

CHAPTER TWO:
GLOBALIZATION, MEDIA ARTS, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF
AVANT-GARDISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

I. Overview

Chapter One investigated the presence of modern technology in the arts, paying particular attention to canonical art historical responses. The mixed reactions to media arts, especially as culled from writings of the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, range from unguarded enthusiasm to foreboding regarding technology's fascistic potential. Still others overlook its significance altogether. This chapter, dedicated largely to developments in art and technology in the 1980s and 1990s, continues this line of discussion by analyzing the growing importance of video, and the onset of digital forms. In addition, the social reality of globalization (with its attendant diversification of subjectivities) will be highlighted as pivotal in the types of works being made. A diversity of artists, whose expressions often reject traditional forms, instead embrace 'low' or 'mass' media like video, projection art, and more recently, electronic and digital art. Looking back on earlier discussions as necessary, this section will consider the relationship between avant-garde practice, globalization, and the role of technology in shaping contemporary aesthetics.

Descriptors like "democratic" and "avant-garde" have been associated with utopian constructions of what electronics and the digital might offer; namely, a "global village" realized. Meanwhile, its negative associations have linked the digital to electronic multinational corporate interests and economic globalization, often ideologically critiqued as a global hegemonic Westernization. Chapter Two contemplates the possibility of an avant-garde in the twenty-first-century, despite the supposedly deleterious influences of globalization, multinational capitalism, and

electronic media—elements that on the surface seem incongruous with the very definition of vanguardism.

Ideologically configured as oppositional to both bourgeois and capitalistic ideals, the mid-nineteenth century construction of the avant-garde drew aesthetically from developments in science and technology, but riled against their artifice, believing that it obfuscated reality. Today, within the social reality of globalization and the postcolonial condition, a vanguard of the twenty-first century faces new challenges. With the expanding presence of the digital, which facilitates new global economic conditions and shapes patterns in labor and migration, contemporary artistic innovator-iconoclasts must redefine themselves in light of such overbearing influences that profoundly affect the real.

Chapter Two also elaborates upon the schematic overview of canonical reception presented in the first chapter, by re-evaluating the modernist construction of an artistic avant-garde in light of high capitalism, globalization, and advanced technological innovation. Is there an “avant-garde” today, and if so, where can it be found? What is the current viability of such a construct, and what is the role of an avant-garde under globalized, postmodern conditions? If globalization can be considered among the predominant social realities of the current period, then how must an effectively European paradigm be made more universally relevant in an era of diversifying contemporary artistic contexts?¹ How do globalization, the postcolonial condition, and the broad impact of electronic mass media affect the cultural production in general? Finally, if there is a new aesthetic associated with electronics and the digital, then how can we begin to understand its manifestation in new media art? This chapter ultimately prepares the way for Chapter Three, in

¹For example, international art biennials and triennials have become a global phenomenon in recent years.

which a “materiality” of the electronic and digital begins its presencing within a social milieu of global interpenetrations, while evading descriptive limitations upon what new media art can or cannot be.

A seminal component of the current inquiry entails clarifying how notions of globalization and identity contribute to the formation of cultural artifacts, especially as they pertain to new media art production. Several major art exhibitions have attempted to capture the complicated portrait of globalized network complexity. Of these, I submit that the most influential endeavor to embrace rhizomatic network models in exhibition practice in recent years has been *Documenta 11*, presented in Kassel, Germany in 2002. I suggest this presentation not for its percentage of successful works, nor its status as the largest exhibition of contemporary art in the world, but because of its articulation of the major themes I have heretofore discussed. In the subsequent pages, I will utilize the example of *Documenta 11* as a touchstone for exploring the ways in which scholars, critics, and artists grapple with the impact media arts have on the underlying ideologies of art history in the American academy.

As exemplified by the historical example of photography, there remains a persisting hesitancy to naturalize relations between art and technology, despite their symbiotic function in cultural expression.² Many of the arguments both for and against the incursion of photography into artistic spheres find themselves repeated in

² Art historian Benjamin Buchloh, for example, writes of the connection between photography and video: “At some point the history of the relationship between the traditional high-art avant-garde and the new video technology will have to be written. It will be surprising how many of the same grotesque features and problems that marked photography’s encounter with high-art institutions in the nineteenth century—the pretenses and disavowals, the mimicry and disguises—were also at work in the interrelationship of video technology and its artistic practitioners.” From: Benjamin Buchloh, “From Gadget to Agit Video: Some Notes on Four Recent Video Works,” in *Art Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Fall 1985): 217-227.

contemporary discussions of electronic and digital forms. Critics of technological works, while impressed with the display of technical prowess, have nevertheless regarded these creations as trifling and lacking in artistic value.³ American critic and art historian Donald Kuspit, for example, has lambasted contemporary art as “postart,” a term that he borrows from Allan Kaprow and which he uses to describe art that has moved beyond the concerns of aesthetics, that is subject to entropy, that is artistically bankrupt—all of which he attributes in part to the pervasiveness of technology:

Technologically oriented art is also in the forefront. Indeed, technology has come to replace theory, social criticism, and the unconscious in postart, which is why it seems increasingly impossible

³ See also for example Joseph Konzal, “Art, Technology and Liberal Arts Colleges: A Reply” in *Art Journal*, Volume 30, Number 2 (Winter 1970-1971): 168. In this essay responding to the question whether technology is vital to the art student’s education, Konzal implies that while electronic art is “interesting” and somewhat entertaining, it lacks depth. In 1969, see also Clement Greenberg’s brief discussion of technology. In an interview, he states clearly that while he is not opposed to technology in art per se, he has not yet seen technology in art to be anything more than “fashion” since it has not yet produced any successful works. Lily Leino and Clement Greenberg, “USIS Feature” in *United States Information Service*, April 1969. Reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 303-314. More recently, Edward Shanken made the lack of art historical attention to art and technology the subject of his doctoral dissertation, “Art in the Information Age: Cybernetics, Software, Telematics, and the Conceptual Contributions of Art and Technology to Art History and Theory” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2001). See also Grant Taylor, “How Anti-Computer Sentiment Shaped Early Computer Art”, Sylvie Lacerte, “Experiments in Art and Technology: A Gap to Fill in Art History’s Recent Chronicles”, Anne Collins Goodyear, “Technophilia, Vietnam, and the Rise and Fall of ‘Art and Technology’ in the United States, 1965-1971”, and Caroline Seck Langill, “Hey, Look at Me! Thoughts on the Canonical Exclusion of Early Electronic Art” all presentations of Refresh! Conference, Thursday, September 29, 2005, Banff New Media Institute, Banff, Canada. Archived at www.banffcentre.ca/bnmi/programs/archives/2005/refresh/lisiten.asp. Accessed May 2006.

to be an artist without also being—indeed, first being—an engineer, computer whiz, or video technician.⁴

Kuspit complains that artists are becoming “technocrats,” as he calls them. “[T]hey appear,” he writes, “under the guise of a celebration of ‘new media’—which is why their art seems expressionless, that is, seems to lack personality—except for marketing personality, that is, the instant marketability of any technical gimmick.”⁵

While Kuspit expresses himself with more vitriol than most on this matter, as I have shown in Chapter One, a number of intellectuals have expressed their concern that too much technology impedes an aesthetic appreciation of art. What does it mean to experience works of art and technology and wonder where the *art* is? What is to separate artistic innovation cutting-edge media forms from research and development being conducted in technology labs? If these questions are taken seriously as more than a kind of backhanded aesthetic judgment, it suggests a hierarchy between the designation of art and its opposite. Would this inverse be called non-art? Kitsch? Yes, and in this case, industry. By being linked to the opposite of art, work engaging new media forms is immediately placed in the position of having to earn its right to occupy the museum space.

Seemingly too rigidly technical to be artistically relevant, these electronic and digital works fall outside the limits of aesthetic contemplation. Their proximity to industry (as tools of the commercial world) immediately severs their connections with certain spheres of reference—the artistic, the rare, the original, the intellectual, and the cultivated. Instead, it links this type of art with other arenas: the technological, the reproducible, the soon-to-be-obsolete, and the aesthetically

⁴ Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 105.

⁵ Kuspit, *The End of Art*, 106.

unrefined. In other words, it becomes a natural outsider to the museum, gallery, or cultural institution.

In order for new media art to have a more stable position in the tremendously influential genealogy of a nation's visual cultural constitution, it must be understood as culturally and aesthetically worthy of historicization. At the present time, and with little exception, it is not. Despite the fact that advanced technology seems to occupy more and more of the workplace and entertainment sphere, it remains a suspiciously regarded, alien component to the traditional museum space. This chapter presents an interpretation of art and technology that, through the common language of counter-culture or avant-garde practice, brings art historical discourse closer to an interpretation of new media art.

Visionary theorist and practitioner Roy Ascott suggests that the museum should provide an experimental space that is deeply engaged with the practice of artists as well as the media they employ:

The digital museum of the third kind will be anticipatory, not imposing perspectives of the history of art, but opening up a pool of possibilities from which art might emerge, working at the forward edge of contrary culture, as an agent of culture change, as a course of art practice rather than as a cultural effect.⁶

Ascott's terms "contrary culture" and "agent of cultural change" suggest the notion of a digital "avant-garde," an interesting construct to ponder since it contradicts the very notion of a medium that is entangled with multinational capitalism. How is it possible to resolve this contradiction? And how is it possible that institutions and

⁶ Roy Ascott as cited by Hans-Peter Schwarz in *Media Art History* (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1997) originally published in Roy Ascott, "The Digital Museum" in *Perspektiven der Medienkunst. Media Art Perspectives*, ed. Hans-Peter Schwarz and Jeffrey Shaw (Ostfildern, 1996), p. 188.

scholarship can open up the potentialities of which Ascott speaks, rather than shutting them down?

The term *avant-garde* literally refers to iconoclastic, anti-establishment critiques, but has become associated with particular kinds of political stances rooted in European modernism and well documented in art history's seminal narratives. In fact, the relationship between the *avant-garde* (or counter-culture) and the digital is not inherently contradictory. Charlie Gere identifies *avant-garde* practice as one key element in a constellation of influences that shaped digital culture's development.⁷ Specifically, he cites the post-war *avant-garde* as re-directing multimedia technologies of interactivity designed for military uses toward more utopian ends. "Computing," he writes, "has not only developed ideas about how to do things from the counter-culture, but also a more general utopian vision of technology as socially progressive and capable of expanding human potential."⁸ The gathering counter-culture influences circulating in the San Francisco Bay Area during the early stages of personal computing, like Eastern mysticism and the independent spirit of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, informed developers' interests in making computing available to the people.⁹ This defied the prevailing post-war cultural notion of technology as exerting an oppressive or even fascistic influence upon everyday life.

It would seem that construct of the "*avant-garde*" requires revamping in order to maintain its relevance within the current social-political milieu of the postmodern era. Peter Bürger's canonical theorization of the *avant-garde* in the 1970s led him to conceptually split Modernism as a set of stylistic movements from *avant-gardism* as

⁷ Charlie Gere, *Digital Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 14-15.

⁸ Gere, *Digital*, 200.

⁹ For a succinct history of these influences, see Gere, *Digital Culture*, especially Chapter 4 entitled "The Digital Counter-culture," 112-149.

a particular anti-establishment impulse.¹⁰ The German intellectual related the avant-garde specifically to a cognitive shift that presented a critical reaction to aesthetic formalism, challenged institutions, and that reconnected art to social practice. Importantly, he also differentiated the historical avant-garde from the neo-avant-garde, the latter being described as a postwar phenomenon. For Bürger, the neo-avant-garde de-authenticated the historical avant-garde by institutionalizing it.¹¹ Hal Foster contested this retroactive invalidation of the historical avant-garde; at the same time, he subdivided the neo-avant-garde into the “first neo-avant-garde” in the 1950s, and the “second neo-avant-garde” of mostly Minimalism and Pop in the 1960s.¹² This gesture similarly conserved the notion of the avant-garde as a historical, not a descriptor to be applied to contemporary production.

A decade ago, art historian Johanna Drucker proclaimed that modernism and its attendant avant-garde are “exhausted, done, finished.”¹³ While conceding that there remains a possibility for art to affect culture, she argued that the term ‘avant-garde’ is modernist in its origins. As such, its historic specificity renders it inapplicable to situations that fall outside its temporal parameters. She asks, “...can there be a model of both contemporary and current art practice in which political efficacy for visual art can be conceived and sustained?”¹⁴

Considering the increased rate of *commodity* production’s absorption of *aesthetic* production, any vanguard movement would need to be dynamic enough to

¹⁰ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Originally published in 1974 in German.

¹¹ Bürger wrote: “Since now the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as an accepted institution is accepted as *art*, the gesture of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic.” Bürger, *Theory*, 53.

¹² Hal Foster, “Who’s Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?” in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 1-33.

¹³ Johanna Drucker, “Simulation/Spectacle: Beyond the Boundaries of the Old Avant-Garde and Exhausted Modernism” in *Third Text*, no. 22 (Spring 1993): 3-16.

¹⁴ Drucker, “Simulation”, 3.

innovate quicker than capitalist interests. And of course, the new avant-garde would necessarily have to shed what Drucker identified as its prohibitions around mass culture and kitsch—or in other words, the high-culture aspirations of its forerunners. This would be vital, since mass culture and kitsch constitute tremendously effective delivery devices for all forms of messages within a globalized, multinational corporate system. Popular films, music, magazines, television programming, electronic games, the net, and a tidal wave of material culture spread Western values and aesthetic standards across the globe. By virtue of sheer quantity and repeated exposure, these media influence aesthetics and shape a commonality of language. However, such unconventional criteria identify an artistic avant-garde as oppositional to the traditional art world, unless that art world is willing to reconsider its currently restrictive definitions.

