

Wikipedia Art: Citation as Performative Act

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Introduction

The *Wikipedia Art* entry, first launched on February 14 2009,¹ stated:

Wikipedia Art is a conceptual art work composed on Wikipedia, and is thus art that anyone can edit. It manifests as a standard page on Wikipedia - entitled *Wikipedia Art*. Like all Wikipedia entries, anyone can alter this page as long as their alterations meet Wikipedia's standards of quality and verifiability.² As a consequence of such collaborative and consensus-driven edits to the page, *Wikipedia Art*, itself, changes over time.³

The work is a poetic gesture towards language and collaboration, a nod to the traditions of concept- and networked-based art, and most of all, a performance on, and intervention into, Wikipedia.

According to Wikipedia itself, an 'art intervention' is 'an interaction with a previously existing artwork, audience or venue/space' and 'by its very nature carries an implication of subversion.'⁴ Art interventions attempt to 'affect perceptions,' 'change... existing conditions' and/or 'make people aware of a condition that they previously had no knowledge of.'⁵ Although such works are now 'accepted as a legitimate form of art,' they often stir 'debate' or cries of 'vandalism,' especially when the work itself has not been endorsed by 'those in positions of authority over the... venue/space to be intervened in.'⁶

Wikipedia Art is many things: an open-ended concept, an immanent object, a collaborative text, and a net-work that complicates the very possibility for these distinctions. This paper most specifically explicates and unfolds the performance of *Wikipedia Art* as an intervention into, and critical analysis of, Wikipedia: its pages, its system, its volunteers and paid staff. Both the art work and our paper use and subvert Wikipedia itself – the definitions it puts forward, the discourses engaged by its surrounding community on and off the site, and as a venue/space ripe for intervention. In the paper, we briefly unpack how the art work speaks

1 The date of launch – Valentine's Day – was a playful reference to the ILOVEYOU virus (which was itself launched May 5 2000). Wikipedia contributors, 'ILOVEYOU,' Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia., 13 December 2009

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=ILOVEYOU&oldid=331449436>>.

2 Wikipedia contributors, 'Wikipedia: Verifiability,' 26 January 2009,'

<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Verifiability&offset=20090205145559&action=history>.

3 Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern, "Wikipedia Art: Original Article on Wikipedia', Wikipedia Art Archive, 10 December 2009

<http://wikipediaart.org/wiki/index.php?title=Wikipedia_Art>.

4 Wikipedia contributors, 'Art intervention,' 6 December 2009, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 13 December 2009

<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Art_intervention&oldid=330098737>.

5 Wikipedia contributors, 'Art intervention,' 6 April 2010, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 13 May 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Art_intervention&oldid=354268129>.

6 Wikipedia contributors, 'Art intervention,' 6 December 2009, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 13 December 2009

<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Art_intervention&oldid=330098737>.

back to the structure and performance of Wikipedia, online consensus, the mythologies behind Wikipedia, and Wikimedia's power more generally.

Structure and Authority

Although anyone may attempt to add an article to Wikipedia, it has strict rules about what should and should not be displayed on its pages. New articles may only be created for 'notable' subjects,⁷ and all information provided must be 'verifiable' through citations from 'reliable' sources.⁸

At this point we should note that our paper, like Wikipedia and like *Wikipedia Art*, uses citations to make all of its arguments, almost entirely from mainstream sources of information (such as, and including, Wikipedia). This methodology is in line with that which the paper aims to critique.

Wikipedia defines citations only 'loosely' as 'a reference to a published or unpublished source (not necessarily the original source)⁹ (and not necessarily true). In other words, the declared 'threshold for inclusion' of knowledge on Wikipedia is 'not truth,'¹⁰ but cited sources, despite their acknowledgment that the reliability of a source, how 'trustworthy or authoritative' it is, 'depends on context.'¹¹ It is up to what Andrew Keen describes as the 'amateurs' of the web to edit and select citations for inclusion on Wikipedia.

Keen and David Weinberger provide two opposing, mainstream perspectives on how Wikipedia functions in just this way. Keen's general position is that amateur-constructed and mediated institutions such as Wikipedia have diluted both the value and content of news, information and public debate more generally. He argues that the

cult of the amateur has made it increasingly difficult to determine the difference between reader and writer, between artist and spin doctor, between art and advertisement, between amateur and expert. The result? The decline of the quality and reliability of the information we receive, thereby distorting, if not outrightly corrupting, our national civic conversation.¹²

7 Wikipedia contributors, 'Wikipedia: Notability,' 8 December 2009 Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 10 December 2009,

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Notability&oldid=330351388>>.

8 Wikipedia contributors, 'Wikipedia: Verifiability,' 6 December 2009 Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 10 December 2009,

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Verifiability&oldid=330013462>>.

9 Wikipedia contributors, 'Citation,' Vers. 328974167, 1 December 2009, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 5 December 2009

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Citation&oldid=328974167>>.

10 Ibid

11 Wikipedia contributors, 'Wikipedia: Reliable Sources,' 28 November 2009 Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 10 December 2009,

<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Reliable_sources&oldid=328322772>.

12 Andrew Keen, *Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture*, New York: Doubleday/Currency, 2007.

David Weinberger contrapuntally argues that it is precisely between the differences in subjective voices that we arrive at a consensual meaning. 'In a miscellaneous world,' he avers

an Oz-like authority that speaks in a single voice is a blowhard. Authority now comes from enabling us inescapably fallible creatures to explore the differences among us, together.¹³

Our paper and art work are less concerned with the individual voices of, or debates about accuracy between, social media participants, and more so in the power that Wikipedia itself holds, and the citation mechanism at the center of it all. We argue, along with Internet Pioneer Dave Winer, that the cited words on Wikipedia have consequences. Winer asserts that 'Wikipedia is... considered authoritative.'¹⁴ It may not be a blowhard, but what its articles say often becomes conventional wisdom.

We mean this in the truest sense of the word 'conventional': Wikipedia is convenient. In a recent Journal Sentinel article, Milwaukee Art Museum curator Mel Buchannan explains that many academics, artists, journalists and curators use Wikipedia as their initial source of information, even if they don't like to say so.¹⁵ Wikipedia encourages its perpetual usage as an information reference with links to 'cite this page' from every article; information powerhouse Google most often points to Wikipedia first in its returned searches; and, as Buchanan points out, even the most qualified and rigorous researchers use Wikipedia as their starting point when embarking on new projects.

Wikipedia citations, in other words – these loose, third-hand and potentially untrue things – disseminate widely. In our research, we began to think of Wikipedia citation as not just a re-cited descriptor of fact, but rather as a performative act.

Performative Citations

Proffered in J.L. Austen's posthumously published lectures from 1955 at Harvard,¹⁶ the basic premise of a performative utterance is that spoken or written words can actually 'do something' to the world. Austin objected to the logical positivist's concentration on the verifiability of statements. He introduced the performative as a new category of utterances, distinguishing it from constative utterances. While the latter report something, the former do something. Performative utterances have no truth-value, as they do not describe or provide information about the world (or a person or thing), but act up on it, are an action in their uttering. Performative utterances function by way of forces.

Austin defined two such forces: the illocutionary and the perlocutionary. Illocutionary acts as utterances have a conventional force. These acts include informing, ordering, warning, and undertaking, and they involve the "securing of uptake," a listener's response.¹⁷ A good

13 David Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous*, New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2008.

