NEW MEDIA, ART-SCIENCE AND CONTEMPORARY ART:
TOWARDS A HYBRID DISCOURSE?

# New Media in the Mainstream

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## Abstract

Over the past decade, contemporary art has increasingly been shaped by concepts of participation, collaboration, social connectivity, performativity, and "relational" aspects. One could argue that art responded to contemporary culture, which is shaped by digital and other new technologies and the changes they have brought about. While art institutions and organizations now commonly use digital technologies in their infrastructure—"connecting" and distributing through their websites, Facebook pages, YouTube channels and Twitter tours—they still place emphasis on exhibiting more traditional art forms that reference technological culture rather than art that uses these technologies as a medium. The article discusses the historical roots of the complex relationship between new media and the mainstream art world, as well as museum exhibitions—media and traditional—that responded to technological culture.

## Keywords

new media, relational aesthetics, exhibition, curating, mainstream, YouTube, Facebook

*Los nuevos medios en el* mainstream

### *Resumen*

*Desde la década pasada, el arte contemporáneo se ha visto cada vez más moldeado por los conceptos de participación, colaboración, conectividad social, performatividad y por los aspectos «relacionales». Se podría afirmar que el arte ha respondido a la cultura contemporánea, moldeada a su vez por tecnologías digitales y de otra clase, así como por los cambios que conllevan. Aunque actualmente las instituciones y organizaciones artísticas utilizan con asiduidad las tecnologías digitales en su infraestructura –de manera que se «conectan» y promocionan mediante sus páginas web, de Facebook, los canales de YouTube y las cuentas*

*de Twitter–, aún otorgan importancia a exponer formas artísticas más tradicionales que remiten a la cultura tecnológica antes que a un arte que utiliza esas tecnologías como soporte. Este artículo comenta las raíces históricas de la relación compleja entre los nuevos medios y el mundo del arte mayoritario, así como exposiciones en museos –multimedia y tradicionales– que se articularon en relación a la cultura tecnológica.*

***Palabras clave***
*nuevos medios, estética relacional, exposición, comisariado,* mainstream*, YouTube, Facebook*

## Introduction

For decades, the relationship between so-called new media art and the mainstream art world has been notoriously uneasy, and a lot of groundwork remains to be done when it comes to an in-depth analysis of the art-historical complexities of this relationship. Key factors in this endeavor are investigations of the exhibition histories and art-historical developments relating to technological and participatory art forms; and of the challenges that new media art poses to institutions and the art market.

In order to discuss new media art one first needs to address the definition of *new media*. After approximately fifteen years of discussion, everyone seems to agree that the term itself is unfortunate since it is not helpful in describing characteristics or aesthetics of the digital medium. On the upside, the term *new media art* safely accommodates new developments in the art form and supports one of the art's greatest assets, the successful evasion of definitions. The term *new media* has been used throughout the twentieth century for media that were emerging at any given time. Predominantly referred to as computer art, then multimedia art and cyberarts, art forms using digital technologies became *new media* at the end of the twentieth century, co-opting the term that, at the time, was used mostly for film / video, sound art, and various hybrid forms.

New media art is now generally understood as computable art that is created, stored, and distributed via digital technologies and uses these technologies' features as a medium. New media art is process-oriented, time-based, dynamic, and real-time; participatory, collaborative, and performative; modular, variable, generative, and customizable.

## Exhibitions and Historical Developments

Over the past decade, contemporary art has increasingly been shaped by concepts of participation, collaboration, social connectivity, performativity, and 'relational' aspects. Examples for these participatory works would be Rirkrit Tiravanija's seminal soup kitchens (1992 - ), celebrated by Nicolas Bourriaud (2002), which provide the equipment and ingredients to prepare meals in a gallery environment, striving to break down boundaries between art and social interaction; or Tino Sehgal's *This Progress,* one of two performance pieces shown in 2010, which took visitors on a conversational journey with guides of ascending age. Both Tiravanija's and Sehgal's works construct situations that expand the traditional context of museum and gallery environments, using social subtleties to emphasize lived experience rather than material objects.

