

# CRITICAL FRICTIONS, CONNECTIVE AFFINITIES

“IDEOLOGIES OF INTERACTIVITY”

By *Kim Sawchuk*

sawchuk@vax2.concordia.ca

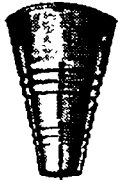
**I**n this morning's talk, I will return to some rudimentary issues that have been pestering me for some time and which now seem pertinent. I hope it isn't a statement on the obvious.

Rather than offering my thoughts on art and surveillance, as promised, I would like to respond to a comment that Simon Penny made on Tuesday in another panel on interactivity and art. When asked what he thought of the critical writing on interactive work he gave a witty and provocative answer, an answer provided by Mahatma Ghandi. Apparently when Ghandi was asked what he thought of Western civilization, he replied, "it would be a good idea." The implication, of course, is that the same can be said of writing on art and new media technologies.

This response piqued my interest because it says something about the very complicated ties- the surface tensions- between different practices or modalities of expression: theoretical discourses, writing, criticism, art works, artists, and institutions. It made me reflect on the ways our terrains diverge and overlap. After all art and theory share some common features within North America in the popular imagination: they are both often seen as useless activities.

What are some of these points of contact? Of interaction? In its most banal form - and in my most cynical take on this interrelationship- we use each other to legitimate our activities, existing in a parasitic codependency where we feed off each other, rotating roles as host and parasite. For example, theorists and critics may use art as examples -or worse- as illustration in their texts. In these models these works then serve as evidence of some grand idea, or concept, that we want to promote, such as *simulation, recombinant culture, or in my case surveillance*. (By this I refer to my interest in means explicating the workings of power through the organization of time and space in connection to various social technologies.) But it is not only writers who engage with theory. Artists may invoke theoretical terminology as references when writing a grant or in artists talk. Theory can provide us credibility to alleviate our insecurity or bolster our arguments; but credentialism is also an issue. Writers need shows to review -and artists to make shows- to build a track record of written works on their c.v.'s. Artists need the attention of writers and critics to indicate they are legitimate; that their work is current and talked about. The irony is that as critics or researchers we may treat artists as our objective ground, or ethnographic subject, as if the artists had some intuitive con-

isea95@er.uqam.ca T : (514) 990-0229



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nection to these forces resurrecting the old idea of artist as mystic and visionary, one which McLuhan was given to pronouncing and which Catherine Richards will explore in more detail in her talk for this panel. But there is little art practice, particularly those practices in new media, that aren't influenced by some theory or at least a set of cultural values and assumptions. Artists themselves are often eloquent and learned in their considerations of these connections because of their own intimate histories with these technologies.

At a more profound level our work intersects because we often are trying to pinpoint and grapple with similar questions, such as the impact, meaning or the embeddedness of technology within a given social formation, a social formation that we share. The words, concepts encountered on a page, organized into an argument and sometimes sweeping and lofty statement about the world and the media, may in some way illuminate the movement of abstract forces- relations felt but which have no language. Raymond Williams, a communications theorist who wrote on emerging cultural forms, called this vague intuitive sense that often guides our perceptions and our work "the structure of feeling." In the same way, artist's projects, particularly those that skillfully and thoughtfully employ the tools of their day -video monitors, cameras, computers, telephone lines, broadcast media, virtual technologies- give shape to these abstract forces and relations by deploying them in the work. This happens because of the representations invoked. It may happen because the materials and techniques borrowed and their properties or tendencies. A consideration here is the way the work or the technologies it uses situates us as spectators. The manner in which we interact with the work may make us aware of our positioning vis a vis some other set of relations. Finally, these works either in their representations, their materials, or the behaviours and encounters they may invoke memory.

