

# INTERSECTIONS OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY: TECHNOLOGICAL, TRANSNATIONAL AND FEMINIST FORMATIONS IN THE PUBLIC ELECTRONIC ART OF MURIEL MAGENTA

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This essay explores not only Magenta's personal and political causes as a transnational academic feminist, but also the ways in which her public electronic art has served as a forum for the intersection of technology, social critique, and women's issues.

A Professor of Art at Arizona State University, Tempe, a new genre artist who works with numerous technological media, and a dedicated proponent of the American women's art movement, Muriel Magenta (1932– ) is the embodiment of not only interdisciplinarity but also of feminist transnational public art. A native New Yorker who was trained at Queens College (NY), Arizona State University, Tempe, and Johns Hopkins University, she has spent her career exploring the interface between art, science and technology, while remaining true to her larger objective of "creating a visual experience in an actual space, and then transmitting it over electronic networks into virtual environments," which are, due to her use of the Internet, both public and transnational [1]. Another goal of her digital art is to carve a space for women within this male-dominated genre. To that end, she has served as the President of the national Women's Caucus for Art, contributed to the College Art Association's Committee on Women in the Arts, and participated in public global gatherings, such as the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, China (1995), where she presented *The World's Women On-Line!*, a transnational web database Magenta created and curated.

This essay will explore not only Magenta's personal and political causes as a transnational academic feminist, but also the ways in which her public electronic art has served as a forum for the intersection of technology, social critique, and women's issues. Focusing on her most prominent works, such as *Coiffure Carnival Trilogy* (1990), *Token City* (1997), *Times Square* (2002), *Club M: Avatars* (2007), and *Hot "Az" Hell* (2008), it will examine how Magenta's public art has addressed the challenges of globalization and transnationalism, and dissect the social critique her feminist digital art has posited since the 1990s. Moreover, it will elucidate the ideological underpinnings of Magenta's contributions to the digital art world, as well as her "activism through electronic art," both nationally and transnationally, by focusing on her work with the WCA, WWOL, and her Internet Art Workshop (2002/2004) at the YWCA Haven House (Phoenix, AZ), which yielded the documentary *28 Women: A Chance for Independence* (2005).

Muriel Magenta (née Gellert) has been producing art as a vocal member of the women's art movement since the 1960s and is known for her signature color magenta which she wears and uses in all of her creative work. However, her profile as a public electronic artist became more prominent in the 1990s after advances in computer technology and the advent of the Internet provided her with the tools necessary to express herself transnationally through her installations, interactive graphic displays, and short videos. One of the first works she produced as a result of these technological changes was *Coiffure Carnival Trilogy* (1990), a three part video/sculpture installation which incorporates computer graphics; specifically, the work *Patio de la Pompadour* which includes a cascade of multicolored androgynous

heads sporting exaggerated pompadour hairstyles, juxtaposed over a checkered disco floor and a magenta Cleopatra image whose hair resembles the Coliseum in Rome. Overall, *Coiffure Carnival Trilogy* is a satire of the power of hair in contemporary society, both as a capitalist industry which defines masculinity and femininity and as a vehicle for the construction of “self-image through hairstyle.” It is comprised of three works - *In Defense of a Hairdo*, a giant pompadour sculpture, surrounded by fencing and concertina wire, and made of hair-like fibers; *Salon Doo*, a series of images depicting hairstyles since antiquity; and *Coiffure Carnival*, a short video tracing the literal and figurative “struggle” between humankind and hair and the “influence of hairstyle in art, history, and art history.” Through numerous vignettes, this installation piece conveys the absurdity of hair, which becomes a transnational, transcultural and transhistorical “indicator of power, youth, and sexuality for both men and women” [2].

