

INTRODUCTION:
TECHNOLOGY AS MONSTROSITY
IN CANONICAL ART HISTORY

My way of getting out of it at that time, was, I really think, to conceive of the history of philosophy as a kind of buggery or, what comes to the same thing, immaculate conception. I imagined myself getting onto the back of an author, and giving him a child, which would be his and which would at the same time be a monster. It is very important that it should be his child, because the author actually had to say everything that I made him say. But it also had to be a monster because it was necessary to go through all kinds of decenterings, slips, break ins, secret emissions, which I really enjoyed.

-Gilles Deleuze¹

Artists have readily embraced electronic and digital media since the 1960s, yet the study of new media forms has—with some notable exceptions—proceeded along a separate and chiefly divergent path from canonical art history. Scholars hailing from within new media studies, as well as from an array of disciplines such as English, Computer Science, Film, Sociology, and Theater have made invaluable contributions to the study of electronic art. In addition, since the late 1990s, several anthologies that collect the seminal writings of those practitioners and thinkers concerned with art and technology have emerged, representing significant strides toward the formulation of a cohesive history. Still, despite the current cultural moment in which electronic media has grown stable enough have unprecedented malleability in the hands of the artist, there lingers a sense that it stands as yet outside the proper study of western art. Within the American art history canon, the presence of technology—and its intrusion into high art—evokes quiet but persistent

¹ “Lettre à Michel Cressole,” in Michel Cressole, *Deleuze* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1973), 111.

anxieties around its industrial-capitalist influences that purportedly erode the valuable essence (aura) of the original artwork by treading too close to the commercial.

In the course of this writing I suggest, alternatively, that what has been conceptualized as ‘monstrosity’ is actually a productive theoretical construct that can be mobilized to recuperate the value of technology in artistic practice today, and in its canonical historicization tomorrow. This provides an intellectual means of navigating the apparently irreconcilable differences between art historical functions and high-tech form. It is my contention that this anomaly is in fact a necessary differentiation of artistic production. This is true for the very reason that variation presents new possibilities, new confluences, new sequences, new differentiation, new potentials.

The strained relations between art history and technology have ideological bases, and those differences inhibit constructive dialogue between existing art-and-technology scholarship and the American art historical canon. Which canonical mores do electronic technologies burden, and why? Identifying four key areas of investigation, I consider: (1) the high art / low culture debate in relation to modern visual technologies; (2) the role of commercialism as antipodal to art-historical ideologies of the artistic avant-garde; (3) the impact of postmodern identity politics and issues of globalization on the canonical valuation of media art; and (4) the role of embodiment in the formation of digital aesthetics. These four points will, in the following investigation, provide an ideological grounding for understanding the present-day anxieties that prohibit the acceptance of electronic media and digitality within the American canon.

This exploration has evolved from my interest in the contemporary interrelationship of “high” culture—specifically contemporary artistic practice—and

the techniques of what is commonly referred to as new media: post-celluloid projection, electronic media and digital art, for example. New media interpenetrates culture both practically and philosophically, and technology and society affect each other in a continual interplay. While the aesthetic impact of the computer is in itself understudied, less considered still is the effect that qualities attributed to new media have had on art and its discourses. The aim of this dissertation can therefore be defined as drawing together two apparently non-intersecting discourses: canonical art history and modern visual technologies. How have media forms reconfigured our understanding of art altogether? And in a greater sense, is there an aesthetic logic of artistic practices shaped by electronics and digitality? What qualities characterize a language of new media, and how do they shirk conventions around the artwork's 'objectness,' or even problematize the autonomy of the viewing subject him/herself? These are the questions that the art canon need reconcile in order to address the technological advancement of the twenty-first century, and which I will address in this analysis.

While new media art proliferates, art history maintains a modernist trajectory—even though artistic developments demand innovation. This uneasy relationship between art history and technology can only be understood by taking into account fundamental philosophical quandaries that divide the two. Therefore, a significant portion of this exploration will be dedicated to unearthing those theoretical leanings and reconsidering their value—thereby constructing a conceptual bridge between the traditional canon and cutting-edge scholarship in new media.

