Performing the web: negotiating affect and online aesthetics

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Abstract

On October 1, 2011, following its public debut at a gallery in Toronto, the Sandbox Project made its appearance online, timidly emerging from the bursting folds of the popular Wordpress Content Management System (CMS). The Sandbox Project is an itinerant community art and activism laboratory consisting of a series of live events and a complementary online platform, both conceived as a collaborative effort of countless individuals. The project explores ways in which respectful and anti-oppressive processes of collaboration, the formation of alliances, and new lines of solidarity may occur between activists and artists working with different media and creative tactics. Now in its third year of existence, the website combines different CMS formats to experiment with new forms of online interaction and to respond to the diversity of interventions featured during the live events. Rather than functioning as a space that simply records and documents each event, the website took it upon itself to play with the live events (the laboratory) dynamically: it sought to give the visitor a sense of the vibrant atmosphere that the participants had been experiencing during live events, in order to elicit further online interactions and initiatives among past and current participants. The website and the live events aspired to complete each other, to become together one continuous and contiguous performance. But to what extent can the vibrancy of human behavior be played and conveyed online? This paper critically reflects on the difficulties in incorporating the project into today’s manifold, yet homogeneous and homogenizing, online publishing options. In acknowledging this difficult process of mediation, it urges to reflect on the material and conceptual complications emerging from the involvement of diverse and far-apart communities and individuals.

Keywords: activisms; aesthetics; affect; platform politics; performance

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Never again will we walk the stable landscape of solid land: we must get used to the idea that “sailing is necessary,” with no fixed direction, no general point of view on this tumultuous and moving surface.  

New technologies can be considered the heirs of old epistemologies and ontologies: these knowledge systems remain embedded in machines; concomitantly, machines act as conduits for the perpetuation of these systems in culture.  

This paper examines the difficult process of mediation needed when a multipart live event is reproduced in a conventionally structured online environment. In particular, I explore a project, the Sandbox Project, whose live incarnation is based on performative actions that are often improvised, collaboratively produced, and emotionally charged. The Sandbox Project is an itinerant laboratory, community art project, and online platform conceived to explore the potential coexistence of different activist practices: this may include practices that involve services to the community, tactical-humorous actions, artistic-political interventions, or traditional activist tactics (protest, strike, sit-in, etc.). Using a series of non-conventional and non-verbal forms of communication, a diverse and wide range of community organizers, activists, and artists focus on the processes needed to establish non-oppressive spaces wherein to initiate respectful collaborations.

Since its first event, it was important for the Sandbox Project to ensure a web presence, in an attempt to reproduce and eventually extend its live activities, and to encourage continuing dialogue, resource sharing, and community and alliance building among participants of its past and future events. Rather than functioning as a space that simply records and documents each event, or as a device for promoting its journey across Europe and the Americas, the website took it upon itself to play with the live events (the laboratory) dynamically: the goal was to give the visitor a sense of the vibrant atmosphere that the participants had been experiencing during live events, in order to elicit further online interactions and initiatives among past and current participants. To put it with Suely Rolnik’s words, the website aimed to create a space “‘for’ and not ‘about’ artistic and activist experience, or its mere cataloguing in an allegedly objective manner.” Its goal was to “enable archived practices to activate sensible experiences in the present, different from those that were originally lived, but nonetheless with an equivalent critical-poetic density.” The website and the live events aspired to complete each other, to become together one continuous and contiguous performance. But to what extent can the vibrancy of human behavior be played and conveyed online? (See Figure 1).

![Figure 1. The Sandbox project online: the main page.](image-url)
In the following pages, I want to reflect on the—constantly in-progress—process of creation of the Sandbox Project website and on its delicate relation with its live events. The site was conceived both as a “critical-poetic archive” and as an experimental online platform to reproduce those elements of “ordinary affect,” that is, “literally moving things”—things that are in motion and that are defined by their capacity to affect and be affected—being mobilized by the human bodies and subjectivities playing in the sandbox. This paper analyzes the difficulties in incorporating the project into today’s manifold, yet homogeneous and homogenizing, online publishing options. In acknowledging this difficult process of mediation, it urges to include in this analysis the material and conceptual complications emerging from the involvement of diverse and far-apart communities and individuals. These individuals had committed to the project and had promised to maintain virtual relations and engagements once the live event was over. However, something kept them from engaging in new collaborations and continuous dialogue: physical distance, diversity of circumstances and media used, and the choice between strengthening the relation with some virtual allies they sometimes had not—or only briefly—had a chance to meet in person and tending to very real and very urgent personal commitments with their local community ended in jeopardizing their long-term participation.

