

## 7 Artistic Expression in the Age of Participatory Culture *How and Why Young People Create*

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### Introduction

Chloe, a seventeen-year-old girl living in western Massachusetts, has taken on the responsibility of translating the lyrics of her favorite Japanese rock songs and making them available on the Web.<sup>1</sup> Chloe, a tall thin girl with long, dirty-blond hair, enjoys cosplay, that is, creating costumes based on characters from her favorite anime series or J-rock bands, dressing up and often performing these roles in public. Young people in Tokyo and across Japan gather on Sunday afternoons in the local parks, parading their costumes and connecting with other young fans.<sup>2</sup> Their images and personal narratives flow across the World Wide Web, and young people like Chloe feel an emotional link to these Japanese fans through their mutual interests in media properties and their



shared participation in the same cultural practices. She interacts with local cosplay kids through science fiction conventions, and she shares images of her costumes via the Web.<sup>3</sup>

Chloe has been inspired by her participation in cosplay to learn more about Japan. Frustrated by the limits of her own high school, she now takes Japanese conversation classes at Smith College. She can speak at length about traditional Japanese poetry and fiction. While discussing how the lead singer of her favorite band, *Dir en grey* (who happens to be male), often writes from a female point of view, she muses on the literary implications. "They'll often write from a female perspective because a lot of the great Japanese authors are female. I don't know if you know too much about Japanese literature, but Murasaki Shikibu was the author of the first recorded novel, *Tale of Genji*, *Genji Monogatari*. Yes, she's a woman."<sup>4</sup> Chloe's knowledge and passion for all things Japanese is truly impressive: She has moved outward from her initial interest in popular culture to embrace traditional literary and artistic practices. She has in the process moved from being a consumer to an active participant, shaping the flow of these materials and educating other Westerners about Japanese culture.

This chapter offers glimpses into the art worlds of Chloe and six other young people, ages thirteen to twenty-eight. This chapter refers throughout to a series of interviews—conducted face to face, with video, and over instant messaging, e-mail, and phone—with seven young artists. Besides Chloe, we talked with Josh Meeter, a *Star Wars* fan and animator; TheSidDog, a gamer and machinima maker; Ariel, an independent comics creator; Ed, a musician and composer; Petey, a multimedia artist; and Antonia, a costumer and performance artist.<sup>5</sup> The question of whether or not these young people are, in fact, artists is an interesting one. Let us leave aside for the moment whether making media is the same thing as making art. At one time, Western culture would have drawn a sharp line between amateurs and professionals and would have reserved the word *artist* for someone who produced art—if not for a living than as a significant part of their lives. We have all met waiters at local coffee houses who claimed to be poets even though they had not yet written a poem, or we have heard a cab driver grumble, "What I really want to do is direct." In fact, these young people are already doing what they want to do. Today, these distinctions between amateur and professional, hobbyist and artist are blurring:



These young people are getting their work in front of a public at a much earlier age, are developing reputations within a larger community, and are defining their identities to no small degree through what they create. The young people interviewed for this study were at various stages of development—some, such as Ariel, are already veterans with national reputations, whereas others are just at the very beginnings of their journeys—yet all of them would see making media (and, perhaps, making art) as a vital part of their lives.

What these young artists have accomplished is impressive, all the more so because few of these activities took place in schools. Indeed, many of these kids have had frustrating experiences in school: Some are home schooled; some have dropped out; and others chose to graduate early to have more time to pursue their dreams. They developed much of their skill and knowledge through their participation in the informal learning communities of fans and gamers. School, if anything, served as a stage for subversive acts, such as Antonia cosplaying *Harry Potter* school uniforms at a public school, and Ariel passing around mini-comics about coming out as a lesbian. These young artists exploited a range of new media tools to do their work and tapped large-scale networks to help circulate and publicize what they had done. They operate outside traditional arts institutions. They have not been sanctioned by the critical establishment.

In any given period there are exceptional individuals who break all the rules and enjoy off-the-chart success. But these kids are perhaps less exceptional than one might at first imagine. According to a 2005 study conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, more than half of all American teens—and 57 percent of teens who use the Internet—could be considered media creators.<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of the Pew study, a media creator was defined as someone who “created a blog or webpage, posted original artwork, photography, stories or videos online or remixed online content into their own new creations” (p. 1). Most have done two or more of these activities. Thirty-three percent of teens share what they create online with others. Twenty-two percent have their own home pages. Nineteen percent blog, and 19 percent remix content they found online.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, these activities are not restricted to white suburban males. In fact, urban kids (40 percent) are somewhat more likely than their suburban (28 percent) or rural (38 percent) coun-



terparts to be media creators. Older girls (27 percent) are more likely than boys their age (17 percent) to be involved with blogging or other social activities online. The Pew researchers did not find significant differences in terms of race.

If anything, the Pew study underestimates the number of American young people who are embracing the new participatory culture. The Pew study did not consider newer forms of expression such as podcasting, game modding, or machinima; they also did not count other forms of creative expression and appropriation (e.g., music sampling in the hip-hop community) that are highly technological but that use other tools and tap other networks for their production and distribution.<sup>7</sup> The study does not account for even more widespread practices (e.g., computer or video gaming) that may require a great deal of time and effort focused on constructing and performing fictional personas.

