

THE POSTMEDIA PERSPECTIVE

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The following excerpt comes from the final chapter of my book “Media, New Media, Postmedia,” recently published in Italian by Postmediabooks (www.postmediabooks.it), who kindly gave Rhizome permission to republish it in English. The book is an attempt to analyze the current positioning of so-called “New Media Art” in the wider field of contemporary arts, and to explore the historical, sociological and conceptual reasons for its marginal position and under-recognition in recent art history.

The starting point of the book is that the label “New Media Art” does not identify an art genre or an art movement, and cannot be viewed – as it usually is – as a simple medium-based definition. On the contrary, a work of art – whether based on technology or not – is usually classed as New Media Art when it is produced, exhibited and discussed in a specific “art world,” the world of New Media Art. This art world came into being as a cultural niche in the Sixties and Seventies, and became a bona fide art world in the Eighties and Nineties, developing its own means of production and distribution, and cultivating an idea of “art” that is completely different from that entertained by the contemporary art world. If you are familiar with Lev Manovich's distinction between “Duchamp Land” and “Turing Land” (1996), you already get the point. According to Manovich, Duchamp Land (the contemporary art world) requires art objects that are “oriented towards the 'content'”, “complicated” and that share an “ironic, self-referential, and often literally destructive attitude towards its material”; on the other hand, Turing Land (the New Media Art world) is oriented “towards new, state-of-the-art computer technology,” and produces artworks that are “simple and usually lacking irony” and that “take technology which they use always seriously.”¹ Both the art worlds changed a lot along the last decade, but the distinction is still valid at some point.

This is, however, just the start of an in-depth analysis of what happened in the following decade. From the mid Nineties, the rise of the web and consumer technologies and the new approach of artists to the medium pioneered by the net.art movement turned this linear situation into a much more complex, conflicted phenomenon that is almost impossible to summarize in a few lines. Technology-based art grew exponentially, and the New Media Art world grew accordingly, but without adapting to these new developments. The New Media Art world became inadequate to an art practice that was increasingly sharing the idea of art and the system of values of the contemporary art world. At the same time, however, most of the attempts made to bring New Media Art back to Duchamp Land failed as a consequence of an approach based on importing the system

of values of Turing Land into Duchamp Land. In the contemporary art world, art is not appreciated as creative research on a given medium, but as a powerful statement on the world we are living in.

The following excerpts attempt to respond to three questions that remain unanswered at the end of the book. If the art formerly known as New Media is moving from its native world to the contemporary art world, is there a future for the New Media Art world? If the conceptual paradigm of creative research on the medium has proven to be weak, obsolete and inadequate in promoting the art formerly known as New Media on the contemporary art platform, is there another approach that can help us call attention to its specificity and topicality? And finally: is it really necessary to insist on this specificity?

– Domenico Quaranta

What destiny for the New Media Art world?

The reasoning developed in the preceding chapters appears to converge on a single conclusion: that today New Media Art no longer needs that specific “art world” which formed beginning in the 1960s to respond to the challenges introduced by media not compatible with the contemporary art world. Does this mean that this world is destined for oblivion?

In actual fact, the question is much more complex, as much of what has been said so far shows. In the first place, not all New Media Art appears ready to take that quantum leap into a parallel universe, towards a more open discursive system, and production and distribution structures entirely different from those it developed in. In 2005 at Ars Electronica the Dutch artist Dirk Eijsbouts presented the installation *Interface #4 / TFT tennis VI80*. The work enabled the user to play a virtual game of tennis in which the screen the ball was visualized on was also the racket used to hit it. The two rackets/screens were fixed to a mechanical arm that revolved around a central arm: when the player moved the screen it not only directed the trajectory of the ball but also changed the game visually. This installation deployed a considerably complex form of interactivity, which would be difficult to apply to a commercial gaming platform; and it introduced an interesting reflection on the relationship between simulation and reality. At the same time, however, it was also a fun game, in some aspects a precursor to the modalities of play subsequently made popular by the Nintendo Wii, based on physical movement. Industrial prototype or work of art? Toy or generator of meaning? Undecided between these two natures, *TFT Tennis* is a typical artefact of the world of New Media Art. Outside of that world, it would not have much of a chance: the contemporary art world would disparage it as a vacuous celebration of technology, while the videogames industry would file it away under unsustainable ideas. The New Media Art world gives it a context in which it can be produced, exhibited and discussed. The importance of this should not be underestimated:

even if the piece never fulfils the idea of art that other arenas have, it will have heralded a new development in knowledge that can be brought to fruition elsewhere. We can look down on the “toys” of Ars Electronica as much as we like, but we must not forget that without them the history of media would have progressed more slowly, and New Media Art would never have surpassed itself and arrived at the point of challenging its very identity.