14 Janet Kornblum, 'It's online, but is it true?,' USA Today, 6 December 2005.

15 Nathaniel Stern, 'Googling Art and Design?,' Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 5 October 2009, <<http://www.jsonline.com/blogs/entertainment/63531747.html>>.

16 J.L. Austen, *How to do Things with Words (William James Lectures)*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1962.

¹⁷ Ibid 116.

example here could be uttering the words, “I’m sorry.” This has the direct force of an apology, the indirect force of admitting wrong-doing, and the potential uptake of a listener accepting the apology (or not).

The perlocutionary act, on the other hand, is “what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading.”¹⁸ While the illocutionary act is bound up with effects, the perlocutionary act produces effects. The most classic example of such an event is a wedding: with the spoken words, ‘I do,’ the speaker is transformed from a single person into a spouse. Words literally change his or her ontological state of being. Other performative / perlocutionary possibilities, which may shift depending on their context, include a declaration of war, after which we are no longer in a state of peace, or to ‘knight’ someone, henceforth ‘Sir Elton John’.¹⁹ Here, words are an activity with consequences. They can make, transform or kill. And Austen believed that all speech has a performative dimension.

Wikipedia citations are performative. They do not merely have truth value, but are bound with actions and consequences. The addition of a new page to Wikipedia, for example, may be considered illocutionary (and require uptake) in its asking for permission to be posted as an article, or perlocutionary in its attempt to definitively frame a given subject. The implications of individual Wikipedia editors’ actions, and the speech / language used to perform these actions, are far-reaching.

As a case in point, David Horvitz once used Wikipedia to initiate cascading effects in the real world. At some point in the mid-2000s, Horvitz altered the Wikipedia entry for Ian Curtis – lead singer of Joy Division – to read that in the last moments before Curtis committed suicide, he glanced at one of Horvitz’s photographs. The falseness of this tidbit was eventually found out and removed from the page, but not before it became part of the mythic story: many Curtis fan sites still include Horvitz in their account of his death.²⁰

The Horvitz work, however, only goes in one direction: from the artist’s initial intervention on Wikipedia, to other sites online. *Wikipedia Art*, on the other hand, capitalizes on the potential for a feedback loop between Wikipedia’s information, and the information that feeds Wikipedia. The Wikipedia page for ‘Digital Dark Age’ provides an amusing illustration of the potential for just such a loophole in Wikipedia’s citation mechanism.

¹⁸ Ibid 108.

¹⁹ Performativity as a concept has been appropriated (and thus redefined) by various disciplines over the last several decades, leading performance studies scholar Richard Schechner to declare it ‘A Hard Term to Pin Down’ and to dedicate an entire chapter in his book, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, to its definition, history and use. He says that as a noun, a performative – which is no longer necessarily spoken – ‘does something’; as an adjective – such as what Peggy Phelan calls performative writing – the modifier ‘inflects... performance’ in some way that may change or modify the thing itself; and as a broad term, performativity covers ‘a whole panoply of possibilities opened up by a world in which differences between media and live events, originals and digital or biological clones, performing onstage and in ordinary life are collapsing. Increasingly, social, political, economic, personal, and artistic realities take on the qualities of performance.’ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 2002, p 110.

²⁰ For example, see <<http://www.last.fm/group/Ian+Curtis>> and <<http://120dbs.blogspot.com/2006/09/suicide-loudest-silence-ian-curtis.html>>

Wikipedia defines the term 'Digital Dark Age' as 'a possible future situation where it will be difficult or impossible to read historical documents, because they have been stored in an obsolete digital format.'²¹ While the problem of digital archiving is a real one, the article as we first encountered it contained a major error. Starting in October 2008, Wikipedia cited as an example of digital obsolescence the magnetic tape recordings from NASA's 1976 Viking landing on Mars, which it said were stored in an outdated and unreadable format. Soon after this information was put on Wikipedia, mainstream publications such as *Science Daily*,²² *United Press International*²³ and many smaller sites and blogs followed with concerns about the Digital Dark Age, all citing the 'lost data' of the NASA Viking tapes.

The problem with this: the data on these tapes was actually recovered.²⁴ We easily found a New York Times article, dating back to 1990, which countered the anonymous Wikipedia claim. And although we were good Wikipedia citizens and fixed the erroneous example on their site 7 months after it was initially posted, this misinformation persists, and has permeated into public conversation. Ironically, a given editor might use the *Science Daily* or *United Press International* articles that followed Wikipedia's false claim as a credible reference in order to post this provable falsehood right back to the site.

This example, one of many, points to the conundrum of Wikipedia being both the most up-to-date *record*, and most-cited contemporary *source*, of knowledge. Wikipedia's co-founder, Jimmy Wales, envisions the site as potentially becoming 'the sum of all human knowledge',²⁵ summarizing what is 'out there.' The site also claims to be 'the largest and most popular general reference work on the Internet' as a whole, the place where information 'comes from.'²⁶ This section is meant to emphasize the difference between summative record of information on the one hand, and a qualified reference or source on the other, between anonymous persons collecting information, and authors/authorities writing that information into existence. Weinberger implicitly calls this the 'paradox' of 'anonymous... authority.'²⁷ On Wikipedia, a citation is meant to merely document an object, place or thing; but instead, it often constitutes how we know the thing itself.

In this sense, Wikipedia's role is not unlike the US Postal Service in the 1947 Christmas film, *Miracle on 34th Street*. In George Seaton's classic tale, an unnamed mail clerk wishes to get rid of all the 'dead letters' to Santa Clause that are piling up in his office. The clerk sees one

21 Wikipedia contributors, 'Digital Dark Age,' 7 October 2009, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 5 December 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_Dark_Age>.

22 Science Daily, "Digital Dark Age' May Doom Some Data", 29 October, 2008, <<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/10/081027174646.htm>>.

23 United Press International, 'Scientist Warns of 'digital dark age,'" 28 October, 2009, <http://www.upi.com/Science_News/2008/10/28/UPI-NewsTrack-Health-and-Science-News/UPI-58301225230240/>.

24 According to the New York Times, 'virtually no data from past J.P.L. planetary missions have been lost' – and the little that was lost is because 'some tapes had been kept in substandard storage.' The very little information that NASA does not have access to has nothing to do with the Digital Dark Age, as Wikipedia et al have published. Sandra Blakeslee, 'Lost on Earth: Wealth of Data Found in Space,' New York Times 20 March 1990.

25 Roblimo, 'Wikipedia Founder Jimmy Wales Responds,' 28 July 2004, Slashdot, 5 December 2009 <<http://interviews.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=04/07/28/1351230>>.

26 Wikipedia contributors, 'Wikipedia,' Vers. 329883228, 5 December 2009, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 5 December 2009 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>>.

27 David Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous*, New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2008

such letter addressed to Kris Kringle, who plays St Nicholas at Macy's in New York City, and decides to follow suit – sending tens of thousands of letters to that very same address. In citing one letter's address for Santa Clause – whether factual or not – this mail clerk lends the US-government's official support of Kris Kringle. The letters he sends are thereafter used as a literal stockpile of evidence to win a large lawsuit claiming Kris to be the one and only true Santa Clause.