Compounding the tensions between art history and electronic technology is a nebulous sense of what properties can even be attributed to the highly problematic umbrella term “new media art.” The tools of hardware and software—especially those of the information technology revolution—have impacted modes of artistic

production, even those whose final forms are not digital or electronic. My research into the study of new media has led me to consider a vast conglomeration of affiliated techniques that include computer or digital art, interactive art, electronic arts of any kind, multimedia installation, virtual reality technologies, and digital cinema. This generalized grouping does include works whose final form may not be digital, although they bear the imprint of this technology, which is integral to their formation (i.e. digital printouts of any kind, digital film converted to 35mm-film for distribution, sculptures developed from computer-aided design rendering, and so on). In recent years there has been a steady increase in scholarly publications that theorize new media, as a means by which to codify it and introduce it into the canon. Still, despite the greater availability of writings on new media, there remains a paucity of theories that convey its import relative to the distinct moment from which new media blossoms. Hence, this investigation considers new media within the social context of globalization and electronic mass media, as factors that frame contemporary perspectives on aesthetic contemplations of the digital.

What aesthetic tendencies do new media have, and how do they interrupt conventions of what art and art making are? How do these particular qualities throw conventional art historical methodologies into crisis? In order to develop a sense of the historical arc within which media art is situated, it is vital contemplate these questions in relation to previous technological debates within art discourses. How have earlier “new media” forms such as photography and video art been received within the American academy, and how do these former cases reflect upon the current tensions between art and digital technology? Do existing modes of art historical scholarship suffice to illuminate the place of electronic and digital art within its canon, or will they require a new model? Arguing for a hybrid approach,

this study considers the changing roles of commercialism, the artistic avant-garde, and conventional notions of authorship relative to art historical scholarship.

Further isolating art and technology studies, many uphold a rigid distinction between new media as an outlying ‘specialty’ area of artistic production. Others maintain impassable boundaries between the so-called ‘high’ art form designed for dedicated aesthetic contemplation, and the artistic innovation present in mass media such as globally distributed commercial electronic games and digital cinema. In consideration of these challenges, this work explores the unique time and space of a particular contemporary moment in artistic production, integrating the dimensions of globalized awareness, postmodernity, and identity politics. It is vital to bring the nuances of these elements more firmly into the discussion, despite their omission from analyses of contemporary art engaged with new technologies. For this reason, rather than delimiting a particular segment of this study to globalization and issues of postmodernity, these concerns are suffused throughout the entire document.

In order to better conceptualize the impact of global networks on contemporary artistic practice, postcolonial critiques are an essential component of this study. With the onset of a global arts movement, cultural producers and thinkers whose intellectual roots lie in postcolonial scholarly traditions have seen their efforts ripple through the contemporary art scene. The shifting notions of identity that inform postcolonial studies are interconnected with the presence of electronic media, and the movements of bodies engendered by a global system of flows. From the perspective of high art production, international biennials have mushroomed and thrived globally, potentially constituting a paradigm shift toward the postmodern. Therefore, my work traces overlapping arenas of theorization, in order to describe a phenomenon that is influencing artistic production on a worldwide scale. The objective here is not to make an overarching, literal-minded postcolonial critique of

technology. Rather, this study maps the significant relationship between the visibility of diversity and the increasing manifestation of these themes in artistic form. Instrumental is my discussion of the relationship between formalist materiality and alterity. What does this have to do with the presence of the ‘peripheral’ artist, and how does this relate to the ‘projected’ (analog and digital) artwork? How do the fragmenting of unitary subjectivity and the materiality of electronics influence the formation of a digital aesthetic?

