

Artifacting New Media; Towards a Historiography of New Media

Patrick Lichty, Executive Editor, Intelligent Agent Magazine

ABSTRACT

Constructing an art history of new media in terms of extent historiographical practice is problematized by rapid change, new epistemic structures, and a broad heterogeneity of forms. This essay considers analytical strategies that are structurally reflective of new media through Manovich's principles of new media, Ippolito's Variable Media Initiative, and Hakim Bey.

When regarding an art history of the technological age, questions arise to the structure of critical and theoretical strategies addressing significant changes in cultural context or technological innovation. The historiographical question of shifts in artistic practice or representation during a period of rapid technological change creates discursive and analytical challenges for the scholar or theorist. How can there be discussion about bodies of work that are currently in a state of constant revision or stages of nascent development? The lag between practice and criticism (if a distinction can be made) accompanying the advent of video art in the 60's and 70's is more pronounced regarding contemporary trends of technological acceleration in the arts, especially in New Media. The issues in addressing historiographical praxis in contemporary art are complicated by the rapid emergence and mutation of genres and memes within computer-based (digital) art and culture and other technological genres. The millennial environment of change questions the viability of any master narrative or common taxonomy/grammar when the dynamic nature of the subject in question suggests the need for constant in situ revision of analytical methodologies. To address the current mercuric nature of technological culture, modes of analysis are required that reconsider engagement with the subject incorporating qualities and strategies in its discourse that reflect those of its 'objects' of inquiry.

When looking at historiographic methodologies regarding new media art, one must consider the contextual frame within which previous genres have been placed. These frames are often cited as 'movements', but many art history texts begin situating artistic practice within a technological framework after the inception of the cameras lucida and obscura. Such practices often overshadow the more complex cultural matrix within which the work is located. It would be reasonable to assume that scholars like Newhall, by virtue of their given field of study, would have some emphasis on the developments of photographic technology [1]. However, such a focused approach elides the fluidity of change and diversity of fin de millennium technological art.

Contemporary practices of the late 20th century have had the luxury of possessing relatively well-defined technological shifts; one of these being that of video art in the 1960's. However, due to the multivalent nature of New Media and other technological artforms [2], the technical and cultural engagement with the subject varies widely, changes rapidly, and creates increasingly porous boundaries between previously distinct disciplines such as robotics, telepresence, performance art, net art, and so on. What may be needed are approaches to the analysis and criticism of new media art that reflect the structural aspects or principles of the works themselves. An ongoing thread in the discussion of critical and historiographic practices of new media art relates to whether any meaningful discussion can be achieved with extant vocabularies.

Artists participating in the Walker Art Center's 1998 Shock of the View maillist [3], argued for the creation of new descriptors for this field of media, at which time many artists were, and are crafting neologisms to attempt to describe attributes of their work. An example is virus artist Joseph Nechvatal, who has defined terms like "Viractual", and "Cybist" [4] in conjunction with his work, creating a localized discursive strategy. In fact, during an early February 2002 CRUMB new media curation online maillist discussion of new taxonomies, Steve Dietz paraphrased Hakim Bey, suggesting that in talking about mutable genres, what might be needed is a "Temporary Autonomous Nomenclature"[5] for discussion of new media works at given times. Such tactics would localize discourse within a tightly defined context. Conversely, the usefulness of ad hoc vocabularies must balance their usefulness with the potential for a kind of taxonomic determinism that would imply a need for expanded vocabularies based upon fashion and affectation.

Neologisms and expanded terminologies may be of some use in the critical analysis of emergent technological art forms, but such verbal tools are but tactical means of expressing larger strategies. As the topic at hand is the consideration of critical methodologies that reflect properties of the medium itself, it is crucial to think about the criteria under which any historiological framework of new media analysis can be conceived. Perhaps we could consider the distinctive qualities of new media as David Antin did in his seminal essay on video art (6) Does new media art have qualities that distinguishes it from previous forms, and if so, what might they be?.

Lev Manovich, in his recent book, *The Language of New Media*, suggests five principles of new media specific to the nature of New Media [7]. The first is numerical representation, or the digital quality of new media. Second is modularity; in that new media works are not continuous, but made up of modular chunks of information, program code, and media 'lexia'. Next is automation; the use of computational processes in New Media. The fourth is variability, or that New Media has large sets of possible representations of the same work. And, the last is transcoding, the quality of New Media having multiple translated levels of meaning at human and machine levels, depending on their level of interpretation. Although an exploration of these principles is beyond the scope of this discussion, we can ponder these distinctions as well as some of the resultant properties of New Media art including media ephemerality and rapidly shifting representational/developmental methods (closely related to variability). These could be considered as building blocks of a historiological methodology of new media.

Taking a cue from the modularity principle, syntax and distinctions can be essential components in a methodology, but only components to be placed in larger systemic contexts. To consider a synthesis of cultural events and artifacts as 'objects', to borrow the programming sense of the word, in the construction of possible critical strategies. One example could take a localized cultural study of the work in context of its milieu and time of creation in terms of the surrounding social/political/economic/etc matrix in which it operates. Some methods for such an approach could include consensual ad hoc definitions and nomenclature adopted for the examination of specific works or

events. Such an approach would reflect the modularity and variability of new media, but also reveals limitations by virtue of its very specificity.