Wikipedia articles, we contend, lend themselves to a similar credibility. They cite or reference something from somewhere, and – although truth is not their threshold – it *becomes* true once on the Wiki. In Seaton's movie, a mail sorter makes a somewhat arbitrary choice that changes history. On Wikipedia, a small group of self-selected editors do the same. In both cases, a citation is a performative act.

Wikipedia Art

Wikipedia Art uses such performative citations to intervene in Wikipedia's paradoxical stature as both *record* and *source* of information. Each contribution to the *Wikipedia Art* entry, which is also the work itself, performatively transforms what it is, what it does and what it means. It is, like Wikipedia, a large-scale collaboration. But unlike Wikipedia, *Wikipedia Art* is a creative endeavor, and an intervention into the powerful platform that enables its existence.

The work, in its first incarnation on Wikipedia, says

Wikipedia Art is an art intervention which explicitly invites performative utterances in order to change the work itself. The ongoing composition and performance of *Wikipedia Art* is intended to point to the 'invisible authors and authorities' of Wikipedia, and by extension the Internet,²⁸ as well as the site's extant criticisms: bias, consensus over credentials, reliability and accuracy, vandalism, etc.²⁹

Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern, *Wikipedia Art's* initiators, refer to the work's publish-cite-transform feedback loop as 'performative citations.' They maintain that the project 'intervenes in Wikipedia as a venue in the contemporary construction of knowledge and information, and simultaneously intervenes in our understandings of art and the art object'.³⁰ The artists request writers and editors to join in the collaboration and construction / transformation / destruction / resurrection of the

28 Scott Kildall, Brian Sherwin and Nathaniel Stern, 'Wikipedia Art: A Virtual Fireside Chat Between Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern,' 14 February 2009, MyArtSpace.com, <<http://www.myartspace.com/blog/2009/02/wikipedia-art-virtual-fireside-chat.html>>.

29 Wikipedia contributors, 'Wikipedia' 28 January 2009 Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 10 December 2009, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia&oldid=266887630>>.

30 Brian Sherwin, Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern, 'Wikipedia Art: A Virtual Fireside Chat Between Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern,' 14 February 2009, MyArtSpace.com, <<http://www.myartspace.com/blog/2009/02/wikipedia-art-virtual-fireside-chat.html>>.

work, want their 'intervention to be intervened in.'³¹ Stern and Kildall say that 'like knowledge and like art, *Wikipedia Art* is always already variable.'³²

Here, we ask our potential collaborators – online communities of bloggers, artists and instigators – to exploit the shortcomings of the Wiki through performance. We invite them to engage with the supposedly ambiguous and decentralized power of Wikipedia's most affluent editors, and with how decisions are made around reliability and verifiability in Wiki-space.

Vital to our project was that we follow Wikipedia's own rules – we did not want the work to be construed as vandalism, and indeed hoped to encourage a critical analysis of Wikipedia's citation mechanism, as well as the most active participants on the Wiki. Following their rules meant that *Wikipedia Art* had to first be written about in 'noteworthy' sources, which could be 'verifiably' cited on the Wiki.

To create these 'noteworthy' sources, we solicited collaborators – several of whom were already cited and thus considered reliable and authoritative sources for art on Wikipedia – to write about the project well before the planned date for intervention. For example, we found that arts critic and former editor of the popular web site MyArtSpace, Brian Sherwin, not only had a Wikipedia page about him and his writing,³³ but his online texts were also often cited on various other Wikipedia articles about contemporary artists and exhibitions.³⁴ We approached Sherwin to introduce and publish a two-way interview between us (Kildall interviewing Stern interviewing Kildall) that laid out the foundations of the not yet extant *Wikipedia Art*, and simultaneously drafted a Wikipedia article on *Wikipedia Art*, which cited that very interview.

On February 14th 2009 at 12PM PST, Sherwin published said interview, and minutes later, Jon Coffelt, aka longtime Wikipedia editor ArtSoujourner, performatively birthed *Wikipedia Art* by placing our pre-drafted and referenced article on Wikipedia. Minutes after that, Professor Patrick Lichty, of *The Yes Men*, posted an analysis of *Wikipedia Art* to Futherfield.org, which was quickly cited on Wikipedia, adding to the work.³⁵ And so on.

We used behind-the-scenes publicity to encourage numerous other online sources to write about the *Wikipedia Art* project. These pages both linked to the *Wikipedia Art* page on Wikipedia, and then were cited on, and linked back to from, Wikipedia itself. The *Wikipedia Art* entry was updated – by us and by others – immediately following every publication.

The documented history of the work, on its Wiki page in its first incarnation, read:

31 Ibid

32 Ibid

33 Wikipedia contributors, 'Brian Sherwin,' 11 February 2009 Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 10 December 2009,

<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Brian_Sherwin&oldid=269991107>.

34 For example, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Stern> and

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarah_Maple> and

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Addressing_the_Shadow_and_Making_Friends_with_Wild_Dogs:_R_emo_dernism> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Craig-Martin> and

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freeze_\(exhibition\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freeze_(exhibition))> and

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesse_Richards> among many others.

35 Patrick Lichty, 'WikiPedia art?', 14 February 2009, <<http://blog.furtherfield.org/?q=node/267>>.

Wikipedia Art was initially created by artists Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern on February 14 2009. It was performatively birthed through a dual launch on Wikipedia and MyArtSpace, where art critic, writer, and blogger, Brian Sherwin, introduced and published their staged two-way interview, 'Wikipedia Art - A Fireside Chat.' The interview ended with Stern declaring, 'I now pronounce Wikipedia Art.' Kildall's response: 'It's alive! Alive!'

The *Wikipedia Art* page and history quickly grew. But while well-known art blogs and sites such as Two Coats of Paint and Rhizome.org covered the piece (enabling yet more performative citations), Wikipedia editor Daniel Rigal quickly nominated the page as an Article for Deletion (AfD). It underwent a long and heated deletion debate, in which many different voices clashed on the merits of the work, its noteworthiness, whether or not it was 'suitably encyclopedic,' and the functions of Wikipedia and its editors.³⁶ 15 hours after the initial intervention, *Wikipedia Art* was removed by an 18-year old Wikipedia admin named 'Werdna.'

In the hours, days, and weeks that followed, the piece mutated from idea to concept to object, from performance to vandalism to trademark infringement to high art. It was killed and resurrected many times over, by Wiki-editors of all sorts. It appeared in several different articles on the site,³⁷ via debate that was cited on and from Wikipedia itself, Rhizome.org, Slashdot, the Wall Street Journal, the Guardian UK, PBS.org, De Telegraph – the list goes on, over 300 texts in over 15 languages, discussing the work, its legitimacy, creative ideas, legal issues and personal insults – all, we assert, part of the 'work' that *is* the 'work of art.'

South African arts critic Chad Rossouw puts forward this very argument when he writes that 'Aside from all the interesting... points [*Wikipedia Art*] makes about the epistemology of Wikipedia and the use, meanings and function of art, the real idea of the work is that art only exists fully through discourse.'³⁸

In other words, it *is* only through how it *is performed*.