On the other hand, it is not just a question of “maturity.” While it is true that consumer IT is now a deeply rooted part of our everyday existence, it is also true that some technologies and languages remain inaccessible to the common artist, due to the costs involved and usage difficulties. While it is true that much New Media Art is capable of taking on the market, it is also true that this path remains unsustainable for many currents and projects even now. And while it is true that much New Media Art can be tackled critically without particular knowledge of the new technologies, it is also true that many works cannot be properly understood without an in-depth knowledge of the medium and its dynamics, and therefore continues to require a specialized critical approach.

Let’s take an example. Although there is a form of “amateur biotech” that some artists have worked with, as yet it is not easy for biotechnology research to exist outside of universities and laboratories. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that, as Jeffrey Deitch noted at the beginning of the 1990s, biotechnologies represent one of the most interesting drivers of change in our era. Tackling biotech as an issue in the form of content is undoubtedly interesting, but it would be a shame if artists did not have the opportunity to gain more in-depth knowledge of this field, and use it as a potential artistic medium.

From this starting point, in 2000 the artist Oron Catts founded Symbiotica, an art research lab hosted by the School of Anatomy & Human Biology of the University of Western Australia (UWA) in Perth. Since then, Symbiotica has offered residencies to artists from all over the world, providing a well-equipped biotech research laboratory and the experience of scientists and researchers. This represents an exceptional opportunity, taken up by the Australian performer Stelarc, among others, who created the third ear he now proudly displays on his forearm at the lab. Thanks to the opportunities offered by Symbiotica, Catts – who, together with two other artists, has been working as the Tissue Culture & Art Project since 1996 – has succeeded in creating fascinating installations that explore the potential and problems involved in tissue engineering. *Victimless Leather* (2004), for example, is a miniature leather jacket that “lives” inside a bioreactor. The work is a reaction to the barbarous use of animal skins to make clothing, something that tissue engineering could offer an alternative to. The artists grafted cells from a living animal (a mouse) onto a structure of polymers in the shape of a jacket, the idea being that the cells will stay alive and multiply in a protected environment. The work also has an ironic side, because in order to save “living” beings, the Tissue Culture & Art Project had created a “semi-living” being, the existence and exploitation of which

raises ethical issues similar to those they were attempting to get around. When the project was exhibited at MoMA in New York in 2008, in the show *Design and the Elastic Mind* (curated by Paola Antonelli), it elicited heated reactions when the curator was forced to “kill” the semi-living jacket by cutting off its supply of nutrients, as the cells were growing out of control. “Museum Kills Live Exhibit” ran the *New York Times* headline.

Despite this exceptional appearance at MoMA (and more recently at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo), the exhibition career of *Victimless Leather*, like most of the works by the Tissue Culture & Art Project, remains firmly within the New Media Art world. Outside of it, it is no simple matter to find the technological expertise and intellectual courage required to exhibit a work of this kind. Its very production would have been unthinkable outside a context that fosters research not directed at the immediate creation of an artefact. The installation in itself is inaccessible to the art market, though the highly performative and relational nature of this piece could occasion its circulation in documentary form, as prints and videos. These elements also foster an interpretation of the world that goes beyond the traditional “art and (bio)technologies” paradigm. Paola Antonelli’s killing of the “semi-living” being was a “funeral rite” that Tissue Culture & Art Project has orchestrated on other occasions, in forms familiar to relational art. The project *Disembodied Cuisine* (2003), for example, entailed the creation of tiny “frog steaks”, produced by implanting on polymers cells taken from a biopsy on a living frog. The “meat” was cultured and kept alive in a laboratory accessible to the public for the duration of the exhibition the project was conceived for. At the end of the event, the Tissue Culture & Art Project cooked up its “victimless” meat and served it to the public.

The work of the Tissue Culture and Art Project appears to demonstrate that the existence of another system of production and distribution is both necessary and instrumental to the growth and evolution of contemporary art. As Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito assert, the art that comes into being “at the edge of art” is an irreplaceable source of dynamism, a force that evolves the very idea of art at the root of the contemporary art world. But to survive, the New Media Art world must first of all formulate a clear idea of its identity, and to do this it must go back to the phenomena that generated it.

As we have seen, the New Media Art world came about as a multidisciplinary arena of research, a reaction to the rigid conventions of a whole series of other worlds: that of contemporary art, but also the performing arts, music, design and industrial research. Its “borderline” status and dynamism should not only be acknowledged but also cultivated, and if possible, reinforced. Historically the New Media Art world filled the gaps between one creative arena and another, between arts and science, arts and technology. This was its mission, its destiny. Reducing it - or as is often the case seeing it reduce itself - to a niche in the contemporary art world, is not only unjust but also historically unfounded, and the same goes for considering it - or seeing it consider itself - an

incubator for industrial research. Yet the conceptual model introduced by the term “incubator” is an apt one: like a business incubator, the New Media Art world has to act as an incubator for the other, more solid art worlds, creating the ideal situation for the development of advanced, risky, financially unsustainable or aesthetically challenging work, and subsequently enriching those arenas that, not out of conservatism but due to their very characteristics, would have nipped it in the bud. The New Media Art world can potentially generate the energy that powers the other art worlds, giving their respective “ideas of art” a radical evolution. While for Shigeo Kubota video was a holiday for art, New Media Art is the childhood of art, or its spring.

