

Intimate Disavowal: Turning Away from Technological Media Art

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Abstract

This paper describes a personal turn away from technological media art towards modes of practice that involve walking based interaction with the local environment. However, rather than stressing areas of difference, I consider points of unexpected continuity. The key association hinges on a common concern with dimensions of mediation. Within this context, I argue for a broader conception of mediation that is not restricted to technological media, but that can also incorporate our complex relation to aspects of lived immediacy.

Keywords: Media Art, mediation, Land Art

I spotted a single red car panel poised on the final slope above the creek. I took some initial photographs and considered how I could remove a square section as cleanly as possible. The cutting proved difficult. It was awkward to stand on the steep slope. I wore through an entire grinding disk before eventually freeing the square [1].

Introduction

After many years of producing software art style projects, I recently produced a project that involved making a series of walks up into the escarpment forest behind my home to remove sections of illegally dumped cars with a battery-powered angle grinder. It was entitled, *A Line Made By Walking and Assembling Bits and Pieces of the Bodywork of Illegally Dumped Cars Found at the Edge of Roads and Tracks in the Illawarra Escarpment*, or *ALMBWABPIDCFERTIE* for short. Apart from taking digital photographs, employing an electrically charged device, and writing blog entries, the project was light on technology. The emphasis instead was on walking and writing. The following essay reflects upon the implications of this turn away from the field of explicitly digital and technologically focused media art practice. I argue that the turn is not as simple as it seems. Rather than representing a nostalgic return to materially grounded, experiential intimacy, it discovers instead, within the

texture of lived action, dimensions of mediation.

Turning

Things tend to begin with protestations of exhaustion and disinterest. So, in my case, I felt that I was starting to repeat myself in programming and that I could no longer sustain the monastic effort required to develop elaborate algorithmic systems from scratch.

I was searching for some means of developing a mode of practice linked to other spheres of my life, particularly my outdoor activities. I wanted to somehow render aspects of my walking, climbing, etc. in terms adequate to art. At the same time, I was not interested in simply representing my leisure activities as art. I was interested in their otherness to art - their distinct context of meaning, their aesthetic distance and reticence.

However committed I was to this turn, and however aesthetically ambiguous, I could still plainly recognize a standard conceptual pattern. I was turning from abstraction to the real material world, from mathematical architecture to embodied action, from technology to nature. In this sense, the turn can all too easily - even inevitably - take shape as a switch, as an alternation between two known states, two legible states. So my notional alternative to the sphere of coded abstraction risked adhering to the latter's most fundamental conditions. In turning, I risked failing to genuinely turn. I changed orientation without actually moving.

Rather than trying to directly avoid this dilemma, the trick was to allow it to play itself out. Instead of imagining a clear path away, it was perhaps better to scrupulously follow the logic of the switch.

So from within the context of my own turn I encountered strange relations. Instead of problems of mediation disappearing, they reappeared in a different guise. Instead of the simplicity of lived action, I discovered the complexity of medial layers, a constant and inextricable play of abstraction, event, thingness and representation.

Disavowal

Turning tends to have an intimate affective weight. It is accompanied by vows and disavowals. To avow is to publicly assert or acknowledge some truth. To disavow is to turn on that truth - to deny and repudiate it. It involves a denial of intimacy.

Disavowal is how art theorist Claire Bishop [2] describes the relationship between contemporary art and digital forms of production. For her it signals less a sudden end to intimacy than an unconvincing distance. Contemporary art, in Bishop's view, insists upon values defined in contradistinction to digital processes - values, for instance, of affect, uniqueness, subjective response, materiality and liveness. Yet at the same time it is integrally affected by new regimes of conceiving, producing and consuming work that are fundamentally enmeshed within digital forms. Bishop projects the sense of a fractured, ambivalent and contradictory space of contemporary art that fashions its dubious autonomy precisely in terms of everything that it wishes it were not. The legacy of Adorno's [3] aesthetic theory is evident here, but also the long tradition of critical discussion considering the relationship between art and the wider social and productive forms characteristic of modern and late capitalism. I am thinking, for instance, of Charles Baudelaire's [4] famous rejection of the artistic aspirations of photography, which simultaneously and inextricably provides the basis for conceiving the proper nature of art, as well as all the various avant-garde modernist traditions that alternatively embrace and reject technology. I am also thinking of Walter Benjamin's [5] harnessing of the apocalyptic character of mechanical reproduction to frame a new, perversely wrought potential for politicization and Clement Greenberg's [6] call for medium specificity, which only makes sense within the context of his perception of a more general and aesthetically disabling space of plural and cacophonous media. These are all examples of how notions of modern and contemporary art emerge through a complex and unresolved dialogue with various 'non-aesthetic' others.