What this chapter describes is a new participatory culture. A participatory culture might be defined as one where there are relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, where there is strong support for creating and sharing what one create with others, and where there is some kind of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. It is also a culture where members feel that their contributions matter and where they feel some degree of social connection with each other at least to the degree to which they care what other people think about what they have created. Not every member needs to contribute, but all need to feel that they are free to contribute when they are ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued. In such a world, many will only dabble, some will dig deeper, and still others will master the skills that are most valued within the community. But the community itself provides strong incentives for creative expression and active participation.

What this chapter refers to as participatory culture has a long history.<sup>8</sup> What is different now? For one thing, there are now channels of distribution that make it possible for young people to circulate what they make more readily. These amateur works move along similar and often, identical circuits as commercially produced works. Amateur media makers may reach publics at least as large as those who embrace the avant-garde artists typically celebrated by arts institutions. Home movies were once shown in the home; now they can be downloaded and watched by thousands, even millions, of people on the Web.<sup>9</sup> As these



art works become more visible, they provide models for other young artists who are similarly inspired to make media. These communities exchange advice and offer critiques. The result is grassroots creativity operating on a scope and scale that would have been unimaginable at earlier moments.

These experiences may be reshaping what is meant by art and by participation in the twenty-first century. Much of this volume's discussion has defined participation in terms of attending concerts or museums, that is, as a form of consumption. But the new media landscape has broadened access to tools for media production, and thus participation may now include involvement in the development and circulation of grassroots media. In such a world, art is integrated into people's everyday lives and is not necessarily a special event like a concert or sanctified space such as a museum or opera house. Arts educators and museum curators often see themselves as being at war with popular culture for the hearts and minds of their students. Yet it is quite the opposite. Popular culture motivates students to do research, read, write, learn, and create. Young people are not disconnecting from the arts; they are connecting to art in new and unpredicted ways. The hope in this chapter is to help arts policy makers and institutions better understand the implications of these new forms of participatory culture to interact with their publics. Arts institutions cannot rely on tried and true methods to connect with these young people; they need to understand the worlds within which these young artists create and consume media.

Unlike many of the other chapters in this book, the approach here is qualitative and not quantitative. Interviews with young artists are used to map a still emerging set of cultural practices and to understand what they mean for the people involved. The recent Pew study previously cited provides some benchmarks: Everything learned so far suggests that these trends are impacting a sizable percentage of people of high school and college age. These cultural practices are so new that they have not yet registered on the radar of quantitative social scientists; there are only fragmented data that might allow us to measure how widespread they are across this age cohort. There are no longitudinal studies to show how long young people are likely to participate in these creative communities or how their participation may shape their attitudes and relations to the arts as they become adults. The hope for this chapter is that it will provoke researchers to reframe how they define



participation in the arts and to explore more fully the implications of this new participatory culture.

### Rethinking Participation

More young people are producing media than ever before, yet policy makers complain about a lack of participation in the arts. What is wrong with this picture? Historically, arts policy makers and scholars have defined participation in terms of attending so-called high art concerts or museums. Currently, there is a growing concern that members of the younger generation do not seem to have much interest in these forms. This chapter argues something different: Youth are very interested in participating, just not necessarily in the arts as they have been traditionally defined. This is not to say that today's young people do not respect artists who have devoted their lives to becoming masters or that over time they may not emerge as active audiences for traditional arts events. Often, young people come away with a new appreciation of such works once they have had a chance to make their own media. They do object to the mystification of art—to an attitude that demands quiet contemplation and distanced admiration. The culture in the United States is moving away from a world where a few gifted artists produced works that would be consumed and admired by many to a world where many are producing works that can be circulated among smaller niche publics. Art institutions need to keep up with these changes or they will be left behind.

Think of a youth on a field trip being told to sit quietly to a symphony to which they have no personal connection. They sit, distracted, squirming in their seats, glancing about the room. Asked to share their impressions, they shrug defensively. Now think of a youth playing a computer game. Listen to the passion with which they contrast different works in the same genre or talk about what constitutes good and bad work within a still emerging genre. Indeed, listen to them debate among themselves whether or not games can or should be considered art. Listen to their pride when they show each other their own efforts to adapt games to tell their own stories—the scrapbooks of images they have captured of their own game play, their efforts to modify the game



levels or create new “skins” of the game character, their first attempts to create short animated films using the games engine as a platform.

These young people are passionate about emerging forms of expression, which allow no fixed hierarchy, no standardized criteria for evaluation, and little inherited canon. They are dubious about being told what artworks matter. They have grown up in a world where tools for media making have been widely available: Why should they sit and watch when they can roll up their sleeves and make something? They are entering spaces where there are no established masters and where it is possible to grab some spotlight for themselves—if the community values what they make.

