

**SHOWING AND SHARING ON A FRIDAY NIGHT
(AFTER WORK – MORE WORK!):
REAL TIME EVENT SERIES
AND THE LOGIC OF SOCIAL SHARING**

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Uploading a photo, posting a blog entry or a comment or a list of your tastes in music, movies, people: these have become common ways of social participation. But people still like to go out in the evening, to be together in person at a show or other entertainment. We are not all “bowling alone.” Concurrent with the rise of the social web platforms are a variety of offline expressions that exhibit many of the same participatory, collaborative, user-generated dynamics, but in physical space.

Slideluck Potshow is an ongoing event series which combines a potluck meal with a slideshow of photographic work. It started in 2000 in Seattle and in early installments, when the event was relatively small, participants brought a home-cooked dish and slides of their images and then the meal and the show were both served up on-the-fly. Now it takes place in large loft spaces for crowds in the hundreds. It has become popular as an industry event where photographers can get noticed by creative directors and photo editors. There have been installments of the series mounted in metropolitan centers around the world.

Pecha Kucha is an event format in which presenters, usually architects, designers or others in the creative professions, work within a set constraint of 20 slides and a 6 minute 40 second

time limit (20 slides displayed for 20 seconds each). Fourteen short presentations per evening allows for a variety of topics and approaches. The first Pecha Kucha was held in Tokyo in 2003 and the event has caught on around the world. The enforced brevity of the format encourages presenters to be concise, and it also takes some of the pain out of a presentation that misses the mark. Stella Buchan-Ioannou of London Architecture Biennale who organized a London installment said, “I’ve got friends who hate architecture and design but love Pecha Kucha. It’s just great entertainment. It’s really informal and, even if people mess it up or someone’s boring, it doesn’t matter because you just wait for the next person.” (qtd. in “Case Study”) One of the initiators of the format, Tokyo-based architect Mark Dytham, has described the intimacy of the Pecha Kucha events as “like the Internet in reverse.” (qtd. in Snow)

dorkbot was started in New York City in 2000 by Douglas Repetto of Columbia University's Computer Music Center. dorkbot events usually consist of three short presentations and time for question-and-answer or discussion. But, in contrast to Pecha Kucha, dorkbot is less defined by its presentation format and more defined by its focus on the creative exploration of technology, such as hardware hacking, robotics and software-based art. The motto of dorkbot is “people doing strange things with electricity.” There are dozens of dorkbot groups active around the world.

Other examples of such series include Ask Later, a series in London that uses the Pecha Kucha presentation format with a focus on technology, and Ignite Seattle, “a geek event that combines on-site geekery, sharing, and innovation (and drinking),” (“Ignite Seattle!”) in which presenters show 20 slides for 15 seconds each. While not codified as a series, or a strict presentational format, the term Lightning Talks is used to refer to programs of very short talks,

usually as a component of a technical conference for computer programmers. Along related lines, a participant-driven innovation to the standard conference format is the unconference model in which topics and presentations are organized by participants once gathered at the site.

All these event series bring people together in real space but exhibit the logic of participation and collective creation that we are familiar with from the social web. These events emphasize sharing and showing. They aggregate a variety of contributions from many participants, rather than presenting a “feature length” work. Like the social web media platforms, they favor brevity, variety and informality. They also offer the potential for communities of practice to develop. And to some degree they are collectively constituted – with the roles of audience member and presenters being fluid. Further, each of these event series operates as a kind of software – a branded forum that can be run or instantiated in many locations.

While the dynamics of interaction echo online participation, the rules of the presentation formats work as a sort of branded social software for running an event. These event series are international networks but each individual manifestation is (usually) locally constituted and run. As with, for example, the Wordpress blog engine, that supports online publishing and commenting, the software for these events can be easily downloaded. Installing it in your locale and developing a community around it may be trickier.