Obviously, for this to happen the New Media Art world must stop considering itself in competition with the other worlds, and cast off its own ineradicable inferiority complex (which often manifests itself as an undue affirmation of superiority, clearly visible in the perspective introduced by Gerfried Stocker² in chapter three). It needs to cultivate hybridization between different arenas and figures. It needs to recognize and proudly accept the entrance of some of the fruits of its labours into the contemporary art world, and not condemn this as a deplorable surrender to market pressures. It needs to recognize the cultural necessity of the practices it cultivates. And, like every other art world, it needs to take a look outside of itself, because only an unprejudiced dialogue with contemporary art can stop it from becoming fossilized as an ingenuous “exaltation of the medium,” as has happened all too often in recent years.

All of this is not only possible, but already taking place. As we have seen, the New Media Art world is complex, and cannot be reduced to the paradigm sustained by situations like ZKM or Ars Electronica. One example of a virtuous approach comes from Slovenia. There, like other areas of culture, the “Intermedia” sector, as it is described in the administrative setting – receives public funding. In the last fifteen years this has enabled numerous small institutions and organizations led by artists to thrive, producing and exhibiting works that would be unlikely to see the light of day elsewhere. While in the “Contemporary Art” sector the weak market and the presence of public funding has led to a degree of stagnation and a lack of quality work, it has proved quite the opposite in the Intermedia sector. The result is that the most interesting contemporary art in Slovenia is the outcome of long-term projects developed in the Intermedia sector. Artists and collectives like Marko Peljhan, Janez Janša, BridA (Tom Kerševan, Jurij Pavlica and Sendi Mango) and Polona Tratnik, and a setting like the Kapelica Gallery in Ljubljana, are the real drivers behind contemporary art in Slovenia, and have garnered increasing institutional acknowledgement. At Ars Electronica in 2008, *Ecology of Techno Mind*, the exhibition curated by the artistic director of Kapelica Jurij Krpan at the Lentos Museum of Linz, turned out to be the most interesting event of the whole festival. A year later, Krpan was back with *Arzenal Depo 2K9*, an ambitious exhibition project organised in the Slovenian capital. Marko Peljhan presented the project *INSULAR Technologies*, in progress since

1999, which is centered on developing an open, decentralized, global, independent radio communications system to offer stable, permanent links to charities, NGOs, individuals and groups of activists operating in remote areas where official communication systems are anything but stable. The system is independent from commercial and state-run communications networks, and thus lends itself to becoming an emblem of resistance to global control, the dark side of the telecoms networks. *INSULAR Technologies* is one of the offshoots of the project *Makrolab*, which was launched in 1994 and presented at Documenta X in 1997, and involves the creation of an independent unit in which people can live, do research and communicate in extreme locations such as the Antarctic. In spite of the name chosen for *INSULAR Technologies*, the project has little in common with the *cultural insularity* that characterizes much of New Media Art, raising crucial issues such as surveillance, climate change and the construction of islands of resistance. It is an imaginative undertaking, and like Billy Klüver's projects in the 1960s, would appear absurd to an engineer, but without the skills of the engineers and hackers who were involved in developing it, it would have remained just another interesting piece of arty science fiction. Now, on the other hand, it has succeeded in combining the futuristic projects of Antonio Sant'Elia and Archigram with today's technology, fusing imagination and reality. It is unlikely that the production system of the contemporary art world would have been able to back the production of such an ambitious and long-term undertaking, yet it is on the conceptual horizon of contemporary art that all the implications of a project of this kind can be fully understood.

The postmedia condition

In the Fourth chapter of this book (*The Boho Dance*), I tried to develop an in-depth analysis of those events that, beginning in 1996, promoted New Media Art in the contemporary art arena. That analysis shows that any attempt to import on the contemporary art platform the idea of art and the system of values on which the New Media Art world is grounded (that is, New Media Art as a category based on the use – and, often, the celebration – of technology) has failed miserably, garnering criticism both about the suitability of basing an artistic category on the use of a medium, and on the cultural value of celebrating technologies. While, on the other hand, events that focused on the impact of the current techno-social development on art, without introducing any distinction of medium, as well as events that researched the way a specific, not technology-related topic (ie, abstraction) was developed in both new media and old media art, proved to be quite well accepted. In the contemporary art arena New Media Art is only allowed to exist if it abandons its techno-centric outlook and the very term that identifies it. Or, to sum up the issue with the help of an early statement by Catherine David:

New technologies are nothing other than new means to an end. Alone they are of significance; it always depends upon how they are applied. I am against naive faith in progress, glorification of the possibilities of technological developments. Much of what today's artists produce with New Media is very boring. But I am just as opposed to the denunciation of technology. For me technology in itself is not a category according to which I judge works. This type of categorization is just as outmoded as division into classical art genres (painting, sculpture...). I am interested in the idea of a project; ideally the means of realizing the project should arise from the idea itself.³

Having taken this on board, how, then, can we underline New Media Art's "specific form of contemporaneity" (Inke Arns) without violating these taboos?