These young people have a seemingly unprecedented access to the means of cultural production and distribution. They are driven to express themselves and to share those expressions with the world, and they are learning how to tap networks to get their work in front of the public at surprisingly young ages. Take, for example, Ariel Schrag, a twenty-something woman with dark, cropped hair, who grew up in the San Francisco Bay area. Ariel used the medium of underground comics to come out as a lesbian to her high school audience. Ariel was talented and persistent enough to get the attention of Slave Labor Graphics. The publishing company first released Ariel’s comic books while she was still in high school. Her books, *Awkward*, *Potential*, and *Definition*, have been distributed in comic book shops around the world and are, in turn, inspiring another generation of young people to create and distribute their own autobiographical comics.<sup>10</sup> How did she do it? As she puts it, “You’ve gotta schmooze schmooze schmooze!” Her hobby took her places she never would have anticipated: “I started this project that completely took over my entire life and I’ve never been the same. I mean no one is ever the same after high school, but for me it was this really specific thing where the entire focus of my life changed. I sort of look at it and every single thing in my life relates back to the comic in some way.” Today, Schrag is a professional comic book artist—if such a thing is possible in a world where relatively few comic book creators earn enough to support themselves from their work. Indeed, Schrag is going into classrooms to instruct young people how to make compelling work and get noticed.

We might think of the emergence of this do-it-yourself aesthetic as a revitalization of folk culture. As scholars have long noted, folk art was



participatory: Many people would participate in square dances, sing-alongs, or quilting bees who would never regard themselves to be professional artists. They learned from each other, and much of what they made became community property. The twentieth century's efforts to industrialize and professionalize artistic production could be viewed as a strange chapter in the history of creativity. In the future, the arts may once again be more participatory, but the traditional high arts will have to operate alongside and often in dialogue with modern mass culture. At the same time, the mass media is being forced to become more responsive to audience demands for greater participation. As anthropologist and consultant Grant McCracken (1997) explained, "Corporations will allow the public to participate in the construction and representation of its creations or they will, eventually, compromise the commercial value of their properties. The new consumers will help create value or they will refuse it" (p. 34). The same could be said for art institutions.

Ironically, despite all of the publicity about law suits against young downloaders, the commercial sector may be more welcoming to young media makers than most art institutions. This is especially true of new media concerns, such as games publishers, who have come to accept audience participation as a central aspect of their business plan. Games might have once been talked about as interactive media; today, games are going further, embracing what industry commentator Tim O'Reilly (2005, p. 2) likes to call "an architecture of participation." Less and less game content is coming from commercial designers—more and more from consumers. Top-selling games are often valued as much for the design tools they provide to users as for the actual games themselves. In addition, movements have emerged around amateur filmmaking projects that make use of the digital assets created for games.

Peter, a homeschooled, California teen who goes by *TheSidDog* online, creates machinima clips using the movie-making software packaged with *The Sims 2*, the bestselling computer game of all time. Machinima turns game engines into a platform for the generation of computer animation in real time.<sup>11</sup> Machinima is close to puppetry, where players are able to use their control over the game characters to improvise scenarios. In this case, players do not directly control the Sims characters: They make suggestions, which influence but do not determine how the Sims behave. The Sims are actually controlled by a structured set of priorities, sometimes responding promptly, sometimes refusing to obey.



TheSidDog works around these constraints. As he explains, “Unlike human and CG actors, Sims don’t know they’re in a movie so to speak, so the trick is getting them to interact with their peers and shoot at the right second. Really, the camera is just there to record. There is no mode to get them to follow your commands exactly as you want. One could be recording the perfect scene only to have his/her Sim pee on the floor at the last second, killing that perfect shot .... Think of shooting Sims like shooting animals—they have no idea they’re on the camera.” TheSidDog has taught himself how to stage performances, to edit his footage, and to choose musical tracks to express his own perspective. In one of his pieces, a Sims character appears in an eerie white space, with an ominous soundtrack. TheSidDog shows him reading a Sims newspaper. Miming the characteristic anguished gestures of an upset Sims character, TheSidDog’s figure undergoes a tongue-in-cheek existential crisis as he reads the headline that he has been deleted from the game.

People are so used to thinking of these young artists as trespassers on other people’s intellectual property that it may be surprising to learn that the legitimate rights owners in this case actively encourage this use of their materials. TheSidDog posts his movies on a fan site owned by Electronic Arts, *The Sims*’s parent company; the company’s head designer, Will Wright, recommended TheSidDog to us, having identified him through one of the contests for amateur filmmakers that the company sponsors. Wright intentionally creates computer games that invite the user to generate original content. Wright predicts that ultimately more than half of the game content will come from amateurs rather than from his commercial team. As Wright explained, “We are competing with other properties for these creative individuals .... Whichever game attracts the best community will enjoy the most success.”<sup>12</sup> Wright’s embrace of user-generated content gives Electronic Arts a competitive advantage over other games companies. The Sims model also works to the company’s advantage: User-generated content begets more users. Some argue it is the key to the record-breaking success of *The Sims* franchise. This push to give consumers the tools to make their own games is spreading across the games industry.



### Redefining Art

Again, it should be asked what is wrong with this picture: Media companies—not all of them certainly but many of them—are embracing young artists, celebrating their ability to use their tools and resources to create new works, whereas many art institutions and policy makers are looking down their noses at what these young people are creating and then wondering why they are not showing up for their docent tours. Just as it is necessary to reconsider what is meant by participation, it is necessary to rethink what is meant by art. As TheSidDog says, “Games have been used since the start of mankind as a way to learn and grow—games like *The Sims* ... are also doing that. They inspire, they provoke thought, they have meaning and thus are art.” This sounds like a pretty good definition of art to us.