Permeating this discussion is the influence of Donna Haraway’s theoretical construct of the cyborg as a political fiction, a monster birthed of the imagination that can function as a creative intervention, and a generator of intellectual differentiation. This provides continuity with the themes of monstrosity that appear throughout this exploration and frames it within the reality of the increasing presence of advanced technology in everyday life. In short, I wish to demonstrate a transdisciplinary means of bringing art history’s tremendous resources and rich intellectual legacy to a discussion of media forms (and vice versa). In order to do so, however, it will require taking that which may seem extraneous to the canon, and recuperating or enhancing it. Of course, not all of these operations will produce viable fusions, but what is art without experimentation? I welcome this scholarly ‘mongrelization’ or ‘interdisciplinarity’ that can revitalize the discourse as it concerns art and technology. This exploration further suggests that the function of art is not one of preserving unity at all costs, but rather of constant and licentious differentiation, and an evolution of affect in the aesthetic (or even the determinedly *anti*-aesthetic) object.

In Chapter One I first draw upon new media theorists like Janet Murray, Charlie Gere, and Lev Manovich—as well as intellectuals connected to digital art history like Edward Shanken and Christiane Paul—to outline the basic confusion

around what new media is, and set forth a few functional concepts. I then introduce the twentieth-century ideological differences that underlie the canonical rejection of modern technology from art history. This is not to say that individual scholars have never undertaken to shape a history of electronic art. Indeed, a diverse collection of fields has contributed to a network of interrelations between the aesthetic and the electronic. But rather, this investigation is concerned with the admissibility of those narratives into the dominant discourse in the American academy. Dialogues around new media art are currently fractured, and virtually untranslatable into a traditional art historical context, given the ongoing rift between art and technology. In addition, electronic and digital art comprises a constellation of technologies and forms that are vastly diverse in terms of their material qualities. Despite the reality that electronic media and digitality increasingly pervade our everyday lives, the canon rarely addresses their presence in the museum space or in art history. This chapter seeks to understand the lag between the inception of earlier modern forms like photography, video, and mass media, and the aesthetic study of their use by artists, as part of a larger investigation of the relationship between art and technology within art historical discourses.

Bridging the chasm between technology and art history is not without its unique and arduous challenges. As a collection of technological forms that are fully steeped in the social reality of late capitalism, new media seems ever more removed from the aesthetic concerns accorded traditional art objects. As an object-based study, art history seems in itself ill-equipped to wholly address the ‘dematerialized’ nature of electronic art. In addition, the technical nature of the technological arts often requires new media expertise, and few institutions are equipped to adequately present electronic or digital works. Indeed, it is only at the end of the twentieth century that a generation whose everyday milieu included the electronic has come of

age; hence, the lack of attention to this area is not surprising. However, the focus for the purposes of this dissertation is not on the practical/material challenges, but rather the ingrained, ideologically validated reasons that shape the poor reception of electronic and digital arts.

The relationship between art and technology certainly predates modernity. However, for the sake of this discussion, I begin with the onset of photography in the nineteenth century as prefiguring issues around technology that would subsequently beleaguer the canon. From its inception, photography was well-recorded as a scientific endeavor and popular form of low culture production for the masses; yet it was not initially taken up by art historians as worthy of formal aesthetic contemplation. Photography's mechanical eye purportedly offered an unmediated form of image making—scientific neutrality, objectivity, and unparalleled accuracy of detail. Therefore, as a collaborative effort of man and machine, it also happened to dovetail naturally into the modernist colonial imperatives that privilege categorization and positivism as the primary means of understanding the world.

As an extension of understanding the degree to which visual technologies are bound up in modernist values, I consider the linkage between photography and the colonial project as intimately tied. Dialogues on earlier forms of “new” media like photography, cinema, and video—which are often initially framed in terms of the commercial (therefore not art) and qualities of ‘immediacy’ (promising unmediated access to the real)—cannot hold up to their utopian promise, but are instructive to art and technology discussions. The majority of the first chapter, therefore, traces a genealogy of art historical documentation that sheds light on the relationship between art and technology in the canon.

