



A Reformation of the Arts

by Alasdair Foster

Economic, social and cultural paradigms continue to change with increasing speed. The shift in emphasis from the creation of real concrete products to a virtual world of images and ideas means that now in Australia (to give an example that's local for me) there are more people employed in the storage and retrieval of information than in the whole of agriculture and industry put together. Meanwhile, burgeoning online communities have evolved that bring hundreds of millions of individuals into personal interaction whether it be through social networking sites like MySpace and FaceBook, through the sharing of images and video clips via Flickr and YouTube or immersed in complex virtual societies such as Second Life and Entropia Universe.

These changes are fundamental. It is not simply that old modes find new means. By opening up lines of communication to the direct access of the individual there is an increasing democratisation of opinion and culture. With the rise of technologies of mass production and distribution in the last century culture became divided. On the one hand there was popular culture delivering lowest-common-denominator products on a vast scale to mass markets. On the other was fine art delivering rare or unique objects and services to a tiny specialist market with values (cultural and monetary) jealously controlled by an even smaller taste-making elite. The role of the home-made in everyday life and the amateur in art became sidelined. The 20th-century mass markets and art industry were both controlled by a rigorous division between producer and consumer underwritten by the belief in the creator's enduring rights over what was created.

The technological developments of digitisation and Web 2.0 have had two significant effects on this duopoly. The mutability of digital data and its ability to be copied and reformed without loss of quality has opened up the possibility of ripping and mashing – the continuous recombination and reforming of cultural material as an alternative to the passive reception, acquisition and preservation of immutable art objects. In the area of reproducible culture such as photomedia, the focus of art is beginning to shift from objects to processes. The mode of artistic production has diversified to embrace both the virtuoso individual and the creative community action.

Meanwhile, the means of dispersion of digital entities has expanded radically. The two-way flow of Web 2.0 has opened up the possibility of reaching a wide audience at little cost without the need to accommodate the taste of a mass market or corporate and institutional hierarchy. The result is a plethora of small niche groups, unconstrained by physical geography, that actively participate in both the production and consumption of new forms of art.

I have for some years sensed a coming dissolution of the hard and fast division between active producer (artist) and passive consumer (audience) in the (visual) arts. It has brought me to the conclusion that we are witnessing the beginning of a reformation of the arts analogous to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th-century Christian church.^{[1](#)}



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That is, not a revolution resulting in the overthrow of one system by another, but the development of an alternative system which places the essence of culture in the heart and mind of the individual rather than in an authorising oligarchic profession.

This is, of course, an analogy and I am not proposing that in every way the new reformation will mirror the old, but simply that there are a number of resonances. Most significantly, what the Protestant Reformation made clear is that the subsequent effects of such a partial shift of power can be far reaching.

In effect the 16th-century Reformation sought to 'de-professionalise' the church, placing the essence of religion in the interior of the individual and I believe we will witness an increasing 'de-professionalisation' of art. This is

perhaps most appropriately thought of as the correcting of an *over*-professionalisation that occurred in the second half of the 20th century in tandem with the reduction of art consumers to passivespectators where once they had been active participants. I do not mean by this that we will see an end to professional artists. The Protestant church has ministers and specialists, but their role is different from their counterparts in the Roman Catholic Church. Their expertise is (in theory at least) at the service of the community not in authority over it, and there is often the facility for community member and specialist to swap roles (as with lay preaching). Creativity and cultural practice will, I believe, increasingly become a process involving the many not the few.

One of the important conditions for the Christian Reformation was the invention of the printing press, which allowed the free flow of information previously controlled by the monasteries. Today the development of the internet (and especially the Web 2 phenomenon) is having a similar effect, as information is no longer constrained and filtered by institutional authority. Just as the veniality of the Roman Catholic church of the 16th century and the selling of indulgences outraged Martin Luther and his followers so there are those who consider that the art world has lost its way, corrupted by its self-aggrandising power as arbiters of taste and seduced by the marketplace. In this view art has become an industry in which the currency of credential can be converted to capital and, all too often, vice versa. Web 2.0 offers not only a way of expressing concern but a medium through which to articulate new approaches to creativity.

Once spiritual judgement became a matter of personal conscience the rule of church and state could separate. With the secularisation of the state issues of scientific exploration and mercantile expansion were no longer constrained by doctrinal orthodoxy, leading to, on the one hand, the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment, and, on the other, industrialisation and the ascendancy of the middle class. That is, what followed as a result of the initial process of reformation led to outcomes far beyond the scope or interest (or, I suspect, the wildest dreams) of those that had initiated it.

However, while the strong central hierarchy of Roman Catholicism maintained, more or less, its unity over the years, the emphasis on personal conscience in Protestantism led to a cascade of schisms as new smaller religious structures were formed that more precisely suited the needs and aspirations of those who constituted them. Similarly I would expect that we will not see a singular alternative cultural structure form out

of the social and technological ferment of the new millennium, but an unstable though potent set of interrelations with a tendency to sub-divide into smaller systems that more effectively generate meaning and affect for those involved. And while these new systems will offer a range of alternative forms of art and ways to engage with it, they will not overthrow the pre-existing art world institutions, though they are likely to cause that original system to evolve in new, if less radical, ways.

Finally, the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church embodied very clear lines of communication (from the top down). The individual-focused and fragmented nature of Protestantism led to network communication based on a system of value exchanges – trade. While trade is based on exchange of goods of equivalent value, symbolic currency (money) and of capital became increasingly important as a flexible translator of that value. The Protestant work ethic is driven by wealth creation and operates in a network system.

The new network systems of information exchange through the internet have created an environment in which little or no financial stake is required in order to become an active consumer and producer. As a result many of the newest internet communities are driven by something other than wealth creation. The Protestant meritocracy that replaced (or at least modified) the Roman Catholic oligarchy is now facing a new democratising sensibility arising from the more level playing field provided by the internet communication and the social forms and connections that, while not spawned by it, have been given new life through it.

Nothing I am saying is specific to photomedia or even the visual arts, though I think the visual arts are more hardened in their established divisions than, say, music. The fact is the flow of information on the internet – good, bad and indifferent as it is – presages profound changes in hierarchies of many sorts – the arts are just one.

It would be foolish to speculate on where the current reformation of the arts might ultimately lead us, but by freeing creative communication from the constraints of the luxury market and the control of an elite profession we could perhaps liberate the quality unique to humankind and its most potent attribute: imagination.

1. I am very aware that the 16th century Reformation and its outcomes are very much more complex than outlined here. I have used a broad brush to paint a picture for the purposes of analogy only, in the hope that to do so will help shed new light on the way we think of art, culture and the individual imagination.

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