Consensus is Consensus is Consensus (maybe)

The performance of Wikipedia, like that of *Wikipedia Art*, goes above and beyond its citation mechanism. Buried in the Wikipedia discussion pages, for example, there are often lengthy debates around when and how Wikipedia's somewhat ambiguous rules are or are not properly adhered to. And decisions about specific articles tend to be made through a consensus of those users who are personally invested in them. But the problem is precisely this: a consensus at Wikipedia is not consensus on a given topic, ready for worldwide dissemination via the site; it is merely a consensus at Wikipedia. This section of our paper

36 Wikipedia contributors, 'Articles for deletion/Wikipedia Art,' 14 February 2009, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 10 December 2009,

<http://wikipediaart.org/wiki/index.php?title=Articles_for_deletion/Wikipedia_Art>.

37 Including, for example, a section on the Wikipedia entry for Conceptual Art (penned by Professor Edward Shanken) and a new page called Wikipedia Art controversy. Neither of these example entries/edits were solicited by us.

38 Chad Rossouw, 'Wikipedia Art: where art and editors lock horns', 8 March 2009, ArtThrob, <<http://www.artthrob.co.za/09mar/project.html>>.

first discusses the potential illusion of general consensus online, where consensus within a given community is misrepresented as global consensus on a given topic. It then argues that consensus – whether on Wikipedia or elsewhere – is something lobbied for, through networking and alliance-building by personalities with agendas, rather than reached through scholarly discourse on a given subject. It gives both past scientific and present Wikipedia-based examples of knowledge-making in just this way. Finally, it turns to satirist newsman Stephen Colbert for a little insight into knowledge production on the Wiki.

Artist, theorist and professor Curt Cloninger argues that *Wikipedia Art* not only intervenes in Wikipedia and the discourses of art, but also into online models of knowledge and debate more generally. Cloninger asks, 'How is a consensus at' one art site 'qualitatively superior to a consensus at' another, or at Wikipedia for that matter?³⁹ In the center of a heated discussion on Rhizome.org, he asserts the irony that small pockets of 'online consensus [are] being used to evaluate the success or failure of' *Wikipedia Art*, 'a piece intended... to explore the topic of online concensus [sic].'⁴⁰

Whilst *Wikipedia Art* was still live as a Wikipedia entry, two well-known critical art sites – Rhizome.org and ArtFagCity.com – provided two very different perspectives on the piece. The Rhizome discussion saw artists and theorists in heated debate about the work, our intentions and its merits (or lack thereof).⁴¹ Here it was alternatively 'a strong relative of networked conceptualism or highly formal online media art' (Lichty), 'an interesting experiment but doomed from the start' (Thayer),⁴² an 'interesting & fun... revelation' (Szpakowski), and 'one big performance' (MTAA) that was 'conceptually porous' (Cloninger), among other things.⁴³ ArtFagCity (AFC), on the other hand, provided a thread where the vast majority of commenters agreed that the work was weak. Here, the consensus was that *Wikipedia Art* is 'almost inherently boring' (Johnson), 'hate'-worthy (Moody), 'a waste' (Hwang) and 'half-baked' (Zimmerman).⁴⁴

Interestingly, what minimal crossover of discussion there was between the two sites illustrates that while consensus may be reached in a small group of like-minded people, it often doesn't hold up to a broader audience. In fact, the commenters at AFC acted like a small faction of the online arts community, huddling together in a camp so as to reach consensus, then sending out word of the decisions they made. Moody, for example, linked to the discussion at ArtFagCity to try and prove his point on Rhizome that the work failed, and was made in bad faith. When he posted on both of the separate Rhizome threads that the 'project is being mostly panned over at Paddy Johnson's blog [AFC],' he was trying to claim that the consensus at AFC was a more general consensus, that Rhizomers should simply

39 Paddy Johnson and ArtFagCity contributors, 'Wikipedia Art Lasts All Day!,' 16 February 2009, Art Fag City, <<http://www.artfagcity.com/2009/02/16/wikipedia-art-lasts-all-day/>>.

40 Ibid

41 See <<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2360>> and <<http://www.rhizome.org/discuss/view/41713>>

42 Patrick Lichty and Rhizome contributors, 'WikiPedia as Art?,' 14 February 2009, Rhizome.org, <<http://rhizome.org/discuss/view/41713>>.

43 Ceci Moss and Rhizome contributors, 'Wikipedia Art,' 17 Februaru 2009, Rhizome.org <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2360>.

44 Paddy Johnson and ArtFagCity contributors, 'Wikipedia Art Lasts All Day!,' 16 February 2009, Art Fag City, <<http://www.artfagcity.com/2009/02/16/wikipedia-art-lasts-all-day/>>.

agree / concede that *Wikipedia Art* and its progenitors and their tactics are 'icky' and 'disingenuous.'⁴⁵

Moody's ongoing hyperlinks and attempts to guide the discussion towards his own / AFC's opinion, were, in turn: taken on board by MTAA – the work 'makes sense to me'; rebutted heartily by Cloninger – 'you're stereotyping your philosophers'; dismissed by Lichty – 'I'm not offended at all at Tom's mock outrage at my mock outrage, or the other criticisms of the project'; and more.⁴⁶ Contrapuntally, commenter t.whid cited Rhizome on ArtFagCity, and asked for clarification of some of the ideas presented, as an attempt to encourage a more even-handed discussion there. Moody quickly shut this down with an ad hominem attack, saying the 'inherently boring' aspects of the work are 'perfectly clear,' and that t.whid was 'wasting time asking for infinite clarification,' despite that the question was raised only once. He went on to call t.whid 'disingenuous as heck.'⁴⁷

In both cases, the relatively easily reached consensus at one site was far from agreed upon when attempts were made to inject that consensual opinion elsewhere. The clash between art-appreciators on AFC and Rhizome provided the aforementioned Curt Cloninger with an apt demonstration of his most lucid point about the work. He applauds *Wikipedia Art* for the potential for commentary that it provides regarding online pockets of consensus vs canonicity / general consensus.

Cloninger effectively claims that any work of art's relevance and value, or, for that matter, a person or object's noteworthiness, is always forever debatable – even if decided and agreed upon in groups. He asks how consensus at ArtFagCity is 'qualitatively superior to a consensus at Rhizome (or at iDC or nettime, where dialogue is also happening about this piece)?'⁴⁸ How, he goes on to bash Brooklynite Tom Moody, is "non-intellectual' Brooklyn underground gallery canonicity qualitatively superior to 'intellectual' academic press canonicity,' the latter implicitly offered by Rhizome.org?⁴⁹ This is when Cloninger makes his ironic assertion about online consensus being used to evaluate online consensus. He suggests that where Tom Moody – the major proponent of ArtFagCity's negative perspective – had intended to discredit *Wikipedia Art* by citing a small audience that agreed on its failure, he merely served the work by instigating further discussions around citations, consensus and how they work together. These differing opinions expressed online do not, as Weinberger hopes, create a consensual meaning across Internet space. Rather, they succeed in implementing isolated areas of contradictory and not-quite consensus.

Cloninger uses our art work to explicitly question not only the rules of and authority behind AFC and Rhizome and the personalities behind their debates, but also *Wikipedia* and its attempt at objectivity. *Wikipedia Art*, he contends, 'has effectively raised' contemporary

45 Ibid

46 Ceci Moss and Rhizome contributors, 'Wikipedia Art,' 17 February 2009, Rhizome.org <<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2360>>.

