We typically assume that events like performances and exhibitions have more-or-less clearly defined boundaries in space and time, thus limiting the possible audience to the people who are able to be in those places at those times. The web, when it has been embraced by performers and curators, has been treated primarily as an amplifier, a way to be seen and heard by a potentially global audience through webcasts of performances or digital exhibitions. What I'd like to talk about today is ways the web might be used not simply as an amplifier, but as a resource for constructing new forms of participation in an event, providing new roles for the audience that extend beyond looking and listening.
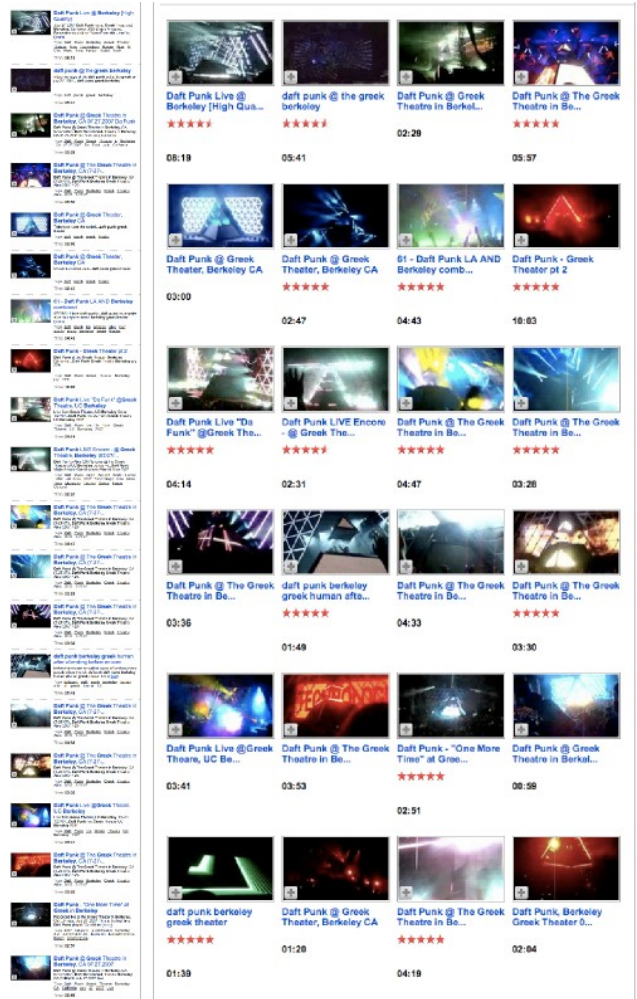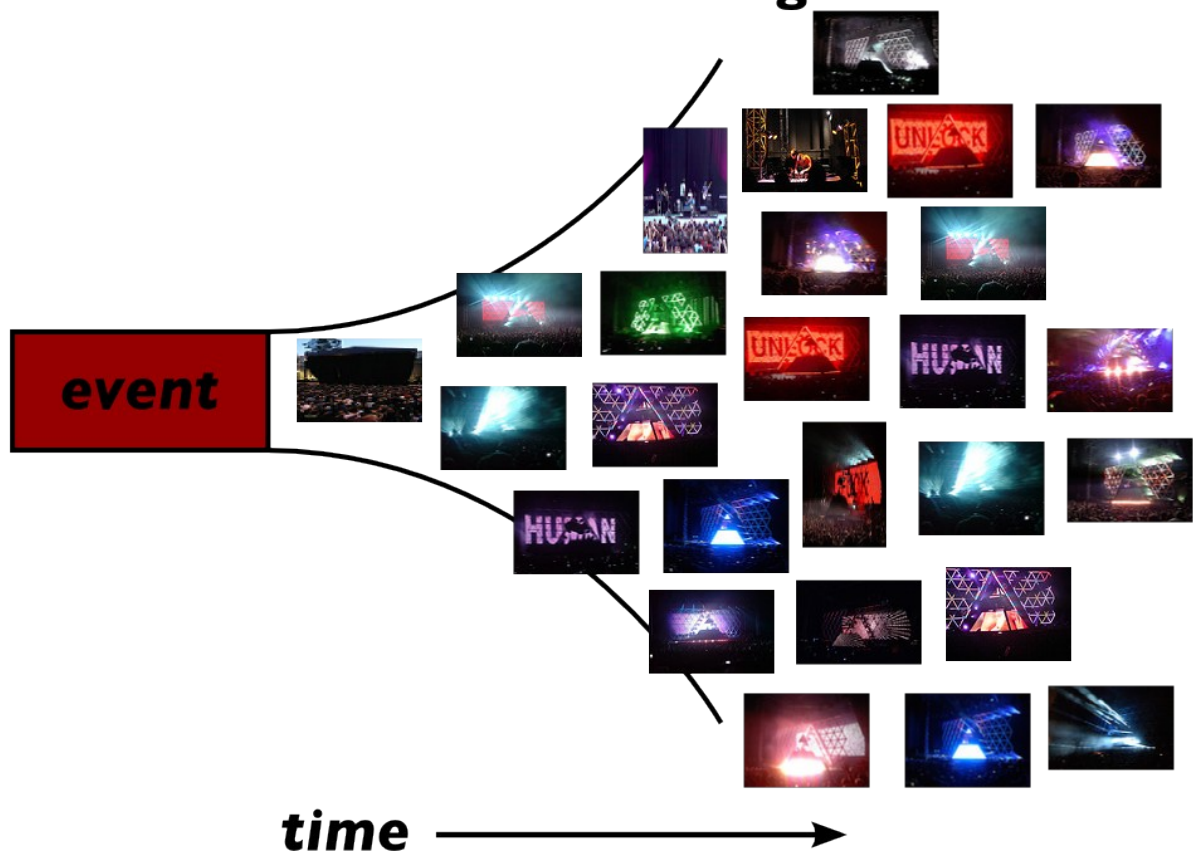

