

CONCLUSION:
TOWARD AN ART HISTORY OF NEW MEDIA

There is a great deal at stake in the contest over the meanings of culture. Institutionally the museum with its interface with corporate capital and national tourism is materially bound to a problematic pedagogy that the uncritical continuation of the art historical canon and its methods of study perpetuate. There have to be other modes of analysis that both reframe Art History's precious authored objects as texts and theoretical practices. There have to be other pedagogies that train new generations of students in modes of reading and analysis that offer them a breadth of understanding of both historical and contemporary regimes of representation so that they become critically self-reflexive players in their own cultural moment.

-Griselda Pollock¹

The reticence of art history as a discipline to acknowledge the technological as an inextricable part of art making points to a predetermination that certain forms, through their connection to commercialism, are inadequate for aesthetic expression. However, this determination is based on an outmoded schism between the regulations of “purity” around artistic expression and a resistance to mass culture, set forth by Greenberg and others as part of avant-garde tenets. It also betrays a limited notion of which art forms—and artists—may be the bearers of aura. As art historians we must understand that, as global phenomena, electronic technologies are already inextricably part of our social structures and our cultural production. Donna Haraway has compellingly argued that we are already posthuman, cyborg, inundated with advanced technology and ideologically, even *bodily* influenced by it. When addressing works made under the influence of cybernated existence, whether they

¹ Griselda Pollock, “Visual Culture and Its Discontents: Joining in the Debate” in “Responses to Mieke Bal’s ‘Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture’ (2003)” in *Journal of Visual Culture*, Volume 2, Number 2 (2003): 253-260. Excerpt from page 259.

are technological art forms or not, art historians can access a tremendous resource for interpretation in new media studies.

The idea that the form of the artwork casts an overwhelming shadow over what that artwork can mean is a technologically-determinist stance that underestimates the artist's voice, and also fails to understand those technologies as integrated within society. It also presumes passivity on the part of the viewer by suggesting that s/he is overly susceptible to its influence. Technological media do not spring fully-formed from the laboratories of engineers and scientists, affecting art and culture as foreign influences. Rather, they operate from within the social, of which art-making is a part.

By the same token, while digital and electronic art should be recognized in terms of its formal departures from classic artistic media, artists still engage with art's histories—and are in fact immersed in these histories—as a part of their social milieu. This is not to say that the technological developments of electronics and the digital are negligible details, nor superficial digressions from traditional media of painting, sculpture, and architecture. The formal aspects of these new media demand their own specific attention; at the same time, they are still forms of cultural production, and as such can be considered within the context of the expressions that have preceded them. This is why canonical art history has much of value to offer new media studies, despite its internal hesitancy around technology.

The question remains as to whether there is such a thing as a “digital aesthetic,” in the sense of the digital possessing unique, discernable qualities that isolate it from other media. Limiting the digital to art whose final form must be composed of illuminated pixels, binary code, digital sound, or electronic hardware are useful for structuring a specialization, but ultimately under-represent the

profound impact of art and technology. The digital has simply become too ubiquitous in western culture to disentangle it entirely and identify it discretely.

However, I contend that cybernated aesthetics do exist. These aesthetics are in conversation with electronics and the digital, but not bounded by them. Cybernated aesthetics reflect the impact of cybernated life, though they may not take digital or electronic form. This perceptual shift opens the conceptual possibility for understanding aesthetic engagement with data as an embodied rather than disembodied experience. Cybernated aesthetics build interfaces between the canonical resources of art discourses, the notion of viewer as agent with multiplex subjectivity, and cybernated life as a significant social reality of the past forty years.

The presence of electronics and the digital in artistic practice continues to stretch the current limits of the American art historical canon. In an era marked by electronic global communications and computer-based information technologies, the art that arises from such a milieu is certainly influenced by that social reality. Rather than dismissing art interpenetrated by the technological as unworthy of serious scholarly attention, art history can instead function as an invaluable intellectual reservoir for the study of new media art forms, whose theorizations often lack focused aesthetic engagement. At the same time the study of new media, which has proceeded along a divergent path, is germane to an art history whose theorizations and pedagogies have yet to fully embrace the presence of modern and advanced technologies.

As the foregoing research has shown, the technological developments of the modern period are accompanied by a series of questions and challenges to the motives for those innovations. This exploration, therefore, has sought to clarify a deeply embedded interconnection between a history of new media art, the ideological impact of modernity, and a social reality of globalization. Initially, I

unpacked these elements relative to the status of new media art, primarily within American canonical discourses. This unveiled a disciplinary hesitancy around advanced technological forms as rooted in modernist avant-garde traditions, particularly their response to industrialized society and mechanical reproduction. This research investigated conditions of postmodernity, considering the fragmentation of subjectivity, globalization, and multinational capitalism from a cultural standpoint. The knotty relations between these elements have greatly impacted the arts, culminating in form/content debates, in challenges to unitary notions of modernity, and in anxieties around the collapsing border between aesthetic and commercial production. This necessitated analysis of the art historical roots of such tensions, located in the historical avant-garde.

The tremendously influential notion of an ‘avant-garde’ focused this theoretical investigation of art and technology, since it is largely their response to mass culture and modern technology that has shaped canonical attitudes toward new media. The valence of an artistic avant-garde under the duress of high capitalism, globalization, and advanced technology remains disputed. An historically-delimited concept, the avant-garde remains vital; still, its application to contemporary artists is eminently contestable.