II. Late Modernism, Kitsch, and the Codification of High and Low

With the effusive technological optimism of early modernity having given way to two profoundly devastating world wars, any intellectual's opposition to the proliferation of technology (even in aesthetics) seems logical at first glance. The contemporary suspicion around technology based upon its perceived failure to facilitate utopia has its roots in modern social theory, especially Benjamin's linkage of politicized aesthetics with fascism. Also of particular influence are Clement Greenberg's early writings, specifically "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in which explicit and polarizing lines are drawn dividing the "proper" function of art from the industrial, and the refined intellectual pursuit of art for art's sake from the brute

mob.¹⁵ Positing the avant-garde as birthed of a discerning “superior consciousness of history”¹⁶ versus kitsch, the “rear-guard”¹⁷ or commoner’s literacy, Greenberg underscored their separateness and reified their hierachal relationship. The avant-garde was hence linked to genuine culture, with reflective observation, with tradition and the notion of “high” art. Kitsch, on the other hand, was tied to ersatz culture, to spectacle rather than aura, to “faked sensations” and simulation, to the mass industry, science, and consumer culture of the West. A true art denigrated, Greenberg argues that by “using for raw materials the debased and academized simulacra of genuine culture, [kitsch] welcomes and cultivates this insensibility.”¹⁸

Damaging is the superimposition of science and industry upon the definition of “low” culture, a move which precipitates an antagonistic relationship between high art, technology, and the masses. Kitsch is the moron, the illegitimate offspring of original genius that has gotten into the hands of plebeians and technicians. Most devastating, however, is the implicit connection made between kitsch and propaganda, as a willing aesthetic delivery device and “merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarianism regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects.”¹⁹ In this manner, associations of the low, the mass-produced, the corporate and the fascist immediately stigmatize art that exists in proximity to technology. Earlier “new media” forms such as radio and cinema had, at the time of the essay’s writing, been recently mobilized to devastating effect in European fascist regimes such as Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy. This stigma has clung,

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in John O’Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 1 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5-22. Originally published in 1939.

¹⁶ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde,” 7.

¹⁷ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde,” 11.

¹⁸ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde,” 12.

¹⁹ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde,” 21.

hindering the appreciation, study, and legitimacy of arts associated with technological forms including new media.

The contemporary multinational-capitalist melding of commodity with aesthetics²⁰ evokes economic and cultural globalization, but it also conjures up the dystopian predictions of postmodern theorists like Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord. Each in his own way warns of the coming of spectacle as a kind of stultifying force, driven by mass media, that overwhelms individual will with the sheer power of the image. Debord wrote of image culture, spectacle, and consumerism, presenting a pessimistic vision of over-stimulation, alienation, and separation from nature. He feared a free-floating ubiquity of images emptied of meaning and turned into a kind of “non-life.”²¹ His prophetic ruminations linked mass media image production, its omnipresence in everyday life, and social relations of power.

Baudrillard likewise considered the ideologies that lurked beneath the surface of a consumer-based society, and the possibility of that ideology floating off and becoming its own communal delusion: the ‘hyperreal’. His four modes of the image read as the successive stages of mourning over the death of the Author, or the loss of the possibility of a meta-narrative:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;
 it masks and denatures a profound reality;
 it masks the absence of a profound reality;
 it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.²²

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

²¹ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

²² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) Originally published in French by Editions Galilée in 1981.

He placed value judgments upon each of the aforementioned—as good, evil, sorcery, and simulation, respectively. This betrayed a tremendous anxiety around what the mass culture-induced metamorphosis of image would mean. ‘Profound reality’ in this instance can be read as a kind of objective Truth, whose sacredness has been violated and then absorbed by the image.

What do these theories of an all-consuming commodity structure have to do with art world conceits? Consider what corporate infiltration of the art world might mean for the Greenbergian boundary between art and kitsch, especially in terms of the traditional function of the art object’s preciousness. Consider, too, the status of the ‘original’ in light of mass production. The originality of the artwork may have been expanded to include the anti-material, through the political gestures of Situationism, performance, and conceptual art. Originality may involve found objects, site specificity, or even concepts without any palpable medium. But these are grounded in the artist as artisan and individual—and certainly never linked to the corporate.

Greenberg’s anti-capitalist, anti-technological critique was rooted (like the writings of many of his contemporaries) in Marxist and post-Marxist social theories. However, the critic occupied a historical moment in which the vestiges of Nazi anti-Semitism and WWII were still visible. This global reality was at the core of Greenberg’s intellectual obsessions and indelibly influenced the shape of artistic debates for several decades to come. Perhaps, given his social context, Greenberg was accurate in his initial assessment of the ties between fascism and the machine; but he underplayed the creative opportunities implicit in the onset of any new medium. Nevertheless, his equivalencies resonated with the American art world, tremendously influencing the reception of technology within the high arts.

Still, in the 1960s and early 1970s, a brief and significant alliance between art and industry occurred in the United States. These included major presentations such as: *Nine Evenings: Theatre and Engineering* (1966), *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (1968), *Cybernetic Serendipity* (1968), *Some More Beginnings* (1968-9), *Software, Information Technology: Its meaning for Art* (1970), *Magic Theater* (1970), *Information* (1970), and *Art and Technology* (1970). Collaborations between artists and engineers occurred in and around the contexts of these exhibitions, the most notable of these being Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) founded in 1966 by engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer, and artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman. Their objective was to bring inaccessible technologies to artists, in an effort to foster innovation in cultural expressions.

However, avant-garde or otherwise counter-culture artists are supposed to subvert the corporate, not entreat its sponsorship. This art-world truism becomes especially problematic when artists must collaborate with companies in order to have access to expensive technologies that patronage from private philanthropists could never subsidize. As artist and curator of computer art Jack Burnham observed:

Whether out of political conviction or paranoia, elements of the Art World tend to see latent fascist aesthetics in any liaison with giant industries; it is permissible to have your fabrication done by a local sheet-metal shop, but not by Hewlett-Packard.²³

Burnham pointed out this art-world conceit in 1971, in response to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's presentation of the same year, *Art and Technology*. The works exhibited resulted from partnerships between artists and

²³ Jack Burnham, "Corporate Art," in *Artforum* (October 1971): 67.

technology corporations. Arranged through the museum and executed to varying degrees of success, the spottily-received collaborations for many represented the total corporatization of art. Worse still, these works for some smacked of an ultimately totalitarian vision in which machination devoured one of the most defining aspects of humanity: artistic creativity. And in more than thirty years the attitude characterized by Burnham has not changed significantly.

This bias, cultivated out of high modernist artistic values that divided art from technology, has been recently explored by several scholars including Sylvie Lacerte, an historian of museum practice and contemporary art. In her studies on E.A.T., Lacerte drew parallels between critics of the sixties balking at the idea of art and technology, and the reverberations of those attitudes in the present. In explanation, she noted that since many of the companies whose resources were needed to create technological art had ties to the Vietnam War machine, critics hesitated to accept such works:

...it's no news to anyone that the Sixties were a time of thriving as well as somber technological developments, with the first man on the moon on the one hand, and the Vietnam War on the other. So it wasn't considered too politically correct to display any kind of association between artists and industry, particularly in the new technology industries, as many of these were developing sophisticated weapons commissioned by the U.S. Army for the war.²⁴

Other art historians such as Anne Collins Goodyear, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on art and technology in the United States between 1957 and 1971, have

²⁴ Sylvie Lacerte, "Experiments in Art and Technology: A Gap to Fill in Art History's Recent Chronicles," presentation at REFRESH! Conference, Thursday, September 29, 2005, Banff New Media Institute, Banff, Canada. Archived at www.banffcentre.ca/bnmi/programs/archives/2005/refresh/lisiten.asp. Accessed May 28, 2006. Transcription is my own.

also attributed the schism between art and industry to backlash from the Vietnam War.²⁵ Art historian and art-and-technology scholar Edward Shanken unpacked the relationship between art that employs technology, and its uneasy relations to corporate sponsorship. Specifically addressing the period of the 1960s and early 1970s in the United States, his analysis considered several significant exhibitions of art and technology that occurred between 1966 and 1972, against the backdrop of America's embrace of technology as a strategy for both preserving its democratic values, and galvanizing itself as a global superpower. According to Shanken, during this conflict-ridden time of competition between the values of communism and capitalism:

technology was widely embraced in the U.S. as the means by which the so-called American way of life would be preserved. Technology became inseparable from the growing “military-industrial complex” of which President Eisenhower had warned in his 1961 farewell address. In this way, international relations, technology, and capitalist industry constituted an allied ideological front in America.²⁶

However, while technology was initially viewed as a keystone of America's global ability to compete, along with it came the technological disillusionment of the post-World War II period and Vietnam War. His text, though supportive of art and technology as art-historically worthy, strayed into skepticism regarding corporate intervention and/or collaboration with artists.

²⁵ Anne Collins Goodyear, “Technophobia, Vietnam, and the rise and Fall of ‘Art and Technology’ in the United States, 1965-1971” Presentation at REFRESH! Conference, Thursday, September 29, 2005, Banff New Media Institute, Banff, Canada. Archived at www.banffcentre.ca/bnmi/programs/archives/2005/refresh/lisiten.asp. Accessed May 28, 2006.

²⁶ Shanken, “Art in the Information Age,” 80.

Among Shanken's criticisms were that corporations sought artistic partnerships "as a means of developing a more positive corporate image, thereby co-opting the transformative potential of art and using it to reify the status quo."²⁷ In this statement, the scholar suggests the corrosive influence of capitalism over art. More significantly, through an explication of Jack Burnham's curatorial strategies during this time, Shanken remained unconvinced of the viability of artistic freedom under the duress of high capitalism and the military-industrial complex.²⁸ At odds with the conflicting aims of the corporation and creative production, the text called significant attention to "the not-unwarranted stereotype of the technology industry, characterized by capitalistic greed and moral indifference to repressive colonial regimes and deteriorating global environmental conditions."²⁹ Wrestling with the contradictory alliances forged between art and technology since the 1960s, Shanken's writings on the subject never seem to make peace with the conundrum of its origins in industry and capitalism.

Of course, keeping art and capitalist industry separate is a losing proposition. To try to isolate artists, their art, or their presentation from the corporation would be to squeeze off the art world's economic lifeline. It is hardly feasible, given the locations of disposable income for art in America—and most other industrialized nations, for that matter. This, combined with the global proliferation of mega-exhibitions since the 1980s (the majority of which are commercially funded), makes it virtually impossible to disentangle commerce from art. Still, the marriage of corporate sponsorship and techno-art within the museum space runs counter to the modernist-defined function of art as separate from the aims of mass production. This union also contradicts the Marxist influences underlying both social histories of art

²⁷ Shanken, "Art in the Information Age," 84-85.

²⁸ Shanken, "Art in the Information Age," 102.

²⁹ Shanken, "Art in the Information Age," 102.

established in the 1940s and 1950s, and the new art histories that have emerged since the 1970s.³⁰

The melding of aesthetic and consumer production as defined by Benjamin, elaborated by the French postmodern theorists, and then later taken up by Fredric Jameson and many others are all variations on an overall theme describing the death of the Author. To be sure, this is not a matter of analog and digital media's coming onto being, *per se*, nor a byproduct of technology's impact on human life. Rather, it represents a major philosophical crisis, a general epistemological shift towards what some define as a postmodern era. Aside from the metaphorical "death" of one type of Author, postmodernism ushered in the possibility of many authors with their attendant subjectivities.³¹ A logical outcropping of decolonization movements in the former territories of Europe and the West, the increased attention to a greater diversity of voices destabilized the notion of unitary narratives. As we will see, this 'crisis' in authorship finds its expression—not its root—in media like photography, film, electronics, and the digital.

While the marriage of art and capitalistic production (most intensely embodied in electronic media art and digital aesthetics) marks postmodernism's distinctive tendency toward dispersion and hybridity, this constitutes a shift but not a decline. Rather, it demands an evolution of one's attitude toward art, especially as it relates to connoisseurship and tottering formalist concerns. The spectacle that accompanies the corporatization of everything is upon us; media super-saturation is

³⁰ For a summary of the shifts in art historical methodology, including social histories of art and the so-called new art histories, see Eric Fernie, ed., *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology* (London: Phaidon, 1995).

³¹ I differentiate Author (capital "A") from author (lowercase "a") as a means of pointing out the difference between the authoritative form of the Author that accompanies unitary structures of thought typically associated with modernism, from the many voices possible in a fragmented structures associated with postmodernism.

veritably achieved, and one could argue that urban existence involves constant distraction. This is the opposite of the age in which one's experience of art rested in the contemplation of an original aesthetic object within a quiet gallery space. The threat of unmooring images from an inherent meaning, precipitated at least in part by technological reproducibility and the digital age, is disquieting. To be sure, the meanings of images have always shifted, but the procedure is phenomenally quickened by their malleability and ready duplication.