47 Paddy Johnson and ArtFagCity contributors, 'Wikipedia Art Lasts All Day!,' 16 February 2009, Art Fag City, <<http://www.artfagcity.com/2009/02/16/wikipedia-art-lasts-all-day/>>.

48 Ibid

49 Ceci Moss and Rhizome Contributors, 'Wikipedia Art,' 17 February 2009, Rhizome, 5 December 2009 <<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2360>>.

issues 'regarding the inherent subjectivity of canonicity and authority' on Wikipedia and beyond.⁵⁰ He continues,

The wikipedians... are deluded into thinking that they are achieving some sort of clinical objectivity via rational consensus (or that any such objectivity could ever be achieved).⁵¹

The larger problem inherent in Cloninger's assertion is that isolated consensus on Wikipedia, as already discussed, can later become conventional wisdom.

Albeit in a different context, Bruno Latour and Steve Wooglar also question the possibility of clinical objectivity, in their book *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*.⁵² Here the authors don't give a history of scientific discovery, but rather attempt to determine how facts come to acquire their factual character. According Latour and Wooglar, they present

the laboratory as a system of literary inscription, an outcome of which is the occasional conviction of others that something is fact. Such conviction entails the perception that a fact is something which is simply recorded in an article in that it has neither been socially constructed nor possesses its own history of construction.⁵³

Their argument is that the laboratory is filled with the social and the political, and the doing and making of science cannot be separated from such forces. The illusion of separation is instituted retrospectively, for example in the carefully written reconstruction of laboratory practice in a research paper.

Latour and Wooglar show that the scientific laboratory is not, in fact, "a sterile, inhuman place," a space "widely regarded by outsiders as well organised, logical, and coherent." Rather, it "consists of a disordered array of observations with which scientists struggle to produce order."⁵⁴ So-called incontestable facts are not truths waiting to be uncovered, but the end result of long, messy, and confusing procedures. Facts become facts only when they are incorporated into a large body of knowledge drawn upon by others and they lose their temporal qualifications.

In Latour's study of Louis Pasteur,⁵⁵ for example, the subject emerges not as the heroic discoverer of the microbial transmission of disease, but as the master who is strategically able to combine his findings with an array of elements and outside interests, for example, army doctors, farmers, newspapers, French nationalism, specialist journals, transport experts, and the microbes themselves. Latour claims that Pasteur and his actor-network erase all controversy, and write scientific history for themselves.

Latour's 1987 book, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, provides another study, into how scientific 'facts' are generated, this time through strategic and collective action via publication and public debate. Here, a citation mechanism

50 Ibid

51 Ibid

⁵² Bruno Latour and Steve Wooglar, *Laboratory life: the construction of scientific facts*, West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1979.

53 Ibid, 105

⁵⁴ Ibid, 5, 36.

⁵⁵ Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, Paris: A.M Metallie, 1984.

not dissimilar to Wikipedia's is used to legitimate the entire process. Scientific fact, the back cover of Latour's book asserts, comes from the building of networks. It's a numbers game, but one based more on perception than anything else. We cite one small scenario from his book at length here because we will later show an equivalent, and not uncommon, example on Wikipedia.

Says Latour:

Mr Anybody's opinion can be easily brushed aside. This is why he enlists the support of a written article published in a newspaper. That does not cut much ice with Mr Somebody. The newspaper is too general and the author, even if he calls himself 'doctor', must be some unemployed scientist to end up writing in *The Times*. The situation is suddenly reversed when Mr Anybody supports his claim with a new set of allies: a journal, *Nature*; a Nobel Prize author; six co-authors; the granting agencies. As the reader can easily image, Mr Somebody's tone of voice has been transformed. Mr Anybody is to be taken seriously since he is not alone any more: a group, so to speak, accompanies him. Mr Anybody has become Mr Manybodies!⁵⁶

Here, as in politics, lobbying takes place, networks are built, and alliances are made to form what Latour calls 'the argument from authority.' The goal is not to 'be right,' but to create 'a majority' that overwhelms 'the dissenter[s].'⁵⁷ In this way, a hotly contested issue can see one viewpoint building much more support, and eventually taking over as the dominant perspective.

One such instance outside of the laboratory in which alliances make way for scientific "fact" is given in N Katherine Hayles' classic book, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*.⁵⁸ Hayles tells of the Macy Conferences – a series of interdisciplinary and scholarly meetings in the 1940s and 1950s – where it was basically *decided* that 'data' is separate from the material that transports it. Communication, the scholars from the conference tell us, is entirely incorporeal.⁵⁹ But information, Hayles remembers for us, requires materiality – whether a hard drive, a mind, electric cables or a book. While we like to think of our bits as travelling around the ether without any flesh, we all know that our data is lost should the hard drive, mind or cables fail, should the book be lost or destroyed. Problems of the Digital Dark Age, for example, can always be overcome if a clever software engineer deems outdated data formats worthy of her time; but if the physical Viking tapes themselves were lost, per our earlier example, there would be nothing anyone could do. Hayles reminds us that although 'it can be a shock to remember... for information to exist, it must always be instantiated in a medium.'⁶⁰

The contemporary misconception of bodiless data, Hayles contends, is a direct result of the alliance-building that took place at, and the subsequent logic that was propagated after, the Macy Conferences. Even back then, she confirms, 'malcontents grumbled that divorcing

56 Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 31.

57 Ibid

58 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

59 Ibid, p. 19

60 Ibid, p. 13

information' from its material made its theorization 'so narrowly formalized that it was not useful as a general theory of communication.'⁶¹

Hayles' book turns historical scientific debate into 'narratives about the negotiations that took place between particular people at particular times and places.' She describes the

contests between competing factions, contests whose outcomes were far from obvious. Many factors affected the outcomes, from the needs of emerging technologies for reliable quantification to the personalities of the people involved.⁶²

Here Hayles conveys just how fragile is the reasoning that underpins this discourse. 'Though overdetermined, the disembodiment of information was not inevitable.'⁶³ The 'fact' of 'disembodied data' is not 'correct,' but rather a decision that was made – a consensus – within a small group of influential people who were advocating for a singular approach to the future of communication theory.

Wikipedia's system of knowledge production through verifiability, we argue, is even more precarious than that of the communities described by Latour and Hayles. The entire structure is based on that which is specifically criticized: the creation of an implicit consensus through personal lobbying and recursive citations.

One Wikipedia-based example of such alliance-building towards a consensual end is the Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) WikiProject. Here, interested parties work together to add articles about the D&D world – its creatures, characters, campaigns and accessories – to *our* world's most often used encyclopedia. The group has approximately 30 dedicated role-playing gamers that are concurrently active as Wikipedia editors,⁶⁴ and so hundreds of articles have been created for Dungeons and Dragons characters, including the deities and demons Eilistraee, Vlaakith and Marilith,⁶⁵ to name just three.

While it could easily be argued that such articles do not meet Wikipedia's threshold for inclusion – the only references given are the gaming materials themselves, zines like TSR or Wizards of the Coast, or fan sites – attempts to tag or remove these articles have been met by strong and coordinated resistance from the Dungeons and Dragons WikiProject members. Pages upon pages of archived text reveal the Latourian 'bringing friends in' model at play.