The idea of artistic originality has become much more complicated. In the fine arts as well as the popular arts, remixing has emerged as a significant aspect of creative expression—in part because of cheap and accessible digital tools and in part because of the emergence of a post-modern aesthetic that values appropriation and transformations of previously circulated materials. Journalists talk about the Napster generation, and corporations blame young people for piracy and illegal downloads of other people’s music. Yet they have also already emerged as a generation of media makers. For example, take a look at *Young Composers*, a website that uses MP3 technologies to allow young musicians to share their own compositions and get feedback from their peers.<sup>13</sup> Websites for fan fiction—original stories written about characters drawn from popular media—may include thousands of works, many of them by teen authors.<sup>14</sup>

In some cases, young artists are making media from scratch. In other cases, they are producing media that appropriates and transforms existing media content. These kinds of appropriation should not be understood simply as plagiarism. Appropriation involves a complex negotiation between the self and the larger culture—an absorption and transformation of shared resources into the raw materials of one’s own collective and personal expression. The digital remixing of media content makes visible the degree to which all cultural expression builds on what has come before. Many of the forms of expression that are most important to American youth accent this sampling and remixing pro-



cess, in part because digitization makes it much easier to combine and repurpose media content than ever before. Jazz, for example, evolved through improvisation around familiar themes and standard songs, yet the digital remixing of actual sounds that occurs in techno or hip-hop music has raised much greater alarm among those who would insist on strong protections of copyright.

Fourteen-year-old Antonia takes cosplay, a form of media appropriation, a bit further: She wears a different look to school every day. She is growing up in a reenacting household; her family engages regularly in vintage dance, civil war reenacting, and other activities that involve sewing reproductions of antique clothing. Her love for the *Harry Potter* books led to a major Hogwarts phase. For an entire year, she wore British school uniforms to her Massachusetts public school. Now Antonia reads the webcomic *Megatokyo* and uses its imagery for her patterns.<sup>15</sup> Though she has become more active in meeting people with common interests online and at conventions, her main outlet is high school. Antonia finds the jeers and dirty looks of her classmates amusing and enjoys playing with people's expectations in an environment that often defines people through their external appearances. Because of her level of self-reflection, one could see her activity as performance art. Though her costumes mark her as strange at her school, they also represent her membership in a subcultural community—one that expands beyond the local community or even national boundaries. This process of self-fashioning starts with a phase of research. Antonia goes online to learn more about periods, genres, or media properties that she wants to emulate through her work. She wants to master every detail of these imaginary worlds, and as she does so, she moves from the specific details—the colors of a herald, the buttons on a coat, the Japanese droopy socks—toward a larger understanding of the cultural traditions that shaped those details.

Many adults worry that these kids are copying preexisting media content rather than creating their own original works. This is the wrong way to think about what is going on here. Their appropriations from commercial media are a kind of apprenticeship phase. They learn what they can from the stories and images that are most familiar to them—just as previous generations of artists and storytellers sought inspiration from the Bible or from folk traditions. Building their first efforts on existing cultural materials allows them to focus their energies on



mastering their craft, perfecting their skills, and communicating their ideas. We often mystify the process of creation—focusing on the act of original invention and personal expression while denying the degree to which all art builds on what has come before. The 2005 Pew study suggests something more: Young people who create and circulate their own media are more apt to respect the intellectual property rights of others because they feel a greater stake in the cultural economy.

People often want to know how much of the work these young people are generating is any good, and the answer is more than we might think. For one thing, young creative artists are exploring new modes of expression: digital cinema, machinima, claymation, and self-fashioning as performance art, mashups, and webzines.<sup>16</sup> As with any emerging artistic practice, much of the work is experimental, and many experiments fail. Yet there is something engaging about watching people transforming emerging technologies into tools for artistic expression and about the emergence of new communities of artists and supporters who are developing new standards for evaluating works that do not fit comfortably into existing artistic categories. In addition to online message boards and other feedback forums, online communities often convene offline at conventions, concerts, or events where a community of peers holds contests, teaches workshops, and appraises each other's work. On the other hand, asking if any of this stuff is good may be wrong-headed. When discussing teaching young people how to write poetry or make pottery, creativity is emphasized as a process; the question of what percentage of them go on to become professional poets or potters is not asked. We should think in the same ways about youth creativity in the new media environment.

Rather than trying to evaluate new media by old standards, the focus should be more on what it means to live in a world where a large number of people—including many young people—have access to new tools for expressing themselves, new distribution channels to share what they have made with others, and new publics ready to appreciate and respond to their art. For example, Ed recorded an entire original album on his Mac computer in his bedroom in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where we interviewed him. "This is where I do all recording, in this room. I tend to use almost anything I can find in here. Like one of the first songs I ever did I used a belt buckle and a glass ashtray and made just like a clinking sound. My mom is an elementary school music teacher so she gave me children's instruments, like a recorder and little sand-blocks



you scrape together to make percussion sounds .... I use those, and for a couple songs I made a noise off my desk,” Ed says as he bangs on his desk. “I used that and sampled it to create some sort of percussion type thing .... I do love using my computer.” Ed uses the simple setup of a microphone attached to his Mac running an audio editing program called ProTools.<sup>17</sup> By circulating MP3s with his iPod and on the Web, he eventually got signed and has now toured the United States under the band name Grizzly Bear.<sup>18</sup>