One could argue that the participatory, 'socially networked' art projects of the past fifteen years or so that have received considerable attention by art institutions all respond to contemporary culture, which is shaped by networked digital technologies and 'social media' (from the WWW to locative media, Facebook and YouTube), and the changes they have brought about. However, art that uses these technologies as a medium remains conspicuously absent from major exhibitions in the mainstream art world. While art institutions and organizations now commonly use digital technologies in their infrastructure— "connecting" and distributing through their websites, Facebook pages, YouTube channels, and Twitter feeds—they still place emphasis on exhibiting more traditional art forms that reference technological culture or adopt its strategies in a non-technological way.

I like to refer to this phenomenon as the "Relational Aesthetics Syndrome". Nicolas Bourriaud first used the term *relational aesthetics* in 1996 (in the catalogue for his exhibition Traffic at CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux). In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, first published in French in 1998, he defines this approach as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 142). Obviously this set of artistic practices also is key to most of new media art in the age of the WWW. Yet the prominent practitioners of new media art remain absent from the list of artists frequently cited by Bourriaud—among them Rirkrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, Carsten Höller, Liam Gillick *et al.*—despite the fact that he uses the new media terminology such as user-friendliness, interactivity and DIY (Bishop, 2004). One could argue that the term *relational aesthetics* itself—in its reference to the relational database, which was formalized in the 1960s and has become a defining cultural form—is deeply rooted in digital technologies. Bourriaud strives to find new approaches to open-ended, participatory art that avoid

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"to take shelter behind Sixties art history" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 7). According to Bourriaud, "in the 1960s, the emphasis was on relationships internal to the world of art within a modernist culture that privileged 'the new' and called for linguistic subversion; it is now placed on external relationships in the context of an eclectic culture where the work of art resists the mincer of the 'Society of the Spectacle'" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 31).

In 2002, Bourriaud curated an exhibition at the San Francisco Art Institute titled Touch: Relational Art from the 1990s to Now, which he described as "an exploration of the interactive works of a new generation of artists" (Sretcher, 2002). Exhibited artists included: Angela Bulloch, Liam Gillick, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Jens Haaning, Philippe Parreno, Gillian Wearing and Andrea Zittel.

The table of contents of Claire Bishop's book *Participation* itself is a testament to the RA syndrome: while it includes seminal texts from the 50s/60s/70s that one finds in publications on the history of new media art, it does not feature a single text by the contemporary prominent theorists of new media art. Rudolf Frieling's exhibition The Art of Participation at SFMoMA was a much-needed response to this neglect of new media's role in the art history of participation.

From an art-historical perspective, it seems difficult or dubious not to acknowledge that the participatory art of the 1960s and 1970s and the 1990s and 2000s were responses to cultural and technological developments—computer technologies, cybernetics, systems theory and the original Internet/Arpanet from the mid-40s onwards; the WWW, ubiquitous computing, databasing/datamining, social media in the 1990s and 2000s. While different in their scope and strategies, the new media arts of the 1960s and 1970s and today faced similar resistances and challenges that led to their separation from the mainstream art world, respectively.

The years from 1945 onwards were marked by major technological and theoretical developments: digital computing and radar; Cybernetics, formalized 1948 by Norbert Wiener; Information Theory and General Systems Theory; as well as the creation of ARPANET in 1969. The 1950s and 1960s saw a surge of participatory and technological art, created by artists such as Ben Laposky, John Whitney Sr. and Max Mathews at Bell Labs; John Cage, Allan Kaprow and the Fluxus group; or groups such as Independent Group (IG), Le Mouvement, New Tendencies, ZERO, Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV). The fact that the relationship between art and computer technology at the time was mostly conceptual was largely due to the inaccessibility of technology (some artists were able to get access to or use discarded military computers).

Seminal exhibitions mounted from the 1950s to 1970 included:

- This is Tomorrow, Whitechapel Art Gallery (1956)
- Stuttgart University Art Gallery (1965)
- Howard Wise Art Gallery in New York (1966)
- Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T), 9 evenings (1966)
- The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age, MOMA, New York (1968)
- Some More Beginnings (E.A.T.), Brooklyn Museum (1968)
- Cybernetic Serendipity, ICA, London (1968)
- Event One (Computer Arts Society), London (1969)
- Art by Telephone, Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (1969)
- Software: Information Technology (curated by Jack Burnham), Jewish Museum, New York (1970)
- Information (curated by Kynaston McShine), MOMA, New York (1970)

Art historian Edward Shanken has proposed that there were significant parallels between conceptual art and art-and-technology in the Software exhibition (Shanken, 2001). New Media theorist and researcher Charlie Gere argued that the idealism and techno-futurism of early computer arts at some point were replaced with the irony and critique of conceptual art. According to Gere, conceptual art and systems art, in their early stages were often interchangeable and indistinguishable and the Information exhibition —which showed conceptual art, arte povera, earthworks, systems and process art— marked a break between the two (Gere, 2008).