Slide 1: Event forum and documentation

I'll start with an example of something that has become commonplace on the web, which is that events start to "happen" in various digital forums from the moment the event is announced, and leave digital media residue that take on dynamics of their own long after the event that generated them has technically ended. What you see here on the left (Slide 1) is a screenshot from a typical event web site. How they work is that someone posts information about an upcoming event such as a concert, theater performance, art exhibition, or new media symposium. This then creates a forum specific to

that event, in which people can indicate whether they will be attending, and discuss the event. This forum usually exists far in advance of the event: as you can see this particular one, for a concert that occurred in Berkeley this past summer, began in March. As the event neared excitement built and the level of activity increased, and people began posting videos of earlier concerts by the same artist. The last few messages were actually posted either from the concert itself or directly afterwards. What you see on the right here is just a small subset of the hundreds of videos and images of the concert, shot by people in audience, that began appearing on the web during and after the concert. One of my colleagues created a specialized web crawler that find media captured at a particular event, and within 2 days after this particular concert it found over a thousand images and videos.
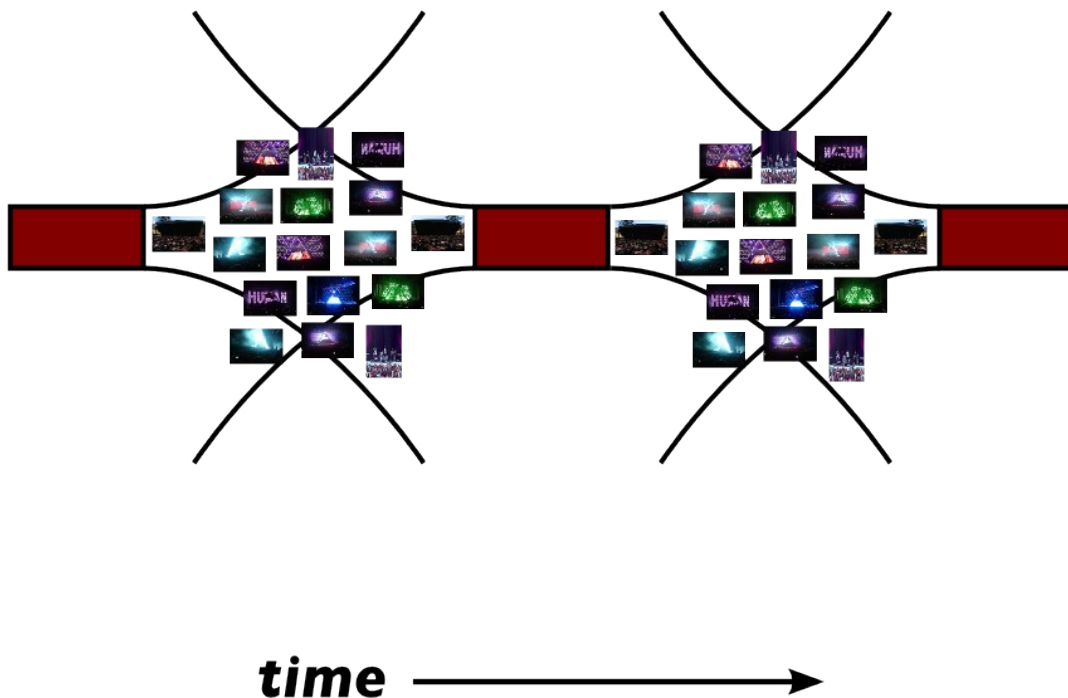