The concept of postmedia, in a broader, more inclusive sense than Rosalind Krauss introduced, does the job nicely. As previously mentioned, the term has a complex history that influences its meanings. Before Krauss, the expression "post-media era" appeared for the first time⁴ in some of Félix Guattari's later writings, published in *Soft Subversions* (1996). As Michael Goddard⁵ observes, Guattari's references to the post-media era are often hermetic; and while they were greeted by many as an anticipation of the advent of the internet (Guattari was a keen supporter of the French Minitel system), the term seems to be a front for a more complex theory, that starts with a reflection on the independent media and free radios of the 1970s to posit, at the end of the consensual era of mass-media, a post-media era in which the media would be a tool of dissent, revising the relationship between producer and consumer.

In this "political" sense the term was adopted in 2002⁶ by the Spanish academic José Luis Brea, who used it to map out the network communities and networking practices deployed by the new "media producers." In this way, the term therefore implies the decline of the mass media used by the powers that be to maintain consensus, in favor of a grass-roots use of the media as a tool for activists and political and cultural movements.

When Rosalind Krauss wrote *A Voyage in the North Sea. Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*⁷ in 1999, she used the term "post-medium" rather than "post-media", reflecting on the decline of the Greenberghian concept of medium-specificity. This term is normally used in contemporary art criticism, while the New Media Art world prefers "post-media," but with a different meaning from that posited by Guattari. According to Peter Weibel, who in 2005 organized a show entitled *Postmedia Condition*,⁸ postmedia art is the art that comes after the affirmation of the media; and given that the impact of the media is universal and computers can now simulate all other media, all contemporary art is postmedia, as he explains:

This media experience has become the norm for all aesthetic experience. Hence in art there is no longer anything beyond the media. No-one can escape from the media. There is no longer any painting outside and beyond the media experience. There is no longer any sculpture outside and beyond the media experience. There is no longer any photography outside and beyond the media experience.⁹

According to Weibel, the postmedia condition was arrived at in two stages. The first stage saw all media achieving equivalent status and the same dignity as artistic media. The second stage saw the various media intermingling, losing their separate identities and living off one another.

Lev Manovich also uses the expression “post-media.”¹⁰ Unlike Weibel, Manovich succeeds in combining a reflection on the crisis of the concept of artistic medium and medium-specificity (Krauss) with the idea that the immense impact of the media has completely altered the destiny of art (or rather, aesthetics). According to Manovich, the concept of medium was challenged first by the development of new artistic languages (assemblage, happening, installation, etc.); then by the advent of media (such as photography, film and video) which clashed with the normal definition of artistic medium, and above all with the usual methods for circulating and distributing art.

The third attack on the classic notion of artistic medium came from the digital revolution. In the first place, the computer appropriated all media, and imposed its own operative approach on them. Copy and paste, morphing, interpolation, etc., are operations that can be applied, regardless of the medium, to photographs and synthetic images, sounds and moving images. The distinction between photography and painting, film and animation, falls away. The web establishes a standard for multimedia documents that combines text, images and sound. Lastly, different versions of every “artistic object” can exist, including in terms of medium: a Flash animation can be put online or burned onto a DVD, generative software can be transformed into a video or a print, a website can be exhibited as an interactive installation.

These are just some examples of how the traditional concept of medium does not work in relation to post-digital, post-net culture. And yet, despite the obvious inadequacy of the concept of medium to describe contemporary cultural and artistic reality, it persists. It persists through sheer inertia – and also because to put in place a better, more adequate conceptual system is easier said than done.¹¹