As was previously stated, the presentiment of totalitarianism as necessarily linked to mass media is misplaced, but understandable given the atmosphere in Europe during the time of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Film had already proven to be a powerful propagandistic tool in galvanizing the support of the people. Also, previous to the existence of video, television seemed an overbearing, unidirectional communications medium that demanded a passive viewer. Still, there were those who did not make such clearly delineated divisions between the automatic and the skilled, nor related the machine with the figurative "mechanization" of all society in the form of fascism. Lawrence Alloway, an art historian, critic and one of several original proponents of Pop art in England (the Independent Group), argued that the tools for determining culture must shift with the population explosion of the masses. Seeing the mass arts as both "urban and democratic," Alloway critiqued Greenbergian formalism and high art in the 1950s as "a repository of time-binding values" that is out of step with contemporary life.³²

In an effort to lift the mass arts from their crass reputation, and with a more integrative attitude toward the role of technology in expanding the possibilities of

³² Lawrence Alloway, "The Arts and the Mass Media" as reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory, 1900-1990* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 700-703. Originally published in *Architectural Design*, London (February 1958): 34-5.

viewership, the British Pop stance embraced technology's democratic potential. Against the backdrop of a dramatic shift in global superpower from the United Kingdom the United States and the Soviet Union, postwar Britain enjoyed its first prosperity since the lean times of World War II and subsequent reconstruction period. Opposed to the minority-rule of dominating art movements of the day, Alloway argued instead for the positive impact of mass arts through their dynamic adaptability:

it is no longer sufficient to define culture solely as something that a minority guards for the few and the future...rejection of the mass produced arts is not, as critics think, a defence [sic] of culture but an attack upon it...The new role for the fine arts is to be one of the possible forms of communication in an ever-expanding framework that also includes the mass arts.”³³

Similar to the American Pop movement, the Independent Group sought to subvert British high art values by integrating mass culture into aesthetics. Assimilation was, for Alloway, a necessary part of modern culture; technologies like celluloid film, radio, and television helped the masses adapt alongside society's increased pace. Utopian though these ideas might have been, they ushered in the possibility of another relationship to technology, one more enabled and, perhaps more importantly, unmarred by an inherently negative attitude toward the masses.

The equivalence of mass arts and culture suggested that the masses had value. The urged connection between the *social reality* of modern culture and *aesthetic concerns* radically interrupted the notion of a rarefied art made by hand and made only for art's sake. At the helm of the American Pop movement, Andy Warhol would declare that he wanted to be a machine. “Paintings are too hard,” he mused.

³³ Alloway, “The Arts,” 703.

“The things I want to show are more mechanical. Machines have less problems. I’d like to be a machine, wouldn’t you?”³⁴ The repetition of his silk-screened images on a single canvas, or copied across numerous canvases, evoked mechanical reproduction and mass culture: the emptying out of meaning through endless replication. But it is important to understand that his machine and Greenberg’s were ideologically divergent. For Greenberg, the machine became concomitant with the mechanization of society in accordance with fascist utopian models; his was a Marxist-influenced interpretation that held technology at arm’s length. Conversely, Warhol embraced mass consumerism and the rapid cultural transformations affecting America during his time. The strategically flattened affect in Warhol’s reproductions of commercial products, and his automatic repetition of icons culled from the public consciousness render his works ambivalent to the observer. Were they sardonic, earnest, or perhaps without any judgment at all? Either way, Warhol’s affair with ‘low’ culture and mass media images held them up for contemplation, melding commodity and aesthetic production.

III. Shifting Notions of the Avant-Garde

The term “avant-garde” has proven to be a tenuous one that ranges from the very general definition of innovative, inventive technicians—especially as it applies to the arts—to very specific associations, namely the Euro-modernist movement toward the pursuit of “purity” through formalist abstraction. Associated with Claude-Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de St Simon, the term originated in 1825 as a call for artists to resolve their own waning relevance to an increasingly commerce-driven

³⁴ As cited in David Bowden, *Warhol* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 140. Originally cited in *Time Magazine*, May 3, 1963.

culture, by becoming the forward-thinkers in advance of calculating industry and dour intellectualism. He wrote:

We, the artists, will serve as the avant-garde: for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious. When we wish to spread new ideas amongst men, we use, in turn, the lyre, ode or song, story or novel; we inscribe those ideas on marble or canvas, and be popularize them in poetry and song...We aim for the heart and imagination, and hence our effect is the most vivid and the most decisive.³⁵

Artists were to guide intellectuals (whose primary concern, according to Henri de St Simon, was reason) and industrialists (concerned with facts and monetary figures) toward utopian ideals. This initial avant-garde was appointed the task of ushering society toward the public good, thereby validating its necessary vanguard role within modern culture. Such a stance on the role of art made sense, coming from a French socialist whose utopian ideals suggested an unbending faith that human creativity would err toward positive impulses, not the perverse or destructive ones. St Simon's infers an array of interventions that may potentially include the political, but not necessarily the "political efficacy for visual art" that was so specific to Drucker's historical avant-garde.

After St Simon, and after a succession of manifestoes that focused upon artistic *subject matter*, the avant-garde would be redefined in terms of its *formalist* pursuits. In particular, Clement Greenberg in his "Towards a Newer Laocoon" would specifically define modernist avant-garde movements in terms of their ability to outstrip content, in favor of the "pure" expression most appropriate to a given

³⁵ Claude-Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de St Simon, "The Artist, the Savant and the Industrialist, in Charles Harrison, and Paul Wood, with Jason Gaiger, eds., *Art in Theory, 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Volume 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 38-39.

medium.³⁶ In fact, both of these constructs were focused upon utopian ideals, only with differing strategies. Greenberg's formalism innovated upon the ideals that artistic subject matter seemed unable to reach by suggesting that the very form of the artwork should be imbued with universalism. Unfortunately, both St Simon's and Greenberg's constructs presumed a singular possibility for what that utopian dream might be, and a single set of values despite the diversity of human experience. Peter Bürger later reoriented the avant-garde away from stylistic concerns and underscored the ideological drives, but maintained the Eurocentric trajectory as understood.

This kind of monocular vision has since garnered harsh criticism as being fixated upon Continental values and norms, while turning a blind eye to the cost it extracts from those whose histories are not equally represented. For example, curator and contemporary theorist Okwui Enwezor, in the context of a discussion about the negative critical response to international mega-exhibitions, has problematized the very notion of an avant-garde as Eurocentric, exclusionary, and oblivious to the social realities that shape the very possibility of its existence:

Such denunciations have made their claims through recourse to what amounts to a theology of modernism propagated from the peculiar view of the Western avant-garde, but without situating that avant-garde within the large, complex political determinations of colonialism and imperialism that made it possible.³⁷

This resonates with Allan Sekula's stance as discussed in Chapter One, in which he links the medium of photography with the bourgeois artistic and scientific values that

³⁶ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," in John O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986). Originally published in *Partisan Review* (July-August 1940).

³⁷ Okwui Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of Transnational Global Form," in *Documents* (Spring 2004): 2-19.

informed its development. In a similar fashion, Enwezor situates the European avant-garde within a social superstructure of colonialism and hegemony.

The connection between vanguard movements in Europe and its status as empire casts a dubious shadow across the historical avant-garde, aggravating some of art history's most cherished intellectual traditions. It is true that the European avant-garde often operated at the expense of non-Western cultures, freely appropriating aesthetics and cannibalizing indigenous cultures, or treating native peoples and lands as exotic backdrops for self-indulgent destructiveness. The social and political should have a valued place in the discussion of art and its histories; without it art history is little more than a pleasing mythology. Granted this, in the most generalized vision of a counter-culture or vanguard movement, the concept of an artistic avant-garde is still viable and useful if understood as referring to cultural producers who wish to jar criticality through aesthetic experience. In this sense, the notion of an avant-garde can be recuperated rather than discarded in the garbage-heap of history.

Writing on the histories of film, video and their relationship to the artistic vanguard, A.L. Rees defines the avant-garde not in terms of a particular historical moment or geographical region, but their oppositional stance to the mainstream, their innovation, and their roots in modernism and postmodernism. His most defining identification of avant-garde practice is through its effective shock to and effacement of bourgeois values.³⁸ This verification of a counter-culture impulse locates the avant-garde not in specific form or content, but through its persisting contraposition. This also implies an underlying political or ideological function of iconoclasm that is

³⁸ A.L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 1-3.

in keeping with prevalent notions of the historical avant-garde, but not linked to a particularized stance or temporal moment.

From a new media studies perspective, Lev Manovich suggests that a defining factor in its development had to do with the *changing* role of the avant-garde. According to his own supposition, contemporary media is rooted to a genealogy of avant-garde techniques of collecting, re-appropriation and sampling characteristic of 1920s “new” media.³⁹ He proposes the term “meta-media” to describe the postmodern, new avant-garde form of representing the raw material formerly archived through compilation during the modernist period. “The gradual accumulation of media records and the gradual automation of media management and manipulation techniques,” according to Manovich, “eventually recoded modernist aesthetics into a very different postmodern aesthetics.”⁴⁰ From this logic, Manovich subsequently refers to other great socio-historical moments in cultural production to illuminate their present-day equivalents. Specifically, the author suggests that the seeds of current new media production lie in techno-cultural innovations of the 1960s. This poses the new media artist as a kind of revisionist techno-collagist who splices, layers, and recombines a new aesthetic out of the remains of the old. But it also suggests that the function of a contemporary cultural avant-garde is in constant flux, adjusting alongside technological and socio-cultural shifts.

Though the art historical avant-garde occupies a fixed place in history, there is slippage between that “exhausted” terminology and contemporary discussions of pioneering and socially engaged art. While openly skeptical about what he characterizes as a chic, false vanguardism operating in the contemporary United

³⁹ Manovich, “New Media,” 23.

⁴⁰ Manovich, “New Media,” 23.

States and British art scene, critic Julian Stallabrass nevertheless describes Internet art as possessing avant-garde potential:

The avant-garde has sometimes been ironically referred to by commercially successful recent art in the US and the UK, but to very different effect. This commodified art has indulged in displays of vulgarity and social irresponsibility, fetishizing novelty, and in the case of the ‘young British artists’ containing a vestige of collective action that tartly raises the ghost of the avant-garde. Especially to those outside the art world, such elements actually appear to be avant-garde, and that appearance is very useful, for it allows the enjoyment of radicalism’s allure without the danger of its content. In contrast, many of the actual conditions of avant-gardism are present in online art: its anti-art character, its continual probing of the borders of art, and of art’s separation from the rest of life, its challenge to the art institutions, genuine group activity, manifestoes and collective programmes, and most of all an idea of forward movement...⁴¹

Calling upon net art examples like the collaborative team jodi’s interventions into conventional web architecture (See Figures 2.1-2.3), Stallabrass contends that the Internet is indeed a site of contemporary vanguardism.⁴² While it may seem contradictory to the historical definition of the avant-garde to utilize the Internet, a form with military origins and overarching commercial uses, for this notable critic the possibility of a new media vanguard remains.

Two characteristics of the historical avant-garde that seem to withstand the test of time are “innovation” and “shock,” or in other words the dedication to pushing ideas, and the attempt to jar viewers (especially those immersed in bourgeois/capitalistic values) out of their complacency. Capitalism requires constant

⁴¹ Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Class of Culture and Commerce* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 35.

⁴² Jodi is a collaboration of artists Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans. See their websites www.jodi.org, map.jodi.org, 404.jodi.org, and text.jodi.org for examples.

innovation; it is significant, therefore, that the shift toward an emphasis in innovation should become codified through the notion of an avant-garde, at the very moment when the social reality of capitalism is settling in.

Granted, the art historical notion of the avant-garde as delimited by Greenberg, Bürger, and others occupies a particular temporal moment—a moment that has passed. Even the terms “neo-avant-garde” and “post-avant-garde” are historically closed expressions that refer to a period of postwar vanguardism ending in the 1970s, and that is culturally linked to the European tradition. However, this grates against the persisting concept of the avant-garde as a forward-thinking, iconoclastic impulse in cultural production, an idiom that can certainly be used in the context of the contemporary.

To be clear, the historical avant-garde was formulated in contradiction to academic institutions, bourgeois values, and a burgeoning mass media culture. By extension, technology was implicated as a tool of bourgeois capitalist enterprise. A second-generation, neo-avant-garde heaped the horrors of two world wars on technology. The tension between art and technology is, therefore, also historically delimited and inextricably tied to the ideology of the avant-garde. It is an old grudge that persists despite the so-called obsolescence of the historical avant-garde.

Perhaps what iconoclastic and innovative work being done by artists today can no longer be deemed avant-garde, because the avant-garde lies in the past through a scholarly consensus that has already been established. However, I do contend that this iconoclastic tradition is indeed being continued, and that it is even occurring within the seemingly paradoxical context of technological media. There currently exists an array of artistic practices that are socially engaged, anti-establishment, and on the cutting-edge of innovation. I want to open the conceptual possibility that this vanguardism is occurring within the context of art and

technology, though certainly not exclusively there alone. In addition, it is in conversation with that which is referred to as the historical avant-garde. Therefore, it bears contemplating whether the avant-garde is actually finished, when, as many including Stallabrass have pointed out, the contemporary is still invoking its legacy.

During its varying manifestations, the historical avant-garde would remain an art-historical countermeasure against an encroaching capitalism, with its attendant mass culture and commercialism. However, in light of capitalism's ever increasing reach, one must consider whether a contemporary permutation of an avant-garde might not also be absorbing and utilizing the aesthetics of capitalism, rather than unilaterally rejecting its influence. For a contemporary vanguard that operates within global capitalism also engages in the appropriation and subversion of capitalist forms, in much the same manner that capitalism itself absorbs virtually anything.⁴³

Jenny Holzer's LED boards, with their scrolling truisms, or jodi's unconventional web sites that contract the supposed transparency of their interface demonstrate this tendency. Artists like Cory Arcangel and Feng Mengbo hacking into commercial video games for their own aesthetic interventions are among the many reformulations of mass culture technology under the will of vanguard impulses (See Figures 2.4 and 2.5). Of course, one cannot forget the dominating cultural form of hip-hop. Pure capitalistic enterprise for some, an art form for others, hip-hop melds both into cultural expression that is highly dependent upon the technology of turntables, mixing boards, and mass media (See Figure 2.6). This might seem contradictory to the art-historical notion of an avant-garde. But in fact it merely

⁴³ For a discussion of how in a paradigm of late capitalism, cultural practice cannot stand outside of its influence, see Laura Kipnis, "Repossessing Popular Culture," in Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, eds., *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 372-387.

takes into account the reality that many of the tools of capitalism (namely, electronics and the digital) now have creative usages that are resulting in artistic forms, even avant-garde ones that both innovate and shock.

