An Ethnography of Online Performance Artists

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Online video sharing and streaming platforms have flourished into a bustling industry in the past decade. The artists that have emerged on these platforms since then have explored boundaries and experimented with styles and formats, influencing both audiences' expectations of performers and of the performances themselves. But these shifts have come with turmoil among this new group of artists, calling for better understanding of the culture and position of this new, growing group. We propose to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in this domain, initially informed by a historical framing, but ultimately studying how digitally mediated publics such as these affect the politics of this group of performers.

Video sharing sites like YouTube and Twitch have captured the attention of audiences of billions of people around the world in the span of little more than a decade. content producers — "YouTubers" and "streamers" — have begun to make their livings on these sites. Indeed, these performers have come to rely on the technical infrastructure these platforms provide as well as the access to audiences that these platforms provide as well. In doing so, these sites have in a real sense democratized media and entertainment industries by making the avenues to large audiences substantially more accessible. And thus, in these transformations into publics, what started as a recreational hobby has become a bustling hub for professional artists to engage with audiences, practice their craft, and hone their skills [5, 12].

But recently, tensions between these online performers and the platforms on which they work have shaken people's assumptions regarding the nature of the space they're using. Performers on now–defunct Vine demanded — unsuccessfully — to be better compensated [7, 10]; YouTubers meanwhile struggle to defend their unconventional performance work [3] and individually and collectively field accusations of misconduct of various forms [4]. These events highlight the politics of an emerging form of expression and art, and specifically the sometimes controversial nature of the experimentation that performers engage in.

One issue frustrating this potential research area is that the platforms have changed so dramatically in as few as 5 to 10 years that it can seem as though researchers are trying to wade through shifting sands. Scholarship on content creators loses bearing rapidly when economic factors motivate aspiring professional entertainers to join the community [5]; the tension between these entertainers experimenting with content remixing and the holders of the copyright of the source material (for example, see [6]) shifts dramatically when the platform's copyright enforcement mechanisms advance not just incrementally but substantially [8]. And the popularity of candidate field sites can vary chaotically (see, for example, Vine reaching as many as 200 million active users and abrupt shutdown less than a year later [9]).

Historical analysis can be a helpful way of making sense of contemporary phenomena and informing early fieldwork. As we found in a recent paper framing crowd work and gig work as a modern instantiation of *piecework*, scholarship from a parallel or similar domain can provide us some grounding to make sense of what we've seen and offer a framework for making reasonable predictions [1]. We believe that a similar approach can be used here to help make sense of online streaming and video performances.

To that end, we can liken some aspects of online performance art on YouTube and Twitch to street performance and busking, allowing us to relate ostensibly new phenomena to robust scholarship. As is the case with street performance, online performance isn't restricted to classically trained professionals; instead, performers (both online and in the streets) practice more experimental drawing on their candid interaction with their audiences, which can change from one performance to the next.

This connection has purchase, but it has gaps, mostly owing to the unique nature of the internet [11]. For one thing, most video sharing websites keep videos in perpetuity — that is, unless a complaint over copyright infringement is filed, in which case the lifespan of that "performance" can be cut short. The public that congregates around a performer, too, has similar permanence that offline busking doesn't; YouTube comments linger for years after they're made, forming in some sense "networked publics" [2]. And these say nothing of the different nature of algorithmic enforcement of rules and policies, and the near–perfect ability of these platforms to redirect revenue and even people's focus instantaneously.

We propose to fill in these gaps in our framing of online performance as a modern instantiation of street performance. How does the *permanence* of digitally archived videos affect people's willingness to experiment with new formats and styles, and *how can we enable and encourage riskier, potentially more rewarding experimentation*? How do networked publics influence whether and how performers engage with their audiences, and *how can we design publics that engage the audience with each other and with the performer*? How do laws, and the algorithmically instantiated policies, on video sharing and streaming platforms spur or stifle creative remixing?

Research Plan

We propose to carry out qualitative research with major online content producers on streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, and video sharing sites like YouTube. Much of this work will consist of ethnographic fieldwork, semi–structured interviews, and open–ended exploration of the field site as we find parallels and divergences in the domain of online performance art from street and other emergent formats of performance and entertainment. A rough timeline of these phases can be described as such:

Term	**Plan**
Q1	Identify potential participants and begin recruiting participants; begin interviews and fieldwork. Research specifically focusing on performers' *relationships with audiences* and noting areas of frustration for performers and intervention opportunities
Q2	Qualitative fieldwork toward understanding performers' *relationships with other performers*, with some attention toward the potential for performer affiliations
Q3	Fieldwork looking at performers' *relationships with their respective platforms* (for example: YouTube, Twitch)
Q4	Exploring and iterating on *design interventions* with YouTubers and streamers to advance values discussed earlier (audience engagement, online performer affiliation, etc. . .)

We'll recruit between 10 and 30 YouTube and Twitch content producers whose work is primarily content creation on their respective sites — in other words, people who have gone "full time". Our initial interviews will be semi–structured in nature, as we'll want to be open to the possibility that

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