Beginning in 2008, for example, user Gavin.collins began arguing that articles such as those detailing D&D deities are self-referential and do not belong on Wikipedia.⁶⁶ What follows is an edited text of a typical response to his criticism:

61 Ibid, p. 19

62 Ibid, p. 22

63 Ibid

64 Wikipedia contributors, Wikipedia:WikiProject Dungeons & Dragons/Participants, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Dungeons_%26_Dragons/Participants>.

65 See <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marilith>>, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vlaakith>> and <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eilistraee>>, respectively.

66 Wikipedia talk:WikiProject Dungeons & Dragons/Archive 13, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_talk:WikiProject_Dungeons_%26_Dragons/Archive_13>

Drilnoth: 'Gavin has been adding Notability tags to articles again. I've been replacing them with Importance tags whenever I see them (hooray for the public watchlist!), but I thought that you might all want to know.'⁶⁷

BOZ: 'Indeed - a brilliant idea you had there... Are you beginning to experience the fun we've all had over the past year? ;)'⁶⁸

Bilby: 'I agree with BOZ here... while Gavin may often be technically correct, the process by which he tends to make his points is damaging to the community who try to build the articles and who might be willing to overcome any problems with them.'⁶⁹

Jéské Couriano: 'I think we may have a legitimate Arbitration case against Gavin. This has turned behavioral for the most part, and past attempts at dispute resolution didn't work.'⁷⁰

Even to the personalities banding together, Gavin appears to be correct in his attempts to remove these articles from the Wiki. Rather than concede, however, they work together to not only prove their viewpoint worthy, but discredit the dissenter. Most D&D characters added by members of the Dungeons and Dragons WikiProject remain on the Wiki because of such back-page organizing, which creates the illusion of consensus on the front end. It is with intended irony that we implemented a similar strategy in our failed attempts to have *Wikipedia Art* remain permanently on Wikipedia.

Stephen Colbert's notion of Wikiality most concisely illustrates the ludic wonders of consensus formation at Wikipedia and beyond. On his nightly fake news show, Colbert proffered 'the idea that if you claim something to be true and enough people agree with you, it becomes true.'⁷¹ Latour might call such a thing a 'factish' – a combination between fact and fetish. Facts are true, he argues, because the objects themselves make it so, while with fetishes, subjects are responsible for projecting their beliefs onto the objects.⁷² A factish requires action and event, or, in the case of Wikipedia, performative and recursive citation.

Wikipedia explains that Colbert defines Wikiality

as the concept that 'together we can create a reality that we all agree on - the reality we just agreed on.' The premise of wikiality is that reality is what the wiki says it is. He explained that on Wikipedia 'any user can change any entry, and if enough users agree with them, it becomes true.'⁷³

67 Wikipedia talk:WikiProject Dungeons & Dragons/Archive 11,
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_talk:WikiProject_Dungeons_%26_Dragons/Archive_11>

68 Ibid

69 Wikipedia talk:WikiProject Dungeons & Dragons/Archive 14,
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_talk:WikiProject_Dungeons_%26_Dragons/Archive_14>

70 Ibid

71 Frank Ahrens, 'It's on Wikipedia, So It Must Be True,' 6 August 2006, Washington Post
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/05/AR2006080500114.html>>.

⁷² Bruno Latour, *Pandora's hope: essays on the reality of science studies*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999.

73 Wikipedia contributors, 'Cultural impact of The Colbert Report: Wikipedia references,' 3 December 2009, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 6 December 2009
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikiality#Wikipedia_references>.

Colbert basically calls Wikipedia a tautology, a cyclical argument for its own arguments – the Digital Dark Age indeed. He takes his own point to its illogical conclusion – editing a Wikipedia page in order to use Wikipedia’s information and site as proof that his false statements are true.

In June 2008, Colbert claimed that Warren G. Harding was a ‘secret negro president’, and cited the Wikipedia page that he himself had changed for ‘proof’ of his reality.⁷⁴ Here, Wikipedia becomes a record *and* a source, a tautology of fact through Colbert’s own discursively formed consensus. Colbert first makes a claim, then cites it *on* the Wiki, and finally quotes it *from* the Wiki, as proof that general consensus has been agreed upon. Put another way, consensus is consensus because consensus is consensus.

Colbert’s ongoing interventions into Wikipedia are, too, quite a performance.⁷⁵ And they begin to debunk the myth of Wikipedia as, like Science, objective truth-seeker.

Wikipedia Mythologies

We further argue that our intervention did not only exist at the level of a small number of editors in debate. It spoke back to the larger mythologies surrounding Wikipedia. We all know these: it is ‘the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit’ (stated on every page).⁷⁶ It is a public site that is in the public service. Even when they get things wrong, *we* are the system, *we* can fix it, and *we* are an inherently fair people. The mythology implies that there is no singular person behind the curtain and no group that maintains control.

Weinberger describes this mythology best:

Anonymous authors. No editors. No special privileges for experts. Signs plastering articles detailing the ways they fall short. All the disagreements about each article posted in public. Easy access to all the previous drafts - including highlighting of the specific changes. No one who can certify that an article is done and ready. It would seem that Wikipedia does everything in its power to avoid being an authority, yet that seems only to increase its authority⁷⁷

In other words, the mythology says that transparency makes all fallibility null and void. More importantly, there is no hierarchy on Wikipedia; all people are editors and all editors are equal.

With regards to mythologies, semiologist Roland Barthes once famously dissected the cover of *Paris-Match* magazine – an image of an African saluting the French flag. The denotation in this image, he says, what we see and what it represents is simply that: a black man in salute. Following Saussure, Barthes says that images can point to a greater connotation, a myth, that is not simply a representation, but rather propagation made by the image itself. Here, the connotation is that of French imperialism. The image does not re-present, but rather

74 Ibid

75 Colbert’s other interventions include, but are not limited to, wiki-lobbying – not unrelated to this section – and an edit of the number of elephants in the world.

76 Wikipedia contributors, ‘Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia,’ 6 December 2009, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 6 December 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page>.

77 David Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous*, New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2008.

presents – all on its own – a picture of France as a great nation, whose children, of all colors, faithfully serve.⁷⁸

Wikipedia – its editors, trustees and PR workers working in tandem, whether they know it or not – propagates a similar image of itself. All of Wikipedia’s children, it contends, may participate in knowledge production. They can, the mythology avers, introduce new articles, edit those that need change, remove irrelevant or unverifiable information.

John Seigenthaler, a well-respected journalist and USA Today editor, famously levied mainstream critiques against the information-structure of Wikipedia when an anonymous user altered the article about him in May 2005. For over 4 months, the page suggested that Seigenthaler played a role in Bobby Kennedy's assassination, as well as that he lived in the Soviet Union for 13 years. These are both demonstrably false factoids, which he fears are still circulating, and that have only been corrected publicly and on Wikipedia thanks to his personal intervention with the Wikimedia Foundation, and appearance on several news stations.⁷⁹

Despite that thousands read and believed this misinformation, Stanford Engineering Professor and Wikipedia advocate Pall Saffo says that Seigenthaler ‘overreacted.’⁸⁰ Saffo, who believes that ‘Wikipedia is a researcher's dream,’⁸¹ claims that Seigenthaler

should have just changed it. And he should've gotten his friends to help him watch it and every time it was changed, to change it back to what was correct.⁸²

Seigenthaler, Saffo goes on, ‘clearly doesn't understand the culture of Wikipedia.’⁸³

But according to Nicholas Ciarelli and his article entitled ‘The Myth of Wikipedia Democracy,’ it is Saffo who does not understand the culture of Wikipedia. Rather, he believes the mythology behind it. Wikipedia, Ciarelli shows, is

ruled by a tight clique of aggressive editors who drive out amateurs and newcomers... The brand is a myth... the most active 2 percent of users [have] performed nearly 75 percent of the edits on the site.⁸⁴

Research by Weinberger has shown that Wikipedia is far from a site by *the* people, and more by *a* people. A mere 600 editors make about 50% of all Wikipedia edits. 87% of the Wikipedia editors are male, the average age is 26.8 years old, and people under 23 years old

78 Wikipedia contributors, ‘Mythologies (book),’ 19 October 2009, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia., 6 December 2009 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mythologies_\(book\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mythologies_(book))>.