A concept of postmedia that takes all these strata into account would prove a useful key to the art of the present. It is significant to mention, for instance, how Nicolas Bourriaud identifies the socio-

cultural impact of the new technologies as one of the points of departure for analysing contemporary art. In *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) he noted how “The main effects of the computer revolution are visible today among artists who do not use computers,”¹² and how in the 1990s, with the exponential development of interactive technologies, artists explored “the arcane mysteries of sociability and interaction.” Bourriaud’s then condemnation of the art that uses computers (described as the representation of an “alienation of methods dictated by production needs”) only demonstrates how much these practices have changed since then, and it should not divert our attention from the close relationship that Bourriaud traces between the “interactivity of the media” and “relational art.” In his subsequent work *Postproduction* (2002), the French critic further develops this reflection on the impact of digital media on artistic means of production. According to Bourriaud, the contemporary artist works like a DJ or programmer, cherry-picking cultural objects from the “proliferating chaos of global culture in the information age”¹³ and incorporating them into new contexts. “The contemporary work of art does not position itself as the termination point of the “creative process” (a “finished product” to be contemplated) but as a site of navigation, a portal, a generator of activities.”¹⁴ In the era of post-production the artist appropriates various operative paradigms introduced by the media, from sampling to copy-and-paste, and various related ideologies such as sharing and copyleft, to produce works starting from secondary materials, which exist not as isolated objects but nodes in a network of meanings. Lastly, in his recent “Altermodern Manifesto”¹⁵ (2009) Bourriaud introduces the concept of “altermodernity” in a socio-cultural context characterized by globalization, travel and increasing opportunities for communication. And he concludes: “Altermodern art is thus read as a hypertext; artists translate and transcode information from one format to another, and wander in geography as well as in history. [...] Our universe becomes a territory all dimensions of which may be travelled both in time and space.” This acknowledgement of the impact of the media on life and art is however entirely free from media determinism, as Bourriaud reiterates in *The Radicant* (2009):

Radicant art implies the end of the medium-specific, the abandonment of any tendency to exclude certain fields from the realm of art [...] Nothing could be more alien to it than a mode of thought based on disciplines, on the specificity of the medium – a sedentary notion if ever there was one, and one that amounts to cultivating one's field.¹⁶

And while Krauss appears to envisage in the “reinvention of the medium” a way to avoid postmedia being transformed into a “new academia”, Bourriaud boldly declares:

Today, one must struggle, not – as Greenberg did – for the preservation of an avant-garde

that is self sufficient and focused on the specificities of its means, but rather for the indeterminacy of art's source code, its dispersion and dissemination, so that it remains impossible to pin down – in opposition to the hyperformatting that, paradoxically, distinguishes kitsch.¹⁷

The idea of *Radicant*, if interpreted correctly, not only enables us to rescue New Media Art from its position on the margins, but even translates the postmedia perspective, still bound to a century of “post” phenomena, into a valuable indication for 21st century art. Cultivating “the indeterminacy of art's source code” also means giving up on the contextual definition of art that was the glib pretext of the last century, as Blais and Ippolito hoped; it also means, at least on the critical level, breaking down the barriers that still separate contemporary art from film, architecture and design to arrive at a new, open vision of the visual realm; lastly, it means replacing these barriers with a new, definitive dividing line between art, defined by the indeterminacy and dissemination of its source code, and media, the land of kitsch and medium-specificity.

In other words, a set of vertical barriers (between media and different distribution circuits) is replaced by a horizontal divider. Art and media can use the same means, be identical in formal terms and travel on the same distribution circuits, because it is their deep-seated nature that distinguishes them, not incidental elements.

From this perspective, independently of the medium it uses to express itself, the art that is most aware of the cultural, social and political consequences of the new media is in line for a position of key importance and unexpectedly reacquires a social function: to combat the flattening of culture with complexity, numbness with sensation and standardization with critical thought.

Among the examples that Bourriaud offers of rejection of the “monoculture of the medium,” that of Paul Chan fits very well into the discourse we are developing. Chan studied film, video and new media at Bard College in New York. An artist and political activist, since 2000 he has been running the site nationalphilistine.com as an online container for his work. Both Chan’s works and writing reveal a lucid awareness of the socio-cultural impact of new technologies. The artist has adopted the ethic of sharing on the web, making a large part of his work available on the site: essays and publications, but also video and audio archives, such as *My Own Private Alexandria* (2006), a personal selection of essays that form a sort of self-portrait in library form, released in MP3 format and free to download. National Philistine also enables users to enjoy Chan’s most famous digital animations, like the series *Sade Before Sade* (2006 - 2009), and to download and install the various alternative fonts that the artist is constantly working on. “I could still write. But I wanted more.,” he explains on the site, “I wanted language to work for me and no one else.” In 2008, Chan exhibited the series *The 7 Lights*, which he started working on in 2005, at the New Museum in New York. The

show, curated by Massimiliano Gioni, combined seven video installations with a series of charcoal preparatory drawings. The projections were distributed in space like outlines of light cast through a window or backlit door. Shadows moved across the bright, coloured light: silhouettes of men, animals, plants and objects that flow past at an increasing pace, converting the initial atmosphere of tranquillity into the sinister mood of a nightmare. The animations contained multiple references to history and current affairs, from Greek mythology and the Bible to the war in Iraq, which intersected in an allusive, non-linear narrative, while in linguistic terms the clear reference was to Chinese shadow theatre.