Several theorists have pointed out that, if there was a "failure" of new media arts, it could be ascribed to the quality of much of the work; the failure of the exhibitions to work as intended; the artists' refusal to collaborate with industry to realize projects and exhibitions; a suspicion of systems art, cybernetics, and computers because of their roots in the military-industrial-academic complex and their use in the Vietnam War; difficulties in collecting, conserving, and commodifying such work (Shanken, 1998; Taylor, 2006; Collins Goodyear, 2008; Gere, 2008).

These factors certainly all played a role in the lack of acceptance of new media art, and need to be (re)considered against the background of contemporary media art. After almost 50 years of artistic practice, lack of quality can hardly be an issue (and art-history has told us that "master pieces" are also created in the early stages of a medium), although it (surprisingly) is still occasionally used as an argument, as in Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA, London) director Ekow Eshun's explanatory comment for the closure of ICA's Live and Media Arts Department in 2008: "New media based arts practice continues to have its place within the arts sector. However it's my consideration that, in the main, the art form lacks the depth and cultural urgency to justify the ICA's continued and significant investment in a Live & Media Arts department" (Horwitz, 2008). Continuous technological support for projects and exhibitions still remains an issue in mainstream institutions, and there is continuing resistance to accepting the fact that technology can always fail. While artists' collaboration with industry to realize projects and exhibitions has its problematic aspects (the artists as content providers showcasing product), artists are now

generally more open to it and art/industry collaborations are facilitated by organizations and funding bodies. In the public at large, suspicion of the military-industrial complex does not seem to taint the acceptance of digital technologies any more. The difficulties in collecting, conserving, and commodifying new media works, however, remain the same.

From the 1970s onwards, traditional art institutions rarely mounted exhibitions devoted to new media art (among the exceptions were Les Immatériaux at the Beaubourg in 1985; Mediascape, Guggenheim, New York, 1996; 010101, MOMA SF, 2001; Bitstreams and Data Dynamics, Whitney Museum, 2001) while numerous festivals, such as Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria, and institutions such as ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, began to chronicle, support, and collect digital works.

Apart from historical baggage, the reasons for the continuing disconnect between new media art and the mainstream art world lie in the challenges that the medium poses when it comes to 1) the understanding of its aesthetics, 2) its immateriality (a key element of the medium's aesthetics), 3) its preservation, and 4) its reception by audiences. All of these factors require in-depth consideration to explain the ongoing tensions between new media art and the art world.

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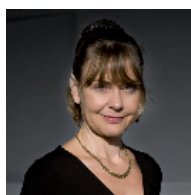
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Christiane Paul is MA and PhD at Düsseldorf University, Germany, and has written extensively on new media arts and lectured internationally on art and technology. An expanded edition of her book *Digital Art* (Thames & Hudson, UK, 2003) as well as her edited anthology *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* (UC Press) were published in 2008. As Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art, she curated several exhibitions—including Profiling (2007), Data Dynamics (2001) and the net art selection for the 2002 Whitney Biennial—as well as *artport*, the Whitney Museum's website devoted to internet art. Other recent curatorial work includes Feedforward - The Angel of History (co-curated with Steve Dietz; Laboral Center for Art and Industrial Creation, Gijon, Spain, Oct. 2009); INDAF Digital Art Festival (Incheon, Korea, Aug. 2009); and Scalable Relations (Beall Center for Art and Technology, Irvine, CA; as well as galleries at UCSD, UCLA and UCSB, 2008-09). Christiane Paul has previously taught in the MFA computer arts department at the School of Visual Arts in New York (1999-2008); the Digital+Media Department of the Rhode Island School of Design (2005-08); the San Francisco Art Institute and the Center of New Media at the University of California at Berkeley (2008).

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