75,000 people and nine months of the year the added population, 40,000 people, of a major University. Champaign is located about three hours south of Chicago.

OPENSOURCE Art, as the name implies, is interested in presenting a platform, basic building blocks, which can then be manipulated in much the same way that open source programming can. Or that is the purported purpose of this art space.

I am interested in the pervasive myth that surrounds both this art space and the software movement: that minimal infrastructure will allow for maximum flexibility by all parties. Instead, both OPENSOURCE Art and systems such as Linux have the potential to maintain an elite power structure present in both the art world and in the information sector.

OPENSOURCE Art’s mission statement says:

OPENSOURCE is an alternative art space accommodating a variety of non-traditional, community-oriented art projects and events within Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. Using our current location as a home base, we intend to host and support a diversity of projects: artists' workshops and lectures; short-term art exhibitions and events by local, regional, and national artists; and arts-based community outreach activities. We intend to initiate and support local, national, and international projects, whether independent artists or students and faculty from the local schools. OPENSOURCE is under construction.

The language used here, “alternative” and “non-traditional” intend to set up a dialectical relationship between the normative, traditional model of the art world and what *this* space stands for.

In the contemporary art scene, gallery is almost always situated after to the word “commercial” and contemporary art is followed by the word “market.” When artist Damien Hurst can create and, more importantly, sell a one hundred million dollar diamond incrustated skull, art can no longer claim to be about expression, creativity, or genius.¹ Of the dozens of articles published in Summer 2007 regarding Hurst’s infamous piece, the majority focus on the monetary value of the skull, the price it was expected to fetch, and what the piece means for the skyrocketing art market. Instead of facilitating a conversation surrounding the meaning of the work, the media and art journalists discuss capital.

As Julian Stallabrass has made clear in his book *Art Incorporated*, the art world closely reflects the movements of the surrounding world, perhaps most pertinently wavering with the economy. To most this would seem an unavoidable trend. Artists depend on wealthy benefactors, museums with budgets that dwarf even Hurst’s objects, and a network of gallerists and collectors. These systems, it seems, must be in place in order for objects to be produced. It is simple supply and demand; if an artist is without the support of a gallery, collector, or museum, then the work is not going to be made. It seems only appropriate then, that the prices of Hurst’s artworks be given as much attention as the works themselves.

[On the art scene] there are striking parallels with the distribution of financial power. It is hardly surprising that the US is dominant...it is no accident that the world’s major financial centres are also the principle centres for the sale of art.

As cultural theorist Georges Bataille states, “On the whole, a society always produces more than is necessary for survival; it has a surplus at its disposal. It is precisely the use it makes of this surplus that determines it: The surplus is the cause of agitation, of the structural change, and of the entire history of society.” OPENSOURCE Art, like open source software, tries to take advantage of this surplus, working “within the gaps of capitalism”, as Nicholas Bourriaud stated.²

What then, does OPENSOURCE Art’s production look like?

Bataille’s change is certainly of interest to the OPENSOURCE Art membership. The space is horizontally structured, a space without a leader, all decisions are by majority vote, and someone who attends a meeting for the first time has an equal say as the oldest member present.

OPENSOURCE’s membership pamphlet states: “The need for a space for presenting art in which relationships between artist, facilitators and audiences can be established without monetary exchange is crucial to finding alternative ways of understanding art and

¹ Nor can we talk about the artwork as being an educative tool for the public, as this piece by Damien Hurst will never be on public display.

² Bourriaud places Relational Aesthetics “within the gaps of capitalism” specifically, but I apply it to all the movements I have mentioned above.

its varied meanings. With this in mind, OPENSOURCE Art exists in order to create the possibility that art might be defined by those whom it impacts and by those who are rarely given a voice in conventional museums and commercial gallery spaces.”

This interest in change is reflected in the type of projects OPENSOURCE Art presents: those that would not otherwise have access to institutional art spaces. But the important question to ask is would these projects have a space *elsewhere* or is it primarily the fact that OPENSOURCE is situated within Champaign, Illinois that it seems to be creating a space for institutional change? Though there is a distinct community of artists (both tied to the university and independent of), OPENSOURCE Art is the only art institution other than the museum run by the University, which the community has little access to for exhibition possibilities, and little contemporary work is shown there. So when art projects like Nancy Nisbit’s *Exchange Project*, come to Champaign, there is nowhere else it could possibly fit than at OPENSOURCE. This, however, is not creating a space for change, it is instead desperation.

Perhaps more easily, we can look at the presentations methods OPENSOURCE Art uses: the small group show, one night event, large curated exhibition, and performances. Each of which fit quite snugly within the normative gallery lexicon.

I would like to suggest that perhaps use of minimal infrastructure, as both open source software and the art space do, creates a technological barrier users must cross. Instead of allowing for editing from all contexts, this instead acts as a gatekeeper. OPENSOURCE Art reproduces a commercial gallery with all the trappings except monetary exchange. By aligning itself so closely with a commercial gallery—the white walls, the types of exhibitions put on—a certain barrier to entrance occurs with any other public than those well-versed in contemporary art theory and practice.

Knowing this, the main question I would like to ask is: what can be done to dissemble these barriers to entry and allow for a different type of production to occur?

Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share*. New York City: Zone Books, 1991.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Paris: Le Press du reel, 2002.

Shaw, William. "The Iceman Cometh." *The New York Times*, June 3 2007.

Stallabrass, Julian. *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art*. Oxford: Oxford Press, 2004.