In agreement with the museum, Chan published an online version of the show,¹⁸ which combined the video documentation of the installations with the drawings and an audio archive featuring a selection of essays from *My Own Private Alexandria*: texts by Anna Freud, Henri Michaux, Theodor Adorno and Chris Marker, an ideal soundtrack for the exhibition. Here too, the essays were freely downloadable, as were the source files (in Flash) for all the animations.

As well as adopting the free software ethic, Chan often draws inspiration from it for his works and his exploration of our technological present. In the essay “The Unthinkable Community,” for instance, Chan reveals how one of the points of departure for *Waiting For Godot* (2007), his revisitation of Samuel Beckett’s play for the streets of New Orleans, was a reflection on the meaning of words like solitude and community in an age in which the explosion of technologies – from mobile phones to social networks - that facilitate communication, have actually increased the individual’s sense of alienation and solitude, rather than reducing it. “Time deepens connections, whereas technology economizes communication. This is why, despite the growing number of ways for people to be seen and heard, tele-technologies have ironically made it harder for people to comprehend one another.”¹⁹

As we can see, Paul Chan uses the new media and develops a critique of the new technologies without ever falling prey to the pitfalls of New Media Art. His work is devoid of any kind of self-referencing, and focuses on issues such as history, war, religion, sex and power; and, as Bourriaud writes, it “reflects our civilization of overproduction, in which the degree of spatial (and imaginary) clutter is such that the slightest gap in its chain produces a visual effect; but it also points to the experience of homo viator, moving through formats and circuits, far from that monoculture of the medium to which certain critics would like to see contemporary art restricted.”²⁰

Digital Natives

Clawed back from the contemporary art world, the art formerly known as New Media Art does not lose its specificity, and can actually become one of the most effective incarnations of our postmedia

world. A world in which it no longer makes sense to distinguish, as Bourriaud did in 1998,²¹ and as the paradigm implicit in the term New Media Art does, between art which uses computers and art which doesn't; a world in which on the other hand it increasingly makes sense to distinguish between art that acknowledges the advent of the information society and art that retreats to positions typical of the industrial era we are moving out of. It is according to this distinction that in a few decades' time we will be able to identify the academia and avant-garde of the present day.

This approach is particularly apt when it comes to interpreting the art of "digital natives," namely that generation of artists who have never experienced life without computers. For this generation, daily use of the internet is the norm, to the point that there is not much sense distinguishing between online and offline. The latter state is simply dying out: they are always online. Computers and mobile technologies have profoundly impacted their social lives and the ways in which they handle their lives, their relationships with others and a constantly mediated reality. In their lives, the dividing line between public and private is being irremediably redefined. Constant tweets render the web privy to all their comings and goings, holiday snaps are immediately posted on Facebook or other sites, and relationships are managed via messages and videocalls and often reported on online for their duration.²²

The artists of this generation are experiencing the creation of the vernacular imagery of the internet from the inside: the ever-expanding mass of amateur photography and low-res videos, but also postcards, greetings cards, little animations and artifacts of all kinds produced from an ingenuous use of the standard tools and effects of the multimedia production studio that is the resource at our fingertips. Today's artists often contribute to this, seeking approval from those communities before branching out into the art world. "I absorb, then I translate and lastly I create," declares Ryan Trecartin, a young American artist who has been eliciting increasing attention in the art world for the last two years, but who was already well-known on Youtube. In his video works, young, heavily made-up exhibitionists are portrayed in domestic settings, enacting snippets of everyday life, while they inundate the viewer with details of their private lives. They are an expression of what Trecartin calls "transumerism", the encounter between posthuman and postmedia: our way of life in the information era. They speak to the web of the web, where they continue to be accessible even now that they are a solid presence on the art market.

His productivity notwithstanding, Trecartin's work is but a miniscule contribution to the 24 videos that every minute are uploaded to Youtube, the platform that has helped make video, as the artist Tom Sherman wrote, "the vernacular form of the era [...] the common and everyday way that people communicate."²³ Among the artists who, like Trecartin, take Youtube very seriously, many are part of the so-called "pro surfer" scene, that since 2006 has grown up around a number of collectively-managed blogs such as Nasty Nets and Supercentral, in which the participants establish

a remote dialogue based on exchanging, manipulating and commenting on media materials – images, videos and texts – found on the net.²⁴ This collective practice, which is a background to participants' solo work, encourages them on one hand to focus on practices such as montage, postproduction, copying and remixing, and on the other hand to attribute considerable importance to a double dialogue: the internal one between members of the “surfing club” and the external one with the wider, variegated community of internet users, or users of a particular service such as Youtube.

