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## LEONARDO THINKS

### Opinion: Collaboration as Media

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Due to an increased emphasis on collaboration, the cultural production and consumption of art has forever changed. Indeed, the meaning of the term “collaborative” can be understood as a challenge to the autonomous authorial identity associated with the object of art. Whether through formal design or informal interdependence, contemporary collaboration re-frames our conception of author and audience.

Over the past three decades, postmodern sensibilities have been realized in new modes of cultural production. Emerging information technology has enabled a redefinition of labor, creativity and communications. Implemented in alternative forms of organization and participation, these structures of collaboration operate as knowledge-production systems that serve to establish a context for meaningful discourse and critical analysis. In the economy of attention where ideas are product, collaboration is media.

The common vocabularies of technology enable interdisciplinary exploration and crossfertilization of intellectual terrain. And although art, science and engineering have different agendas and methodologies an understanding of the benefits of collaboration among them has grown significantly. Institutional, corporate and private enterprise continue to adopt many collaborative organizational and operational frameworks into their bureaucratic design. A strong case can also be made regarding the influence of new collaborative models on popular culture and family and interpersonal relationships.

As cultural investment in the potential of information technology expands, new models of collaboration emerge that challenge traditional hierarchical and autocratic strategies. This new generation of hybrid forms has provided alternative configurations for individual, group, team and institutional interaction. Whereas conceptualist models first introduced collaboration as media in the direct exploration of administration, bureaucracy, partnership, business, the corporation and family organization, new media artists have extended these models to incorporate distributed participation, interactive processes and social networks. The very nature of creativity, labor and communications will continue to be transformed as cultural sensibilities shift

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with regard to these new mechanisms of human interaction and experience. However, it is the unexpected consequences of collaboration that catalyze critical analysis of political, ethical and cultural issues.

In that collaborations are systems of knowledge production they provide the terrain for colliding sensibilities, paradigms and theoretical conceptions. Collaborations function semiologically. Critical investigation into how new models can be reconciled with the social, economic and political consequences of their implementation is essential. Therefore, research into the epistemic function of collaboration by artists will assist in the framing questions that serve to direct experimentation with and development of new models. How does collaboration change the conception of authorial intentionality and responsibility? Distributed participation and social network models do not necessarily preserve the autonomous character of individuals. Rather, a literal displacement of the individual into an environment of associative relationships establishes a form of authorship in which there is no singularity of ownership, origination or directorial oversight. Collaborators may not be aware that they are participants or distinguish their roles. With decentralized authorship, how do we consider information property? How can a social network of cultural production be an artwork? What about the fading distinction between author and audience? Are such terms obsolete? New models favor emergence, embeddedness, entailment, parasitism, inference and prehension as terms that more effectively describe the associative factors and function of the collaboration as a system. How does this shift in taxonomic character affect the expectations of performance? Are these models of collaboration actually emergent systems, rather than traditional cooperative arrangements? If knowledge is the product how is it evidenced? What are the aesthetics of distributed participation and social networks?

My apperception is that the expression of collaboration has an applied and semiological identity and can therefore be considered as critical text. If true, these new models of collaboration are simultaneously explicit and implicit, both signifier and signified, and possess a meaning that is manifested as something more than the mere structure of cooperative interaction.

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