What, then, is the constructive purpose of re-evaluating the planned obsolescence of an idea of the avant-garde? There is little point to contesting the verity of the historical avant-garde, although that history represents only a fraction of the vanguard practice occurring during the time in question. However, the cultural and temporal formulation of that practice into a restrictive history, in which a broader demographic may not participate—this demarcation warrants further scrutiny.

IV. The Technology of Video as “Democratic” or “Inclusive”

The second part of this issue regards the cultural specificity of the historical-and neo-avant-garde. Since the postmodern opening up of the art world in the 1980s and 1990s, with its fragmentation of unitary narrative, a multitude of voices that hail from outside the European tradition have sought greater recognition within mainstream art discourse. As I have described previously, video is often thought of as being inclusive or democratic, because it seems to make accessible media that were once strictly corporate and therefore exclusive and driven by capitalism. Multimedia artist and theorist Christine Tamblyn wrote of the inclusive qualities of video, calling it a “primary tool in the production of social space.”⁴⁴ In addition, she named its broad accessibility (due to both its ease of use and relative affordability) as

⁴⁴ Christine Tamblyn, “Qualifying the Quotidian: Artist’s Video and the Production of Social Space” in Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, eds., *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 13-28.

capable of transcending the cultural divide between high and low, and re-integrating art into everyday life:

Validating poststructuralist theories that demystify art production and qualify modernist attributions of genius and originality to canonical artists, consumer video art occupies new cultural niches.⁴⁵

The qualification of video as interrupting conventional art historical standards has become commonplace, perhaps even synonymous with the medium. Given its anti-high-culture qualities, video as a technological form seems almost ready-made as a form suited to institutional critique. By the same token, for others it lies too close to corporate television and therefore transgresses their borders between where art should or shouldn't venture. Is it a tool that can be used to dismantle the ‘master’s house,’ so to speak, or does video merely herald the long foreseen collapse between aesthetics and capitalist drives?⁴⁶

In his essay comparing video to film, cinema historian and cultural critic John Belton wrote of video as a medium that artists have exploited for its self-referential critique regarding its own immediacy. By attributing its formal developments to the cultural avant-garde, he effectively connected video art with art history:

Video art transforms, but its transformative features and the unique formal language it has developed over the years derive from the techniques and practices of the avant-garde; that is, video art stems, in large part, from the appropriation of video technology by artists who worked in other media.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Tamblyn, “Qualifying,” 27.

⁴⁶ For a discussion of this, see Fredric Jameson’s writings on video in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁴⁷ John Belton, “Looking Through Video: The Psychology of Video and Film” in Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, eds., *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 61-72.

Unlike Tamblyn, Belton situates video art as originating from *within* artistic traditions, rather than in opposition to them. However, regardless of its location on the map of artistic production, video retains dualistic and seemingly contradictory functions of both providing a site for inclusiveness vis-à-vis the financial exclusivity of corporate television, and simultaneously visually assaulting its observers with shock tactics and aesthetics of harsh or “unmediated” reality.

Its liminal status as both a tool for democratic inclusiveness and a reflection of corporate image production placed video in a unique position to invite social-engagement and political disdain simultaneously. Still, through the appropriation of video as a tool of the avant-garde beginning in the 1960s, and its eventual adoption by a generation of postmodern identity artists in the 1970s and beyond, the medium sustained an oppositional, activist role that impeded its ready assimilation into canonical art history. On the surface this seems contradictory to art history’s claims upon and elevation of avant-garde practice as a valued part of its heritage. Barbara London wrote of the increasing prevalence of video in the art world, noting that seemed to occupy “equal footing” with traditional media by the time of Documenta IX, presented in 1992.⁴⁸ This might have been true of the contemporary art world, but the pivotal dimension of scholarly attention lagged behind. Many observed that video was not being adequately historicized; outside of the United States, it was suggested that art history’s methodologies were challenged by the medium of video. Writing on the British art scene, art historian of electronic media Frank Popper characterized video as having an elusive quality that resisted historical assimilation:

the institutions of the art world have never known quite what to do with video. After twenty years, it still lacks a solidly independent

⁴⁸ Barbara London, *Video Spaces: Eight Installations* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 18.

body of criticism, a situation largely attributable to its dearth of those qualities required for art-historical appraisal (materiality, established aesthetic criteria, and a history).⁴⁹

Popper's comment is especially relevant in terms of his dual positioning as a scholar of both art history and art and technology dating back to the 1960s.⁵⁰

It is, perhaps, its mixture of technology and alternative subjectivities that contributed to this disconnect between video's presence in the art world, and its representation in academia—even the interconnectedness of these two arenas. Given this connection between the shifting qualities of the artistic avant-garde and the social realities that drive its metamorphosis, the cultural impact of globalization bears consideration in understanding the contemporary legacy of historical avant-garde practices.

V. Globalization Shapes a “Social Reality” for Contemporary Counter-Culture

Various scholars have suggested that beneath the immense pressure of global networks, conventional experiences of identity along racial, national, and gender lines are coming into crisis. In his *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson investigates the cultural signifiers of globalization within artistic practice, as embodying or suppressing the economic and political qualities of post-industrial society. His decidedly interdisciplinary Marxist-inflected analyses consider aesthetic production vis-à-vis politics and global economic conditions, in an effort to characterize what is widely referred to as the postmodern era. As the title of

⁴⁹ Frank Popper, *Art of the Electronic Age* (New York: Abrams, 1993), 77.

⁵⁰ There are many other examples of scholars and arts professionals who point out the technical and distribution difficulties of video, as well as its incongruous qualities in the museum space. See for example, curator Carol Ann Klonarides, “Is the Site Right?” in *Art Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 4, Video Art (Winter 1995): 77-78.

his work suggests, Jameson links postmodern cultural production to ‘late capitalism’ or multinational capitalism—interchangeable terms which he uses to describe the third stage of capitalism. He associates mercantilism (the first stage) with the aesthetic of realism; industrialism (the second stage) he associates with the modernist aesthetic. Postmodernism, he suggests, is a populist rejoinder to the totalizing nature of high modernism, and a culturally expressed *political* response to late capitalism:

every position on postmodernism in culture—whether apologia or stigmatization—is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today.⁵¹

Importantly, he distinguishes postmodernism from earlier movements by signifying its valence as a “cultural dominant” rather than a purely stylistic movement—a strategy that the reader may take as obliquely inferring that earlier movements (modernism, realism) maintained a barrier between aesthetics and politics. On this distinction, his theorization does not calculate the revisionist scholarship that has since contextualized “aesthetic” historical works of art within a socio-political milieu. However, his assertion that aesthetic production and commodity production have become impossible to differentiate, is one of his most salient observations. It is this distinctive marriage of aesthetics with commodity that grates against the art historical notion of the avant-garde.

The terrifying simultaneity of this postmodern condition, as enumerated by Jameson’s text, leads to a “schizophrenic disjunction” in which a change of affect occurs as we reconfigure our relationship to a moment unmoored from both temporal

⁵¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 3.

order and stable meaning.⁵² As a result, artists from around the globe are expressing this change of affect in a wide variety of media.

Jameson suggests that in analyzing a work of art issuing from such a destabilized cultural moment, the interpreter *must* adopt a schizophrenic method in order to appropriately ‘read’ such an image. It recalls the Deleuzian construct of “schizoanalysis”, which implies an unconscious-based free-flow that is postmodern in nature and opposed to all repressive, organizing impulses. But in Jameson’s model, the spectator operates without an enthusiasm for discovery, resulting in an experience evocative of the Kantian sublime. It is an exhilarating and frightening hysterical lack of filtration, an aesthetic euphoria in which a viewer is entreated to:

see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference...and to rise somehow to a level at which the vivid perception of radical difference is in itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship: something for which the world *collage* is still only a very feeble name.⁵³

This new relationship to the deluge of imagery and the necessary subjective editorial mode that results has found its way into artistic expression. Consider, for instance, American artist Lorna Simpson’s *31, 2002*. It simultaneously presents thirty-one video excerpts from the life of a female protagonist, each on its own flat screen, as she moves through the banality of everyday life (See Figure 2.7). Referencing discourses around surveillance, especially as it pertains to the female subject, the cool-grey monitors that comprise the art object also demand of the viewer that s/he organize a great deal of imagery into a set of relationships, if not a cohesive narrative. Arranged as the days on a monthly calendar, the screens initially appear to

⁵² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 29.

⁵³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 31.

call to the viewer's attention with equal intensity. But as one becomes accustomed to the visual noise, a rhythm or flow begins to surface. This work also recalls the Mike Figgis film *Timecode* (2000), in which a screen split into four quadrants presents four perspectives of a narrative captured in real time. Through manipulations in sound, the director guides viewers' attention from one quadrant to another. As the viewer settles into the system of unconventional cues, a narrative emerges from what is initially an over-stimulating visual cacophony. Still, it is left largely to the viewer to direct attention to the various sequences of events and to 'edit' them into coherent meaning (See Figure 2.8).

Artist Shirin Neshat also utilized this strategy in her double DVD-projection *Tooba* (2002), in which she forces the viewer to selectively edit between two perspectives of the same story (See Figure 2.9). Arranged on opposite walls, both large projection screens cannot be viewed simultaneously from within the gallery space. As the viewer moves their attention back and forth, an individualized montage materializes from her array of haunting and richly evocative images. Belgian artist Chantal Ackerman's *From the Other Side* (2002) with its eighteen monitors and two screens, documented border tensions between the US and Mexico in a similarly multi-dimensional fashion (See Figure 2.10). Multiplicity's *Solid Sea* (2002) recounts, through the presentation of recorded talking-head testimonials, the catastrophic sinking of a Maltese ship carrying 400 refugees and clandestine immigrants (See Figure 2.11). These are but a few examples of artists' attempts to move beyond the rigidity of traditional narrative structure, through the use of technologies that lend themselves to the simultaneous presentation of multiple accounts.

Of course, with the shift to sophisticated technologies that are able to represent samplings from a seemingly infinite repository of potential raw material, it

stands to reason that the subsequent quickening of the image places a new stress on the body of the viewer. This duress, according to Jameson, causes a disconnect between the body (which cannot evolve as quickly as technology) and what he calls “new space” or “postmodern hyperspace.” I would suggest that this statement was truer in 1991 when his text was published, considering that an entire generation of people has since matured on the heels of the Internet revolution. For this generation, a multitasking viewership and a greatly increased quantity of visuals becomes naturalized, rather than necessarily invoking merely distracted attention. Hence, the transition to schizophrenic interpretation—the aesthetic of perpetual, open-ended sampling and recombination—is not as abrupt or insurmountable as it seems.

The “aesthetic of cognitive mapping”—Jameson’s term for the new cultural form that emerges from the onset of multinational capitalism—would be a subjectively organized way of ordering one’s sense of place in relation to an inconceivable totality. By constantly adapting to new knowledge, it would be possible to achieve a more complex way of describing one’s location on a fluctuating map that constitutes the “world space of multinational capital.”⁵⁴ This cognitive mapping is significant in that it calls not for totalities in thinking, but analytical frameworks that guide understanding. In effect, it acknowledges all perspectives as a matter of subjectivity, as opposed to the modernist belief in the myth of scientific objectivity.

The scholarly move toward multivalent comparisons necessarily acknowledges both the transitional nature of borders in the messy aftermath of colonialism, and the erosion of fixed identities precipitated by globalization. Many scholars from divergent spheres of study have begun to eschew the idea of operating in discussions of absolutes, in favor of presenting clusters of conceptual relativities

⁵⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 54.

that hang together and potentially gesture toward meaning. But what is the effect of new media on this paradigm? And what is the relationship between this unique cultural moment, and the ebb-and-flow of bodies across the national borders? New media with its malleability (as instrument of communication or creative output, business tool, etc.) lends itself naturally to the new demands engendered by the conditions of globalization. It is now possible for corporations to outsource specialized services like online customer support and telephone banking offshore because the geographical distance between nations has been nullified by the immediacy of electronic communication. Hence, multinational corporations are able to harness the skilled labor of many nation-states without demanding the relocation of bodies. Even within particular geographical borders, relations between businesses are reconfigured, as small firms—armed with newly affordable technology—are able to compete with larger ones.

This emergent transculturalism, brought about by global socio-economic conditions, will become a touchstone for further discussion of an intense transformative period for the role of identity. At this juncture it is important to mention Arjun Appadurai, whose invaluable theorization links postcoloniality and electronic media, thereby providing a cultural anthropological consideration of how the migration of peoples and the proliferation of media affect cultural production. He defines cultural production broadly as the “work of the imagination,” describing it as “neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined, but...a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

Appadurai stops short of any effusiveness on the utopian democratizing values of digitality. But his affirmative consideration of the imagination as a galvanizer of individual agency engages the subversive and transformative qualities of electronic media, and its role in inserting the subject into potentially global discourses. To this he adds the importance of migration, which in itself is not uniquely modern. However, when combined with electronic media, it creates a global dynamic that engenders “diasporic public spheres.”⁵⁶ Repeatedly utilizing terms like ‘rupture’ and ‘break’, he suggests a modern epistemological shift, although he does not use the word ‘postmodernism’ to describe this. Rather, he settles on “modernity at large” to capture the sense of a living constellation of modernity in which the “work of the imagination” plays a definitive role in culture. This discussion taps into the relationship between individual agency and electronic culture. It underscores the many ways in which humor and creative re-invention affect the ability of the third world to compete with first world advantages. But he also addresses how smaller agents are able to compete with larger agents in intra-national levels of media engagement:

we can see that electronic mass mediation and transnational mobilization have broken the monopoly of autonomous nation-states over the project of modernization. The transformation of everyday subjectivities through electronic mediation and the work of the imagination is not only a cultural fact. It is deeply connected to politics, through the new ways in which individual attachments, interests, and aspirations increasingly crosscut those of the nation-state.⁵⁷

What does this mean for culture? First, Appadurai defines culture as intimately bound up in the details that differentiate one agent from another, or as the

⁵⁶ Appadurai, *Modernity*, 4.

