

# The prelude to the Millennium: The backstory of digital aesthetics

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## Introduction

The artist and scientist have been depicted opposites since Michelangelo claimed that Leonardo da Vinci was wasting time with foolish inventions while his art suffered. However, the artist taking on the role of the researcher has precedent. In the 1960s E.A.T., Experiments in Art and Technology, led by Bell Labs' engineer, Billy Klüver, aided artists such as Robert Rauschenberg in pushing the avant-garde to utilize technology. Sullivan (2005) asserts that the time has come to examine art as data and artistic practice as research. The digital revolution produced a new artist model that has been described as a Merlin (Hickey, 1997). Perhaps a more plausible model is the artist-scientist creating a paradigmatic aesthetic shift.

## An aesthetic shift

The writings of Youngblood (1970) and Enzensberger (1974) were concerned about the lack of interactivity in media consumption. Enzensberger maintained that if the receiver is passive, they are not exercising control over what is being projected upon them. Darley (2000) postulated that there exists a paradigmatic aesthetic shift that has taken place that coincides with the development of digital imaging. Today's spectator demands real-time, high resolution, and simulated hyperreality within which she has control. These controls shift our notions of power and are more radical than the depthless surface play that Darley (2000) suggests. There has been an explosion of new media exhibition venues including the Internet, personal computer, and cell phone.

The spectator is increasingly choosing a mono-to-monitor experience with media. From the 1960s through to the 1980s, there was the emergence of the rock concert and the movie-goer; reinforcing an idea that people desired a mass-collective experience. This human need has shifted towards a removed social network experience, such as *MySpace*.

## What's new about new media?

What is new media Art? Manovich (2001) answers this question by defining it as the "...digital material itself, its material and logical organization" (p. 11). Manovich's argument is that the human-computer interface is a cultural interface. The ability to communicate and socially organize in new ways subverts previous models of information distribution.

Magda Sawon, Postermasters Gallery Co-Director, stated (April 7, 2003) that,

"There are specific things to new media art, for instance you cannot make a nonlinear painting. It is very different when someone actually works with the parameters of a medium than simply outputting through a medium." (April 7, 2003, Interview).

*Bitstreams*, curated by Larry Rinder, an exhibition in 2001, was dedicated to the digital impact on American contemporary art. The point was made that to be a digital artist is to be a hybrid.

"The lessons of the video artists of the 1960s and 1970s have become so widespread that they no longer pertain solely to electronic media as such. The lessons of self-reflexivity, truth-to-materials, openness to media culture, and the freedom not-to-paint have become absorbed into virtually every dimension and media of art practice. Even in the realm of painting, artists these days paint with 'the freedom not-to-paint'." (Rinder, September 22, 2002, Personal Communication)

Cross-disciplinary fertilization combined with new tools of manipulation have prompted collaboration in new media works. Collaborations happened well before the pixel. Similarly, the notion of interactivity is not novel to the Internet. What is new is the ability to integrate media and have a global network for distribution, collaboration, and research.



Illustration 1. *Hannigan Cyborg*, digital jpeg, 500 x 720 pixels, 2006, Redbull\_UK

## The body politic

Haraway (1991), a cyberfeminist, spins a utopic myth of the cyborg:

“Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. The replicant Rachel in the Ridley Scott film *Blade Runner* stands as the image of a cyborg culture’s fear, love, and confusion. 1”

In this new world order, homework economy equals technocracy; sex is genetic engineering; and hygiene is maintained by psychotropics. Haraway sees the cyborg as a savior for a world beyond gender. In the case of *Bladrunner’s* Rachel, she is questionably empowered, as she is raped by Harrison Ford and has a preset termination

date. Cyborgian visualizations, such as in Illustration 1, repeatedly vandalize the female form for techno-erotic and violent ends. These cyberpunk fantasies have not shifted the poetic association of death and the maiden depicted throughout art history (Wolf, 1995).

Portable assistants, such as the cell phone, have developed new body-machine relationships that qualify us as cyborgs. *SecondLife* and *MySpace* are examples of sites dedicated to social interaction, in which you place your avatar representation into a database that distributes information to others. Whether painting, film, TV, or cyberspace, the act of psychologically projecting into virtual relationships removes you from your body and enables an alternate experience (Turkle, 1995).

## Requiem for the consciousness industry

In new media there exists a post-production phase that distinguishes this group of artists as manipulators of the real. The new media artist may not make the raw data themselves; they may sample it. Enzensberger stated, “cutting, editing, dubbing -- these are the techniques for conscious manipulation without which the use of the new media is inconceivable” (in Handhardt, 1986, p. 121). The modernization of art for mass consumption liberated it from function and ritual (Benjamin, 1968) and made it both democratic and capitalist propaganda. It allows the receiver to float in a miasma of decontextualized symbols where signification becomes criss-crossed and re-associated. The result is a requiem for the consciousness industry, in that people search for their own identity through what is projected onto them.

## Artist-researcher model

Hickey’s (1997) disbelief in the sunset over the Vegas strip sums up art as about magic, beauty, and illusionism. If this were true, the new media artist would be nothing more than a magician whose works are puff, smoke, and mirrors. Instead, artists incorporating post-production practices provide critique on the technology they use and actively create knowledge. There exists advocacy for the artist as agent of social transformation and for art production as a form of research in Youngblood’s (1970) writings, which sets solid precedence for Sullivan’s (2005) argument that artistic practice is a form of research.

The mediaspace has engulfed all of us with computer access; reality has been fused with the virtual. The aftermath of September 11th created paranoia propaganda such as “if you see something, say something” posters requesting information about your neighbors.<sup>2</sup> Google™ has street views of any location adding to our sense of



Illustration 2. Facebook.com entry, retrieved June 11, 2007, courtesy of account holder.

remote-control. Millennial youth have responded to the private being public, 61% of youth aged 13 to 17 have online profiles (Nussbaum, 2007). The need to connect to others has outweighed our culture of fear (see Illustration 2). Wolf (1995) asserts the need for cultural studies, "to use those theories that seem to work when exploring the cultural formation of identity and to work with the bricolage of cultural events and moments through which the experience of culture is mediated and in which it is encapsulated (p. 35)." The amount of

personal fragments available to the researcher through online social networks is tremendous. These archives provide the evidence of identity formation impacted by digital culture. What appears as diaristic exhibitionism is perhaps vital cultural data that needs to be mined for the benefit of a democratic future. It is this intersection of digital lifestyles, metaspaces for personal annotation, social networking, and cultural production that offers the artist a role as researcher and resurrects the avant-garde.

1 Donna Haraway. 1991. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. see <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/CyborgManifesto.html>

2 MTA Eyes of New York Campaign, see <http://www.mta.info/mta/news/newsroom/eyesecurity.htm>.

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