Chapter One achieves this by surveying American canonical art historical responses to technological arts in journals, conference proceedings, and pedagogical

texts. The latter of these are especially illuminating as a litmus test of how art history propagates itself to the next generation. Notably, many of these texts continue to demonstrate an underlying anxiety around postmodernity, with its attendant technological developments and its impact on the discipline. In addition, linkages forged between political or identity-based practices and media arts such as video have resulted in the melding of socially-defined minorities (and their use of media arts) with forms of activism. And as activism or ‘political art,’ the discipline has made room for such works as academic specialties, but not considered them within the formalist or aesthetically-oriented contemplations of art history, much less its mainstream discourse. The confluence of popular forms and electronic mass media into art making has further pushed the envelope of the discipline, prompting questions as to whether the current models are sufficient in regard to the analysis of art and technology. This chapter ultimately fosters an interdisciplinary approach that combines the rich visual interpretive capacity of art history, with the technological acumen of new media scholarship, as a means for reconciling the needs of both fields in the twenty-first century.

By plotting the ideas that shape their reception within the academy, earlier movements like Impressionism, Futurism, Conceptualism, Pop art, and Situationism become portentous intersections between art and technology. Similarly to the ways that the then “new” medium of photography proliferated in the cultural epicenter of early modernist Paris (yet temporarily stood outside of the art world), digital technologies of today occupy a largely commercial sphere, garnering little acceptance as a formal medium worthy of traditional aesthetic inquiry. Of tremendous relevance also are the links between technology, industrialism, capitalism, and totalitarianism—machine-driven forces that shaped artists’ and historians’ reception of technology in the modern era. This chapter effectively “sets

the stage” for the in-depth theoretical considerations of commercialism versus the avant-garde, to which Chapter Two is dedicated.

From within the art historical canon there exists a strong critical push, often coming from dominant American discourses, to theorize out digitality and projected art because of its dubious relationship to the commercial and the military-industrial complex. Chapter Two locates the tensions that electronic and digital forms present to traditional art historical frameworks in terms of these concerns. Here, I draw upon the writings of John Belton, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, and others to illustrate a prominent institutional hesitation around what are perceived as new media art’s inherent properties. While ateliers of artists in mass media entertainment busily forge ahead, art historians consider them outside their purview, and perhaps more appropriately suited to the knowledge production of visual studies. Therefore, technological forms like digital cinema, analog/digital projection and electronic games lose their vanguard status, though they are among the most cutting-edge aesthetic interventions of today.

This chapter moves toward the terrain of electronic and digital production, by first considering the relevance of video art within the larger milieu of digital culture, postmodernism, and multinational capitalism. For many artists, video provided a means by which to critique the influence of television, a unidirectional form of corporate media. Hence, it has largely been the medium of choice for postmodern artists seeking to make an artistic intervention into issues of body and identity, including (but not limited to) sexuality, gender, race, class, and nationality. Performance artists appropriated video as both a means of documentation, and a form of virtually immediate feedback with which they and their audiences could interact. Further, those wishing to make institutional critiques regarding privacy, surveillance, and the militarization of everyday life have also made use of video

technology. However, the approach of this research is not to consider this subject purely in terms of its purported “democratizing” function, or even in terms of its knotty proximity to commercialism and surveillance, but rather to examine how electronic and digital arts warrant art-historical analysis, despite their overt relationship to kitsch and capitalism.

As a technological intermediary between the mechanical reproduction of photography and the digital reproduction of new media, video has been accepted as a legitimate form within the museum, yet it remains marginal within the academy. It is discussed, but held at arm’s length—perhaps because of its ties to television and surveillance, or maybe the complications that surround its commodification. In this analysis, I assert that the relationship between art history and commodity must change to include that which has been produced under the influence of late capitalism. For ultimately, to elide the importance of digitality on purely ideological grounds, is to overlook the considerable aesthetic contribution of art and technology since the 1950s. As a scholar of this meritorious discipline, I stress that art history should affirm and incorporate into its canon the language of media forms such as video and digital projection, net art, and electronic games.

