

## Media Art and Its Theories from “New Avant-garde” to “Science-Brut”

Discourse Analysis Approach

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The discourse of New Media Art (NMA is used here as a general term encompassing other related designations like Electronic Art, Digital Art etc.) emerged in a cultural and intellectual context of the late 80ies, which essentially determined its theoretical framework. From the very beginning NMA has claimed its cultural ‘added value’ by positioning itself as a vanguard of “creative exploration of New Media”, which goes beyond the borders of mere artistic practice: it is a socially useful field of experimentation, in which “art, science and technology” can be successfully integrated.

One could distinguish two major intellectual traditions, which became a feeding ground for a theoretical conceptualisation of New Media and NMA in the 80ies. On the one hand, there was a distinguished neo-positivistic trend, represented by artists and institutions (e.g. the MIT Media Lab, *Leonardo* circle) primarily concerned with a practical implementation of New Media in art practice. An “exploration” of new technologies was an implicit ultimate purpose of this trend.

On the other hand, we find an attitude rooted in an intellectual tradition and discourse of contemporary art, which was mainly formed by theoretical trends and tendencies in the academic humanities. Concerning the 80ies, these trends can be retrospectively clearly differentiated: French poststructuralism with its worldwide reception partly overlapped with the postmarxism and a Frankfurt school devotion and resulted in massive “postmodernism” debates, spreading out into public discourse.

The NMA discourse of the 80ies and 90ies was perfectly inbuilt into a conceptual interpretative matrix of the ‘High Postmodern epoch’. A simplified poststructuralist conceptual apparatus and its interpretative techniques were widely applied for a description of “New Media” and associated art practices: Computer networks have “rhizomatic structure”; “hypertext” is an ultimate alternative to the “classical linear narrative”; “interactivity” creates an “open artwork” and dissolves an opposition of author/recipient and suspends thereby “authoritarian aesthetical dispositives” of “traditional art forms”, and so forth and so on.

In the process of the institutionalisation of NMA a glorified initial “critical” and “truly democratic” potential of NMA, especially of “Net Art” and “Tactical Media” practices, was step by step turned into ritual slogan. The globalized system of contemporary art, fully conformed to the universal neoliberal agenda, has quickly instrumentalized an “anti-capitalist” protest rhetoric and integrated it into its “hegemonial” discourse and official program. Socio-critical NMA activism has obtained its harmless place in the reservations of international art festivals, biennales and other institutional venues.

This evident instrumentalisation of the concepts of “critical art practice” and “critical” per se was helplessly registered by politically conscious artists and art theoreticians. “Gouvernementality” concept, developed by late Foucault, was taken on board in order to explain, how in the art field a critique of a system becomes an essential part of the system itself.

However the discourse of NMA, produced and distributed within an institutional NMA context, till now continues to actively exploit the rhetoric of the (pseudo-) critical. Aesthetically unpretentious and conceptually repetitive “trying-outs” of the up-to-date technical facilities, which represent the mainstream of the current NMA production, are constantly interpreted (partly naively, partly hypocritically) by numerous NMA discourse producers/propagators as “critical reflections”, “artistic explorations”, “deconstructions” and “new definitions” of new media and technologies.

These conceptual ‘copy & paste’ common places still permanently migrate from project descriptions to critical reviews, from application proposals to curatorial statements. They slowly become semantically entirely emasculated signifiers, which in fact have nothing to do with the objects they are supposed to designate. The only thing they still successfully represent is the state of the system, which functioning became an end in itself and in which the question of conceptual and aesthetical ‘quality’ of artistic production (whatever it might mean) became absolutely irrelevant because of purely structural reasons.

The last ten years of a NMA development have proved that the neo-positivist trend has definitely won a competition with the contemporary art orientated NMA wing, whose representatives today very cautiously and reluctantly define themselves as media artists. The main mantra of NMA – the holy Trinity of Art, Science & Technology – led to reduction of the notion of art in this triad to a pre-modern, in antiquity rooted conception of art as producing *téchne*, where art is only a set of practical skills and ‘know-how’ and artist is a craftsman, who, with the help of these skills, produces a particular kind of objects.

As a result, today’s NMA has ended as an apprentice of Technology and media artist as a not enough skilful craftsman. His fate is to be a kind of a hobby-scientist, who has to learn from the real professionals in order to improve his skills. While many NMA-pioneers were professional scientists and hobby-artists *stricto sensu*, who practiced a sort of ‘*Technological Art-Brut*’, today’s media-, bio-, etc. artists became in fact hobby-scientists, who diligently practice something one might define as ‘*Science-Brut*’.