Slide 2: Events as documentation generators

What I'm trying to illustrate here (Slide 2) is how, when we look beyond the actual event to the larger system that surrounds it, events can function as generators of media, with the audience taking on a documentary role.

Now, these images and videos aren't documentary in the usual sense of something that could substitute for the event itself. They are usually so short, indistinct, and devoid of context that they are

only meaningful as prompts for the people who attended to remember specific moments from the event, or for people looking forward to the event to whet their appetites. Thus an interesting pattern emerges when an event is part of a chain of similar events, such as a concert tour or traveling exhibition. Each event in the chain generates documents which circulate among the local community that attended the event, illustrating their reminiscences but also circulating among the community anticipating the next event in the chain, arousing their interest (Slide 3).

Slide 3: Event documentation chains

So this is something that is commonly happening now, the development of these larger, more diffuse, part-online/part-offline meta-events within which traditionally bounded events are embedded. Yet the meta-event is still treated as an epiphenomenon, or at best a way to do "viral marketing." Something I've been involved in over the past couple of years, is how to design systems in which these kinds of activities aren't just a byproduct of the event, but resources for the creative development of the event.

My first example of this is a system I helped design for the 2006 San Francisco International Film Festival. 19 directors agreed to allow scenes from their films, which were being screened at the festival, to also be put on the festival web site. We developed a web-based video editor, which visitors

to the site could use to create re-edits, using the original scenes as raw material.

The scenes and this tool were made available online a few weeks ahead of the festival itself (Slide 4). During these few weeks several hundred remixed videos were created and added to the online gallery, so that by the time the film festival actually began, festival attendees had actually generated additional works that could be screened there. And that's exactly what we did: midway through the festival fifty of the best re-edits were selected and screened publicly at the festival, so people could see their work displayed alongside the original works from which they drawn. Thus the festival audience was used as a resource for generating, not documentation of the event, but variation or derivations of the event.

Slide 4: International Remix at San Francisco International Film Festival 2006

My second example is a system I helped design for Marianne Weems and the Builder's Association, in conjunction with the Continuous City workshop they produced here at UC Berkeley this fall. The Builder's Association is a theater company, and the focus of their production is a stage play, albeit one that incorporates heavy amounts of technology such as video displays. But given that the themes of Continuous City revolve around networked communication technologies, Marianne wanted to create a web site to accompany the production that would be interesting in it's own right, but also function