Petra Cortright's video work is a shining example of this, perfectly camouflaged as one of the most common genres of vernacular video, namely “ego clips”: narcissistic self-representations in which users pose, dance, sing and play sports in front of the camera. Cortright capitalises on her own attractiveness and teen style to do the same, before applying a few simple postproduction tricks to convey her individuality with respect to the culture that she nonetheless strives to be a part of. She incorporates animations, clips and “glitter” effects into her videos, or uses standard filters, as in *Das Hell(e) Modell* (2009), where a lighting effect suffices to transform a girl dancing into an eerie and evocative presence.

Produced for YouTube or other platforms, these videos are both a conforming response to and a note in the margin of the culture that these platforms have given rise to. They might be in line to become the next “viral video” but they are also a comment and a critique of the presumed democracy of the “vote for this video” culture and the low level of individual attention devoted to such a vast mass of material. Cory Arcangel developed this critique, appropriating one of the *topoi* of “digital folklore,” the cat.²⁵ On December 22 2005, a cat called Pajamas starred in the first ever video posted on YouTube. In a sophisticated remix, Arcangel used hundreds of its successors to create *Drei Klavierstücke op. 11* (2009): a series of three videos in which the artist plays this difficult piece by Arnold Schoenberg utilizing found footage of a cat walking across the keys of a piano. In the work, vernacular and avant-garde - *Op. 11* is considered to be Schoenberg's first “atonal” piece of music – mingle irresistibly, garnering more than 100,000 viewings on Youtube.

The editing of vernacular video can also get extreme. Brody Condon, who has always been interested in out of body experiences, came across a series of videos of people filming themselves under the effects of powerful psychedelic drugs. The first outcome of this was *Without Sun* (2008), a 15 minute video montage in which these impromptu performers give vent to their visions, talking, screaming and crying in front of the camera. Condon then got various performers to repeat these words and actions, using the video as a screenplay and basis for the choreography, and recording it all in another video, the twin of the original one.

Criticism cannot but acknowledge that a lot of recent art operates beyond the New Media Art / contemporary art dichotomy, in a fully postmedia perspective.

Other critical approaches

But once we have acknowledged these changes, it should also be noted that the art formerly known as New Media Art has a strong need of other points of view, other critical approaches, other associations. It is time to cast off the old prejudice, reiterated by Christiane Paul, according to whom “new media could never be understood from a strictly art-historical perspective: the history of technology and media sciences plays an equally important role in this art’s formation and reception. New media art requires media literacy.”²⁶ This is only true to the extent that it is true of all other artistic practices, on two levels. Firstly, I will have a better understanding of the painting of John Currin if I am familiar with his medium (painting), in terms of both its history and its purely instrumental elements. Secondly, I will have a better understanding of the painting of John Currin if I am familiar with today’s media, and the ways that images circulate in the current information landscape. The American painter looks to figurative painting traditions from the fifteenth century onwards, but takes his subjects from magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*, and observes the amateur pornography that does the rounds on the net.

In other words, all contemporary art needs to be media literate. For its part, New Media Art needs above all to be conversant with art history, and to have a working knowledge of contemporary art. Let’s take an example that verges on the extreme. Gazira Babeli is an artist who has been operating on the virtual platform of Second Life since 2006. In view of the fact that there is no actual person called Gazira Babeli, and the identity of the person who controls her is unknown, Gazira Babeli is, on one level, a work of art in her own right – an identity construction project in a simulated world. But as an artist, Gazira also produces art: “performances”, “installations”, “sculptures”, “environments” and even “paintings.” However, like Umberto Eco’s postmodern rose, all of these terms require inverted commas because the different entities that they describe are all actually the result of the same operation: the manipulation and subversion of the codes (3D modeling, scripting languages) that a simulated world is based on. To approach work of this kind we must undoubtedly be familiar with the media world. We have to know what a virtual world is, and what an avatar is; nothing that the *Matrix* saga and James Cameron’s recent blockbuster have not illustrated, in abundant detail. Basic knowledge of computers as an operative environment, with their limits of bandwidth and graphics card, languages and conventions is desirable, and a minimum of experience of virtual environments will aid comprehension of certain community dynamics. It also helps to be familiar with the brief tradition of the artistic use of virtual worlds. All of this provides the technological key to access the figure of Gazira Babeli and her work, but is not enough to develop a critical discourse on it. To enter into possession of the “cultural” key needed to understand it, it is

equally necessary to be conversant with the theme of identity experimentation that runs throughout the history of contemporary art, from Rose Sélavy to Matthew Barney.

Works like *Avatar On Canvas*, reproductions of Francis Bacon paintings that the viewer is invited to sit on in order to be subjected to a series of spectacular deformations, can be better understood in the light of the history of performance art and body interventions; while projects like *Grey Goo*, that unleashes a storm of pop icons, require the viewer to have some knowledge not only of the viral strategies deployed by hackers, but also the pop multiplication of images and the invasion of the spectator's visual horizon put into practice by Andy Warhol, for example.