As an extension of the foregrounding of subjectivity that accompanies postmodernity, the body mediates aesthetic experience—even that of the ‘immaterial’ digital. Therefore, I considered what it means to engage aesthetically with data, as an embodied experience, not a disembodied one. In a discussion of technological arts and the body, it is important to foreground the aesthetic interface that is involved in human-machine interaction. Embodiment, consequently, remained central throughout this discussion, as there must be a body to apprehend or sense aesthetic experience. Even digitality, with its promise of disembodiment, is

subject to this mediation. Information and matter are therefore not oppositional, but operate in an exchange that cannot be sensed without a body, or without subjectivity. An aesthetics tied to the influence of information technologies does not, therefore, mean that these aesthetics are without a material basis, which is necessary in order for them to be apprehended.

The influences of telecommunications and computational technologies are social forces in the development of artistic production; hence information exchange shapes aesthetic objects fashioned under their influence, regardless of whether their final manifestations are digital. The term “cyberneted aesthetics” also invokes cybernetics as interaction and feedback between human and machine that integrates both into a system of mutual exchange. From this model, I proposed that the art-audience relationship, formerly understood as ‘viewer’ and ‘viewed,’ be reorganized around interaction and exchange. This model conceives of the body as an active agent within aesthetic engagement, while acknowledging that computational technologies exert a generalized pressure on works completed under their influence.

Critics of this model might argue that if the digital interpenetrates everything today, then perhaps it can be factored out, as one might cancel out common elements on either side of a mathematical equation. However, the impact of the informational constitutes a significant force in contemporary society, one that informs an understanding of work produced in its environment. True, art history has no duty to represent particular interests in art and technology, nor obligation to make a place for them. However, the discipline is weakened when influenced by ideological interests that would pre-determine what can or cannot fall under art history’s purview. Art history cannot close itself to the influence of postmodernism, or the impact of technology as two key factors to shape artistic production since the 1960s.

If, as Donna Haraway stated, we are already hybridized with technology or ‘cyborg,’ then art history is also cyborg: its object of study (art) has differentiated under the influence of technology into all sorts of variations. Some of these new strains of art making are viable forms, others are not. American art historical discourses, however, often still construct these outcroppings as oppositional to the proper study of art, although they have issued from within culture. Of course, at the center of this discussion are students, whose development of critical analysis should be expanded to reflect the reality of globalization and informational culture that surrounds them. The study of art provides a powerful foundation for understanding culture and fostering its learners to become, as the epigraph above elucidates, “critically self-reflexive players in their own cultural moment.” The increasing fluidity between the commercial and the aesthetic, as well as the pervasive influence of electronic and digital technologies pressurize key discussions within the discipline. But the self-criticality within art history that results from tackling these challenging developments strengthen the discipline and add rigor to its conceptual foundations.

Highlighting the importance of advanced technology in shaping artistic practice since the 1960s is not concomitant with a technologically deterministic stance that would wholly place the impetus for artistic developments squarely upon the technological. However, electronics and the digital continue to significantly impact pre-existing forms like photography, sound art, cinema, sculpture, and even painting. In addition, new media forms like net art, computer art, machinima, electronic games, and many others are spawning new expressions that have been publicly presented since their inception. These forms warrant historicization as aesthetic expressions that speak to the concerns of their time, using the tools that emerge from their social milieu. Likewise, the artists that employ these media

should not be excluded from mainstream discourse on the basis of their chosen tools of expression.

By developing a sophisticated language with which to discuss works that take both digital and electronic form, or that reshape pre-existent media through the influence of new technologies, art historians contribute to the illumination of what these innovations mean in culture today. Because these works are often in conversation with artistic expression of the past, art historians have a unique perspective to offer in regard to analysis of technological art, which often addresses more universal themes and concerns. In addition, the highly contingent and experience-based nature of these works makes it imperative that such presentations are recorded, historicized, and well-documented for posterity. Of course, the ‘immaterial’ nature of code-based art and the innovative visual logic made possible by the digital challenge art history as an object-based discipline. However, earlier contestations to art history as rigidly adhering to formalist concerns have already given way to social histories of art that have since gained increasing legitimacy within the canon.

Acknowledging the presence of the commercial in the aesthetic is not a form of collusion with multinational capitalistic aims. That the artistic avant-garde opposed bourgeois values, capitalist industry, and sought to separate itself from the masses is a modernist model of vanguardism that is avowedly situated in an art historical past. It is also regulated by its proximity to a Eurocentric tradition whose models are ultimately insufficient to address the flowering of multiple narratives of modernity, as well as the fragmentation of unitary subjectivity that accompanied postmodernism.

New media anxiety is not only an anxiety regarding how technology will affect longstanding art-historical conventions of beauty, originality, aura, and

content. This anxiety also speaks of the body reasserting itself as a filter of experience, rather than melting away as an outmoded concept of identity. I cannot underscore enough the importance of conceptualizing and holding fast to an embodied form of technology. It brings art and technology into relations of commonality, rather than difference. More importantly, it conceives of media arts ranging from video to electronics and the digital and beyond into the fold as capable of conveying affect, and capable of more than mere technological gimmickry.

It is of crucial importance that American art historical discourse extricate itself from a conflicted relationship with its own times. Though existing works of electronic and digital art might not seem readily assimilable into art's scholarly discourses, we as art historians should remain open to the possibility that they can belong there. Indeed, this openness does not herald the relaxing of disciplinary standards, but revitalizes the role that art history can play in shaping the language of aesthetics in the twenty-first century.