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Illustrations by Karen López Murillo**

Virtual Artistic Communities: Vessels in Time

Today, theorizing about virtual art communities risks operating under the idea of an absolutely unstable certainty: that there is a digital desert teeming with artists and artistic possibilities. During the time that it takes to either write or read this text, a considerable number of virtual communities will have cropped up across the world with the shared goal of existing outside of all ontological spacetimes to inhabit the virtual, with all its advantages and contradictions.

How can art bring build community? How can we physically and corporeally make sense of the words "virtual" and "community" when they're used in the same sentence? Can we create community from a distance? Just how virtual is the virtual, in technological terms? How can we understand the word "art" in terms of the virtual, especially considering the last few years?

After a simple brainstorming exercise, we might come up with these and many other questions. Perhaps their answers won't hold over the years, since time is the creation of art, and not the other way around. Art invents time, or at least that's

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the case in our postmodern era, whose ideas, art, philosophically inspired aesthetics, sociology, and, of course, politics we are still working to disentangle.

We may draw several key ideas from the phrase "virtual art communities": many are inevitably problematic given that few communities actually agree upon what it is they constitute, while speaking of "community" is always politically charged. The "virtual," meanwhile, calls to mind philosophical ideas of the late twentieth century. "Art," then, serves as the nexus between the above words, a place where the two come into tension, only to eventually lead us to agonize over aesthetics.

So why should we even write or read about these ideas, and could it be that now, more than ever, we need to make sense of space, time, and social interaction? This article seeks to insist upon this question, especially since the archives we are producing online have yielded an unprecedented awareness and experience of the world. And perhaps it is from these archives that we may draw almost everything we require to configure new forms of experience. Of course, I would never suggest that we aren't producing new cultural objects, yet it's obvious that almost everything is now online, with the internet becoming the new matrix of experience. Social networks, image banks, personal blogs, and virtual exhibitions boast rich visual and textual repositories. They aren't made for everyone, though, since there's always a filter of privilege determining who among us

can access them, and we must remain critical of the multiple systematic factors that make the virtual inaccessible for so many, whether due to prohibition or poverty.

The idea of community would warrant a full article on its own, but, for the sake of brevity, we could summarize it as the possibility of human interaction based on something held in common. We understand commonality as the series of agreements reached by those who decide to inhabit a given community. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to delve into the disputes and tensions found in communities, since we might find creative potential in the cracks: these might either yield a tendency to question everything in order to create new ways of doing, or they may catalyze an unraveling that starts with an idea and ends with a result. If we consider community in relation to the virtual, then we must include one significant specification: the body abandons the flesh and bone and morphs into the avatar, nickname, profile picture, but also into multiple personalities. The beauty of the latter lies in the way it unravels the idea of being in order to give way to a multiplicity of

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personalities. This is what's fascinating about living virtually. Each of us becomes a spellbound Pessoa.

"I contain multitudes," Bob Dylan said. Though he probably had other ideas in mind, this phrase is key to understanding the virtual body, as is Bauman's idea of fluid identity, perhaps. From the body-territory we might move on to the body-avatar on the internet-territory that houses our deterritorialized communities whose geographies are embedded into code, data, and glitches.

"Community" stands as yet another term that has become trite over the last few years, which does not imply that communities, understood politically, are in danger or at risk. That a word has become overused and tired should only push us to seek new ways of updating our concepts to denote their true potential. This idea might be dangerous to activism and to those marching along its path, yet the fact that we're increasingly using the word "community" adds a certain connotation that has become necessary to our times: the connotation of the virtual.
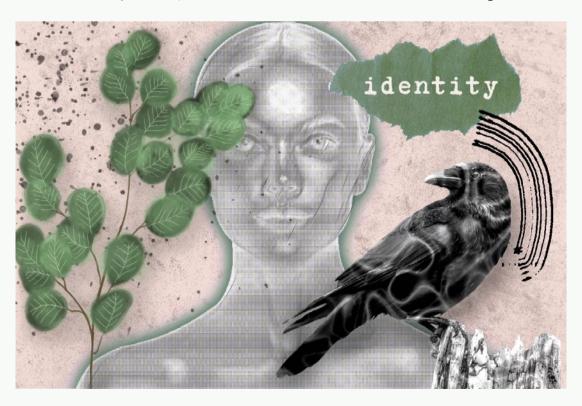
We find ourselves further from the raging Pangea, a Pangea that morphed into continents, countries, cities, neighborhoods, houses, and rooms only to occupy the baren land of the screen where today's geographies now come together. The need to decenter art is also key to communities, since decentering yields a plurality of ideas, cultures, ways of doing things, and personalities, all of which are necessary to artistic production and con-

sumption. Planes, trains, and boats are now sweet metaphors for coming together, though certain romantics will always insist on in-person touching, smelling, and seeing. Personally, I stand among the latter. What about you?