ENVISIONING THE SANDBOX

On October 1, 2011, following its public debut at the Toronto Free Gallery, the Sandbox Project made its appearance online, timidly emerging from the bursting folds of the popular Wordpress Content Management System (CMS). Now in its third year of existence, the website combines different CMS formats to experiment with new forms of online interaction and to respond to the diversity of interventions featured during the live events (Figure 2).

The Sandbox Project was initiated as a collaborative endeavor between this author (Roberta Buiani) and Alessandra Renzi. It emerged as a response to the rise of a diverse population of artists, activists, and media practitioners engaging in struggles to address labor exploitation and corporate injustice, as well as sexual, racial, and human rights violations that oppress individuals worldwide. Using different media and artistic forms, from traditional street protest to street theatre, from kettle concerts to civil disobedience, from electronic resistance to politically engaged and community art, artists and activists employ very different, yet all potentially effective strategies.
and tactics. In the wake of the disastrous events following the G20 gathering in Toronto in the summer of 2010, we started reflecting on ways in which activists, artists, and other individuals who preferred not to be affiliated with any social movement or political party could engage effectively and constructively in collaborative activist projects and actions. Despite sharing similar goals, these different individuals often find it excruciatingly difficult to join forces or to transform their single interventions into powerful and long-lasting projects. A common vocabulary to share knowledge and respect differences exists but is rarely carried through, while learning from different approaches is frequently limited by the very circumstances of emergency that trigger any activist action. In these conditions, movement building becomes problematic.

We created the Sandbox Project to explore ways in which respectful and anti-oppressive processes of collaboration, formation of alliances, and new lines of solidarity may occur between such apparently disjoined groups of activists and artists in a global context. Borrowing its title from the rectangular shallow box filled with sand designated as a space for child’s play, the Sandbox Project evokes comfortable playing; the sandbox is the space where the child can construct and destroy structures, fill and empty molds. In the same way, the Sandbox Project invites participants into this symbolic container. We like to define this space as a laboratory in order to give a sense of, and to promote, free experimentation. Rather than following traditional forms of communication, the participants are instructed to engage in relational exercises such as creative speed dating, object exchanges, and collective making and performances—all activities that call for a variety of physical and gestural forms of communication11 (Figure 3). This brings participants to create a public performance or an in-progress multimedia project to elicit the understanding and the participation of an audience. We prefer these methods to traditional roundtables and panel discussions, since they may help participants communicate informally, positing themselves on the same plane, by “do[ing]-it-with-other (DIWO)”12 and “dialoguing” rather than “discussing” or “debating.”13 The latter tend too often to reassert traditional modes of interaction, power relations, and privileges usually brought forward and imposed by more educated, articulate, non-racialized individuals, thus letting hierarchies and assumptions re-emerge.

While each laboratory/live event constitutes an independent microcosm featuring a range of different practitioners, it aspires to create continuity and resource sharing among past and current events. For instance, labs start by asking questions unanswered or issues that went unresolved in previous labs: how does one effectively

Figure 3. The live event: the Sandbox Project in Berlin (Transmediale, February 2, 2012). Detail of the physical structure of the sandbox.
integrate tactics, artistic interventions, and other forms of activism without inhibiting the diversity of the group? Or without perpetuating those dynamics of power and gestures of dismissal and oppression that too often frazzle and undermine much of the innovative force of activist circles? These are, among others, the recurring questions that informed the first event in Toronto and then continued to emerge during the following events.

On that first day of October, armed with the best intentions, we gathered around a wooden frame symbolically marking the perimeter of the sandbox, where representatives from the local arts community, progressive academia, and alternative media spent 1 day focusing on knowing each other’s practice and politics, and devising new strategies of inclusion and intersection of such practices. A series of sessions eventually led to the creation of a public intervention (in this case, a radio show). It was the process of establishing alliances and collaboration, and not the product of such collaborations, that counted for us; we were interested in addressing how the social, material, and cultural dynamics responsible for creating divergences and conflicts hindered dialogue, rather than in examining the end results.

