

Seven Short Essays on Art and Media

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On Digital Media Art

The meaning of the term media art was still clear back in the 1990s, when digital computers were yet a rarity in the art world. It referred to art that employed new, digital technologies, and sought to sound out their aesthetic possibilities: interactivity, networking, communication, animation, 3D simulation and so on. However, this 'new' media art had been preceded by another type of media art. The artistic experiments of the 1980s involving video, TV, fax and satellite technology had also been described as media art. The reasons for the widespread objections to this term are quite obvious. Are not the painter's oil paints and canvas likewise 'media'? Are not all types of art dependent on a medium, and therefore media art? Is there any sense in describing a medium as 'new'? And if so, for how long?

Discussions about these questions now fill whole books and Internet archives. In the meantime, these technologies have become so integral to our culture that making videos and audio files available online, for example, has long since ceased to be the preserve of visionary media activists, but for many people, is just as much a part of everyday life as the creative use of computer games, weblogs, and online forums. Digital culture has become part of the standard repertoire of enlightened contemporaries. As a result, digital media art is losing its pioneering character and becoming recognizable as what it seeks above all else to be: an aesthetic practice which is concerned—part playfully, part experimentally, occasionally poetically, often critically, and from time to time affirmatively—with the cultural significance of digital technologies and their impact on social processes. Varying emphasis is placed upon the significance of the technology itself as a source of meaning, but there has been a general shift away from the mere demonstration of technical functions and towards the continuous exploration,

expansion, and modification of artistic possibilities. Even though this art uses digital-technological means, it is a mode of experience that takes us to the limits of perception, sensitivity and thought—and, like all art, promises to transport us across these boundaries.

Intermedia – Transmedia

How should we describe the artistic work that consciously operates in the domain *between* the various media (camera, television or computer screen, photograph, microphone, loudspeaker, writing, voice, body etc.) and the various artistic disciplines (painting, sculpture, performance, music, video, film, literature etc.)? And what role should be allocated to digital technology as a machine that traverses the media? In the 1960s, Dick Higgins et al. coined the term “intermedia” to describe this mediatory artistic practice. The intermedia approach transcends the boundaries between the disciplines and explores the aesthetic continuities as well as the dialectical relationships between the various media. Higgins was not primarily interested in the question of whether this was a new phenomenon or one that reached far back into the history of artistic practice, for instance by connecting the work with digital media to Surrealism, or to Dada, or perhaps even to ancient Greek theater. For him, the most pressing issue was how intermedia practice engaged with the social significance of the media. In view of the Vietnam War, which was the first war of the intermedia age in which the tensions between television, radio and print media had political fallout, Higgins was not concerned with discovering ever more new media and ever more new intermedia constellations, but rather with developing appropriate and expressive applications. “We must find the ways to say what has to be said in the light of our new means of communicating,” he claimed in 1966.

The capacity of the digital computer to translate movement into sound, sound into image, image into text, text into process, and so on certainly provides an outline of the intermedia domain, but it does not exhaust its possibilities. At the same time, by moving through the various media in this way, digitization has opened up the space of “transmedia”, which is probably the most decisive broadening of artistic scope that the digital computer has produced.

Media Ecology

Whenever the talk is of the “increasing penetration of our lives by new media,” it tends to conjure up mental images of social change that vary greatly from person to person. One person might think of the links between traditional mass media and individualized media: the radio as podcast, the blog as an extension, or critical counterpart, of a newspaper, private photos and video archives in the Internet which then become the subject of television shows. Another might think of a generation of laptop-toting young people in cafés with wireless Internet who—far from being digital bohemians—in fact form a new society of distributed workers. And a third might view with concern the everyday environment of control and surveillance, in which products in the supermarket are tagged, passports and chip cards lay their owners’ private data bare, and public spaces—including such privatized public spaces as railroad stations and shopping centers—are scanned by distrustful cameras and sensors. There is a tendency for this media-saturated environment either to be further improved, with one element intermeshing even more smoothly and even more ingeniously with the next, or to be eyed from a critical, romantic, media-ecological perspective. The latter view seeks to return to an imaginary condition in which the relationship between humans, nature, technology, and medium was one of social harmony. A third approach attempts to find opportunities to understand, change, or at least undermine, this media ecology, which is no longer shaped by the collective masses, but by mass isolation. Félix Guattari and Howard Slater describe a post-media ecology in which small, scattered, multifarious, networks of operators use new, digital means of production and distribution. Post-media practice grows out of the networking practices of passionate individuals and groups who work in local and translocal contexts. In these networks, differences are expressed rather than negated, intuitive interfaces are scratched, and smooth mirror images distorted. This is a media ecology in which even the media being used and their contents are in turn viewed critically and changed at any time, if necessary.

Playing Identities

The artistic examination of reality often resembles the make-believe of a children's game in which a hypothetical reality is treated as a given. Playing out various scenarios is then a way of sounding out the boundaries, the traps, and the opportunities that these different realities contain. Reality is represented in one of its own modes, this repetition revealing—preferably—a hidden beauty, or the distorted face of normality. In the world of digital copies, you cannot rely either on a clear social structure or on your own identity. The self can no longer be taken for granted amid the self-dramatization of reality TV à la Big Brother, Second Life avatars, and the increasingly matter-of-course sales pitches of a 'body industry,' which offers cosmetic surgery and chemical stimulants for all walks of life, and their perfection. Self-realization is out, role-play and identity hacking are in. Identity is becoming a medium, an interface between the virtual, meaning the latently possible, manifestations of a body and its potential social roles and functions. There is no longer a "right life," which Theodor W. Adorno once said was debarred (only) from "the wrong one." The Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling calls it the "radical mediocrity" of individuals who are not unique, not an essence, not a center, but only a means, in other words a medium of the systems surrounding them. Humans are not destined "to be", *esse*, but "to be between," *inter-esse*. However, there are different variants that can be played out here. These may adhere to the norms of the entertainment and consumer industry, as do Ken and Barbie, but they may also tease out the fault lines and turbulences, the polymorphous reproduction, hybridization, and endless nuances, which the game of human identity also holds in store. The successful games are about finding something that you were not even aware existed, let alone knowing what it looked like. They thrive on people's desire to play the game of the Other.