These encounters that stimulate memory can be conceptualized as a form of movement: chain of associations and connections are left in the work that sets my mind and body into motion. It may bring us to places we do not necessarily want to revisit. For example, I was forcefully propelled by one of Chris Csikzentmihlyi's robots that he presented as a slide for discussion at this same panel. It provoked my discomfort, it agitated me. The robot was a being that responded to aggression with aggression. If a loud sound was made, it had the potential to fire a bullet in the direction of the sound's source. I could not help but think about this work in my own context, that of Montreal where 5 years ago on December 6, 14 women were killed at L'Ecole Polytechnique. Technologically based art is like other art in this respect: the spectator doesn't merely come to these interactive pieces as a universal subject devoid of memory, devoid of history- and sometimes anger. Our affective responses and critical assessments of the appropriateness of works, such this, takes place in a context. But this location is not a solid or unified ground, that provides the truth of that piece. Every place is but a layered space of shared meanings, in some

instances, but also contested territory and zones of conflict. Rather than bury these frictions, they can be a site of critical reflection and writing.

In the current theories, borders seem to be falling, the distinctions between high and low obsolete, at least rhetorically. The languages drawn upon to discuss art no longer come from the aesthetic tradition, which itself has had a pretty checkered history with lots of borrowings appropriations and subfields. The new critical vocabularies that are being generated and incorporated into our writing and art practice come from communications, media studies, philosophy, cybernetics, literary theory. In considering this interdependency particular names become very current: Gilles Deleuze's theory of rhizomes as a way to explain the supposedly non-hierarchical nature of network communications; Paul Virilio to talk about the nefarious effects of speed and visibility. Within the Canadian tradition of writings on technology, Marshall McLuhan still has currency, while others, less trendy more stolid and stodgy like Harold Innis are left behind. Psychoanalysis, once dominant as a critical framework, wanes while the vocabulary of poststructuralism takes hold. There is an issue of fashion here, but also one of formation: where does one go to learn to write on the new media? What disciplines support this work? While intellectually we strive for interdisciplinarity, academically we still seem to be in a state of split existences. Resistances and frictions still exist.

In departments like mine, communications, we are encouraged to read and examine theories of media, technology and culture. These theories are germane to the issues in new media, but we rarely are encouraged to write on art or artists because of the hierarchies that exist between different kinds of published work (refereed, non- refereed). Nor do we encourage our students to explore artists practices -or not- so- -popular culture, as performance artists Tanya Mars so aptly terms the arts. In the humanities and social sciences we have too little understanding of the history of representation and aesthetics that these works may also call upon. But as well, we often lack the technical knowledge or expertise in the cognitive sciences to comment upon these aspects of an artist's practice, while those trained in these disciplines seem to have little interest in writing art criticism. Conversely, while course outlines in Fine Arts may include the occasional communications article, it is my guess that their curricula don't include media studies courses or histories of the media that may provide invaluable ways for students to contextualize their own work. While most programmes offer some access to each other, in these times of budget crisis the doors to courses and resources may be closing. We need new strategies of collaborative work, but overwork seems to be the only thing that many of us share or have in common.

In short, it isn't enough to comment on the lack of critical writing. If there is, or it is inadequate, it is incumbent upon us as writers and teachers and practitioners in other guises to figure out why and how and where we encourage writing within

local spaces at the same time paying attention to what movements are taking place elsewhere. What publication possibilities exist for such writing? Are they enough? How do we practically nurture this type of writing intellectually and financially? How do we shift our attention to what has not been legitimated yet? For we share another common tendency: star gazing. If you are a media theorist, it is much easier to write on a phenomena from pop culture where you know everyone at least as heard of Madonna. Slides are easy to pirate, video clips to find, and the sheer numbers in the audience guarantees a certain relevancy to the research. To write about some obscure media artist may take more time. It raises that embarrassing question: "who cares?" If you are a critic, it is tempting to write on art works or the practices of artists who have already garnered international attention.

Do we have the courage to the unknown and encourage this kind of practice in others? This doesn't necessarily mean trumpeting what is new and pronounces itself to be on the cutting edge, or valorizing everything that is marginal or considers itself as such. It does mean paying attention to the here and now. In practical terms it implies concerning oneself with the so-called dead end user: those left behind in the wake of technological change.