Using similar methods of communications, which we adapt to the different circumstances and venues with the help of participants, the project has brought its experimental journey from the grassroots space of the Toronto Free Gallery to the international new media arts context of the Transmediale Festival in Berlin; it visited the independent Collectif Artivistic in the intimate artist-run space of the Skol gallery in Montreal, just when the student protests in Quebec empowered by their ubiquitous carré rouge were gaining momentum; it reached decaying North Troy with its foreclosed houses, soaring spirit of solidarity, and thriving DIY community; it stopped by New York City’s Immigrant Movement International in the Corona neighborhood and the Queens Museum; and it participated in São Paulo’s Encuentro of the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics, where the language barriers posed by the trilingual context (English, Spanish, and Portuguese) were turned to our advantage thanks to the focus of the lab on gestures and guerrilla performance, rather than solely on words (Figures 4–6).

**THE SANDBOX PROJECT GOES ONLINE**

The website accompanied the Sandbox Project throughout its journey by promoting, documenting, and reporting on each event, and adding new features as the project grew, eager to address the increasing diversity of its interventions. We envisioned the Sandbox Project website as an experimental platform growing with, not out of, the live project: in other words, once the live event was over, the website would continue to nurture performances, multimedia projects, and new ideas that had started during the live event. Thus, in order to accommodate diverse material and to allow all participants to take part in the project easily and without having to learn and tweak code, our online presence amalgamated three popular CMS platforms: a space designed with the assistance of the artist-friendly management system offered by Cargocollective, containing the main page and the main navigation links; a blog on Wordpress, including quick updates, reports, and apps pointing to a Flickr image archive, the YouTube channel, and the Twitter announcements; and a series of visually based pages in Tumblr, where participants could insert links to each other’s projects, add recommendations, and upload other contributions.

The website had to act as a connector between the different events, like a virtual time machine giving the opportunity to participants from past and current labs to establish novel dialogues, and to eventually welcome new players. For instance, we collected the three projects initiated during the Sandbox lab in São Paulo on Tumblr. Created as a response to the topic of “block” and “blockage” in its many connotations, the three projects were recorded and reproposed online to enable the participants to transform the footage filmed during the live event into several video installations. In fact, everybody, including individuals we had met during previous labs, could edit and utilize the material we had collected in São Paulo.

Despite the frequent stints to combine different platforms and designs, and to encourage further involvement from the participants, neither has the website accompanying the Sandbox Project been able to generate the same energy and match the gestures of solidarity that had characterized its live events, nor it has fostered the depth of collaboration that we had envisioned when we had first
decided to venture online. The navigation, design, and aesthetic appearance of the virtual Sandbox did credit the variety but not the vibrancy expressed by the events. The static and rather boxy structure of the popular platforms we had chosen served the purpose of organizing each event and location in its own section. However, this well-organized geometric structure failed to transmit the multiple facets, the unexpected twists, and the continuous adjustments that had emerged during the activities of the live events. The stylistic features that our platform of choice offered and that we kept adding to the website merely serve cosmetic purposes: they qualify the website aesthetically, yet they only act as static embellishments; they are captivating, with their ability to show a moment suspended in time, as if they were film stills not yet completed. However, they do not appear to capture the liveliness and the bursting diversity—what Kathleen Stewart defines the manifestation of “ordinary affects”—that populated the live events.

Presently, although suggestive of the particular actions and interaction enacted during the Sandbox events, the visual content of the website mainly serves documentary purposes. One wishes
that images could speak: photos taken during each event show the diverse composition of the groups participating, busily negotiating their aesthetics and preferred actions, but they don’t say anything about their fervor and their personal stories. The varying color palette prevailing in each set of images constitutes a vivid indication of the wide variety of venues that the lab has visited. However, these images say little about the sociopolitical conditions and the specific contexts with which we were engaging. A few videos highlight salient moments, like a performance, an interactive intervention, an extemporaneous installation; but these videos are not sufficient to communicate why, and the way in which, these very processes had occurred. In other words, all these elements are only partially able to convey the modulation of ordinary affects: the intense and often unexpected interactions and meaningful amalgamation of bodies, objects, and politics that had occurred between the participants, all elements that we had thought were crucial in the unfolding of the Sandbox Project, appeared to have been transformed into discrete and well-categorized moments frozen in time. This is not to disparage the power of images and photographs to document and evoke the particular conditions, the particular types of relationalities and human emotions that animated the live event, but to emphasize the existence of a discrepancy between the expectations from the images chosen to communicate these moments and the disappointment to see them failing to tell what we had imagined to be the true and complete story. In Life after Media, Kember and Zylinska explain this phenomenon as the “elision of becoming from the process of looking” by using the words of Bergson: “Our mind, speculating on it [space] with its own powers alone, cuts out in it, a priori, figures whose properties we determine a priori…” that is, it is the “dialectical relationship between flux and stasis, between duration and the cut that organizes the conceptual and affective universe for us.” Yet, this affective universe lacked something that only we and the participants in the event could identify with, but that appeared out of context or not entirely expressed in the space of the website.