79 Wikipedia contributors, ‘Wikipedia biography controversy,’ 30 November 2009, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 5 December 2009, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia_biography_controversy&oldid=328695840>.

80 Janet Kornblum, ‘It's online, but is it true?,’ USA Today 6 December 2005.

81 Wikipedia contributors, ‘Paul Saffo,’ 1 November 2009, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 6 December 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Paul_Saffo&oldid=323324024>.

82 Janet Kornblum, ‘It's online, but is it true?,’ USA Today 6 December 2005.

83 Ibid

84 Nicholas Ciarelli, ‘The Myth of Wikipedia Democracy,’ 30 November 2009, The Daily Beast, 6 December 2009 <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-11-28/wikipedias-attack-dog-editors/>>.

produce 50% of all its content.⁸⁵ These editors are, according to Wales, 'very technologically savvy... 20s and 30s [male] computer geeks.'⁸⁶ The result is often an over-focus on popular culture and aversion to outsiders with perspectives that differ from this demographic's. These editors run a very tight ship on the open editing system that is Wikipedia, in effect – according to William Emigh and Susan C. Herring – 'literally erasing diversity, controversy, and inconsistency, and homogenizing contributors' voices.'⁸⁷

Ciarelli interviews several would-be editors who have had a very hard time participating on the site. Says one,

You just can't sit down and write an honest, creative, and argumentative article... [a small] clique of users enforces Wikipedia's bewildering list of rules - policies covering neutrality, verifiability, and naming conventions, among other areas.⁸⁸

Ciarelli quotes Justin Knapp, a regular Wikipedia contributor, as saying that when newcomers try to edit highly erroneous factoids, 'someone will almost blithely refer' you to one of a growing list of many unknown and highly technical policies. Your 'changes are reverted immediately' and one won't 'know how they arrived at this decision.'⁸⁹ Ex-Wikipedia editor Eric Lerner says Wikipedia's 'democratic reputation is undeserved.' 'What ends up getting published,' he says, 'is not decided by 'the wisdom of crowds,' it's decided by the administrators.'⁹⁰

So pervasive is the populist image behind Wikipedia, that many are surprised to learn that individuals at Wikipedia can have more or less 'clout' as editors, about the game-like 'deletionists' that take it upon themselves to erase that which they deem non-notable and 'inclusionists' who try to sneak past them. The large public that uses Wikipedia rarely thinks about the hierarchical structures that are behind the making of Wikipedia's long list of ongoing rules, about those that make PR decisions on its board, or that their founder and full-time public relations advisors will not hesitate in spreading falsehoods about, and name-calling, Wikipedia naysayers. The myth is that Wikipedia deserves to be powerful precisely because no individual on the Wiki has power. Unfortunately, and as we've said, this 'fact' is much more consensus than it is truth.

WikiPower

85 Glott, Schmidt, Ghosh, 'Wikipedia Survey – First Results', 9 April 2009, conducted by UNU-MERIT in co-operation with Wikimedia.

86 Natasha Lomas, 'Jimmy Wales on What's Next for Wikipedia: Why Wikipedia needs geeks and why a life unplugged is unthinkable,' 5 November 2009, silicon.com, 11 December 2009 <<http://www.silicon.com/technology/networks/2009/11/05/exclusive-jimmy-wales-on-whats-next-for-wikipedia-39626372/>>.

87 William Emigh & Susan C. Herring, 'Collaborative Authoring on the Web: A Genre Analysis of Online Encyclopedias', 2005, Proceedings of the Thirty-Eighth Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences, Los Alamitos: IEEE Press,

88 Nicholas Ciarelli, 'The Myth of Wikipedia Democracy,' 30 November 2009, The Daily Beast, 6 December 2009 <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-11-28/wikipedias-attack-dog-editors/>>.

89 Ibid

90 Ibid

In fact, we have experienced firsthand assertions of power not only from anonymous Wikipedia editors, but also from paid staff members at Wikimedia, their lawyers, and even Jimmy Wales himself. The foundation deployed media-spinning tactics and legal intimidation in order to – quite counter-intuitively – enforce the mythology of Wikipedia as a free and open enterprise.

Our prime example, on March 23rd, 2009, Scott Kildall, the registrant of the domain name <wikipediaart.org>,⁹¹ received a letter from Douglas Isenberg, a lawyer representing the Wikimedia Foundation, which alleged that the ‘Wikipedia Art’ domain was infringing on their Wikipedia trademark. The foundation specifically requested that we transfer the domain over to them.⁹² This action would effectively render the project extinct, since it had already been removed from Wikipedia and now only existed there in archive form.⁹³

We sought legal advice from many sources, and eventually worked very closely with Paul Levy, a pro bono lawyer from Public Citizen, who determined that we were on legally safe ground under ‘fair use’ of trademark.⁹⁴ Our work is both a commentary on Wikipedia and a non-commercial project.⁹⁵ We put up a disclaimer on our site that made clear ‘we are not Wikipedia and do not wish to benefit from Wikipedia,’ and in a written letter offered to edit said disclaimer however Wikimedia saw fit.

Wikimedia again asked for us to transfer the domain, citing other, similar cases as proof they had legal standing. In response, Levy wrote to Mike Godwin, Internet guru and general counsel of Wikimedia:

As sad as I am to have to hold Wikipedia to the First Amendment and fair use rights of its non-commercial critics, I will have no compunction about doing so. I hope it does not come to that. I am sure it is not in the interest of Wikimedia to add the suppression of fair use and free speech to its brand identity.⁹⁶

Levy then recommended we ‘go public.’

We uploaded the appropriate legal correspondence to the <wikipediaart.org> website and provided Corynne McSherry at the Electronic Frontier Foundation with the link for a blog post. She wrote:

91 The legal proceedings were directed at Scott Kildall since he was the official registrant of the domain name. It should be noted, however, that he and Nathaniel Stern split the legal costs and worked together in all decision-making regarding the threatened litigation.

92 Douglas Isenberg, ‘Re: registration and use of <wikipediaart.org> domain name’, 23 March 2009, available online at <<http://wikipediaart.org/legal/032309-Isenberg.jpg>>.

93 Ibid

94 Note that while ‘fair use’ is a term usually associated with copyright law – referring to how copyrighted content may be used transformationally, for commentary, etc. in a new work – there are also cases of fair use for trademarked names and logos, although the laws are much stricter in the latter case.

95 Lloyd L. Rich, ‘Fair Use of Trademarks’, 2002, The Publishing Law Center, 10 December 2009, <<http://www.publaw.com/fairusetrade.html>>.