as a generator of material that could be used in the stage production. What we developed was a web-based performance tool, which displays scripts karaoke-style, and allows visitors to the site to record performances via a web cam. Depending on the type of performance, the visitor may be delivering a monologue, or engaging in a dialogue with a pre-recorded actor.
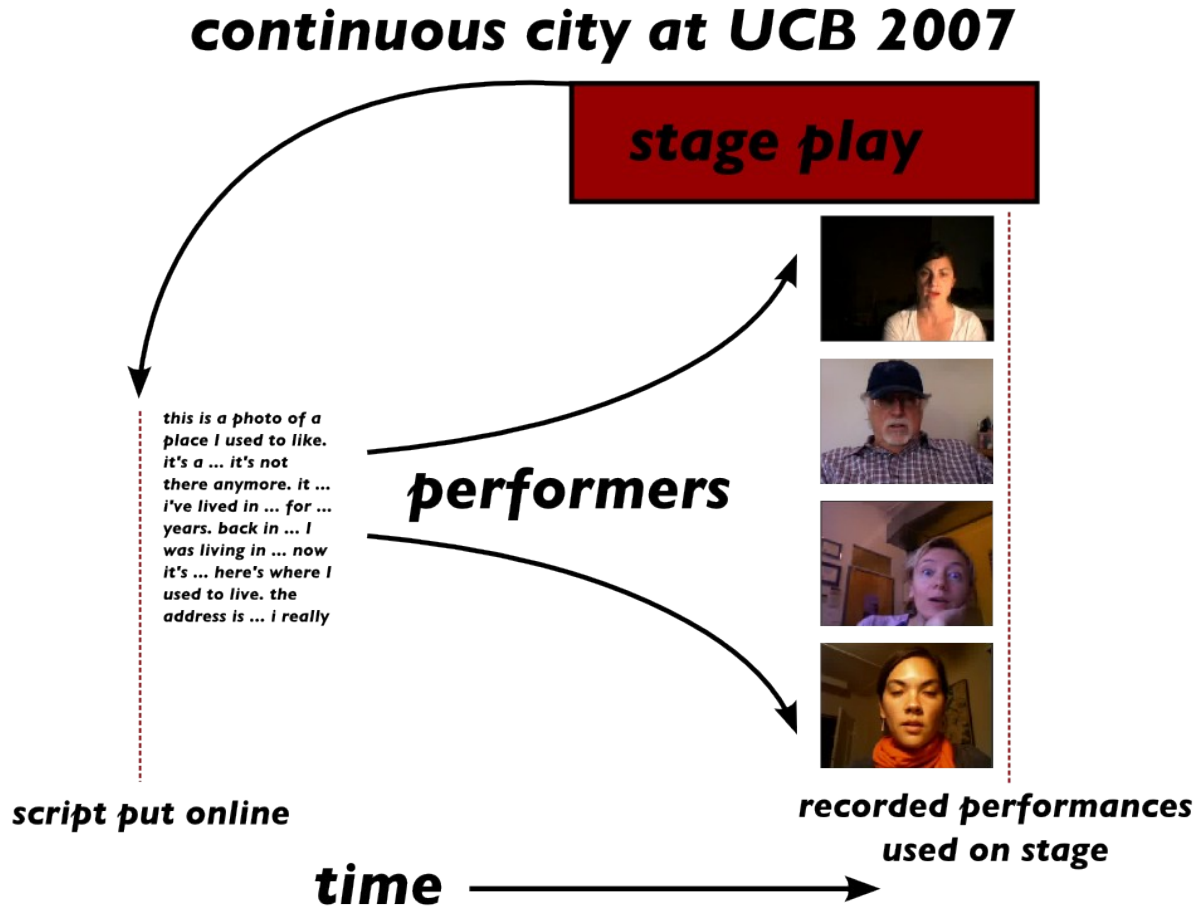
Slide 5: Continuous City at UC Berkeley 2007

The pattern (Slide 5) was similar to that of the film festival, except that instead of putting footage online to be re-edited, we put scripts online to be performed. The scripts and recording tool were put online about 2 weeks before the opening night of the play, so that we had several dozen performances by the time the play opened. These were used primarily as a kind of "greek chorus" projected on stage between scenes. Each night the play was performed generated more contributed performances, as people used the site in the lobby of the theater or went home afterwards to try performing in the privacy of their offices or bedrooms. Thus each night the producers had new performances to use in the stage production.

To conclude, I'd like to emphasize a couple of points and pose a question. The first is that, in both of these projects, my collaborators originally emphasized the "global reach" of the web, as reflected in

the titles they chose: "International" Remix and "Continuous" City. They saw the development of a web-based system as a way to globalize their events. What actually happened was, in my opinion, more interesting: namely that the sites were used primarily by local people anticipating or reflecting on the event. The web served more to elongate the event in time than it did to extend the event over space.

Second, in all of the examples I've discussed today, the online and offline components create a kind of virtuous circle, where online activities build anticipation of and interest in the event, and the event itself motivates people to go online in order to prolong their engagement with it. In the case of the concert tours, this cycle generates flows of media from the offline event to the online meta-event, while in international remix and continuous city these flows were reversed.

My question is, what are the creative possibilities of viewing performances and exhibitions of various sorts as meta-events? Can we move beyond the admittedly simple patterns I've discussed today? And can we take creative advantage of the social processes surrounding events without falling into the creative traps of, on the one hand, American Idol-style popularity contests or, on the other, Wikipedia-style art by consensus?