2.0 POLITICS, NETWORK DISCRETENESS, AND THE IMAGINED PERFORMANCE OF THE HUMAN

There are several concurrent reasons behind the failure to reproduce the particularly fluid structure of the live event online, and to ensure its survival once the live event is over. The Sandbox Project had surely underestimated the implicit regulations of social networks. Taking advantage of the user-friendly spectrum of social networks and applications freely available online might have lured us into falling for their perceived horizontally constructed and user-generated politics. In order for our online presence to be acknowledged, a series of “new techniques of [soft] control” end up dictating at many levels the choices we make: the stylistic and formal configuration of the platforms we choose can’t deviate too far from established
conventional models and custom methods of representation, either because the internal coding that regulates any network platform won’t let us, or because of the obligations that tie us to our users or community of users. In fact, the popularity (in terms of the aesthetics displayed and the number of hits obtained) of a website depends both on its readability and immediacy, and on how well it fares with other users.

We believed that the typical geometry of the website layout and the strategically and precisely located hyperlinks in the navigation bar (a default element to be positioned at the margin of the webpage) would fail the purpose of the project and its fluid structure. However, according to today’s trends in design and network customs, one must provide clear guidelines to the user, as they constitute structural and rhetoric elements that improve legibility and navigability. The reluctance to order the content of the website according to a defined grid and a set of conventions had to be counterbalanced by the need to reach out to a wide audience and to “fit” the diverse yet well-regulated universe of blogging and social networks. Thus, the Sandbox Project website became the product of a compromise.

Furthermore, the Sandbox Project had to negotiate its smooth and unpredictable anatomy with the discrete and clear-cut structure29 defining the World Wide Web—a characteristic that permeates all media as “brains that contract forces of the cosmos, cast a plane over the chaos.”30 The digital system supporting this structure “assumes that every object has the same importance as any other and that everything is, or can be, connected to anything else,”31 complicating its ability to perform fluidity and variability. In order to represent human actions and gestures, this system has to fragment them into discrete unities. This translates into an epistemological difficulty to perform human affect, to transcend the very constitutive structure and the building blocks that are assumed to constitute the base of the internet, a space still permeated by the “legacy of Cartesian ontology and post-Cartesian rationalism within the knowledge systems that have informed the rise of computation.”32

There is another element that has contributed to challenge even further the development and sustenance of a lasting online community revolving around the Sandbox project: after meeting for a very intense yet brief day of interactions and vigorous collaborations, artists and activists would head back to their communities and to their respective countries. Despite their genuine desire to continue this learning experience and to collaborate with the peers they had met during the Sandbox Project, these individuals were re-absorbed into their everyday practices, and their interest in the Sandbox Project suddenly seemed to fade. It is possible that the website in its current configuration has been unable to motivate the lab participants enough to maintain a continuous interest in the project. At the same time, it is as if there was a general suspicion that the online space in general would not be capable of performing those processes of sociality and multiple expressions of subjectivity that had marked so physically and viscerally the live event.

There is no single explanation for the issues we experienced and are still experiencing with the website. It is not clear whether the successive fading of participation was due to these interwoven aspects or was simply caused by a combination of physical distance, the very diversity of the participants involved in the project, and/or, more importantly, the absence of a single project to complete. 2.0 politics, the materiality of networks, and the imagined performance of the social appeared to play equal roles in inhibiting the development of the website in the expected direction: not only would the website partially succeed in “performing” the live event, that is, its vibrancy, its improvised nature, and its unexpected results, but also it would not “be performed” by its users.

2.0 POLITICS: TO CUSTOMIZE OR TO PERSONALIZE?

Daphne Dragona notes that “the percentage of users in alternative platforms remains small and the acts of opposition against the mechanisms of the dominant platforms are ephemeral and often unfruitful.”33 She asks: “How can one escape the forms of data aggregation and control?”34 The Sandbox Project needed a website that could transmit the constantly changing configuration, the exchanges, and the intense atmosphere that people could experience during its live series. Although seeking strategies to break free from the current dominant system of platforms and from
their customary aesthetic and structural organization, the online platform was apparently unable to provide such options: this impossibility was only equally imposed by the structural composition of the Web, and it stemmed from a conscientious decision to adjust to the trends and the standards of connectivity respected by the majority of bloggers, social network dwellers, and other typical users and designers of web content.