Although localized studies can offer much to the understanding of new media works in a given context, the dynamic nature of genres such as net art render such approaches problematic. A conversation with Christiane Paul [8] revealed an agreement that much contemporary technological art, especially those using recently emergent technologies, are in a perpetual state of 'beta'. In these 'works', there is an ongoing process of project development of an indeterminate length and frequency, making it nearly impossible to quantify many projects as discrete bodies of work. This calls to mind the metaphor about trying to nail half-congealed gelatine to a wall. Of course, the gesture itself is futile, as the gelatinous mass slides downward a certain amount with the driving of each nail, but it results in a series of records (nails) documenting the epistemic arc, or trace, of the wayward confection in its travel.

Although this analogy is a fanciful one, it offers insight into how one could document ongoing works, and especially evolving net art. In the example, a process was studied at intervals and defined as periodic or in terms of significant events and developments over that period. The resulting epistemic arc for that body of work could be revealed through such a method. This interstitial methodology could be used to create maps for interpretation of the development of process- or conceptually-based artwork. The cultural context of a project would be examined at intervals, opening a larger discursive matrix, arcing across time and describing the procedural nature of the work.

If the analogy of documenting a process through interstitial analysis is taken further, the analysis could become an ongoing dynamic process in itself. This differs from traditional historiographical methods in that the analytical process would not generate discrete documents over time. The result would be a continually revised record or set of documents, databases, etc. that would evolve as a singular or collaborative process. This process would parallel the procedural nature of the work under scrutiny. Simple examples would be maillists like CRUMB or Thingist [9] that are archived as accretive databases. However, more advanced methods could expand in complexity to collective online journals that differ in that they would exhibit a relatively tight focus and relatively little hierarchy. To take this example one step further, my metaphor would incorporate some of Manovich's principles of new media, such as modularity, automation, or variability to atomize critical texts into smaller lexical chunks and media clips, that would be continually revised or expanded by the scholar involved or parsed by algorithmic means [10]. Taken to logical extremes, this methodology would use parasitic databases linked to an online work that would continually update the documentation in tandem with the scholar's interaction with the document. Such an approach would tightly integrate principles of new media practice within its own critical analysis[11].

Variability, as defined by Manovich states that a new media work can exist in "different, potentially infinite versions"[12] given the technological/representational context under which the work is experienced. John Ippolito has interpreted variability within curatorial practice in creating the Variable Media Initiative[13]. Here, parametric guidelines are created for the representation of a given work. A case study is that of a Dan Flavin fluorescent work which experienced failure of one of its tubes. To allow for unkeen spare fluorescent tubes were stored

for the more obscure colors, but by the late 90's, a common tubes at the time of inception had been discontinued. Therefore, the Variable Media Initiative works with artists to determine guidelines for display and curation, not in antiquarian terms, but in terms of the conceptual representation of works.

Contemporary culture includes 'variable' works of art, taxonomies, and curatorial practices. A case could be made for a variable new media art historiography/epistemology that adjusts its strategies to fit the localized context of a given piece of work and its context. This approach at first glance may not seem novel, but this strategy could allow for multiple, simultaneous interpretations that could vary over time as the work's context given cultural and intellectual environment changes. Perhaps to follow from Bey to Dietz, one could possibly extrapolate a form of Temporary Autonomous Epistemology [14] to allow for localized analysis of works over periods of time.

I have considered the construction of critical and historiographic strategies vis-a-vis the changes in the cultural environment brought about by new media art. The alternate analytical methods discussed here are far from encyclopedic, and are suggested as possibilities for practices that may more aptly resemble the cultural forms that they address. The desire for new taxonomies stems from the emergence of cultural forms which can be slippery to classify, but ask for vocabulary and syntax to expand the discussion of technological art. But to more aptly describe often vague genres like new media, possibilities arise that conventional metanarratives may fail, resulting in dynamic histories and tightly contextualized discourse. Is Jones correct in saying that art is indefensible[15], and that new media art is odd in that it eludes clear boundaries of genre and classification? Some artists would argue that this is the case. But there will be those performing new media arts critique who may require historiological/theoretical strategies to better articulate their ideas. In so doing, scholars will need to consider these epistemological questions in terms of the nature of the subject under scrutiny. As technological art and new media continues to develop in distinctive ways, equally innovative strategies will be required to address the dynamic structures of these cultural forms.

References/Endnotes:

- [1] Newhall, Beaumont. "The History of Photography", Museum of Modern Art, NY NY USA, 1982
- [2] Manovich, Lev. "The Language of New Media", MIT Press, Cambridge MA USA 2000, pp.18-55
- [3] "Shock of the View" maillist, Walker Art Center Gallery 9, Minneapolis, MN USA <http://www.walkerart.org>, 1998
- [4] Nechataval, Joseph, *various*
- [5] Dietz, Steve. Curator thread, Crumb New Media Curating online maillist, 2/6/02
- [6] Antin, David. Video: "The Distinctive Qualities of the Medium", *Video Art*, ed. Delahanty, Philadelphia ICA 1975.
- [7] Manovich, Ibid.
- [8] Email conversation with Christiane Paul, May-August 2001.
- [9] CRUMB maillist & Thingist maillists
- [10] Conversation with Martin Wattenberg and Marek Walczak, Nov.30, 2001 - There are possibilities for dynamic documents that update relative to other data using techniques such as discrete rhetorical analysis.
- [12] Manovich, Ibid.
- [13] Ippolito, Jon, "Variable Media Initiative", 2000
- [14] Dietz, Ibid.
- [15] Jones, Bill. "Interaction: Artistic Practice in the Network, Scholder & Crandall, ed. 2001, D A P, NY NY, USA", p. 85