⁵⁷ Appadurai, *Modernity*, 10.

articulation of differences “that express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities.”⁵⁸ This definition has a profound political dimension, because as the scholar has suggested, electronic media’s presence as a carrier of *individual* identity erodes the conventional *group-think* of the nation-state. Perhaps the real problem is that culture is associated with a static sense of identity and nationhood. This constitutively grates against the spectralizing nature of globalism. Perhaps the notion of a nation-state is arcane, or conceptually incompatible with the transnationalism that defines the postmodern global experience. Indeed, by the end of his text, Appadurai sets forth what is tantamount to a manifesto, declaring that, “we need to think ourselves beyond the nation,” and calling for the formation of a postnational studies. This prefigures his suggestion made some four years later that a new interdisciplinary structure for unpacking the effects of globalization may provide a pedagogical means of leveling the “playing field.”⁵⁹

Appadurai’s “diasporic public spheres,” which emerge from the movement of bodies (migration) and technological innovation (electronic mass media), hint at what network complexity might mean, and how it might affect cultural production. For it is in the interstices marked by hybridity, flux, contingency and new aesthetic logics that a uniquely postmodern cultural production has flowered. This is a polymorphous cultural expression marked by self-construction, global cultural flows, media, multinational capital, and the global reach of ideology. Appadurai described these interstitial sites as “imagined worlds,” of which he identified five specific types: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity*, 13.

⁵⁹ Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination” in *Public Culture*, no. 12, vol. 1 (Winter 2000): 1-19.

⁶⁰ Appadurai, *Modernity*, 32.

These deterritorialized zones become cultural Petri dishes in which formerly distinct identities are exposed to each other—and subsequently grow and change. See for example, the various theoretical reconfigurations of space and time including: Sally R. Munt, (who wrote of the spatial praxis which occurred between human and machine, which she called “technospaces”); Michel Foucault (who described the social fluidity of spatiality with his construct of “heterotopias” in his “Of Other Spaces”); Henri LeFebvre, (who argued for a science of the production of social spaces) in his *The Production of Space*; and more recently, the special issue of *Wired* with architect and guest editor Rem Koolhaas, who outlined thirty distinct spaces that characterize the 21st century.⁶¹ The potential list of salient ideas and theorists in this area warrants further consideration that falls beyond the scope of the current discussion. What is important for the moment is to consider the explosion of potential spaces or “scapes” that have opened up as a result of such theorization. Considered very much of-the-moment” in the mid-1990s, spatiality gains a new urgency with the evolution of global interconnectedness.

The impulse to develop overarching categorizations for the new spatial paradigms of cultural globalization is futile, since the demographics involved are so fluid as to elude classification. Still, Appadurai’s notion of “diasporic public spheres” provides a language with which to grasp the scope of transnational social realities that communication technologies, multinational capitalism, and migration engender. While this reality is reflected in cultural expression, art history has yet to integrate it meaningfully into its pedagogy. As such, Appadurai’s theorization

⁶¹ See Sally R. Munt, ed., *Technospaces: Inside the New Media* (New York and London: Continuum, 2001), Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” in *Diacritics* (Spring 1986): 22-7.; Henri LeFebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991) First published in French in 1974; and more recently, Rem Koolhaas, guest editor for *Wired*, Volume 11, Number 6 (June 2003).

provides a useful alternative framework for understanding the workings of culture beyond the boundaries of nation-state.

The contemporary art world, which should be differentiated from the art *historical* world, has moved along its own trajectory, incorporating themes of globalization, hybridity, transnationalism, and postcoloniality as a means of galvanizing movements around particular identities. However its themes, largely indebted to discussions of postmodern/postcolonial identity discourses, have strayed far from optimism when addressing technology and globalization. Well-known cultural producers such as Coco Fusco, Adrian Piper, Isaac Julien, Allan Sekula, Steve McQueen, Renée Green, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, and Keith Piper—many of whom utilize media forms—comprise part of a postmodern generation of artists whose engagement with identity is deeply entrenched in its shifting use-value in the current global reality.

Many of these artists have been influenced by postcolonial scholarship that pressed at the boundaries of modernist artistic, political, and theoretical conventions. Homi Bhabha is one such scholar whose writings embody this shift by drawing from a dynamic array of forms and scholarly traditions, in order to illuminate a new way of thinking about the postcolonial, postmodernism, and culture:

The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological ‘limits’ of those ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices – women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities. For the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees. It is in this sense that the boundary becomes the place from which *something*

begins its presencing in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond that I have drawn out...⁶²

He proposes a re-configuration, or what Appadurai would call “self-imaging,” of identity according to the needs of shifting localities.

postcolonial critique bears witness to those countries and communities—in the North and South, urban and rural—constituted, if I may coin a phrase, ‘otherwise than modernity’. Such cultures of a postnational contra-modernity may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, resistant to its oppressive, assimilationist technologies; but they also deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to ‘translate’, and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity.⁶³

It is vital to consider what ‘diasporic public spheres’ and ‘shifting localities’ give way to: namely, hybridity, creolization and transculturalism. This presents challenges to modernist constructions of cultural production and their understandings, which have been hereunto bound up in discrete constructs of the nation-state.

Art history is organized around particular geographical regions and nationally-delimited cultural moments that punctuate its founding narratives. For instance, in the course catalog one finds Chinese Art, Northern Renaissance Art, Egyptian Art, Italian Renaissance, German Expressionism, etc. In many ways a global perspective interrupts the organization of art historical knowledge. As of late, it has been further interrupted by comparative modernities that destabilize notions of a single modernist art movement that occurred solely in Europe and the West. To reconfigure the study of art in terms of global and transnational concerns, therefore,

⁶² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 4-5.

⁶³ Bhabha, *Location*, 6.

represents a fairly devastating shock to the preset categories of art history, and in fact its whole meta-structure of knowledge. This must be taken into account when considering the irruptions to which art history is apparently subjected by modern technologies. Indeed, the presence of alterity and the presence of technology have clear linkages. The relationship between these two things will be further explored; however, more pressing are the questions of artistic practice and historicization given the social reality of globalization.

VI. Artistic Practices and The Global

While strictly art historical scholarship is slowly turning its attention to the global presence of postmodern artistic practice, there have indeed been critical responses made, albeit from other academic realms. Kwame Anthony Appiah, an early commentator on the relevance of non-western art forms to postmodernism and postcoloniality, was one of the first to discuss contemporary artistic practices in terms of the global:

Postmodern culture is the culture in which all postmodernisms operate, sometimes in synergy, sometimes in competition; and because contemporary culture is, in a certain sense...transnational, postmodern culture is global—though that emphatically does not mean that is the culture of every person in the world.⁶⁴

While gesturing toward postmodern culture's relative exclusivity, he does acknowledge it as a “space-clearing gesture” that configures Africans (or any anthropologized grouping) as inhabitants of an intellectual and cultural modernity.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” in *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991): 343.

⁶⁵ Appiah, “Is the Post-,” 348

In his commentary, however, Appiah offers acerbic critiques of the cosmopolitan intelligentsia arising from the postcolonial. He considers them an aberration of the *market* that neither represents African cultural life, nor functions beyond the projections of the West:

Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a *comprador* intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa.⁶⁶

For Appiah, this means that the cultural production emerging from postcolonial intellectuals is not to be ignored; however, it should not be understood as rooted in an authentic Africa. This betrays an underlying value-system in which one's authentic voice is rooted in proximity to land, as well as exposure to the unbroken heritage of that land. One's 'Africanness' may come into question with too much exposure to the West—and while this does not invalidate the cultural production of that 'comprador intelligentsia', for him, their expression is only of an imagined Africa.

Carol Becker similarly critiqued the position of transnational artists, who are often seen as "westernized" because of their relocation to the West, or their appropriation of forms that fall outside the lingua franca of their home nations' aesthetic traditions. In her reflections on the proliferation of biennials, Becker wrote of the global citizen-artist who moves from one transnational intersection to another, configuring their professional identities as post-national while simultaneously

⁶⁶ Appiah, "Is the Post-," 348.

representing their nation of origin. Her essay argued that in the case of the *Johannesburg Biennale*, for example, the African works exhibited were in fact alien to African museum-goers who could not identify with the strong presence of a Western aesthetic. Invoking the curatorial vision of the biennale as one of superceding specific nation-states, Becker questioned the global nature of the exhibition when in fact their “individual points of view are sifted through the sieve of the New York aesthetic.”⁶⁷ Questioning the effectiveness and true scope of so-called global exhibitions that have mushroomed up in metropolises worldwide, Becker linked the aura of an international artist’s production to their physical locality:

Many live in political limbo when in the United States and usually, although not always only truly engage with the local when they return, bringing their new hybridity back into their own culture, challenging, forming, engaging, and often transforming local debates. And it is, in truth, many of these artists and writers who make work or write about the transnational experience and are then chosen to be in international exhibitions because the work talks about the process of crossing over and has been formed within the Western aesthetic. But what does it mean to come from Asia, Latin America, Africa, or certain regions of the United States and become a part of this international discourse? As their work becomes more and more about the complexity of their relationship to their multiple realities, and as they speak more and more from the centers of capitalism, where is their point of connection to those who have never left these places that may now have become the economic peripheries, or worse, beyond the measurable parameters of the global market altogether?⁶⁸

This stance hinges on the idea of authenticity as being associated with alterity, or that one’s value lies in an identity marked by difference. Because artists are no longer

⁶⁷ Carol Becker, “The Romance of Nomadism: A Series of Reflections” in *Art Journal* Volume 58, Number 2 (Summer 1999), 22-29.

⁶⁸ Becker, “Romance,” 27-8.

authenticated by their locality, they are unable to express the concerns of their nations. Their ability to produce aura, in other words, is linked to their authenticity and is produced through physical proximity to their ethnic origins. It also presumes the possibility of access to Africa in an unmediated or objective sense, and that it is possible to have an experience that is quintessentially African.

It becomes unclear what globalism means within Becker's discussion—but from contextual references it appears to be a notion akin to global *Westernization*. On this point, I would conceive of globalization not as a totalizing system, but rather a degree of rhizomatic access and exposure that is enabled (unevenly) through technology as well as within socio-economic systems. Unfortunately, constructs like hybridity and internationalism, and by extension sampling, are configured as a *dilution* rather than an *evolution* of culture. Ultimately, Becker's essay is ambivalent to transnationalism as both a form of exile, and a quasi-utopian neutral zone that ameliorates one's sense of local responsibility through a privileged nomadism.

To add another dimension to this discussion of increased nomadism within the art world by artists, curators and aficionados alike, Miwon Kwon outlines the increasingly ambulatory nature of the multinational capitalist economy, in relation to the human desire for a fixed sense of place.⁶⁹ Describing the circulation of bodies, information and capital, Kwon ponders the physical and psychological impact of what she calls “placelessness,” a kind of disconnection from any sense of locality caused by the postmodern abstraction of space and time. Calling primarily upon LeFebvre's notion of a social and ideological construction of space and Jameson's insights into the late-capitalistic reorganization of space, Kwon ultimately concludes that it is we who are out of step or “wrong”—not our surroundings.

⁶⁹ Miwon Kwon, “The Wrong Place” in *Art Journal*, Volume 59, Number 1 (Spring 2000): 33-43.

Proposing that avant-garde politics is largely a destabilizing spatial politics, Kwon argues that the “right” place lies in articulating a new relationship to postmodern modes of space, place and time. This ambivalent stance, as Kwon articulates, renders one “vulnerable to new terrors and dangers.”⁷⁰ While her essay stops short of a call to action on the part of transnational artists everywhere, Kwon does conclude by suggesting that the avant-garde lead the way to a postmodern sense of identity relative to place.

Finally, in relation to the criticisms of Kwon, Becker and Appiah, I would like to invoke the interventions of Achille Mbembe for whom “discourses and representations have *materiality*.⁷¹ By this, he reminds us that ideological constructions often replace the literal subjects of lofty abstract discussions. In his introduction to *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe implores his reader to consider the African postcolonial subject who is “living in the concrete world” as a palpable individual, one subject to the ramifications of the scholar’s intellectual indulgences.

In keeping with this spirit, I endeavor not to dismiss the practical concerns expressed by many scholars in relation to those on the other side of the ‘digital divide’—those who are not beneficiaries. By no means do I wish to belittle their often-abject realities in favor of nebulous musings on the privilege of that cosmopolitan minority who moves freely between nations. Art history is by definition a sphere of privilege in which the harshness of reality can easily become abstracted and encoded into intellectual wordplay. However, there is a trend in cultural production that is emerging as a result of the flow of capital, information, bodies and cultures across national borders. This tendency has a tremendous impact on the lives of people, the configurations of their identities, and therefore upon their

⁷⁰ Kwon, “Wrong,” 39.

⁷¹ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 5. (my emphasis)

cultural production. I only wish to problematize the terms and influences by which this production comes under analysis. Specifically, I assert that configuring the subjects of globalization as *inherent* victims belittles their potential to affect it.