The title of Bishop's essay, "Digital Divide", resonates with this history and immediately recalls Andreas Huyssen's, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* [7]. Huyssen traces the ambivalent relationship between modernism and mass culture. He stresses that the identity of high culture is strongly marked by its resistance to mass-mediated popular forms, taking coherent shape in terms of its avowed differences from popular modes of cultural production and consumption.



Fig. 1 *ALMBWABPBIDCFERTIE* @ Brogan Bunt, 2013

Bishop's sense of the hermetic nature of contemporary art – its fragile distance from everything that surrounds it and lends it meaning – is legible in terms of Nicolas Bourriaud's insistence upon a "Law of Relocation" [8], which requires that art manifest its concerns with wider spheres of modern and postmodern production in displaced, indirect terms. His conception of relational aesthetics takes shape precisely in terms of its opposition to the characteristics of contemporary networked media. It frames contexts for human dialogue that avoid the glib, participatory rhetoric of social media, linking people together in local immediate situations rather than at a virtual and qualitatively impoverished remove.

Surprisingly enough, Bishop's most pertinent point of reference would seem to be Lev Manovich's conception of new media [9], particularly his recognition of a hierarchy of fundamental structural-material principles (numerical representation, modulation, variability, transcoding, etc.), as well as his emphasis on a clear cultural divide between experimental new media ('Turing-land') and contemporary art ('Duchamp-land') [10]. Bishop's sense of a neat split between these two cultural spheres is shaped by this now slightly outdated conception. The notion of new media itself and its associated exclusive focus on the consequences of digitization is no longer constitutive of contemporary media arts practice. Contemporary media art has a much broader range of concerns. Media art has moved beyond conventional media, beyond 'the digital' and into an intimate relation with all manner of other forms of contemporary art.

My point is that this rhetoric of disavowal no longer issues entirely from some rarefied space of alienated contemporary art. It emerges just as much from within the apparently marginal field of media art practice itself. Think of the various notions of the post-digital, or of all the efforts to return to the pre-digital (anachronistic media), or even the renewed emphasis upon media materiality – all of these contemporary tendencies look beyond the standard self-image of old-school new media production. They are no longer future-focused, no longer cutting edge technology, no longer so enmeshed in the virtual. The disavowal gains a more intimate character. The digital appears not as some external bogey, which can be simply embraced or avoided, but rather as the necessary basis for any kind of turn away.

Media Generally

It's funny that despite the sense in which the notion of 'media', in its dangerous plurality, in its resistance to formal reduction, has worked to unsettle the contours of the traditional artistic medium, it nonetheless retains, even within the field of media art practice, a more everyday and very resilient sense. The media are the overall complex of technological forms of representation and communication. They indicate a new ground for social interaction, in which immediate social contact gives way to indirect and distanced systems of exchange. Technological forms of communication, as inhuman prosthetic systems, emerge as emblematic of media – of everything in media that works to defer, displace and then illusorily reconstitute and reintegrate. However,

this intense focus on technologically enabled mediation has at least one odd and counter-intuitive implication: it can restrict the scope of mediation. It can suggest that mediation is only ever technologically based. In this manner, it can also produce nostalgia for non-media, for the possibility of the unmediated.

My concern is to conceive media as a field of process that is not restricted to modern, technologically forms of communication. Instead mediation intrinsically affects all aspects of experience and being. It relates not only to cameras, screens, mobile devices, digital networks, etc., but also to skin, voice, particles and all manner of dimensions of the material and immaterial world. I am aware this broader conception of mediation has a perverse and counter-intuitive aspect. No longer exclusively focused solely on relations of distance, it considers modalities of intimate exchange. The advantage, however, is that it enables the experience of immediacy to be rendered in different terms – less as a space of pure simplicity than as a complex relational field.

The activity of walking, for instance, can be regarded as a fundamental lived means of medial engagement and discovery. *ALMBWABPBIDCFERTIE* led me to make repeated walks up into the temperate rainforest behind my home. The process was constitutive of my experience of that space. It shaped it in specific terms. I was aware of the steepness through the effort required to ascend. I was aware of the distance by the sense of how long it took to walk from one place to another. I was aware of the temperature, smells and sounds as I passed between the trees and along the narrow trails. The forest space cohered and gained intimate resolution precisely in terms of walking. In this sense, the activity represented a particular mediation of the forest – one that took form less in terms of absolute and abysmal distance than dimensions of intimate interaction. However, in my experience, this intimacy is never reducible to something fixed and self-present. It is intrinsically complex and layered.

Forest

The forest obtained a sense of autonomous force as I walked within it. Mediation – the complexity of an encounter, of an interaction – provided the basis for realising the alterity of the

forest. It was not as simple external matter that the forest affected me, but rather in terms of a negotiation that drew the material and the immaterial close together, that lent them a generative, emergent capacity.