Foucault reminds us how, in a biopolitical system, the notion of population replaces the one of the “individual”: once comprising a heterogeneous group of distinct elements (the individuals), now the term “population” designates “a mass of living and coexisting beings,” an anonymous agglomerate of discrete parts, whose collective behavior is quantified in order to anticipate and prevent unexpected episodes (such as the incidence of diseases and epidemics). Frequent recommendations, suggestions, and guidelines encourage one to “rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population.”

To run smoothly, this system establishes reductive categories by metonymically predicting a number of features and needs of the individual as the ones of the entire population.

In the case of the Web, this translates into avoiding technical inconveniences, such as broken links and loss of connectivity, and avoiding uneven, incomprehensible, or illegible content. The individual is not necessarily forced into a certain path or a specific procedure in order to obtain certain results or to avoid certain inconveniences, but is invited to follow models that are already available and that have successfully enjoyed the consensus of the majority. “The Web speaks to power and hierarchy rather than multiplicity and the margins,” as new online practices are fully accommodated only in compliance with the comprehensive semiotic and technical order of the system that hosts them. This means that on the Web, “control is not only soft; it is also invisible, enabled through the interconnections of the platform,” as adopting a set of popular strategies or using a variety of established tools will make an online object likeable not only to the very community it wishes to address, but also to the rest of the so-called community of bloggers and frequenters of network platforms.

The arrangement of Wordpress and other CMS follows these implicit rules: they understand different perspectives and practices as “complementary segments of subjectivity” accommodating an apparently heterogeneous corpus of subjects and practices in the name of diversity and hybridity. They don’t need to establish restrictive laws and prohibitions, as the platform tends to self-regulate thanks to the policing of its members. Most freely available CMS platforms offer users a set of layout options and graphic elements (e.g. by letting users choose among a series of themes, pick a set of fonts, add an image header or a variety of widgets, etc.), which they can recombine and duplicate. By supplying users an appreciable number of choices, the system gives them a false sense of autonomy. These choices direct users to follow general guidelines, and support a layout and design that bear no substantial diversity. Creativity is then conceived within acceptable limits as a discrete, thus easily manageable, series of patterns that can be combined, mixed, and modified, but not completely overruled (a straight line can’t be bent; a grid can’t be turned into a circle, and new code can only be added on top of the already-existing one).

Using Wordpress was planned. Following the statement of intent of the Sandbox Project praising new and creative forms of activism, artivism, and hacktivism, using Wordpress was a way to appropriate in order to “identify uses of technology that are generated by communities of users to benefit their own values and priorities.” As Ramesh Srinivasan suggests, appropriation and its careful analysis may strengthen the sense of belonging and solidarity within a specific community. However, the Sandbox Project had to deal with different communities and individuals, whose technical skills, conception of technologies, and aesthetic preferences were extremely varied. Thus, our goal was to test, combine, and eventually challenge the potential of Wordpress, Tumblr, and other similar free web 2.0 platforms without necessarily remaining anchored to one.

We determined that the popularity and simplicity of the platforms available would best accommodate the diversity (both cultural and technical) of the participants. However, while the decision to combine popular network platforms may have facilitated the understanding and the dissemination of the project to a wider audience, it has also
limited its ability to freely establish its own structure. While initially embracing this efficiency, we soon realized that our goals were radically different. Yet, it was impossible for us to dissociate ourselves from a well-established system and its guidelines. While we were free to choose among many options, our abilities to modify our online space were limited to basic templates. Customization, rather than autonomy, determined our online presence.

Here lie CMS’s strengths and shortcomings: the majority of regular users of Wordpress and other CMS platforms are not particularly interested in innovative or experimental platform uses, or in finding new approaches to the internet. Personal bloggers, organizations and institutions, online magazines, and artists are more invested in managing and disseminating their (personal or official) content efficiently, rather than in transforming the interface that supports it. As a result, they tend to appreciate a ready-made and user-friendly structure that can hold multiple users and well-classified information. CMS offers sufficiently customizable platforms to accomplish most of the requests of its users, whether their goal is to upload their portfolio, to publish, or to archive, giving them exactly what they expect. By promising to give users their “own account in seconds,” platforms like Wordpress, Tumblr, and countless other engines claim to offer services optimized for different activities in a risk-free, bug-free, reliable environment. This impression of efficiency discourages any urge to exceed the boundaries of their preconceived interface. However, in welcoming these benefits, the user loses the ability to question the default structures provided.