In this chapter this type of activity is called *grassroots convergence*.<sup>19</sup> Right now, the media industries are embracing convergence as a way of expanding the potential market for their properties. In this culture, any significant story, sound, image, brand, or relationship will play itself across the maximum possible range of media. Right now, convergence is being shaped by decisions being made in corporate boardrooms as media conglomerates demonstrate their mastery over all different kinds of distribution channels. But convergence is also taking shape through decisions being made in teenagers’ bedrooms. Young people are demanding the right to access the media they want, when and where they want it. Simultaneously, these young people assert their ability to transmit the media they have made across a range of different distribution channels. A commercial song might spread from a concert performance to an album to a music video to a film soundtrack to an advertisement, gaining new listeners and acquiring new meanings along the way. An amateur song, at the same time, might move from a friend’s computer into a podcast, might surface on someone’s entry on MySpace, Friendster, or another social software, might get downloaded through peer-to-peer technology, and, as in the case of Grizzly Bear, might find its way into the hands of a recording industry executive. The flow of media does not simply gush forth as a river but flows in many different interconnecting tributaries and estuaries.

Some of these youth see themselves as future participants in commercial media, some as entering the world of high art, and some will no doubt remain amateurs. Regardless, the lines between these spheres of cultural production are breaking down. In such a world, making, consuming, and sharing media is integrated into people’s everyday lives and not necessarily always set apart as a special event, with a definite time and place. Take, for example, Petey—a quirky thirteen-year-old artist whose website hosts a variety of his creations: flash-animated shorts,



comics, writings, games, original and remixed music.<sup>20</sup> Much of his fan base springs from *The Best Show with Tom Scharpling*, which airs on WFMU, a listener-supported, free-form radio station in East Orange, New Jersey.<sup>21</sup> “A year after the Tom Scharpling show started on WFMU I started calling up and I was kind of a jerk back then. I was kind of a prank caller back then and Tom used to hate me. But eventually we became friends and I started helping out on the show and entering contests and stuff. I became a frequent caller and do skits on the air sometimes.” During Petey’s average day, he might post a new flash animation to his website, e-mail online with fans of his website and other artists, and call into the WFMU radio show on which he has become a regular personality. In this way, his various activities support each other: He makes media because he can. He shares media because other people seem to like what he makes.

### Redesigning Art Worlds

James Paul Gee (2004) used the term *affinity spaces* to refer to the new creative and learning communities that have emerged online. He argued that such communities often function more effectively than formal education in supporting the growth and development of their participants. For one thing, they consist of artists at different stages of development so that each individual can learn from others in their affinity space and at the same time; each can pass along what they know to those in need. Such affiliations surface often in the stories we heard from young artists: One way that young people have been able to break out of their bedrooms has been by networking within art worlds. For example, Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>), the socially networked photo sharing website, extends and connects a global virtual community of amateur photographers. These art worlds expose young people to other amateur works. They provide encouragement for them to produce their own works, a context for them to share those works with others, and feedback that helps these artists grow and develop.

Many such transactions occur in digital space: Young people can reach out and connect with others who share their interests around the world. Chloe, the young fan of Japanese rock music and anime, follows her interests across cyberspace, learning about groups and artists whose



work might be obscure even in a Japanese context. But she also gathers together with like-minded people in physical spaces, such as science fiction conventions at local hotels: "The biggest payoff of cosplay is to go to the conventions where there are other people who know who you are dressed as and can appreciate your effort. At the first convention I ever went to, I must have had fifty people take my picture and at least ten of them came up and hugged me. It's almost like whoever you dress up as, you become that person for a day .... People put the pictures up on their websites after the con. So after a con, you can search for pictures of yourself and if you are lucky, you will find five or ten." At the conventions, she can compare notes with others who share her investment in cosplay; she can learn new techniques, discover new inspirations, and meet new people. She gets recognition for what she has accomplished. Impressions of these face-to-face contacts spread back to the Web, where her work draws attention from an even larger community of fellow fans. Rather than focusing only on what we can do to get young people to support existing arts institutions, maybe policy makers need spend more time thinking about what they can do to support affinity spaces and how real-life and virtual spaces interconnect. Maybe they should stop thinking in terms of archives and start thinking in terms of networks.

The idea that information wants to be free has been a recurring refrain among digital revolutionaries. Maybe the same thing can be said about art: No longer locked up in museums and galleries, art, like information, flows across networks, passing from one person to another at the click of a mouse. Young people take pride in their roles as tastemakers and influencers. They love to straddle between different creative communities and to facilitate the circulation of amateur work from one public to another. For the past several decades, media scholars have written about the cultural productivity of fan cultures, celebrating the ways that they turn mass culture back into participatory culture. Fans tap existing media texts for raw materials that they can remake to serve their own fantasies, as resources for their own artistic production. Fans, we are told, create stories, make videos, construct costumes, stage performances, and compose songs, which speak to their relationship to the content of mass media. Yet for all of the glee with which we have written about these new forms of grassroots cultural production, fan researchers missed a big part of the story. In the old days, fan communities, for example, existed to signal their support for commercial media proper-



ties. Increasingly, young people are seeking out fan communities because they represent the best networks for getting their own works seen.