VII. Documenta 11: Postmodern Media, Mega-Exhibition

Since the late 1990s, a burgeoning discourse on African modernity—linked in the art world to themes of globalization, diaspora, transculturalism, and the phenomenon of the mega-exhibition—has significantly influenced the art world by presenting a critical counter-model to the unitary notion of modernity. This movement, exemplified by the efforts of Sidney Kasfir, Okwui Enwezor, Salah Hassan, Olu Oguibe and others, have presented a strong suite of exhibitions and critical projects such as: *The Short Century*, *Authentic/Ex-Centric*, *Unpacking Europe*, the 2nd *Johannesburg Biennale*, *Documenta 11*, *A Fiction of Authenticity*, and *Fault Lines*. The largest of these exhibitions, *Documenta 11*, is an exemplar of transcultural artistic, curatorial and intellectual production. Notably, American critics harshly criticized the exhibition and its artistic director, Okwui Enwezor, for relying upon corporate sponsorship⁷² and for the preponderance of media works. However, more importantly than this, the presentation and critical response to this exhibition raised questions about the relationship between art and technology, the historical worthiness of media arts, and the plausibility of an avant-garde in an era of globalization.

⁷² As a large-scale exhibition, *Documenta 11* was not at all unusual for its corporate sponsorship. However, this issue became a particular sounding board for critics who perceived it as politically hypocritical that the exhibition accepted corporate funding, although a great many of the artworks had anti-corporate themes.

Through its conceptual melding of mass media forms, transculturalism and identity, *Documenta 11* presented a rhizomatic model that manifested the impact of network complexity on contemporary cultural production. Not only has it become the object of continual debate; the exhibition also forcefully engaged various dimensions of the flow of bodies, ideas, information and capital across national borders. Accordingly, the literal and figural spaces of this exhibition function as useful territories in which to explore the degree to which technology and commercialism are, ideologically speaking, diametrically opposed to art.

Documenta 11 represented the most ambitious installation of the contemporary art exposition in terms of size, inclusiveness, and the number of new commissions. A massive logistical undertaking, most critics readily conceded that in the few days they spent on site, they could not possibly see all of the exhibited works. Video and filmic presentations alone comprised more than six hundred hours of viewing time during the course of the hundred-day event. This is not to mention the five-pronged worldwide presentation of which the exhibition was only a part. Four additional “Platforms” were held in various international locations. Each invoked a major theme identified by the curatorial team as seminal to the conceptualization of *Documenta 11*: Platform 1, *Democracy Unrealized*; Platform 2, *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation*; Platform 3, *Créolité and Creolization*; and Platform 4, *Under Seige: Four African Cities—Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*. According to Enwezor, these five moments were intended to deterritorialize the contemporary art world’s critical engagement with larger global realities. In an effort to meld discussions of global culture and art, the exhibition highlighted the hybrid nature of modernity with its multinational condition of global capitalism. As such, the four

platforms provided a strong theoretical background for the fifth, which was realized as an exhibition of unprecedented scope.

During the *Documenta 11* press conference, the artistic director elucidated his vision of the exhibition as an experimental project whose slow gestation period disallowed any possibility for “prognosis” of the art world. Rather, he considered the endeavor to be “diagnostic” of the “scenario of art today, which is transnational.”⁷³ That is to say, *Documenta 11* endeavored to speak to the nature of its time, rather than to forecast artistic trends. Said Enwezor of the project:

It is above all an attempt to shape and assess the common points of fruitful exchanges and the questioning necessary to craft an exhibition project that would project a more complicated picture of contemporary life and thought.⁷⁴

This hearkens to network models of complexity as set forth by theorists like Manuel Castells, but in fact this pluralistic model bears intellectual roots in the “constellation.” Conceptualized first by social theorist Walter Benjamin and later taken up by Theodor Adorno, the constellation expressed the possibility of interrupting cognitive models that would point to a “supreme principle”.⁷⁵ Adorno believed that bourgeois idealist values were decaying, and that he could quicken their inevitable ruin by forcing them to their logical conclusion, thereby exposing the contradictions that lie within.⁷⁶ Calling this his “logic of disintegration,” Adorno

⁷³ Okwui Enwezor at *Documenta 11* Press Conference, Kassel, Germany, 6 June 2002.

⁷⁴ Enwezor, “Black Box” in *Documenta11_Platform5: Austellung/Exhibition*, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje-Cantz Publishers, 2002), 52-3.

⁷⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 162.

⁷⁶ Please see Susan Buck-Morss’ discussion in: *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*, (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 63-81.

sought to burden bourgeois ideology until it finally collapsed under its own weight. The constellation, as imagined by Adorno, provided an alternative to the inductive model in which specific items or instances are subsumed under general categories. This allowed for a general sense of grouping without the hegemonic ordering of strict categories or clearly demarcated identities. Rather than relying on a taxonomy of concepts, the constellation model allows the meanings within larger ideas to become clear through their loose proximity and mutual resonance.

It is this resistance to definition, identity, and categorization that characterizes the curatorial team's radical break with traditional curatorial practice.⁷⁷ Enwezor explicitly demarcated his intention to engage with dynamic, alternative intellectual models in his curatorial statement:

this exhibition could be read as an accumulation of passages, a collection of moments, temporal lapses that emerge into spaces that reanimate for a viewing public the endless concatenation of worlds, perspectives, models, counter-models, and thinking that constitute the artistic subject.⁷⁸

Documenta 11's exhibition catalogue opens with an assemblage of politically oriented documentary photographs. Printed in a moiré newsprint style, the images charge viewers with the responsibility of bearing in mind the socio-political climate from which the presented works arise, while simultaneously pointing to their

⁷⁷ To be sure, Adorno is not the only major theorist to deal with concepts of difference. See especially Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) in which the author describes identification only through comparison and opposition. Originally published in French in 1968. See also Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) in which the author formulated a resistance to stable meaning and definition through his metaphorical construct of "différance." Originally published in French, 1972.

⁷⁸ Enwezor, "Black," 42.

spectralized global dispersal. This spotlighting of press imagery indicates the influence of socio-political realities upon the conception and production of the works included. The catalogue presentation resists the notion that artists are hermetically sealed from all political realities. These realities are foregrounded within *Documenta 11*, and subsequently its “white box” presentation is not sanitized of political content. Like Benjamin and Adorno’s model, Enwezor provides a model that is always dynamic, volatile, and perpetually in transition. It is destabilizing, but it is from this imbalance that the *active* rather than *passive* viewer is brought into play within the presentation spaces.⁷⁹

Criticism of the exhibition ranged from the disparagement of artistic content and perceived didacticism, to personal attacks on the artistic director himself. Some called the work humorless, others found it to be politically top-heavy, or complained that there was too much documentary and not enough art. Roberta Smith of the *New York Times* called it “a Lazy Susan of moralizing primness, eccentric materials, intellectual dryness, multidisciplinary amorphousness or high-tech spectacle slowly revolving on a pedestal of artistic development.”⁸⁰ It is in these types of critiques

⁷⁹ For Enwezor’s own explanation of what the postcolonial constellation means within the context of the modern and contemporary art world, please see: Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition” in *Research in African Literatures* 2003, Volume 34, Number 4: 57-82. Also related to this subject of a constellation of modernities, please see following: Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Sarah Campbell and Gilane Tawadros, eds., *Annotations 6: Stuart Hall and Sarat Maharaj: Modernity and Difference* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2001); and Timothy Mitchell, ed., *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁸⁰ Roberta Smith, “When Exhibitions Have More to Say Than to Show” in *The New York Times*, April 13, 2003, Section 2, Column 1: 31. I use Roberta Smith as one example, since she succinctly and provocatively captures a sentiment shared by many critics in the American press at the time of Documenta 11’s opening. However, so as not to unfairly single her out, please see also any of the following: Blake Gopnik, “Fully Freighted Art: At Documenta 11” in *The Washington Post*,

that several qualities unique to media art production emerge—drawn out by their difference from previous forms, and highlighted through the distaste of American critics for the strangeness of what greeted them within the museum space. The next section, therefore, will consider the ways in which new technologies have become embroiled as media in a struggle over the future direction and values of art history.

VIII. Documenta 11 Part Two: Technology and Obsolescence

Art producers, scholars, and presenters have responded to the postmodern epistemological shift that *Documenta 11* symbolized with varying degrees of tolerance. In the Spring of 2002, for example, the editors of the scholarly journal, *October*, assessed the status of their discourse in their hundredth issue entitled: *Obsolescence*. In the introductory remarks, the editors refer to themselves as an intellectual avant-garde that has perhaps finally seen the boundaries of its own explorations. Calling upon Benjamin's diminishing aura, they drew parallels between the onset of digitality and their own obsolescence. While their discussion largely centered on filmic debates of celluloid versus pixel, it illuminates a more fundamental struggle between materiality and digitality. With the exponential possibility of reproduction that is within the nature of digitality, the essay asserts, the

June 16, 2002: Sunday Arts Section, G 01. Eleanor Heartney, “A 600-Hour Documenta” in *Art in America*, Number 9 (September 2002): 86-95. Michael Kimmelman, “Critic’s Notebook: Global Art Show with an Agenda” in *The New York Times*, June 18, 2002, Section E, Page 1. Peter Plagens, “A County Fair for Intellectuals” in *Newsweek*, June 17, 2002: 58. Peter Schjeldahl, “The Global Salon” in *The New Yorker*, July 1, 2002. Adam Shatz, “His Really Big Show” in *The New York Times*, June 2, 2002, Section 6, Page 38. Also, for an interview with Okwui Enwezor that discusses the American critical response to Documenta 11, please see Derek Conrad Murray, “Okwui Enwezor in Conversation with Derek Conrad Murray” in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Number 18 (Spring/Summer 2003): 40-47.

meaning of the original is being suffocated through sheer volume. On the loss of material-based, celluloid cinema, for example, the editors contended that:

For some of us, the radical idea that reproduction can loosen the grip of the original, putting pressure on all those institutions dedicated to preserving the aesthetic original and its “aura,” itself now falls victim to reproduction’s own exponential development within the abyss of the cybernetic hall of mirrors.⁸¹

Creating an equivalency between the binaries of celluloid/electronic and materiality/digitality, the essay posits digitality as a degradation of cultural production, based on the value of an “original” and what is lost in multiplicity. Offering the issue as a “site of resistance,”⁸² *October* seeks to isolate their theoretical discourse of materiality (which has been deeply entrenched in a discourse of the body) from digitality (machine), refusing to allow any influence of the latter to seep in. In doing so, *October* ideologically establishes itself clearly on the materiality side of the equation, placing value upon the authentic versus the interchangeable. Notably, this particular stance also expressed resistance to the idea that anything related to the digital has any distinctive cultural or signifying value. Consequently, this perspective disallows the consideration of significant scholarship relating to—among many other fields—an aesthetics of the digital.

This self-described leftist avant-garde regards digitality as incompatible with canonical art discourses. But while the body seems to be safely under control in their criticism, the dominant canon does not acknowledge its own troubled relationship to corporeality. Theirs is a discourse preoccupied with materiality, “the

⁸¹ Editorial, in *October*, No. 100 (Spring 2002): 3.

⁸² Editorial, *October*, 5.

formless”⁸³; Sade, Fourier and Bataille are held aloft. However, identity politics which are also deeply entrenched in the body as a site of categorization, trauma and redemption—and which are also implicit in the discussion of globalization—must remain separate. And so, at the moment when the canon shows signs of initiating pluralistic discourses such as identity politics into the canon, *October* announces its discussion is closed. In order to preserve the scholarly integrity of its material and intellectual boundaries, *October* declares its own obsolescence.

In considering the relevance of modern technologies to the diversification of authorship, it is not surprising that the aforementioned critique would surface just before the opening of *Documenta 11*, a media-strong presentation brimming with postcolonial critique. Three years before the opening of this exhibition, Rosalind Krauss in her discussion of the “post-medium condition” wrote of how video forever changed the way that scholars of art must think of media.⁸⁴ Arguing that video ushered in a broad array of discursive practices that superceded categorization into a single medium, she asserted that we are now living in a “post-medium condition” in which media are characterized by heterogeneous functions, roles, and forms. However, in the context of this discussion, Krauss also expressly implicates “installation and intermedia” art as complicit with globalization and capitalism.⁸⁵ This is extremely significant because it marries specific media, in particular video through its corporate origins, with globalization. Such a comment is particularly barbed in its attempt to denigrate the use of certain media, by asserting that they are by definition proscribed on account of their dubious associations to the commercial.

⁸³ See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*, (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

⁸⁴ Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

⁸⁵ Krauss, *Voyage*, 56.

This conflict was exemplified in a published exchange between Enwezor and George Baker, art historian and editor of *October*. Enwezor, upon whom much of the art-world interest in a global movement was focused during the time of *Documenta 11*, acknowledged the historical ramifications that accompany the current global shift.⁸⁶ Characterizing both pro- and anti-globalism stances as reductionist, Enwezor related the market, media and institutional concerns with the confluence of globalization and the culture industry.

The essay presented four key conditions for the proliferation of world transnational exhibitions, or biennales. The first of these is the historical and cultural traumas as a result of which it becomes necessary to radically redefine one's self as a citizen, or as a nation, etc. The second relates to the global phenomenon of modernization, and the desire of the 'margins' to become nodes of cultural modernity. The third condition relates to the mobility of bodies and cultures in the form of diasporic public spheres, a mobility that engenders transnational attitudes toward identity. This relates directly to Arjun Appadurai's notion of diasporic public spheres. Finally, the essay considered the predominant notions around spectacle in relation to mega-exhibitions. Ultimately, Guy Debord's construction of the spectacle, which figured strongly in the discussion, Enwezor deemed insufficient to consider the *global* exhibition practices that are interpenetrated with social, cultural and political critique. The notion of spectacle deriving from of the French Postmodern tradition, did not account for those spectators who represent a fragmented, dispersed form of counter-hegemonic viewing. Elided under the totalizing construct of a passive viewer enticed by spectacle, these spectators in fact

⁸⁶ Okwui Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form" in *Documents*, No. 23 (Spring 2004): 2-19.

move through spaces with an enabled criticality that diverges from those imagined under Debord's construct.