Viewing a practice of this kind against a limited background such as that of New Media Art certainly does not help us to comprehend "its contemporary specificity." What does Gazira Babeli have in common with those who construct impossible architectural structures in virtual worlds? Or with the amateur art that is displayed in the galleries of Second Life? Or with the interactive installations at ZKM? Vice versa, what benefits can be drawn from considering her work critically or curatorially in a discourse on gender ambiguity, alongside Wolfgang Tillmans, or contemporary identity, in a dialogue with Cindy Sherman, or with regard to the manipulation of the body and interventions in public space?

This kind of argument could probably be made for much of the art formerly known as New Media Art, the real power of which today lies in what more and what else, compared to other practices, it can tell us about the destiny and topical nature of abstraction; racial and sexual issues; our globalized world; control and censorship; terrorism and climate change. The art of our time must be measured and assessed in these terms. In order to do so, art criticism must cast off its prejudices on the media nature or the social origin of what it is looking at, and learn to look inside and outside of the art world, and look for art where it is not expected to exist; it must lose that baggage of ignorance (technological on one hand, artistic on the other) that it still carries.

Footnotes:

1. Lev Manovich, "The Death of Computer Art", in *Rhizome*, October 23, 1996, available at <http://rhizome.org/discuss/view/28877>.
2. I refer to the article: Gerfried Stocker, "The Art of Tomorrow", in *a minima*, n° 15, 2006, pp. 6 – 19 (online at <http://aminima.net/wp/?p=528&language=en>), widely discussed in Chapter 3.
3. Catherine David, "dx and new media", June 20, 1997, available online at <http://documenta12.de/archiv/dx/lists/debate/0001.html>.
4. In actual fact, Gianni Romano has been using the term "postmedia" since 1994, when he set up the magazine of the same name. After the first three issues, in 1995 the magazine was converted

into the site postmedia.net, which is still active; in 2002 it was joined by the publisher Postmediabooks. According to Romano, «the postmedia condition is the parting shot of the postmodern age, the final warning that the media are not neutral when used politically, while artists favour a neutral use, not conditioned by the medium» (personal communication, October 2010).

5. In Michael Goddard, “Felix and Alice in Wonderland. The Encounter between Guattari and Berardi and the Post-Media Era”, in *Generation-online*, June 1996, online at www.generationonline.org/p/fpbifo1.htm.

6. José Luis Brea, *La era postmedia. Acción comunicativa, prácticas (post)artísticas y dispositivos neomediales*, Consorcio Salamanca, Salamanca 2002.

7. Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage in the North Sea. Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames & Hudson, London 1999.

8. Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, November 15 2005 –January 15 2006; Centro Cultural Conde Duque, Madrid, February 7 –April 16 2006.

9. Peter Weibel, “The Post-media Condition”, in AAVV, *Postmedia Condition*, cat., Centro Cultural Conde Duque, Madrid 2006, p. 98.

10. Cfr. Lev Manovich, “Post-Media Aesthetics”, sd (2000 –), online at www.manovich.net/DOCS/Post_media_aesthetics1.doc.

11. Ivi.

12. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presse du Reel, Paris 1998, p. 67.

13. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York 2002, p. 13.

14. Ibidem, p. 19.

15. Nicolas Bourriaud, “Altermodern Manifesto”, 2009, online at www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm.

16. Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, Sternberg Press, New York 2009, pp. 53 – 54.

17. Ibidem, p. 138.

18. Cf. www.newmuseum.org/paulchan

19. Paul Chan, “The Unthinkable Community”, in *Eflux Journal*, Issue 16, May 2010, online at www.e-flux.com/journal/view/144.

20. In Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, cit., pp. 130 – 131.

21. And how he also asserts in *The Radicant*: «home computing has gradually spread to all modes of thought and production. At the moment, however, its most innovative artistic applications stem from artists whose practice is quite distant from digital art of any kind – no doubt while waiting for something better to come along.» Ibidem, p. 133.

22. About digital natives, cf. Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, McGraw-Hill eBooks 2009; John

Palfrey, Urs Gasser, *Born Digital. Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*, Basic Books, New York 2008.

23. Tom Sherman, "Vernacular Video", in Geert Lovink, Sabine Niederer (eds.), *Video Vortex Reader. Responses to Youtube*, Institute of Networked Cultures, Amsterdam 2008, p. 161.

24. Cfr. Marisa Olson, "Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture", in *Words Without Pictures*, 18 September 2008, online at <http://wordswithoutpictures.org/main.html?id=276>.

25. Cfr. Olia Lialina, Dragan Espenschied (eds.), *Digital Folklore*, Merz and Solitude, Stuttgart 2009.

26. Christiane Paul, "Introduction", in C. Paul (ed.), *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond*, University of California Press 2008, p. 5.