The social reality of globalization, postcolonial conditions, and identity politics shape current artistic practice and are a part of new media’s milieu. As such, a preliminary grounding in these concerns will be necessary. This leads organically to a discussion of burgeoning discourses that appropriate Western media forms, but subvert or otherwise alter them for the sake of critique. Media arts, especially video, often stem from a rich tradition of activism aimed at intervening in overbearing, unidirectional mass-media forms like film and television. The great preponderance of these kinds of works in contemporary mega-exhibitions, such as *Documenta 11* (2002), are considered through the writings of Okwui Enwezor, Carol Becker, Mark

Nash, and George Baker, among others. In the response to this curatorial project in particular, issues around alterity and electronic media—the “peripheral” and the “projected,” so to speak—came to a critical head.

In addition, post-colonial scholars like Lisa Nakamura, Wendy Chun, Coco Fusco, Achille Mbembe, Arjun Appadurai, Kwame Anthony Appiah and others address the impact of multinational capitalism and globalization. Many of these scholars challenge the so-called democratic potential of electronic media, and demonstrate compelling arguments both for and against the incursion of technology into cultural production. Their compelling discussions unfold in the wake of the early modernist European motives of imperialist expansion, introduced in the first chapter.

In Chapter Three, I consider the possibility of digital aesthetics, and where the materiality of the digital intersects with the shifting concerns of art history. I revisit the pivotal function of aura, through an in-depth examination of the status of the art object, in relation to its maker’s authoritative ability to wield affect. This chapter explores the difficulties that the mechanical and especially the electronic present to the originality or ‘aura’ of an artwork. As infinitely reproducible data and code increasingly interpenetrate our daily lives, how does this affect aesthetic experience, and challenge longstanding notions of the aura? Here I expand upon those explorations by discussing the relationship between maker and object, in the case where an artist has effectively been deemed theoretically incapable of communicating ‘aura’.

I wish to clarify the intimate connections between the agency granted the artist by virtue of his/her theoretical status within the canon, and the degree to which their works are believed to possess artistic aura. If the status of the art object is traditionally grounded in scarcity—in other words in its unique originality—then it

naturally follows that digitality presents challenges due to its unprecedented reproducibility. Using Walter Benjamin's notion of 'aura' and Fredric Jameson's 'waning of affect,' I develop a working definition of affect as it relates to art production. I suggest how digitality has modified, but indeed has not removed affect. Explored in this chapter is the relationship between this shift and the increasing visibility of alterity. What agency is given or taken through digitality? How is agency made visible through media, and to what degree can Benjamin's ideas still be counted upon in light of the tremendous technological shifts in visual production since his time?

Chapter Three also considers how materiality and embodied artistic production are linked to the presence of the other, for whom his/her body is continually reinscribed. This linkage seeps into their production, which always functions an extension of their bodies, so much so that it often supercedes their roles as artists by creating them as ethnographers or native reporters of their own cultures. But in addition to this, these artists institutionally function as 'peripheral' or 'minority' artists, suggesting that they comprise an extraneous element, in opposition to or in excess of the norm. In my linking of the study of art and technology with embodiment, this contemplation ponders how people interface with digital aesthetic objects and experiences. I consider digital aesthetics from inside and outside of art history, upon the theorization of Mark B. Hansen in regard to new media and affect, as well as N. Katherine Hayles, Sherry Turkle, and Amelia Jones for their attention to the fluid interplay of bodies and technology. In this chapter, I propose the nomenclature "cybernated aesthetics" as an alternative to formalist-driven categorizations of art forms influenced by information technology and electronic media.

Art history must reassess its embattled relationship with technology. While I am certainly not a technological determinist I believe that, as art historians, we can only benefit by engaging theoretically and aesthetically with the potent impact of electronic and digital media on art production and appreciation. It is daunting to contemplate what is lost in the wake of art history's nominal engagement in such a broad spectrum of aesthetic concerns. This study represents an attempt to provide both a schematic of that ideology, and a rightful place for the intellectual histories of new media within canonical art discourses in the twenty-first century.