In order to partially regain control, Dragona suggests a playful exploit, “activated by play and expressed through creativity. It is an attempt to locate and highlight the playful but yet radical elements that might characterize strategic moves made to regain control.” The Sandbox Project sought to “play” by combining and trying to exceed the limits imposed by CMS guidelines and recommendations. In doing so, it was faced with two choices: to comply with the platform rules and accept its protective and well-connected, yet hardly flexible, space, or to step outside and experience the potential loss of connectivity. In the first case, the project would enjoy speedy upgrades and easier access to a wide range of users, apps, and social networks, but definite structural constraints; in the second case, it would risk increased isolation from the wider network, and longer times of realization due to the need to pay more attention to programming from scratch.

**PERFORMING AFFECT**

Generally inserted in the context of festivals or artistic events, the live portion of the Sandbox Project is usually announced with a call for participation disseminated several weeks before the event takes place. This call is a mere blueprint. Participants, circumstances, and technological availability will adjust and reshape its structure during the event and when the documentation appears online; participants and audience are invited to build these two spaces as their relations unfold through “the mapping of [their] field of orientation,” or the sense they make of them. This continuous adjustment effectively prevents us from predicting whether any specific result will emerge from any lab, or how different individuals, locations, group dynamics, or technologies associated with it will perform with each other. The convergence of heterogeneous, differently motivated, and culturally diverse individuals materializes dynamically through the succession of ordinary affects, through which “forms of power and meaning become circuits lodged in singularities .... Things like narrative and identity become tentative though forceful compositions of disparate and moving elements.”

The website seems to be unable to capture these kaleidoscopic flows. With digital media, continuous data are being translated into discrete data: first data are sampled, most often at regular intervals, such as the grid of pixels used to represent a digital image online. Then each sample is quantified, that is, it is assigned a numerical value drawn from a defined range. But in this apparently non-hierarchical environment, where everything is valued in terms of identically measured signals rather than semantics carrying different intensities, power, subjectivity, and nuanced realities play a fundamental role in multiplying and differentiating the combinations available.

For Roberto Esposito, life emerges as an agglomerate of natural, qualitative, and technological...
forces that determine the condition of living in its entirely, rather than as a bare state. In its attempt to make sense of, and to govern, life in its multiple instances, politics strives to delimit it through rules and recommendations. In fact, being a combination of many aspects, life tends to escape constraints. Biopolitics, or the management of life though politics, implies a juxtaposition between these two forces. Politics has no choice but straining “to imprison [life’s] innovative potential.”

This struggle manifests in the Sandbox Project in a rather circular way: our initial intentions and expectations (our politics) bifurcate into an unexpected number of interactions and outcomes performed by several individuals (life generally defined). Similar dynamics are enacted online, through the encounter of the live project (its life and affective liveliness) with a well-arranged and pre-organized platform (with its implicit recommendations and connectivity-controlled governance). Conversely, despite its predetermined structure, the online rendition becomes an entity that we ultimately have no power to shape (thus, it becomes a form of life itself), since we, as authors and facilitators, seem to be unable to pursue the objectives and directions that we had initially imagined (as our politics do not correspond with the politics of the network and do not share the imagined life of the platform).

Jussi Parikka defines the politics that modulate the qualitative forces of life into online platforms as “topologies of relations that stretch across the technological and the social.” The technologies that make online platforms are both technical enablers of communication and producers of sociability: “The engineered is not removed from, but rather constitutes the social, and the social is embedded and afforded by a range of technological problems and solutions.”

This understanding of platforms as “affordances for communication and the social” emphasizes the implications resulting from the interplays of the forces that dominate their politics. Admittedly, this method is a viable strategy to understand a realm that otherwise would just stand as a series of evenly quantified elements. However, while it reveals the resulting product of the modulation of technologies and the social, this approach ignores the dynamics and the processes of mediation that contribute to its formation.