As Magenta has conveyed, “the trilogy addresses the quest for ideal beauty, as dictated by popular culture and driven by the stimulus of media ‘Image Makers.’ [It] speaks to styling one’s hair as an aesthetic act. We create a work of art, a sculpture, as we stand in front of the mirror each morning, making sure that it works from all angles: top, sides, front and back...[Thus] the trilogy is a tongue-in-cheek look at society’s obsession with the hairdo. It is a spoof on our pre-occupation with self-image as pure vanity” [3]. *In Defense of a Hairdo*, for example, is a “monumental, totemic icon to hairstyle” that juxtaposes both the sacred and the profane: “It’s like a big, pagan idol. It’s on wheels like something they would pull down the street.” Even though the sculpture is a tribute to absurdity, Magenta simultaneously defends the notion that hair is also a palate for self-expression, creativity, and originality, and that it should be protected against the enemies of culture and individuality [4]. Implicit in the trilogy, however, is an indictment of the presupposed relationship between hair and gender. Although society has traditionally associated hair with women, especially in literature, mythology and popular culture (Medusa and Rapunzel), as Magenta illustrates through *Coiffure Carnival Trilogy*, it has also been an obsession of men, ranging from the flowing locks of the biblical Samson, to Louis XIV and his wigs, to Elvis Presley and his over-the-top stage presence, to drag queens. Hair, she suggests, like gender, is a daily performative act that involves staging, artifice and, above all, participating in multi-billion dollar global industry which traces its roots to the ancients. Thus hair, as part of the unattainable ideal of human beauty, is not just a concern for women but also an indelible element of masculinity.

*Token City* (1997) marks a turning point in Magenta’s career in that the works since the debut of this electronic installation piece share a distinct urban, cosmopolitan, and multicultural dimension. *Token City* is essentially a four minute electronic representation of a New York City subway station that depicts the sights, sounds, and even scents of the world-famous public transportation system through real-time recorded footage of riders mixed with a 3-D computer animated subway station. A collaborative work with composer and percussionist Michael Udow, who recreates the subterranean sounds of the subway - past, present and future - by weaving a mixture of actual noises with electronic and multicultural musical elements to reflect the wide-range of subway riders, *Token City* is a multimedia work of virtual reality or “digital time travel” that uses computer graphics to “transform the everyday commute into an experience of images and sounds that simulates [the subway experience]. The viewer is immersed in a situation where emotions and thoughts associated with the subway are implied and heightened: the anonymity of the individual within the crowd, the anticipation of the unknown, [and] the passing of time.” Viewers enter a subway platform that replicates riders’ experiences and once again juxtaposes the sacred and profane elements found in urban street culture, such as exquisitely detailed mosaics and gum on the walls. Thus, *Token City* essentially transforms “the everyday commute into an experience that merges reality with the extraordinary” [5]. As Magenta elucidates, *Token City* was inspired by her own childhood experiences: “I actually spent all my time until I was about 20 years old in New York...I traveled to school on the subway...and I always used the subway as a place to sort of think and get my

system together as the subway system seemed to unfold itself. So I was very aware of the subway as a place, as a site, as an institution in my life, so to speak...I was always very fond of the mosaics and all the art that I saw in the subway. I was very observant of all the details, so it just sort of went into my consciousness" [6].

The 1997 opening reception of *Token City* at the Arizona State University Art Museum also had the added element of smell - specifically that of urine - which was meant to add to the virtual subway experience by injecting a "whiff of reality." In a parallel project called *Actual Odor*, "a Two-Hour Guerilla Performance," artist Angela Ellsworth "wore a jersey cocktail dress soaked in her own urine for the duration of the opening reception...to demonstrate how smell destroys any social boundaries existent in a subway, as it permeates the space and transcends visual barriers or experiences." As Ellsworth describes, "For six days prior to the event the dress soaked. On the seventh day the dress was hung out in 110 degree weather to dry." While wearing the dress, she fanned herself, "spreading the odor with a hand fan, one side of which was lettered with the word 'actual' and the other side with the word 'odor.'" Ellsworth mingled with other museum visitors and for continuous periods of time sat in the projection space of *Token City*." At other times, "she positioned herself under hot spot lights in order to generate more heat from her body for the utmost odor." While "most of the visitors could smell the unpleasant odor, [they] did not associate the nicely dressed woman with the smell, nor could they find the source of the scent," probably because femininity, as Ellsworth suggests, is still not associated with "actual odor" [7]. Thus Ellsworth's performance piece responded to *Token City* not only by questioning socially constructed definitions of gender, especially within public, urban, cosmopolitan spaces (women are not supposed to smell), but also by effectively challenging Magenta's comfortable and digitally-sanitized virtual depiction of the subway.