Like the social web itself we should see these events in relationship to the current organization of labor. As Lazzaroto notes, in the paradigm of immaterial labor, boundaries between work time and leisure time and the boundaries between work activities and leisure activities become blurred and “life becomes inseparable from work.” (Lazzaroto) The flexible, “immaterial laborer,” is engaged in “polymorphous self-employed autonomous

work” (Lazzaroto) - typified by temp jobs and freelance assignments. In this paradigm the relative security of waged labor is eroded by a system in which each worker becomes a sort of “entrepreneur, inserted within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks that are changeable in time and space.” (Lazzaroto)

For the knowledge worker, the form of the events echoes the world of work. The events are based around the conventions and tools of business presentations, product pitches or client meetings: a projector, a screen and a set of Powerpoint or Keynote slides. Presenters demonstrate their work-in-progress, or a side-project or they pitch their portfolio. They may present their professional, client-driven work, or the work they fit into their un-billable hours. Although presenting looks like work, relates to work, and may lead to work, this is not meant to be understood *as* work. Presenters do not get paid. This is supposed to be fun. The Creative Entrepreneurs Club which hosts a Pecha Kucha Night in Glasgow promotes it as a “down-time event.” (“The Lighthouse - Membership”)

For the creative industries professional this quasi-work is the unpaid labor that is required of precarious workers – part-timers, freelancers, contingent employees – to maintain their currency. It is a facet of what Virno calls *hidden labor* - “the part of human activity which, alike in every respect to the activity of labor, is not, however, calculated as productive force.” (Virno 103) For the worker these events represent opportunities for continuing self-education. They allow presenters and attendees to make and re-affirm social/business contacts and immerse themselves in the culture of their field.

But not all participants in these events have the designation of being professionals. These are “down-time events,” outside the structure of the firm. As such they can break down

divisions between professionals and amateurs, between the employed and the need-to-be-employed, and between the credentialed experts and the students, hobbyists, tinkerers and enthusiasts. The informality of the events allows for exchange, either through built-in question and answer segments or after the program, depending on the format of the event. The bar to participation for presenters – for instance, convincing the organizer that you are capable of a short but compelling presentation – is relatively low.

There are certainly internet forums on seemingly any conceivable profession, hobby or other interest that also level professional hierarchies and foster exchange and mentoring between participants. Clay Shirky, (drawing on Etienne Wenger) discusses these in terms of communities of practice - “people who converse about some shared activity in order to get better at it.” (Shirky 100) But these events - Pecha Kucha, Dorkbot, etc - take place in real space and are locally organized. This is significant because it responds to the delocalization of production and resituates the networked individual in his or her local community.

For workers engaged in information processes, production has become significantly delocalized. Messages and files are sent over the network or work takes place through shared software services accessible from any internet connection. With a laptop and a mobile phone the knowledge worker may not need to go in to work (but, conversely, may not be able to leave work behind). Work is performed from the office, the home and while traveling. As Hardt and Negri note, “the network of laboring cooperation requires no territorial or physical center.” (Hardt and Negri 295)

In contrast to this paradigm of delocalization of labor, these events are specifically manifested in localities, reflecting a desire to create local face-to-face communities of practice.

Despite the richness and variety of online communities, the network is not enough. Repetto describes the origins of dorkbot as simply the desire to get together with others working in the same general field: “I ... had this idea that it would be fun to just sort of send out a blanket call to say, 'Hey, if you're doing neat stuff, I'd like to, you know, hang out with you.’” (qtd. in Metz)

Whereas workers at a firm with a centralized location where work is produced have opportunities for face-to-face exchanges, peer group formation and informal mentoring, workers in the delocalized economy may find themselves both networked and isolated. Although traditional professional organizations can provide a forum for such activities, in the current economy professional affiliations are fluid. In a field of atomized, autonomous workers, working sometimes from home, sometimes from an office, sometimes highly paid, sometimes not paid at all, the boundaries between the professional, the under-employed and the amateur enthusiast are blurred. These events then provide a support system for communities self-defined by work, but not defined by work performed for a wage.

To be clear, I see nothing explicitly oppositional in the formulations of the event series I have focused on. To the contrary, these event series work as a social support system for enabling the flexible - and exploitative - labor conditions required of knowledge workers. Bringing work outside of work at first looks like a disaster for the worker. This is the “social time [that] seems to have come unhinged because there is no longer anything which distinguishes labor from the rest of human activities.” (Virno) But the fact that these events look like work, smell like work and act like work without actually being subject to the control of capital opens up possibility.

The open question is, how do you organize atomized, autonomous, flexible labor? While these events function as another extension of work into leisure time, they also suggest something

more. These event series respond to (and through) the networked condition. They bring the fluidity, aggregated contributions of a collective, low barriers to engagement, and informality we are familiar with from online social participation into real space. They hold out the possibility - at least - for the formation of locally-constituted, internationally networked groups that break down divisions between professionals and amateurs, between the employed and the need-to-be-employed, and between the credentialed experts and the hobbyists, tinkerers and enthusiasts.

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