The difficulties that we have encountered during the construction of the Sandbox website emerge from the quiet acceptance of this interpretation. In our attempts to recreate online the same degrees and intensity of participation of the live events, we treated the process of mediation between the offline environment and the online platform as if it was a puzzle, where the material and the social could be pieced together and recombined. This process ignores the variety unfolding through the friction of bodies, the sudden and unexpected agreements between human beings, and the mutating emotional states involved in the production of content to be viewed through these platforms. How to make those ordinary affects emerge and perform within the space of the web?

Indeed, if examined as a biopolitical byproduct, this gap reproduces, as Munster suggests, old epistemologies and ontologies. At a cognitive level, it originates from the inherent disposition of the intellect to act mechanistically: as we try to reproduce reality, we tend to “cut it up into states.” Yet, this cut is substantially different from the process occurring during digitalization. When mediation occurs between the analog and the digital, these states become modular and equally measurable units that can be reassembled and substituted with one another. Anything falling beyond or exceeding this regular succession of digitized items and their relation disappears. Although “every medium carries within itself both the memory of mediation and the loss of mediations never to be actualized,” what is not actualized in our case constitutes the very crux of our project.

In order to exit this impasse, Kember and Zylinska propose that we reflect on the very practice of cutting. This is no conventional cut whereby “photons are reduced to pixels that are in turn reduced to zeros and ones on which discrete calculations can be performed.” It is rather an ethical cut, that is, a cut that takes into account the mutual constitutions of entangled agencies, that doesn’t interpret the relation between the technological and the social as a combination of items, but as a “multiagential force that incorporates human and machines, technologies and users in a process of becoming-with that is neither revealed nor concealed but rather apprehended intuitively—from inside the process.”
The discourse initiated by Kember and Zylinska suggests possible approaches to the problem of the negotiation and mediation of affect online. However, it also illuminates the concatenated reasons for the failure of the Sandbox Project to perform affect online. In approaching mediation as an ethical issue rather than a simple mechanical or technical operation of correspondences and piecing together, and by redefining mediation as not a simple matter of association of affordances with sociopolitical factors, thinking in terms of agential cut emphasizes a necessity to see the encounters between the analog and the digital, life and politics, online and offline as mutually co-constituted and co-constructed.

If seen from this standpoint, reproducing or recreating ordinary affects online involves a more complex rethinking of the human relationships that we have established during the live event, and that we were hopeful to reproduce online. In particular, this re-evaluation has to take into consideration the assumptions and the expectations of individual participants regarding their physical interaction during the live event, and how they imagined it in a non-physical environment. In other words, it appears that the failure of the website to perform affect had to do with the present and projected participants as much as with its material structure.

THE IMAGINED PERFORMANCE OF THE SOCIAL: CONVERGING WORLDS, REVERSED POLITICS

The technical and structural features of our website certainly had an impact on the way viewers interpreted the project and how they interacted with each other. However, expectations regarding the imagined relationships that might emerge or be carried on the website have certainly affected the outcomes of the Sandbox Project. During the Sandbox live events, participants expressed a desire to remain involved in the project even after it was over, and to stay in contact with the individuals they had met. Whether these propositions were dictated by shared interests, or just curiosity, the frequency with which they were expressed was very encouraging. However, once the project moved online, this desire appeared to gradually fade. We had assumed that most challenges would be generated by the encounter between the—very bodily and embodied—offline actions taking place in specific and always-different venues, and the reasonably flexible yet volatile space of the internet. In fact, it was the live event, not the internet, that manifested the fluidity and volatility we often ascribe to the latter. This inversion depended on the very provisional nature of the Sandbox Project as a series of open-ended live events, and on the way we understood the relationship between the embodied live manifestation of the live event and its online alter ego: in contrast to other projects that feature a combination of online and offline interaction, our “live community” was rather scattered, gathering only once for the lab event. This configuration is more likely to be found among online hubs, where people converge from different contexts, as opposed to the tendency of offline communities to usually gather around a local reality or a homogeneous group of peers.

Physical proximity had functioned as a connector between the diverse individuals, the contrasting politics, and the different practices that had characterized the population of the live phase of the Sandbox Project; gestures, expressions, posture, sudden reactions, and all aspects of human communication that had assisted the participants in establishing dialogue and intimacy could not be directly reproduced in an online environment. Once the dialogue moved online, other strategies of mediating affect would have to be evaluated. This apparent hurdle appeared to inhibit a number of individuals from further engaging.