*Times Square* (2002), like *Token City*, was created from Magenta's personal urban experiences and uses the medium of 3-D computer animation and her skills as a sculptor, a painter, and a videographer. Moreover, both works provide an electronic, public window of critique into the fast-paced New York lifestyle on multiple levels - as it exists underground in the subway system or aboveground on Broadway - rendering New York not merely a "token city" but rather a microcosm of urban space around the world. As Magenta conveys, the four-minute long *Times Square* 3-D animation is "driven by the universal attraction to this urban icon" [8]. Using computer animation, "an ambient soundtrack made from sounds recorded at the real Times Square," as well as hip-hop beats and three of Magenta's custom-made video games which add to the interactive environment, Magenta recreates the exciting rush that accompanies Times Square, however, virtually: "hurried people stream down the sidewalks, taxis zoom by with horns honking, the air is filled with throbbing energy and random strains of music." Altering colors and textures of buildings to include her famous magenta, and substituting her own image and artwork in Times Square billboards, she imbues the space with her own subjectivity as a feminist artist and a creator of popular culture. As Magenta conveys, "I literally changed my art to fit Broadway and I changed Broadway to fit my art" [9]. Moreover, by using the Internet as a public forum to display works such as *Times Square* and *Token City*, she makes the local global, thus contributing to the transnationality of electronic art.

Magenta's public electronic works have continued to incorporate the urban sensibilities of *Token City* and *Times Square* as well as her image as a "hot pink" feminist icon. Not only have they grown increasingly reflexive and subjective, but they have also become increasingly political in terms of the statements they make about the emphasis on youth and sexuality in contemporary popular culture. Many of the images in *Club M: Avatars*, such as the laughing woman, the beating heart jumping rope, the blond with the flowing locks, and Magenta herself can be seen in the billboards of *Times Square*, thus creating

an electronic genealogy that links Magenta's work across time and space. Representing a wide-range of her animated characters or "alter egos," these avatars simulate "a discrete aspect of her own persona. The avatars reside at Club M, a cyberspace locale with an Internet address. They appear on video in actual spaces for specific museum and gallery installations. [However] in this work, the avatars are juxtaposed on an animated street mural, referencing Magenta's urban background" and her interest in public art [10].

Similarly, the video installation *Hot "Az" Hell* (2008) also uses urban elements, such as a brick wall, this time painted in magenta, to showcase a public street mural. Reflective of the metropolitan experience of living in a city like Phoenix - a cross between an urban environment and desert landscape that is "hot as hell" - the animated "vibrant, colorful, funky and contemporary" mural expresses "the overriding effect of the Arizona summer sun on urban and desert life." The progression of the video "mimics the hard light of the [Arizona] sun that changes the color, texture and intensity of everything it illuminates" [11]. It "combines a perpetually radiating sun and desert landscape digitally painted on a virtual brick wall. The blazing sun bleaches the wall until all color disappears, [with] the slowly moving video loop suggesting time lapse photography" [12]. Images on the wall include many of the same avatars or alter egos from *Club M: Avatars* as well as southwestern elements such as cowboys, cacti, the Phoenix skyline, snakes, skulls, desert rabbits and birds, and a blazing sun. Not only is Phoenix as "hot as hell" but, we presume, so is Magenta. By inserting her image in hot pink into the video, we infer that she is angry at society - perhaps at the stylized, cartoonish, way it depicts different groups - including women and African Americans, who she also inserts into the mural. The avatars in *Hot "Az" Hell* are meant to entertain; however, behind the vibrant and colorful public face of the mural lies a layer of social criticism.