Art historian George Baker's published response to Enwezor's assertions took the curator to task on several points including his discussion of globalization, the mega-exhibition, the role of the spectator and the institutionalization of the art world. Baker sought to re-establish an economic definition of globalization, as opposed to the cultural model set forth in Enwezor's essay. Tying this to the existence of the mega-exhibition, Baker felt that:

in the moment of globalization and the rise of the mega-exhibition, what we actually witness for perhaps the first time is the *total institutionalization of the practice of art*, the onset of art's total *administration or total bureaucratization*. Curators replace artists in such an economy in the same way as experts replace critics. (author's emphasis)⁸⁷

This comment in particular seems to make thinly veiled reference to the critiques lodged against *Documenta 11* in terms of its corporate sponsorship, as well as the very large organizing team that executed the massive undertaking. For example, in *Newsweek*, art critic Peter Plagens wrote the following:

Big business, incidentally, takes a lot of hits in *Documenta 11*'s various platforms. But Volkswagen is still a sponsor, and *Documenta* personnel ride around happily in its cars. Go figure.⁸⁸

Plagens' comment insinuates a hypocritical relationship between the organizational body's purported politics, and their unabashedly materialistic actions. Further, from

⁸⁷ Baker, "Globalization," 22.

⁸⁸ Peter Plagens "A County Fair For Intellectuals" in *Newsweek*, Society and the Arts, June 17, 2002, Atlantic Edition: 58.

underneath his words there emanates an infantilizing gesture, intimating a childish distraction by the accoutrements of corporate sponsorship. This stance elides the reality that an event of *Documenta*'s magnitude would be financially unfeasible without corporate sponsorship. What Plagens is suggesting is that the *Documenta* organizing team be held accountable to higher financial standards than other major cultural institutions. What is lost in such an argument is the fact that in the era of globalization, counter-hegemonic efforts must find their force from within multinational capitalist structures, not just from outside of them.

Key is Baker's language in referring to the mega-exhibition as "the *total institutionalization of the practice of art*, the onset of art's total *administration* or *total bureaucratization*." Such an exhibition is, by accepted art historical terms, the exact opposite of the historical avant-garde. Through the consideration of globalization as a process of Americanization, Baker understands the very concept of a world- or mega-exhibition to serve the interests of multinational corporatism. In addition to this critique, the issue of exhibition size becomes linked to the deleterious notions of spectacle. Exhibitions of such magnitude, Baker asserts, disallow the possibility of being assimilated into a singular understanding or experience. On this point, the two actually agree—except while Enwezor uses magnitude as a strategy for interrupting meta-narratives, Baker characterizes it as a calculated impediment against critique, one that constitutes an act of violence upon the spectator. Ultimately, Baker sees the possibility of an 'anti-imperialist spectacle' as imaginable, but not to be found in the postcolonial, techno-friendly mega-exhibition.

What deserves consideration is whether the use of media is actually the point of rupture for art history; or is it rather the postmodern content, which is understood by many to be diametrically opposed to formalist concerns? Moving beyond video, similar linkages have been made between capitalism and the digital. John Belton

locates the discussion of digitality around its dubious status as a form of avant-garde practice.⁸⁹ Asking whether the digital revolution can rightly be characterized as such, his essay, “Digital Cinema: A False Revolution,” asserts that digitality is a distinctly market-oriented movement that stands in stark opposition to the very idea of an avant-garde:

The digital revolution was and is all about economics—all about marketing new digital consumer products to a new generation of consumers—all about the home electronics industry using the cinema to establish a product line with identifiable brand names for home entertainment systems.⁹⁰

The cinema historian and theorist argues that the digitization of film production and presentation does not substantively alter the movie-going aesthetic experience, and that the real benefit to this shift lies in the potential financial returns. Even allowing for the disparity between digital cinema developments between the time of the essay’s publishing and today’s innovation, this characterization inaccurate. Several groundbreaking films released to mainstream audiences including *Timecode* (2000), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), *28 Days Later* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), *The Celebration* (1998), *Dogville* (2003) and *Collateral* (2004) were shot on digital, and have foregrounded an artistic exploration of the aesthetics of digital cinema. Meanwhile in the “high-art” sector, artists such as Luc Courchesne in his *Landscape One* (1997) or Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand with *Beyond Manzanar* (2000) among many others investigate the expanded narrative and interactive possibilities of the digital. In addition, digital forms like

⁸⁹ John Belton “Digital Cinema: A False Revolution” in *October*, no 100 (Spring 2002): 98-114.

⁹⁰ Belton, “Digital,” 100-101.

electronic games, machinima, digital non-linear editing, and the Internet are seeping into the aesthetics of pre-existing media like celluloid film and television.

The experience of each of these works is distinctly marked by its own materiality, whose initial particularity interrupted one's passivity as a viewer by forcing one to consider a shift in aesthetic modes. On a fundamental level, digitality—as all media—has distinguishing properties and tendencies. As Lawrence Rinder, curator of contemporary art at the Whitney Museum of American Art wrote:

Nothing since the invention of photography has had a greater impact on artistic practice than the emergence of digital technology. While photography revolutionized the arts by superceding painting's claim to represent the "real," digital technology has become the ultimate tool for capturing the nuances of the "unreal." In digital media, all information is reduced to binary code, a series of zeroes and ones, creating a dynamic arena in which images and objects can be melded, morphed, or made to disappear. Artists have taken advantage of their unprecedented control over sensation and information to produce works that challenge our everyday perceptions of color, form, sound, space, and time. Imbued with unsettling emotional and psychological states, these works also reflect the pervasive sense of unreality that has come to suffuse our everyday lives in this dawning digital age.⁹¹

Rinder affirms the uniqueness of digital forms, but even more significantly, points to the evocativeness of plugged-in life linked to this new set of media. While the specifics of those material and emotional properties are still under contention, artists and filmmakers are nevertheless beginning to grapple with them.

One of the hot-button issues covered by Belton's essay was the "democratization" of new media relative to its comparative affordability and widespread availability. According to the author, "Next Wave Films, a subsidiary of

⁹¹ Lawrence Rinder, "Art in the Digital Age" in *Bitstreams* [exhibition catalog] (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001), 1.

the Independent Film Channel that furnished finishing funds to independent filmmakers, has seen a dramatic increase in digital submissions for funding; roughly 51 percent of the films submitted are shot digitally.”⁹² Certainly the instantaneity of product, and non-linear editing alone must change a filmmaker’s relationship to his craft. This is to say nothing of films that integrate computer-generated special effects, which has become so sophisticated that virtual characters increasingly share the screen time with live actors.

This democratization or access is uneven—and should not be confused with utopian notions of unilaterally equal representations of all parties. The essay expresses skepticism around the ability of an independent form of digital cinema to affect the Hollywood machine. He does not elaborate on the converse relation: namely, Hollywood’s aesthetic appropriation of the artistic possibilities of digital media. However, similarly to early video, the increased acceptance of digital film does present the possibility for creative innovation by those who may not otherwise have access to the tools of mass communication.

Critiques from other lefts originating in postcolonial studies—who would, incidentally, be unlikely to align themselves with the canonical left described above—often reject digitality as well. And while it is linked to the notion of a cyber-democracy, it is formulated from different bases. For some theorists, mainstream electronic media is a tool for manipulation that must be subverted at every turn. Cyber-media theorist Lisa Nakamura warns of “the global Coca-Colonization of cyberspace and the media complex within which it is embedded,” unveiling what she perceives to be the reification of otherness that underlies the utopian vision of a ‘global village’.⁹³ Coco Fusco also expresses cynicism toward digital technology,

⁹² Belton, “Digital,” 106.

⁹³ Lisa Nakamura, “‘Where Do You Want To Go Today?’ Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet, and Transnationality” in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed. *The Visual Culture Reader*,

which she believes is “a market-driven phenomenon that organizes our vision in the era of multinational capitalism, with global economic ramifications.”⁹⁴ However, this perspective diverges where it investigates the ‘digital divide’ between technology’s haves and have-nots, by considering globalization’s impact upon specific identity-based groupings.

In her “At Your Service: Latin American Women in the Global Information Network,” Fusco discusses the effects of digitality and globalization vis-à-vis postcoloniality and media theory.⁹⁵ Fusco characterizes the art world’s relationship to technology as cultivated by young scholars who are caught between the military-industrial complex spectacle and the Web’s utopian promise of disembodiment. The essay defines four key categories of artists and thinkers who consider identity in relation to digitality: (1) those who have adopted technology as a means not to appear primitive to others; (2) those who engage in cultural studies of the virtual; (3) those who engage the internet in relationship to activism, rather than aesthetics; and (4) those who study the impact of technology on the body of the other. She is correct in her cautionary attitude toward technology, since abuses brought about by its unwelcome incursion are widely known and well documented. Those abuses do need to be identified and checked. Ultimately, the essay reads as a call to action for political responsibility and activism against digital hegemony.

Artist and art historian Olu Oguibe similarly critiques the disparity between those on the downside versus the upside of the digital revolution, and issues a call for political activism aimed at a greater inclusivity in cyberspace. In an essay on the

Second Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 255-263. Nakamura credits Salman Rushdie with origination of the term “globalizing Coca-Colonization” in the same essay.

⁹⁴ Coco Fusco, “At Your Service: Latin Women in the Global Information Network” in *The Bodies That Were Not Ours* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 192.

⁹⁵ Fusco, “At Your Service”, 186-201.

“New World ‘Other’,” Oguibe describes the relative presence or absence of digital access in less industrialized nations such as Mexico and South Africa. However, where Fusco’s text reads in a mode skeptical of the technology itself, Oguibe’s work does not imbue digitality with any intrinsic moral dimension. Rather, he conveys the relative absence of computer access to the daily lives of those on the other side of the digital divide, and the incursion of their more pressing needs:

...for the millions who have only just emerged from a century of segregationist disadvantage, for those who wait still for the promises of a new, liberal democracy to be fulfilled, the allures and discourses of cyberspace are nonexistent. For those millions, the question is not whether the computer is favored or resented. The fact is that it does not exist, and the reality within which their daily lives are defined and spent has no room as yet for digital nirvana. Their worry is not over the inconsequence of nature and the body in a digital utopia; their most elemental worry is for the survival of nature and the sustenance of the body.⁹⁶

While acknowledging that cyberspace is a territory to which only a select few currently have access, he also addresses the tremendous potential of the digital medium. His perspective recognizes the discursiveness of power as a function of the ‘space of flows’ that globalization has engendered. This creates the possibility for agency and self-invention, even if the technology is not immediately at hand.⁹⁷ And, as Oguibe has suggested, the availability of digital access may not be of the utmost concern to those whose daily lives are destitute. But this does *not* mean that the prospect of that access should not be conceived of and pursued within the

⁹⁶ Olu Oguibe, “Forsaken Geographies: Cyberspace and the New World “Other”” in *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 153.

⁹⁷ For an account of new media art and the problem of the digital divide, see Gerfried Stocker and Christine Schöpf, eds., *Unplugged: Art as the Scene of Global Conflicts* (Osfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002).

imaginaries of our theoretical frameworks. In representing the current “social reality” as exclusive of issues such as the plight of the global underclass and the digital divide, art history’s discourse too narrowly defines it.

The artificial separation of life from art, reflected in the institutional rejection of the diversity that postmodernity and globalization have engendered, is disturbing to say the least. These two things converge in electronic media since it is, as Arjun Appadurai and others have shown, a vehicle for the crosscutting of culture with the influences of various identities.⁹⁸ In this sense, *Documenta 11* addressed this lack directly by highlighting the many artists whose works engaged identity, and who used mass media forms to do so. Of particular note in this regard were two documentaries. Steve McQueen’s *Western Deep* (2002) viscerally conveyed the claustrophobic working conditions in South African gold mines. Allan Sekula’s *Fish Story* (1990-1995), an epic multimedia installation, drew parallels between early European imperialist expansion and the contemporary global maritime industry (See Figures 2.12 and 2.13). These, among many other examples of exhibited works, embodied the fruitful intersection of identity and technology that exists the art world, yet remains under-historicized in the academy.

Clearly, the curators of the exhibition were cognizant of the difficulties surrounding the art world’s reception of media arts that commingle with postmodern identity politics, and therefore sought to push them to the fore. Mark Nash, one of six members of *Documenta 11*’s curatorial team, made plain the connections between the strong presence of media-based documentary and the conservative art world’s rejection of the exhibition:

⁹⁸ Appadurai discusses transnational movement and electronic media as a means of dispersing culture in a way that counteracts the specifically Eurocentric notion of modernity. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

I reference the Hal Foster volume *The Return of the Real* here in a double sense: to reference one strand or preoccupation in contemporary art with social reality (what art-world conservatives often refer to anxiously or defensively as “politics”), most insistently present in the return to documentary evidenced in Documenta11 and elsewhere; and also to reference, as Foster does, the eruptions onto the psychic worlds of individuals’ art practice of the Lacanian real.⁹⁹

Nash’s openly critical assertion points to the largely unchallenged stance that influential scholars have maintained regarding the increase of both documentary forms and socially-aware content within major international exhibitions. Most importantly, Nash identifies the underlying theoretical foundation, which is founded upon a conjoining of the ‘real’ (to be read: *documentary*) with Lacan’s notion of the real (to be read: *trauma*). That is, Lacan’s construct links the inability to symbolically represent the ‘real’, with the resulting anxiety; hence a ‘trauma’.