Take Josh Meeter, an earnest, driven, and aspiring young film director. In his last year of high school in Nevada, he made a claymation piece, *The Award Showdown* (2000).<sup>22</sup> It spoofs the many films of Meeter's favorite directors, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. As he explains, "I'm going out there as a filmmaker, nobody knows who I am. There are so many people who want to make movies and get out there. It's really hard to make a short film and get a whole lot of people to actually see it and like it. It's challenging to be able to draw people in. So I figured if I took Spielberg and Lucas, people are already familiar with them, know their history, where they came from and what films they've made, you know *Star Wars*, *Jaws*, *E.T.* ...." Josh is a fan himself, and so for him it was natural to make a movie starring his favorite directors. But he also knew that there would be people out there who wanted to see a film on this topic. Meeter negotiated with composer John Williams for the rights to use excerpts from his film scores. He networked and was able to get the film seen by Stephen Spielberg, and ultimately it was featured on a DreamWorks-owned website:

I was searching through movie websites and I found Counting-down.com. .... They were hosting a webcam on the set of *AI*. I think it was in the canteen area, where you could talk with the stars. They could come up and chat with the fans. I thought, "Oh this is pretty cool." I just started getting on the message boards there and spreading the word about my movie. It was already online so people could access it. That's the really cool thing about the Web. I just started posting a bunch of messages. I was pretty annoying—"Look, it's pretty cool! Just go see it!" I was asking for Spielberg to see it .... The next morning I woke up and checked my e-mail and "Congratulations! Stephen Spielberg saw your film and he wants to recompress it and put it on his website."

This story no doubt underscores the role of luck involved in reaching the upper echelons of Hollywood, but it also demonstrates the degree to which youth are able to navigate the maze of transmedia tributaries. At last count, there were more than 400 amateur *Star Wars* films in circulation on the Web, many of them made by high school or college



students, who see this as a chance to rehearse and perfect skills that will be applied in subsequent productions.<sup>23</sup>

One of the first skills these young artists master is how to target an audience. They are pushing the limits of technology to get their work out there, but at the same time they tap into combinations of virtual and real-life social networks. Josh pointedly went for the Lucas-Spielberg fan base. Ariel felt that distributing her art face to face is a meaningful stage for young artists to go through. Ed brought his iPod around and burned CDs of his music until he got a record deal, and TheSid-Dog used *The Sims* contest promotion to draw attention to his animation. Such strategies work because more people are responding to amateur media makers. Spielberg and DreamWorks were willing to put *The Award Showdown* on their website. Will Wright and Maxis are committed to building up their market by empowering fans. The record company executive was willing to listen to Grizzly Bear's demos, and Slave Labor Graphics was willing to publish and distribute Ariel's work. In that sense, the shifts are not simply technological (i.e., new networks for distribution) but also cultural (i.e., a new openness to do-it-yourself media and grassroots expression).

### Reconsidering the Digital

Digital media have a role to play in every story recounted here—sometimes a positive role, sometimes a more ambiguous one—but what these young artists create cannot be reduced to is digital culture. In many cases they are reacting against this preoccupation with the digital and seeking to return organic materials and processes to the center of their artistic expression. Chloe may seek inspiration for her costumes by surfing the Web, but in the end, she admires people who can sew their own clothes and even make their own buttons. Ed must reverse engineer his computer music to be played before a live audience, and Petey's audience for his website and flash animations grew out of his participation in a live, local show at WFMU. Ariel Schrag has little use for a purely digital culture, dismissing blogs as making it too easy to throw up half-processed work without regard to audience expectation. Her advice to young women interested in making comics is to try self-publishing and selling their comics face to face, hand to hand, "because



there's something about that mode of self-promotion and getting-it-out-there that I think is a really important part of the whole process. It's a really great experience because you're connecting with your fans. The whole point of writing anything is to connect with people .... There's always this drive to get it published, which obviously in my experience after a while is important because you want more people to read it, but I think you don't want to skip over this phase of actually selling your own work."<sup>24</sup>

At every step along the way—from research to production to distribution to community—a high degree of hybridity has been observed. These artists pull from all available resources, use all available tools, and get their work in front of targeted audiences, both online and offline. Their talents start with being able to organize clusters of information, to draw inspiration across various media, and to translate what they learn into their chosen medium. New media mean more options, thus more decisions, more boundaries to play with. There is a push and pull between high-tech and lo-fi modes of production wherein young artists struggle to formulate and articulate their own philosophies.<sup>25</sup> Josh wants his art to look clean and professional more than anything else. Ariel gripes about how the color—as opposed to black-and-white—cover of her first published comic connotes professionalized editorial distancing. Ed loves his computer and yet doesn't want it on stage when performing because he does not want "that laptop image." Most of the young artists see production as a process through which they learn skills and come to a sharper understanding of their subject. Yet the emergence of new media forms presents more challenges in negotiating the meaning of such new modes of expression.