When we speak of virtual spaces, it's as if we have to question everything just so we can use a fashionable phrase, but how virtual is the spatial? Perhaps we can review everything that's been written on the subject over the last few decades, but there will always be room for the personal and the private, both of which aren't confined to academic theory. This intimacy seems more and more shared, and communities have put their trust in the private as a starting point for coming together, because can we really trust one another based on our usernames and profile pictures?

The internet as a way of life is now so ubiquitous that it has become hard to parse which of our interactions are physical and which are digital. Sometimes we use a messaging platform to agree upon a time and place to meet, and sometimes all our conversations take place online. With just a little effort, we can always push our groups to become communities. Art then becomes a space for coming together, a place for conversation and creation, or simply a space to imagine, think up projects, or consume artistic ideas.

Virtual art spaces crop up as quickly as they disappear. All of our notions of time become intelligible, and this notion is so

attractive that artists involve it in their creative processes, adapting to the new ways of putting our original concepts —time, space, affection, or even being— in tension for the purpose of artistic creation.

While technology comes and goes, it becomes hybrid, denying itself. It raises its potential as it clings to all aspects of existence, and we seek to keep up with technology as we prop up our ideas, including artistic ones. Thus, digital art and digitalized art responds to the technologies that communities appropriate. For instance, artistic communities meet virtually to write poetry, finding in the video call a space far removed from the classroom or workshop. In terms of education, this chips away at the idea that classrooms are fundamental to learning —and this departure is now a key aspect of contemporary education. Art is becoming less and less transmitted through the medium of the chalkboard. Online workshops for artistic production are becoming increasingly commonplace, while professors are finding new freedoms as well. Some people have become their own bosses, with everything that implies.

Art communities are generally self-managed, which is relevant in terms of capital. Generating resources for virtual spaces opens possibilities beyond the institutional, and fundraising can be more significant or simply more convenient for communities. When this isn't the case and artmaking finds itself in a precarious position, there's still a bright side: massive publicizing remains possible through the virtual —something that often doesn't crystalize without communications media. Virtual art spaces may focus on broadening their scope to reach more diverse spaces and people (see @iman_proyecto).

Now, in terms of collaboration, communities house a wide range of know-how that can boost communal creation. Of course, community art has also entered the screenspace, provoking interesting and urgent encounters. While this kind of art would require its own space of reflection, that is beyond the scope of this article. Yet, we might highlight the idea squatting, okupa style, in virtual spaces in order to create and forge community, politically addressing social issues and rooting our efforts in activism and art as an encouraging form of symbiosis. We must constantly shift from the individual to the relational, from the private to the public, and from the tangible to the virtual, and the other way around.

We might also speak of the social need for affection, proximity, and coming together that we've become acutely aware of ever since the COVID-19 pandemic. The urgency to come together has fed our imaginations in terms of building online communities, not only for art, but for the world. It has become a

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means of survival. Perhaps art and life aren't so different after all, which is why we now have more and more virtual spaces in which to share forms of resistance rooted in creation as we take on cultural productions in the face of threats —whether the pandemic or ever-present war. All virtual encounters produce atemporal narratives, and the small histories within History with a capital H are what configure our understanding of culture and its micropotential in reality, and these smaller histories are, of course, necessary to breaking away from the top-down nature of certain narratives (see @puntojotapg).

As to our revision of words that have become overly handled, losing meaning by the second, we might find that they dovetail new possibilities of artistic configuration. I am thinking of a virtual sphere of social encounters in which, perhaps, political artistic inclinations might coexist with the virtual without necessitating an organic, physical body. I am imagining a space in which people don't meet in person, a space in which perhaps the only thing people know about one another comes from a physical description provided by the person herself: short narratives of self-perception that configure an imaginary avatar. I am fantasizing about a community of beings who can organize and take on the project of activating artistic forms, just as weeds cling to the sidewalk, growing exponentially with no specific attention required as they tend to their own needs. I am thinking of the idea of a life project as an artform, as with Boris Groys: his is a life that doesn't aim to produce artwork or cultural objects but that documents life-in-the-project, comprising an archive of shared experience. His artwork and life are exchangeable in that his art is understood as a process and not as a result, as something that is never finished because everything is in constant flux. Perhaps the only change is the unique vessel in which art is held, the only conceptual receptacle in which such art might fit. We are experiencing the fortune of having shifted from the vessels of Ancient Greece to vessels that have been subject to intervention, to virtual ones that can hold an amalgamation of glitches, muddling everything together and forcing us to question why we are building community in a territory that must become more human, develop its gut, and shed its metallic skin. **VM**