Finally, while I must admit that I have my pet theories which help me to make sense of the world and guide my interests as a writer, it is my belief that the search for a unified aesthetics of interactivity or of new media is a useless pursuit: different works speak to different issues in our relationship to technology, but also to issues other than technology. When asked to write catalogues essays, short reviews or longer articles in the media arts it is my job to ask what I want to promote in my critical practices and to discern which theories are the most appropriate to those works. But one needs to be aware of the performative dimension of these choices at the same time as one is aware of the potential of the unintended or chance meeting. Of the possibility that your work, which takes on a life beyond you, may cause you to be misinterpreted, or misunderstood. Or maybe you didn't understand yourself in the first place, and now you find yourself in uncomfortable disagreement with your own previous position. But I digress. What is needed, perhaps, is less general theories that can be universally applied to all work and more consideration of what we create when we bring the different modalities of practice, whether they be theories or visual representations, into contact and conjunction.

Stimulating encounters and charting changes, or lack of change, may mutate into what Doug Back has called "critical frictions." I like this term. Firstly, because of its sonic invocation of the term fiction, which displaces any notions of ultimate truth. Secondly, because of its rather crusty reference to abrasion and the sparks that can be created when two bodies or materials rub together. Without friction we would not have a sense of feeling or touch and hence no pain or pleasure.

In addition to critical frictions, we also may want to investigate "Connective Affinities": ways of working with art, writings, theories that intermingle these discourses. In this concoction they become more than two discrete entities soldered together. Their interaction produces another entity, a new assemblage unexpected by both. These are the surprises that Norm White has mentioned and the chances I spoke of a few paragraphs back.

There are two further challenges that I will address before ending: on the one hand, it is critical that theory doesn't occupy a place at the top of art practice in our s/m relationship where the critic is a top, as the arbiter of good taste, in a classically modernist sense. On the other hand, it is necessary to avoid becoming a p.r. person for either artists or new technologies. This has particular relevance in the current context of hype around media technologies. Let's not forget that the support now lavished on the new media is taking place in the midst of governmental and corporate exuberance for all things technological, specifically in the area of new media, where these technologies are expected to act as a kind of panacea for other problems. This has very old history, as John Quirk and James Carey point out, in North America where technology has been seen as a way bringing progress to humanity. Our conception of technology is still tied to the tendency, drive and faith in the goals of modernization as progress, and this ideology cannot help but infuse art that takes these technologies as their medium and/or content. Modernism has been thoroughly critiqued in other realms of the arts, and postmodernism has definitely influenced the theoretical vocabulary of new media. But new media retains its ties to modernism and the avant-garde when it espouses technological innovation. Modernism thrives in the language of new technology. Perhaps this accounts for the bipolarization of much of the work and thinking in the area into either radically hopeful or dystopian views of technology's longterm effects on a culture. Even more specifically, in Canada technology has had a cherished place in our political life. Maurice Charland has charted the history of technological nationalism in terms of government policy. This is the belief that communications technology can unify a very unwieldy geographical polis, a very real issue that I am now exploring in other work that may be indirectly relevant to the media arts.

In the current rhetoric of modernization and progress, interactivity is a central buzzword used to describe the democratic and participatory nature of consumer culture and the entertainment industry. When searching for discussions of interactivity in the media for this paper, my library search inevitably coupled the term with the research of Videotron, the Quebec cable company who have been investigating and promoting home shopping and playing blackjack via your t.v. for some time. It made me wonder whether interactive engagements are a desirable state of affairs after all, and who was doing the desiring. But maybe I'm paranoid because of the theories I have been working with... As I mentioned, I seem obsessively con-

cerned with the means by which we are increasingly regulated through the gathering of information about our lives and habits.

Connectivity or collaborations; affinities between bodies and practices suggesting not only a connection of like but of the dissimilar in the desire for exchanges and friendship at a personal level, connections at an intellectual level, transformations at the political and economic level of the distribution of power and capacities. For me, this is virtuality in its ordinary sense of potentiality. It is an approach to theorizing I learned from feminism. It includes in its agenda for critical writing the chance to respond to what is affective, in an equally affective and engaged way. It risks failure. Finally, it is a practice that needs these frictions to produce any sensation or movement at all in this field called new media.

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