### Remaking Art Institutions

After reading these stories of how young artists are learning how to make and distribute art on their own, outside of formal classes, without help from arts institutions, policy makers may wonder what, if anything, young people need from established artists and curators. Consider two key roles they might play: (1) as mentors helping young people master professional ethics and navigate the risks of breaking into the art world; and (2) as enablers ensuring that all young people have access



to the skills and experiences needed to be full participants in this new realm of cultural production.

In Fischman et al. (2004) discussed how young journalists learn about the ethical norms which will define their future professional practice. They acquired their skills most often by writing for high school newspapers. For the most part, the authors suggest, student journalists worked in highly cohesive and insulated settings. Their work was supervised—for better or worse—by a range of adult authorities, some interested in promoting the qualities of good journalism, and some concerned with protecting the reputation of the school community. Their work was free of commercial constraints and sheltered from outside exposure. The ethical norms and professional practices they acquired were well understood by the adults around them. This might be broadened to consider the role of school plays, literary magazines, band concerts, and art exhibits in shaping the development of young artists, all of which operate according to similar principles. Historically, local art institutions were the places young people went to learn how to be artists, though their focus was often on issues of craftsmanship and expression and not on networking and professional development.

Now, consider how different the context is for the emerging participatory cultures. In a world with a blurred line between consumers and producers, young people find themselves in situations that no one would have anticipated a decade or two ago. Their creative work is much more open to the public and can have more far-reaching consequences. Young people are creating new modes of expression, which adults around them poorly understand, and so they receive little to no guidance or supervision. The ethical implications of these emerging practices are fuzzy and ill-defined, and young people are discovering that information they put online to share with their friends can bring unwelcome attention from strangers.

Many of the young artists interviewed for this study told stories of adults who claimed to want to help them but who in reality sought to exploit them. Going online is the best way to reach a larger public and jump start their artistic careers, but it also comes with considerable risks. The young artists interviewed benefited from having supportive adults around them to help them sort through choices and potential consequences. Many had parents or siblings who helped to foster their talent and protect their interests. Petey comes from a family of artists, and Ariel's mother backed her when she decided to self-publish. Yet,



eventually, these artists have had to step beyond those safety nets and take some social risks as they enter into a predominantly adult sphere of activity. Art institutions could help them make that transition, by brokering mentorships with more established artists in the same media. Such mentorships take on central roles at a time when more and more young people are producing works for public circulation rather than purely for personal expression.

In returning to the 2005 Pew study with which the chapter began, remember that 57 percent of teens who use the Internet might be considered media makers, but what of the other 43 percent? Throughout the 1990s, enormous energy went into combating the digital divide, which was defined around questions of technological access. Considerable success has been seen in ensuring that most American kids have at least minimal access to networked computers at school or public libraries. But as a 2005 report on children's online experience in the United Kingdom concluded, "No longer are children and young people only or even mainly divided by those with or without access, though 'access' is a moving target in terms of speed, location, quality and support, and inequalities in access do persist. Increasingly, children and young people are divided into those for whom the internet is an increasingly rich, diverse, engaging and stimulating resource of growing importance in their lives and those for whom it remains a narrow, un-engaging, if occasionally useful, resource of rather less significance."<sup>26</sup> All of these young artists had more than simply public access, though in some cases limits in bandwidth still shaped their participation. What these kids can do at home is very different from what kids can do when they only have shared, limited, and public access to computers, which often lack the possibility to store or upload media content.<sup>27</sup>

This participation gap creates a real challenge. On the one hand, schools are effectively deskilling the most media savvy kids, cutting them off from their best ways of learning and denying them access to the tools with which they can most fully express themselves. On the other hand, schools are leaving behind those kids who have little or no access to the resources these young artists tapped to do their work. After-school programs at arts institutions could play an important role in expanding access not simply to the tools and technologies needed to sustain artistic production in the digital age but also to the kinds of



knowledge, skills, and experiences required to participate effectively in these emerging cultural practices.

Educators have long talked about cultural participation as a kind of hidden curriculum. Indeed, Ostrower (2007) found that those who regularly participated in cultural events were also more likely to vote, to belong to social organizations, to conduct charitable work, and to attend religious services. More research is needed to determine if those same traits extend to those who participate in online communities or who create and share media in digital environments. Historically, those kids who had access to books or classical recordings in their homes, whose parents took them on outings to concerts or museum exhibits or theatrical performance, and who engaged in dinner time discussions of current events developed—almost without conscious consideration—skills that helped them perform well in school. Those experiences, which were widespread among the middle class and rare among the working class, became a kind of class distinction, which shaped how teachers perceived students. These new forms of cultural participation may be playing a similar role. These activities shape what skills and knowledge students bring into the classroom and, in this fashion, determine how teachers and peers perceive these students.

The young artists discussed here learned and grew outside of the formal education system. But care should be taken in pushing that insight too far. At a time when funding for the arts education is endangered, we reject the idea that arts education is not needed because kids can do it on their own at home. Rather, the present research points toward an even greater need for arts and media literacy education that can help bridge the participation gap and can reengage these bright kids with schooling. These stories should be used not to dissolve formal education but to reform it.