Many participants in the Sandbox came from experiences of community organizing and local activist practices. Once the live event was over, they were quickly absorbed back into their activities. It is possible that when having to choose between continuing a completely open, non-specific, and somehow unpredictable project online, as opposed to dealing with a concrete, well-defined, and familiar situation in real life, the latter, and not the former, becomes the priority. In fact, on the one hand, the Sandbox project, in its original conception, is already abstracted from a real lived context. On the other hand, in its online version, it is both lacking in physical proximity and fragmented in its political identity. Culturally speaking, the absence of these two important reference points (identity and physical proximity) is most disorienting. Thus,
despite its hierarchies and power relations, its emergencies and its conventions, engaging with a local community that is nonetheless very concrete and very familiar suddenly appears more attractive than dealing with an idealized and ephemeral space such as the online Sandbox.

The web is often perceived as an open, distributed, and freely shapeable space, a "distributed and decentralized organization of large numbers of interacting peers and … a feature of social, technical and natural systems,"\(^57\) as opposed to any offline, lived environment, often determined by well-established conventions and traditional forms of representation. Interestingly, in the case of the Sandbox, on the one hand, it became increasingly clear that the initial perceptions regarding the endless possibilities of the World Wide Web and its CMS platforms ring true only when one remains within the possibilities allowed by the system. Paradoxically, the interaction we had engaged in during the live events would better satisfy this need for flexibility. On the other hand, the assumed messiness and unpredictability of life suddenly seem to provide a variety of certainties to be preferred to the static, yet highly provisional status of the online space of the virtual sandbox.

CONCLUSION

Even after a number of experiments with different platform formats, the Sandbox Project website has remained a static archive. However, our endeavor has inadvertently made us reflect on the relationship between live, concrete spaces and online platforms and repositories. This—apparently simple—attempt ended up speaking not only to the relationship between online and offline spaces, but also to the politics, the potentials, and the limitations that determine how individuals interact within them, prompting us to better assess our project and our expectations.

Examining the politics of archiving, Rolnik suggests that they should be "distinguished on the basis of the poetic force that an archiving device can transmit rather than on that of its technical or methodological choices." With this study, I raised questions about these politics, in particular on the relationship between the "technical and methodological" and the "poetic and performative." The issues experienced in the construction of a virtual home for the Sandbox Project did not merely depend on the affordances (or the lack thereof) ensuring the practical functioning of the website; nor did they emerge from the interconnection of these affordances with the sociopolitical forces, the conventions, the habits (the biopolitics), and the delusions that invisibly dominate network cultures; and, finally, they did not entirely pertain to the particular provisional and apparently unfocused nature of the Sandbox project.

In building an online home for the Sandbox project, it has become clear that these aspects are indeed entangled and equally significant in affecting our abilities to make website and offline space resonate with each other and perform together. In addition, drawing attention to these elements revealed how, in this specific project, offline and online spaces flipped their roles when they were made to play together: the assumed rigid social structure of the first suddenly became a fluid and malleable formation; the promising flexibility of the second proved to be a harness that poorly coped with unruly social dynamics unfolding during the Sandbox project. For the participants in this project, human relations appeared to have more significance when anchored to face-to-face encounters.

The issues encountered by the Sandbox project are both ontological and epistemological: they stem from cultural and habitual expectations about internet content and aesthetics, and from its very material and technical configuration, or its logical order. Following Barad, we need a new performative approach to "understand natural cultural practices that specifically acknowledges and takes account of matter's dynamism."\(^58\) Rather than looking for correspondences between what appear as separate entities, this view invites us to reflect on the process of enactment of boundaries by means of "matters of practices, doings, actions."\(^59\) This view sheds a new light onto the material and cultural boundaries of the real and the virtual, online and offline realms. In particular, it recalibrates the focus on the very dynamic process of formation and mutual sustenance binding, say, a website and its offline action, rather than on the static moment of their intersection (the dots and points of intersection). It follows that only a shift of perspective in what "online content" means in relation to the "lived world" might liberate the Sandbox project from its own impasse.
Notes

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4. Suely Rolnik, Archive Mania (Kassel, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 4.
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9. The Toronto Free Gallery was a local independent gallery located in the West End of the city, dedicated to offering creative responses to social issues such as sustainability, poverty, gentrification, human rights, and equality. The gallery closed in March 2013.
10. Despite being the main initiators of the project, our role in this project is the one of co-contributors, as most of the labor and creative outcomes that built the Sandbox project are the products of the collective work of all participants, whether online or offline. Of course, we came to the project with a number of expectations, which this article tries to spell out.
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