Foster in particular unpacked the validity of “political” or identity-based personal narrative art, as problematic for its embrace of a hierachal binary notion of power relations between victimizer and victim. Assigning this type of artistic expression the moniker of “trauma discourse,” he theoretically constructs it as a form of self-referential ethnography in which the artists can testify to their oppression on behalf of their own demographic, for an artistic audience. Their righteousness or moral high ground, in other words their right to be the subject of history, is assured by virtue of their historical trauma.¹⁰⁰ Foster, however, expresses skepticism that the proffering of identity or otherness as a strategy for art making tends toward the commodification of that difference as a spectacle for consumption. This belittles that historical experience of victimization, and creates the trauma narrator as a native

⁹⁹ Mark Nash, “Life is a Pale Imitation of the VCR” in *Fast Forward: Media Art*, ed. Peter Weibel and Stephan Urbaschek (Karlsruhe: Ingvild Goetz, 2003).

¹⁰⁰ Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 180.

reporter who panders to the market while violating his/her own culture. Ultimately, their critique is rendered impotent since it proffers that suffering narrative for capitalistic gain; hence, the speaking positions of these artists are de-authenticated.¹⁰¹

The emergence in the 1980s and 1990s of a subaltern contingency of voices that used their identities (race, sexual orientation, gender, etc.) to strategically interrupt mainstream discourse has altered the direction of the art world. However, their presence has not only diversified artistic production; rather it has also forced the art world to grapple with the shattering of all normative subject positions. The labeling of raced, sexed, gendered and otherwise activist subjectivities as “political” mistakenly suggests that there can be an artistic subject position that stands outside this paradigm, that is without agenda, is apolitical and identity-free. Of course this is no longer plausible in the postmodern condition with its fragmentation of unitary narratives and the acknowledgement subject positions as intrinsic to expression. Still, much of this “political” or “trauma discourse” art is considered an activist form that, while harboring a certain legitimacy as a specialty, maintains a peripheral position outside of mainstream discourse. With *Documenta 11*’s robust presentation of ‘projected’ images, engagement with documentary, and its theoretical engagement with postcolonial issues (i.e. “politics” and/or “social realities”), it is therefore no surprise that it should become a site of contention within the art world.

More recently, the democratic potential of a new media form was taken up during a 2003 roundtable discussion organized by Malcolm Turvey and George

¹⁰¹ For an in-depth examination of the ramifications of the ethnographer paradigm, see Derek Conrad Murray and Soraya Murray, “Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity,” in *Art Journal*, Volume 65, Number 1 (Spring 2005): 22-39. For an excerpt of the relevant section of this essay, please see Appendix II.

Baker.¹⁰² In this forum, Baker, and Hal Foster pointed to the relationship between what the latter termed “the peripheral and the projected.” In other words, this comment made reference those who operate outside of mass media, such as the many artists ‘peripheral’ to the mainstream whose ‘projected’ (slide/film/video/digital) works gather cultural resonance through their representation in major venues such as international biennales, and particularly *Documenta 11*. The linking of these ‘peripheral’ modes with ethnographic filmic strategies for artistic production signal the synergistic coming together of mass media, the underrepresented and artistic production:

[Chrissie] Iles: I think the same is true of Stan Douglas, Isaac Julien, and a whole generation of artists who came to prominence at the beginning of the ‘90s. The specifics of their work are intertwined with the moment when VHS video technology first became widely available, which provided easy access to Hollywood films for the first time.¹⁰³

Iles, whose intentions during this discussion seemed to diverge from Foster and Baker’s, laid bare the unspoken connections being made between technology, image production and the gathering strength of alternative voices. The early postmodern explosion of such video artists provided a means by which to project their voices globally, but also shattered the predominant notion of so-called ‘minority’ artists as operating in a narcissistic, a-temporal bubble. The respondents focused their discussion to the art world’s return to film upon the onset of video, as nostalgia for the lost Author. Comparing Krauss’ earlier discussion with the roundtable that occurred some twenty-five years later, it is clear that anti-technology

¹⁰² Malcolm Turvey, George Baker, et. al, “Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art” in *October*, no 104 (Spring 2003): 71-96.

¹⁰³ Turvey, “Round”, 86.

debates around video (and later, digitality) seek to undermine the legitimacy of artistic media used by many artists operating within an exclusionary sphere. This theoretically eliminates the responsibility of art historians to seriously consider this form of cultural production, because it simply is not art.

Counterbalancing this skeptical school of thought are other figures like John Hanhardt, Curator of Film and Media Arts at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; Barbara London, Video and Media Curator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA); or Christiane Paul, Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Their more investigative approaches vary, but both are open to technology beyond its association with spectacle. They understand that, “for the first time, an art medium can be documented fully as it unfolds from pioneering efforts to prospective maturation.”¹⁰⁴ While operating from within traditional museum structures, they nevertheless entreat their respective institutions to tackle what is quickly defining the artistic production of our time.

One of the most notable contributors to the broader acceptance of new media within the American museum is Steve Dietz, former Curator of New Media at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota (WAC). He founded its New Media Initiatives department in 1996, as well as its online art gallery (Gallery 9) and digital art study collection. Despite his progressive and well-received innovation at the WAC in the field of new media, Dietz was discharged and his new media initiatives discontinued, ostensibly to balance the 2004 fiscal year budget. To the chagrin of the new media community, the Walker sent a potent message that the new media curatorial budget—along with its attendant concerns—were expendable.

¹⁰⁴ Barbara London, “Digital Art Takes Shape at MoMA” in *Leonardo*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2001): 99.

The new media art community rallied in protest of Dietz's dismissal, and of the Walker Art Center's faltering commitment to electronic and digital art. Of the more potent criticism was an open letter sent to WAC director Kathy Halbreich, composed by new media scholar and curator Sarah Cook, and signed by more than seven hundred supporters. In it, Cook communicated many apprehensions felt by the new media community around what the loss of the WAC's new media galleries and programming would mean for the field at large.¹⁰⁵ Describing this decision as "nothing short of tragic," Cook characterized Dietz's efforts at the Walker as formative to the contemporary new media arts movement. To place the gravity of the Walker's decision in context, Cook called upon Christiane Paul's similarly urgent response:

This cut comes at a time when the rest of the world is gearing up for its new media efforts (and the US has been behind on that end in the first place). If US institutions do not at least maintain the new media initiatives they have built so far, they may have to spend millions in the near future to catch up with the rest of the world.¹⁰⁶

In Dietz's own estimation, with the termination of these programs at the Walker "it has to be asked whether this is another manifestation of an old-fashioned and inaccurate notion that the virtual is not real (really); it's sort of invisible, and so it does not quite matter as much."¹⁰⁷ While understated, his response suggests a degree

¹⁰⁵ Sarah Cook, "Open Letter to Kathy Halbreich, Director, Walker Art Center," www.mteww.com/walker_letter/index.shtml, posted June 26, 2003. Downloaded February 1, 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Christiane Paul, as quoted in Cook, "Open Letter," June 26, 2003.

¹⁰⁷ Steve Dietz, "Steve Dietz's response to the net art community's concerns regarding the future of new media at The Walker Art Center," www.mteww.com/walker_letter/index.shtml, posted June 26, 2003. Downloaded February 1, 2006.

of broad-based institutional disregard for the valence of new media, of which the Walker's economic decision is only one example.

Several critics of the *Documenta 11* complained of inequities in the representation of particular demographics. Much of the commentary was easily brushed aside as hypercritical bean-counting; however, as the exhibition passes into history one objection does cling. Even despite its equalitarian participation, there existed a noticeable lack of new media art, specifically digital art.¹⁰⁸ The absence of digital works is curious, given the broad scope of the exhibition and the established significance of the digital in shaping the global conditions that the exhibition addressed. While the digital divide limits the degree to which nations could equally participate, *Documenta 11* displayed little critical attention to the important works that do exist.¹⁰⁹

I have illustrated how influential art scholars have ideologically linked electronics and the digital with the “political” documentary-style presentations made by postmodern artists engaged in postcolonial critique, *not* art making. This effectively theorizes out the presence of both certain kinds of technologies and the other, through the collapsing of the so-called political “global” artist and those artistic forms associated with mass media. In this period of evolving attitudes toward the global nature of contemporary artistic production, the manipulation of the term “political” into a code word for the presence of alterity in the arts is suspect. At

¹⁰⁸ For a critique of *Documenta 11*'s lack of digital works, see María Fernández, “A Critical Perspective,” in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No. 18 (Spring/Summer 2003): 48-55.

¹⁰⁹ Notable examples that were presented included Feng Mengbo's *Q4U* (2001/2), a customized version of a commercial video game (*Quake III Arena*) in which all players were replaced by the figure of the artist with a video camera in one hand, and a gun in the other. Viewers were invited to play online and in the presentation space. Also included were Asymptote's *FluxSpace 2.0/Mscapes* (2002), David Small's *The Illuminated Manuscript* (2002), and tsunami.net's *Alpha 3.4* (2002).

the same time, theorists concerned with postcolonial critique need push beyond frameworks that can only conceive of the subaltern body as subject to technology.

These limiting theoretical paradigms can only find currency in a consensus that identifies minority artists as inherently acted upon by capitalism—and therefore fundamentally lacking in agency. Under the current model, the unproblematised linkage of alterity with capitalism within art historical discourse constitutes an act of disenfranchisement, despite its good intentions. In this construct, minority artists are viewed as pawns of a capitalistic and exploitative art market. *Documenta 11*'s more than six hundred hours of media-based offerings suggests that the relationship between the peripheral and the projected should be reconceived to include the possibility of these artists as agents with technology in hand, not victims.

Under the rubric of art history, key is the relationship between the art object as a conductor of aura, and the individual agency (or autonomous genius) of the artist. Aura is therefore about agency, but also about who is deemed fit to wield aura. Stripped of agency, the cultural production of the minority artist is little more than a fetish object. This exploration of the links between the apparently separate spheres of modern technologies and globalized practices in the arts begins to signal possibilities for where a contemporary avant-garde might be found, and how it might function.

IX. Conclusion

At the start of this inquiry, I asked how an historically European model of the avant-garde might be made more relevant to the present. The beginnings of an answer can be found in contextualizing the artist's role as agent, while expanding the Continental model to include the global presence of artist-agents who both innovate

and agitate in the truest sense of avant-garde traditions. I make no assertion, however, that subaltern artists or global art movements bear any unique claim on contemporary avant-garde practice. I merely argue that, while postcolonial theory should be integrated into electronic media studies and art discourse in general,¹¹⁰ the underlying question of global minority artists' agency under the duress of late capitalism bears much weight upon the canonical response to media arts. What place will these technologies—and the artists who use them—have in our American histories? Our unique social reality gives rise to its own brand of vanguardism, one unfettered by historical definition, but weighted with the responsibility of global awareness.

Within a multinational capitalist system, everything must be translatable into commodity value. For better or for worse, this is characteristic of the expanding industrialized world. The significance between that reality, and the development of the digital—with its visuality that can be translated to numerical code—is not coincidental. In his 1976 comments on video and the tension that surrounded its relationship to corporate television, David Antin wrote of the futility of shutting out the medium's origins:

the politics of the art world is, for good reasons, rather hostile to Pop, and that kind of admiring discussion [of technology] will have to wait; even *Cahiers du Cinéma* has abandoned Hitchcock and Nicholas Ray for Dziga Vertov and the European avant-garde on socio-political, aesthetic grounds. But it's unwise to despise an enemy, especially a more powerful, older enemy, who happens also to be your frightful parent.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ For an intervention into the importance of postcolonial theory for electronic media studies, see María Fernández, "Postcolonial Media Theory" in *Art Journal* (Fall 1999): 59-73.

¹¹¹ David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium" in Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot, eds., *Video Art: An Anthology* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 174-5.

Antin reaffirms video's uneasy relationship to television as corporately owned, and federally regulated in a system in which "transmission dominates reception."¹¹² However, his statement also presents the possibility of acknowledging the origin of a particular technology, and even its tendencies, while permitting that it can have an expression of its own once appropriated by the artist. Considering the difficulty that the academy has experienced in delimiting video's characteristics, one must ask what the investment is in formalizing it into a discussion of materiality. Can unwieldy electronic and digital media be penned in by formalist discourse and objective criteria? In this effort to domesticate these technologies and to understand what they mean for artistic production, are we as art historians merely trying to contain them?

This chapter has attempted to shed light on the ideological discord between art and technology that circulated around the historical avant-garde, and how it persists in shaping the reception of media arts in today's art world—even despite the purported obsolescence of the avant-garde itself. I do not argue that contemporary vanguard practice is necessarily to be found in the media arts alone. Moreover, I do not insist upon arbitrarily assigning a modernist descriptor ("avant-garde") to postmodern circumstances. However, in a late capitalist society immersed in media culture and global telecommunications technologies, one must allow for the conceptual possibility that some version of this concept *can* exist through these media as well. In this sense, this chapter has pursued an end to the stalemate between art history and technology, through an understanding that the broad array of new media practices shares its counter-culture legacy, and are in conversation with that legacy even today. The collapse of aesthetics and commodity in the postmodern condition as described by Jameson does not describe the historical closure of avant-gardism, rather a new iteration of that cultural impulse, whose manifestations are in

¹¹² Antin, "Video," 175.

keeping with its times. This intellectual heritage, albeit troubled, belongs to new media arts; likewise, technological arts bear an undeniable art historical component that warrants formal study within the canon.