This research suggests that young people remain actively interested in the arts, if by the arts is meant the full range of human expression. This research reveals that young people are participating in the arts to an unanticipated degree, if by participation is meant not simply consuming public performances and exhibitions but rather making and distributing their own media works. What can art institutions do to assist this process? They can provide classes to help young people acquire skills in these new modes of expression. They can offer websites and exhibitions that showcase the best works that are produced and in this



way can call greater public attention to the creative expression of this emerging generation of artists. They can foster networks that broker relationships between emerging and established artists. They can provide a physical space where young artists can gather and interact face to face. Art institutions do not necessarily need to curate, but they can certainly facilitate the production and exchange of artworks in the digital age. In the process, they may blur the lines between high art and popular culture, creating a more inviting space for young people to experiment and explore artistic expressions of all kinds. Some of this they can do online, but much of it they can do the old-fashioned way: opening their doors and inviting young people to congregate inside. This chapter urges arts policy makers and institutions to reappraise how their physical spaces (e.g., art museums, concerts halls) might serve as much needed nexus for the real life community, no matter how much cyberspace has reconfigured how communities are conceived of. After several decades of research, it is now clear that the virtual communities that survive over time and sustain the lives of their participants are those that get renewed from time to time by face-to-face contact among at least some significant portion of their members. Do not think of this as simply part of a youth outreach program. This is not a temporary fix that channels young people into traditional arts institutions and practices. If participatory culture changes the way people engage with art, then art institutions will have to shift how they operate. Young people are the center of this change, to be sure, but these shifts are going to impact all strata of society, one way or another.

Art institutions can become an active part of this process, or they can watch media flows route around them. Young people are not making the same kind of distinctions between high and low culture, between digital and nondigital expression, that policy makers are. As sociologists in this anthology note, Americans are becoming cultural omnivores. Consequently, they are increasingly wary of the ways cultural institutions police the borders between different forms of expression, deciding what art matters—and, implicitly, what art does not—rather than seeking to further expand who gets to make art and to broaden what counts as expression. Art institutions need to rethink their traditional roles as curators of the arts and instead embrace a new and potentially unfamiliar role as facilitators of participatory culture.



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#### Endnotes

1. Chloe X, "This is Not Greatest Site." <http://www.notgreatestsite.net/>.
2. Henry Jenkins, "Media Literacy—Who Needs It?" New Media Literacy, 2005, <http://projectnml.org/yoyogi>.
3. For example, Chloe uses CosplayLab.com (<http://www.cosplaylab.com/>).
4. Dir en grey's official website is <http://www.direngrey.co.jp/>.
5. More information can be found at Jenkins and Vanessa Bertozzi, "Young Artists," Media Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, <http://vanessabertozzi.com/youngartists/>. In this chapter, all quotes from these young artists come from interviews and correspondence with them, conducted between August 2004 and May 2006. Interviews were conducted via e-mail, instant message, phone, and face to face with notes, video, and audio recordings. In some cases, the young artists preferred to not have their last names used.
6. Lenhart and Madden (2005).
7. Podcasting refers to the distribution of audio or video files over the Internet for listening on mobile devices or computers. Modding technically refers to any effort to modify existing software but is most often used to refer to modifying computer games. Mods could range from simple adjustments to the mechanics of the game to totally replacing all of the assets used in the game, transforming a fantasy landscape into one set in a specific historical period, or introducing new missions and situations. Machinima refers to the use of game engines and in-game cameras to create forms of digital animation. Often, these tools allow one to animate a sequence in real time and thus to dramatically lower the time and cost of production.
8. Petrik (1992), Douglas (1989), and Duncombe (1997).
9. Zimmerman (1995).
10. Schrag (1997, 1999, 2000).



11. See "Making Movies in Virtual Reality" (<http://www.machinima.com/>) for more information.
12. Will Wright (personal interview with Henry Jenkins, summer 2003). More information on Maxis's policies can be found in Henry Jenkins (2006a).
13. Young Composers (<http://www.youngcomposers.com/>).
14. Fan fiction involves the appropriation of characters or situations from an existing media property for the purpose of constructing original stories produced by impassioned amateurs. For more, see Jenkins (1992).
15. Fred Gallagher, Megatokyo, <http://www.megatokyo.com/>.
16. Claymation refers to stop-action animation created using molded clay figures. Mashups are a form of expression that involves combination of two or more media properties, most often two of more pieces of music.
17. DigiDesign puts out ProTools, a powerful multitrack audio editing and mixing application, which became very popular among amateur and professional music and radio producers. In part, its popularity was due to the fact that the company made a free trial download available via their website (<http://www.digidesign.com/>).
18. Ed Droste, Grizzly Bear The Band (<http://grizzly-bear.net/>).
19. For more on convergence, see Jenkins (2006a, 2006b).
20. Petey X, Suburbanal Cuts (<http://suburbanalcuts.com>).
21. Tom Scharpling, Friends of Tom (<http://www.friendsoftom.com/>).
22. Joshua Meeter, MeeterVision Entertainment (<http://www.meetervision.com>).
23. For more on the Star Wars fan cinema movement, see Jenkins (2003).
24. Duncombe (2002).
25. For more information on the lo-fi music movement, see Grajeda (2002).
26. Livingstone and Bober (2005, p. 12).
27. Wartella, O'Keefe, and Scantlin (2000, p. 8).