96 Paul Levy, ‘Upshot and Status’, 17 April 2009, Wikipedia Art Archive, 10 December 2009, <<http://wikipediaart.org/legal/041709-LevyEmail.html>>.

it is hard to see what Wikipedia gains by litigating this matter. But it is easy to see how it... loses : What better way to call attention to the artists' critical work than by threatening their free speech?⁹⁷

The controversy was picked up by several media outlets, most of which were very critical of Wikimedia. The negative publicity cost them the goodwill of many in the community that support its open enterprise, probably summarized best by the closing remark on a Slashdot.org post: 'Load and aim at foot.'⁹⁸ Although no official legal settlement was reached, Wikimedia eventually backed off.

But Wikimedia's PR response to the media blitz was swift. Despite documentation showing otherwise, Godwin stated on a semi-public list that 'No litigation was threatened or commenced.'⁹⁹ He went on to publicly call us 'would-be artists.'¹⁰⁰ In another public forum, we were accused of producing a money-grubbing PR stunt by Wikipedia Press director David Gerard,¹⁰¹ who went on to say 'They're performance artists. This is more performance. They fooled the EFF into playing along.'¹⁰² And Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales himself named us 'trolls... dedicated to vandalizing Wikipedia.'¹⁰³

We decided not to respond publicly. Wikimedia was doing our (art) work for us: enacting much of what we had asked the public to look at critically on and around Wikipedia.

The conflict with the Wikimedia Foundation became part of the *Wikipedia Art* narrative, and after it produced this second round of press coverage, *Wikipedia Art* was again added to the site by an anonymous editor. The same Wikipedia editors from the first debate eventually deleted this page as well (despite that, again, a proper consensus was not reached). *Wikipedia Art* now exists only as a memory, an ephemeral performance, and, in a very succinct fashion, on the Wikipedia pages for Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern.

Conclusion

Despite its live mutations through continuous streams of press online, *Wikipedia Art* was considered controversial vandalism by those in the Wikipedia community, and eventually removed almost entirely from the site.¹⁰⁴ If only for a short time, it addressed issues of notability, bias, consensus, myth and power. *Wikipedia Art* exemplified citation as

97 Corynne McSherry, 'Wikipedia Threatens Artists for Fair Use', 23 March 2009, Electronic Frontier Foundation, 10 December 2009, <[http://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2009/04/wikipedia-threatens->](http://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2009/04/wikipedia-threatens-).

98 Ragin, 'Wikipedia Threatens Artists for Fair Use' (comment), 24 April 2009, Slashdot, 12 December 2009, <<http://yro.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=09/04/24/1239232>>.

99 Mike Godwin, 'The EFF appears to be somewhat upset by the foundation', posting to the Foundation-I mailing list, 23 April 2009, <<http://lists.wikimedia.org/pipermail/foundation-I/2009-April/051505.html>>.

100 Ibid

101 David Gerard, 'The EFF appears to be somewhat upset by the foundation', posting to the Foundation-I mailing list, 23 April 2009, <<http://lists.wikimedia.org/pipermail/foundation-I/2009-April/051509.html>>.

102 Ibid

103 WebProNews Staff, 'Wikipedia Founder Slams Wikipedia Art: Calls artists 'trolls'' 11 May 2009, WebProNews, 12 December 2009, <<http://www.webpronews.com/topnews/2009/05/01/wikipedia-founder-calls-artists-trolls>>.

104 Excepting a tiny paragraph on the pages that describe Kildall and Stern's practices at large.

performative act: it was, as predicted, birthed, killed, resurrected, transformed and eliminated yet again through a performance of words.¹⁰⁵

Artist Pall Thayer argues that 'Art is always strictly tied to the time and culture from whence it came.'¹⁰⁶ Perhaps for that very reason, he goes on, 'it was best that *Wikipedia Art* was deleted.'¹⁰⁷ Rather than continuously being changed, and perhaps diluted, in its ongoing-ness, *Wikipedia Art* 'gets to live on as a reference point to the time and culture that created it.'¹⁰⁸

In other words, *Wikipedia Art* lives on because of its death; it is permanently inscribed in collective memory, an object-less fixture that asks us to remember the shortcomings of the Wiki. As user 'Helen' says on Furtherfield.org, 'the ghost of *Wikipedia Art* is bound to haunt the web for some time yet.'¹⁰⁹

Selected Online Traces of Wikipedia Art

Wikipedia Art (web site)
<http://wikipediaart.org>

Wikipedia Art, A Virtual Fireside Chat (interview)
published by Brian Sherwin, myartspace.com, 14 February 2009
<http://www.myartspace.com/blog/2009/02/wikipedia-art-virtual-fireside-chat.html>

Wikipedia Art (original article / archive)
posted by Jon Coffelt, 14 February 2009
http://wikipediaart.org/wiki/index.php?title=Wikipedia_Art

WikiPedia Art?
Patrick Lichty, Furtherfield Blog, 14 February 2009
<http://blog.furtherfield.org/?q=node/267>

Wikipedia:Articles_for_deletion/Wikipedia_Art
Wikipedia contributors, 14 - 15 February 2009
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Articles_for_deletion/Wikipedia_Art

Wikipedia Art Lasts All Day!

¹⁰⁵ Here it is worth noting the *Wikipedia Art Remixed* project. Launched in mid-2009, this project was a collection of several dozen pieces from all over the world, where each artist-volunteer used some of the *Wikipedia Art* content – our logo, for example, or the text from the original article or debates – as source material for new art works ranging from music or video to painting or printmaking. The collection of projects - all documented online at <http://wikipediaart.org/remixes/> - was officially included as part of the Internet Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale.

¹⁰⁶ Patrick Lichty and Rhizome Contributors, 'WikiPedia Art?', 14 February 2009, Rhizome.org, 8 December 2009 <<http://www.rhizome.org/discuss/view/41713>>.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Helen Jamieson, 'WikiPedia art?' Furtherfield Blog, February 2009, <<http://blog.furtherfield.org/?q=node/267>>.

Paddy Johnson, Art Fag City, 16 February 2009
<http://www.artfagcity.com/2009/02/16/wikipedia-art-lasts-all-day/>

Wikipedia Art
Ceci Moss, Rhizome.org, 17 February 2009
<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2360>

Art Space Talk: Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern
Brian Sherwin, MyArtSpace.com, 5 April 2009
<http://myartspace-blog.blogspot.com/2009/04/art-space-talk-scott-kildall-and.html>

Wikipedia Threatens Artists for Fair Use
Corynne McSherry, Electronic Frontier Foundation, 23 April 2009
<http://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2009/04/wikipedia-threatens->

Wikipedia Threatens Artists for Fair Use
Hugh Pickens, Slashdot.org, 24 April 2009
<http://yro.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=09/04/24/1239232>

Deconstructing Wikipedia
Mary Louise Schumacher, Journal Sentinel, 30 April 2009
<http://www.jsonline.com/blogs/entertainment/44035017.html>

Wikipedia Founder Slams Wikipedia Art
WebProNews Staff, WebProNews, 11 May 2009
<http://www.webpronews.com/topnews/2009/05/01/wikipedia-founder-calls-artists-trolls>

Wikipedia Art: Vandalism or Performance Art?
Simon Owens, May 13 2009
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