Tactical Media

In everyday usage, the word “media” is still used first and foremost to denote the mass media of the twentieth century (TV, radio, print media). Whereas these are changing and hybridizing under the influence of digital technologies and a society furrowed by the Internet, they are basically still the same blaring mouthpieces of the few who address a mass public. This complex has long been faced with a different vision of the media, one that facilitates a multi-dimensional, horizontal dialogue in which everyone, at least potentially, is both a recipient and a transmitter of messages. A media practice of this kind responds to the large strategic machines involved in the information and opinion war with a multiplicity of voices, and to ostensible objectivity with a pronouncedly subjective attitude. It acts ‘tactically’ because it cannot concentrate on the long-term achievement of what are supposedly greater goals, but instead has to operate on an ad hoc and temporary basis. Such ‘tactical media’ began life as pamphlets, anonymous bulletin boards and samizdat publications, and found their first clear expression in the “camcorder revolution,” when video cameras became portable in the 1980s with the result that they could be used flexibly and independently of state or industrial media monopolies. In those days, the cheap VHS copies of stirring activist documentaries shown in bars presented a real alternative to television—at least for a minority. David Garcia, the initiator of the influential Amsterdam ‘tactical media’ event series *Next 5 Minutes*, characterizes tactical media as “what happens when the cheap ‘do-it-yourself’ media of consumer electronics and the expanded dissemination possibilities offered by cable, satellite and the Internet are used by groups and individuals who feel culturally oppressed or excluded.” It is questionable today whether YouTube, MySpace and Google Earth are concealing a populist, but useful variant of tactical media, or whether they represent the commercial sell-out of a whole generation of intensive media users. Tactical media practice is about refusing to conform to the technical and stylistic parameters of the media, about consciously reading their aggregates of power, and going against the grain. Tactical media aim to trigger singular events. The turbulence they

generate in the public domain is limited. What they offer is not so much self-reflective, political critique, as straight activism and a humorous sense of the absurdity of power.

Critical Tinkerers

The technical knowledge acquired by artists often exceeds what they need for a skillful, even virtuoso use of a piece of equipment or a particular process. Some practitioners are concerned with understanding an instrument and its structural specifications so well that they can exploit all of its possibilities as an artistic medium, and integrate its functional limitations into the aesthetic process. Others study the principles of electrical engineering or programming, say, so carefully that they are able to develop new applications which, being technically logical, but functionally or socially illogical, no ordinary engineer would have hit upon.

Technological means are thus deployed to execute artistic works in which the aesthetic dimensions of design, agency, and experience have prominence. A third form of artistic interaction with technical knowledge aims to understand, criticize and refashion existing technologies. The assumption here is that as well as mastering the practical functions, you need to have an insight into the social, political, and ecological implications of a technology in order to understand it fully. These aspects are inbuilt in the design of a technology, as are accidents and errors, and it takes impressive artistic gestures to expose the assumptions inherent in a given system. Computer software, for example, determines to a large extent the structures and potential for action in technically supported communities, affecting not only the Internet's online communities, but also the scope for political action of a democracy equipped with e-government. Issues raised by data privacy and the surveillance of public spaces, as well as the restrictions that copyright law imposes on social communication, play a particularly important role in the critical questioning of contemporary technology. Matthew Fuller and many others have shown how artists 'speculate' about technology and the media by exploring their possibilities and, through unusual interventions and associations, forcing them to engage in self-reflexion.

Culture Industry

For the generation of intellectuals influenced by the analyses of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the industry of mass culture, occasionally described as the consciousness industry, was a machine of intellectual deformation and subjugation. The cultural patterns imposed upon individual lifestyles by popular culture have for decades been the target of a type of criticism that attempts to respond to stereotypes with strategic alternatives. Even left-wing parties are now pinning their hopes on the economic potential of what they euphemistically refer to in their manifestoes as the "culture economy" and "creative industries."

Now that work-intensive production processes have lost much of their significance in industrialized countries, immaterial goods and work—in the form of knowledge, research and information transfer—are increasingly forming the bedrock of their economies. The term "creative industries" refers to all types of art and design, as well as the productive processing of immaterial goods. The term "culture economy," on the other hand, refers to a domain in which expenditure is weighed up against the expected income and possible profit, rather than one in which cultural programs and events are subsidized undertakings provided as a form of public luxury. Hardly anywhere else is it so obvious how oblivious today's decision-makers have become to ideology. The culturally determining apparatus of the media, which Louis Althusser has described most appositely as an "ideological State apparatus," is being naively surrendered to the ideological forces of the so-called market. This 'market' is an auto-feedback system in which contemporary and historical cultural content, social class, taste, opinion, private investment, public subsidies, and the ticket price paid by individuals are all mutually influential. Here, however, supply and demand are not structured according to objective need, but are themselves shaped by program choice, advertising, discursive repetition and political control. Artistic practice can also not escape this complex of relations—relations which define us as subjects and determine what we are able to decide and do as social agents. Yet what artistic practice can do is to

consciously operate within the paradox that it is able to shape industrially manufactured culture, as it is itself shaped by it.

* This text was originally published in: "Mediale Künste Zürich. 13 Positionen." Ed. Departement Kunst & Medien, ZHdK. Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2008.