

Going Viral: Art in the Media



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Video Link -

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzFBD-LgKV0>

In the past several years, social media websites, chat rooms, and personal blogs have taken on new life by dispensing the news of the day as short, highly charged viral accounts. These viral accounts, or stories, are created and defended by the people who are not traditionally in charge of the news media, but by those who are the recipients of the media. Through social media outlets, people not only receive information, they also have the ability to share the story in sharing online posts and videos. These websites, such as youtube, arguably give their participants the ability to reach the world more rapidly and with more translucency than any previous technological advancement. Just the act of “logging in” to the conversation and then sharing that conversation to friends or email groups allows the story to expand, reach additional people, and potentially take on additional significance. The more controversial the story is the more potential it has to “go viral;” in other words, the more potential it has to be shared to thousands of people in online communities within a few short seconds.

While some stories are found to be false fairly quickly, there are a number that remain conversations within these online communities, even causing petitions and anti-websites that are tagged along with the story itself. If stories like these viral posts create such wide and varied response what could happen when an artist begins to realize the power of such a means of media manipulation and dissemination? More and more, artists are becoming interested in how their projects take on new life within the context of social media. These projects in large part compel moral and ethical discussions within communities on and off the web. While many of the rumors that surround these art projects are quickly debunked as false, some of them continue to receive discussion.

One artist, Guillermo Vargas, created a project that took on new significance once it entered the context of social media. Vargas’ exhibition titled *Exposición N° 1* used a very highly charged subject to test the reaction of the online community. Vargas, working under the pseudonym Habacuc, also gained worldwide notoriety with his one-person show in 2007 at the Códice Gallery in Managua, Nicaragua. This exhibition featured several works of art that were in large part created as an installation and which became part of an event. The event, or happening, took place on the opening night of the show and would only be witnessed by the people who would attend that evening. All descriptions of the project were collected and revealed through event photographs, conversation, and second hand accounts.

The event had three main parts: an incense bowl filled with a large pile of burning cannabis; a bowl of burning crack-cocaine; and an emaciated dog tied to the corner of the gallery. From second-hand information, it was believed that Vargas had paid two young boys in the area to chase down a runaway dog, which was then tethered up to the gallery wall during the exhibition. On the wall over the abandoned dog, Vargas spelled out in dog food “Eres Lo Que Lees,” which translates to “You are what you read.” During the exhibition, the dog remained tied up to the wall and was not attended to. During the opening event, the attendees left the dog tied to the wall and withheld food from the dog. Over the next couple of days Vargas’ exhibition became more and more infamous, as news leaked that the dog had died later that evening while chained to the wall due to starvation. Once the news of the dog’s death hit the Internet, accounts of the event went viral on social media websites. Vargas was quickly seen as a dog murderer and the information about the project was out onto the Internet where it would be quickly tested and contested. From initial reports of the installation of his show, Vargas paid for a dog’s capture from the streets of Nicaragua and made sure that the dog was left to die by starving the dog in the name of art.

From the backlash, people began declaring his installation not art at all, but the cruelest example of animal abuse. Vargas was famous, he had found a way to get his name out into the public and a heated discussion began about the rights of the animal he used in the exhibition. The conversation had gone viral and it seemed like everyone would have something to say about the Vargas’ project. In most cases the most vocal opposition came from people saying that this was not art but plain abuse. Because of this growing conversation and Vargas’ newly gained notoriety, he was asked to “replicate” this exhibition as the Nicaraguan representative at the Bienal CentroAmericana in Honduras in 2008. Once the news of his next project reached the Internet, a petition asking him refrain from recreating this project quickly circulated, on sites such as Myspace and Facebook. There were pages devoted to saving the dog Vargas might use in his next exhibition. Vargas replied that he agreed with the backlash and signed the petition himself. He stated that he was not responsible for harming the dog, but that the blame was with the people that participated that evening in his exhibition. Vargas stated that if anyone wanted to save the dog that evening, no one would have stopped him or her. He went on to say that everyone in the room left the dog and even when food was located in the gallery no one stepped in to give the dog any help. Vargas explained that he was trying to make a statement on the affairs outside and inside the gallery by saying that if anyone saw this same dog on the street in the same situation they would not stop to help. In most cases, Vargas explained, this dog would be left to die

anyway and was actually very sick when it was in the gallery. Therefore, Vargas believed that nothing could be done with the dog. For Vargas its death was inevitable.

Video Links- PART 1

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_F46fjy7sFo

Video Links- PART 2

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTRGnGNVj0M>

Video Links- PART 3

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6_BmeIAC24

The fact that Vargas thought of the dog as almost dead really fueled the backlash on the Internet. Vargas' argument about the nature of humanity and mistreating animals sparked a huge negative response against Vargas, with many Internet users declaring that they would attack Vargas if they were to ever see him in person. Once the doors had closed that evening on "Exposición N° 1" and the news had entered the Internet chat rooms, Vargas was known worldwide as a murderer and animal abuser in the name of art. The Internet chat rooms themselves made this story much more than an exhibition; it made the event powerful by perpetuating and publicizing the story. Conversations that arose from this exhibition tested the notions of cruelty, abuse, animal rights, human rights, and what art is and should be. Furthermore, it tested the notions of our own ideals of humanity and how sharing the conversation just continues to build upon the story, sharing with the rest of the world causes the story to go viral.

Additional information on the exhibition is very hazy. It is difficult to actually ascertain the true treatment of the dog. During an interview with the Nicaraguan Newspaper "La Prensa" the gallery director of the Códice Gallery says that the dog was only chained to the wall for three hours during the opening. The rest of the time the dog was free to run around the gallery and that Vargas himself was feeding the dog during the day with food he himself had brought into the gallery. Furthermore, the gallery director says that during the night, after the doors closed to the public, the dog escaped from the gallery and ran off into the streets. The gallery director says that the dog was still alive when it ran off that evening. Vargas on the other hand has declined to make any statement to the like and continues to refuse to talk about what happened to the dog. Furthermore, an investigation by the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) concluded that the dog did not die that evening and was treated properly by Vargas. It was also decided by WSPA that Vargas could not be tried for any cruelty to the animal since Nicaragua does not have laws that address cruelty towards animals. The WSPA continued to say that the

incident still had many unclear questions to be answered. For now what the authorities could say was that Vargas was in many ways free from any wrongdoing. The WSPA did step in and tell Vargas that he would not be allowed to use another dog for his second exhibition. This requirement seemed fine with Vargas since he was not planning on doing a second piece with a dog, but that that story was only fabricated on the web. Vargas was planning on another piece for the 2008 Bienal CentroAmericana that did not involve a dog at all.



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