Magenta has been an outspoken advocate of women's rights in the art world since the 1970s - before it was politically correct and even on the agenda of most women's organizations. She was one of the first academics to introduce women's art into the university curriculum, which she did in 1974 through Arizona State University, Tempe's program "Woman Image Now." Magenta maintained that women artists were not being taken seriously in the art or academic worlds. Thus, one her first activities was to lobby for the inclusion of the first female juror in ASU's Student Art Exhibition. This catalyzed her agenda and "Woman Image Now" eventually became a nationally-recognized program and participant in the American women's art network, promoting "the professionalism of women in the visual arts through education from a feminist perspective" [13].

Magenta continued her feminist activism through her participation in the Women's Caucus for Art (WCA) in the 1980s. She served as the president of the WCA between 1982 and 1984 and during her term "set two goals: to strengthen links between the national office and the chapters and to 'raise the feminist consciousness.'...Under Magenta, a national headquarters at Moore College in Philadelphia was established" [14]. Moreover, she also sought to increase the number of WCA chapters nationwide in order to strengthen its outreach and influence in the art world, which, in the 1980s, was overwhelmingly dominated by men. Magenta's other goals included making the WCA a multicultural organization and institutionalizing a communications network. To that end, she began publication of the quarterly *Hue-points*, which was one of the most effective networking strategies in the days before email and the Internet [15].

As an active member of the College Art Association's Committee on Women in the Arts, Magenta also attended numerous conferences worldwide - including three UN world conferences on women (Beijing, Nairobi, and Copenhagen) - all with the goal of promoting women in art [16]. One of her most productive conferences proved to be the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), which

was also attended by then-First Lady Hillary Clinton. There, Magenta introduced the Internet forum *The World's Women On-Line!*, making her truly one of the pioneers in the electronic medium of the Internet. In fact in 1995, there was no global Internet network, so Magenta used projectors to display saved versions of her website. The website remains one of the first transnational "electronic art networking projects...[using] the Internet as a global exhibition format." It "focuses attention on the vast resources of women's experience and culture...[and] bridges language barriers though art imagery and promotes interdisciplinary collaboration between [female] technologists and artists." Moreover, "all media are represented, from painting and sculpture to crafts, ceramics, photography and computer art," providing women, especially those from developing nations, with a free and accessible means of displaying their art both instantly and globally [17].

In 2002 and 2004, Magenta participated in a community engagement project, "Shelter Against Violence: A Case for Empowerment," at the YWCA Haven House in downtown Phoenix, where she and a group of students trained the women at the shelter in multimedia computer skills. Each of the twenty-eight residents created their own website to post artwork as well as their autobiographies, family photos and resumes for potential employers to view. As Magenta conveyed, "Most of these women are homeless and accustomed to society telling them no. [This] opens doors for them and empowers them" [18]. The women's struggles – and the process of rebuilding their self-esteems through the healing mechanism of art – were documented through Magenta's film *28 Women: A Chance for Independence* (2005). The documentary was inspired by the residents who "described their individual pursuits toward self-reliance...[such as] completing a basic education to qualify for a job, juggling work and childcare, budgeting, and maintaining sobriety." Magenta was particularly "moved by the determination of these women to overcome adversity to make a new life for themselves and their children" [19].

Magenta is not only a world-renown electronic artist whose works have been screened globally, but she is also a feminist activist who will undoubtedly inspire future generations of women. However, as Magenta readily admitted in a 2008 interview, the work of activists has and always will be a struggle: "I didn't wake up one morning and say 'I will be a feminist.' My activity in the women's movement was - personally and professionally - for my own survival." According to Magenta, while strides have been made towards gender equality in the arts, "the same attitudes toward women are still there, but they're expressed more subtly." While discrimination has partially gone underground, the most dangerous obstacle that remains for women is, ironically, women themselves: "Some obstacles are created... by women...because of conditioning... unfortunately, many younger women have no education relating to feminism, so they join the rest of patriarchal society in rejecting it" [20]. Thus, Magenta envisions that the future of women's art will not only involve the creative process, but will also include educating younger women and continuing the public struggle to be heard.

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