The project began with a sense of incongruity. I was interested in the relationship between the escarpment rainforest and the abandoned cars. This seemed like a simple relation, but turned out to be complex. The cars were just the most obvious signs of a cultural clash and a field of impurity. Walking within the forest quickly revealed the extent to which the natural environment and the immediately proximate regional city were in close interaction. Of course, this can be regarded as a largely one-sided relation. The forest bears the scars of a century of logging and is infested with all manner of weeds and feral animals. It is crisscrossed with tracks, trails and rotting bits of coal mining and water board infrastructure. Yet at the same time, it somehow retains its sense of lush resilience. It continues to be a place of landslides, leeches and falling tree limbs. It remains a dark, green curtain looming above the city, steel works and suburbs. The illegally dumped cars appear as emblematic of this relation, of its moments of violence, silence and reprieve. I was particularly concerned with the skin of the cars – the surface patina in which the mediation of city and forest gains visible and tangible expression.

These cars have spilled down the escarpment hills on dark and drunken evenings (or so I imagine, perhaps the truth is less colourful and violent, perhaps the violence only takes proper shape when the cars slip over the edge – when gravity kicks in – perhaps prior to that there is only the dull thought of getting rid of an unwanted thing), but as soon as they halt their slide, as soon as they come to rest, they gradually become something else. They are absorbed within the forest. They become habitat for lizards and possums. Their skin grows mottled and less reflective. That is what I notice the most – the shininess disappearing, passing into something else – something that I cannot quite describe. Abject and desolate perhaps, but also calm and oddly transcendent. Transcendent not of the forest, but of whatever originally shaped their existence. The wrecked cars remain at once very obviously cars, but at the

same time, as dumped things, as things slowly decaying in the forest, they manage to transcend their identity as cars. They manage to transcend even the sense of ruin and simple decay. They gain another indeterminable skin [11].

Alongside this primary, thematic space of mediation, there was also my own activity - not only the walking, but also the cutting and collecting of car pieces, the recording of sequential images and the subsequent blogging of my experiences. Each of these involved dimensions of mediation. The cutting was a deliberately crude, but also minor and unobtrusive, mediation of the skin of the cars. But more than this it was also a mediation of art, bush walking and vandalism. It placed each of these in a new strange relation, in which no single one of them attained precedence, in which each could be interrogated in terms of the other. The photography and writing are more obviously forms of mediation, but here, very importantly, they obtained performative dimension. They were not simply modes of documentation. They entered into the tissue of the work as vital procedural features.

The issue of procedure provided the strongest point of association with my earlier algorithmic work. Drawing upon the tradition of Conceptual Art and my experience of programming, the project manifested a strongly procedural aspect. It was characterized by rules and iterative actions. So, for example, I walked to each dumped car site and back again home with a single rectangular piece. I cut seven different pieces from seven different cars on seven different days.

I am interested in the problem of running embodied procedures, of setting myself a task and then dutifully following my own instructions. And this is really a straightforward process. There is nothing especially inspired or ecstatically phenomenological about it. It just has to be plainly and simply done and then just as plainly and simply described [12].

Whereas programming encourages a neat distinction between the conceptual work of procedural design and the inaccessible, machine-based work of procedural execution, I found that the process of enacting algorithms enabled a more fluid relation. New rules emerged from within the terrain of action itself.

My focus shifted easily between abstract procedural architecture and the rich and qualitatively determined field of particular iterative events.

Finally, the issue of mediation affected the structure of the work itself. It emerged less as a coherent single thing – a performance, a piece of sculpture, a set of images or writings - than as an assemblage of medial layers, a juxtaposition of dimensions of event, action, image, memory and reflection.

I wonder whether this shift in perspective, this attentiveness to dimensions of mediation, could possibly have occurred without my having been absorbed for so long in technological media processes? Perhaps it was necessary for media to take pronounced technological shape before I could become sensitive to more general contours of mediation. Perhaps it was necessary that it become reified and clearly identifiable before it could obtain a more elusive and widespread currency - before it could return back down into the apparently unmediated world.

Conclusion

This very personally inflected paper describes a turn away from technological media to a concern with aspects of mediation within lived experience and the always impure, natural world. It suggests that this turn is not simply the prerogative of an alienated contemporary art, but that it occurs within the field of media art itself. Most importantly, this turn can have unexpected consequences. Instead of confirming what we have always thought about abstraction and materiality, mediation and being, it can work to unsettle these terms – enabling the implications of technological media to be thought more generally and beyond the horizon of the technological as such.

Ultimately, I have the sense that my communication is intransitive. It lacks an object. It cannot adequately produce or imagine one. It is motivated not so much by the thought of reaching another person as by an intimate engagement with the escarpment field. The latter demands efforts of mediation because the field is endlessly elusive. It is never simply itself [13].

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