

# What's So New About New Media Art?

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No matter how culturally sophisticated we become, there are ways in which our behavior does not seem to change. For example, we tend to view our own time and experience as something special and outside of the workings of history. This is the case when we employ words like "new" or "modern" or even "contemporary" in terminology that privileges our own point of reference, our own point in time. After all, neither "modern art" nor "contemporary art" mean what they did twenty years ago.

This has always been the case. In the history of architecture, for example, the term "Gothic" once implied "modern" (the "French style"), while the Renaissance was considered modern only by virtue of being old: "neoclassical" or "antique." It is the same with the slippery term "new media," which has referred to some rather different phenomena over the past several decades. It seems that the term "new" is an index of our own temporal vanities. But the "media" in "new media" is a different matter. In traditional art-historical discourse, a medium is the material substance of an artwork (paint, clay, torn newspapers, etc.). On the other hand, outside of art, in the broader culture, "media" or "the media" refers to the means to disseminate information, as in Hans Enzensberger's 1970 "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," in which he identified mass media with the "consciousness industry" and discussed its one-way manipulation by dominant power groups, and how the "new media" (for Enzensberger, electronic media) offered an opportunity for two-way, dialogic exchange. Since Enzensberger, media theory and criticism have generated vast commentary addressing the exact nature of the media, what the first medium was or might have been, and which media qualify as "new." I am suggesting that understanding "new media" is a discipline-specific enterprise and, since I am an art historian, I can best examine the term from that perspective.

## Oppositional Media

In fact, the issue of medium has been at the very heart of 20th- and 21st-century art. The rift between traditional art media (oil paint, fresco, bronze sculpture, etc., and anything else one might use to make art) drove the development of the avant-garde in the 20th century. In the 19th century, the avant-garde originated

in a break with the hegemony of the academy, but only in terms of art's subjects, style, and mode of exhibition. The more revolutionary development, photography, was not even a concern of the academy. But by the 20th-century it was. Marcel Duchamp employed both photography and the readymade to drive the question of medium like a wedge that split the practice of art to this day: one wing produces art that can be marketed as such, the other produces work that resists collectability and challenges the old order. In the 20th century, artistic "revolutions" were primarily about media, and how new media are naturalized to become old (or just "art") media.

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In the 1950s, "junk art," art made essentially from trash or detritus, appeared both in Europe and in America, where it had its infancy in free collective spaces like the Judson Church in Washington Square, and appeared alongside experimental dance, theater, and event art -- all "alternative media." These were intersecting forms without boundaries, a fact that, combined with the use of refuse found in alleyways, amounted to perfect qualities with which to offend "high art." Such work appeared to resist valuation: as gallerist Ivan Karp said, "No one wanted junk in their house." However, by 1960, with two exhibitions entitled *New Forms New Media*, New York gallerist Martha Jackson gambled that junk would sell if marketed properly, and packaged the rogue (so-called) "new media" as fine art. And this is the point: in art, terminology is codified when categories are required -- the moment of industrialization.

The intersecting function of "media" between art and commerce was a central issue in the developments of 1960s art. Andy Warhol lifted bits and pieces of mass media and reassigned them as art works. At the same time, Dick Higgins -- Fluxus artist and founder of the Something Else Press -- coined the term "intermedia" to describe non-traditional works that fused multiple media and occupied ambiguous terrain between art, theater or music; such works were media aggregates,

incorporating various forms including traditional ones. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, conceptual art, too, galvanized itself largely around this issue of media, and the market orientation of any materialist art production. In the interest of dematerialization, Lawrence Weiner pointed out that the real medium of art is language ("Without language there is no art") and Jack Burnham wrote, "conceptual art's ideal medium is telepathy."

Michael Rush's survey book *New Media in Late 20th-century Art*, reflects the recurrence, at least since the 1970s, of "new media" as an umbrella term encompassing alternative practices that have dematerialized media in favor of time-based forms, including performance, some aspects of conceptual and process art, film, video, and computer art, as well as digital and networked forms (surprisingly, Rush leaves out mail art and other early networking practices). Rush's interpretation of "new media" is still shared by many art historians and writers.

## Video

So the term new media was already in use inside the art world when, in the 1970s, video art -- again, initially an oppositional practice -- was subsumed under this heading. American video art was inspired by ideas surrounding minimal and conceptual art and by a renewed interest in performance (Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci), plus the import of a new (essentially utopianist) communications discourse centered in the writings of Marshall McLuhan and Gene Youngblood. When the SONY portapak appeared in 1965, creative production with that tool attracted both trained artists and young professionals in fields as diverse as communications theory, English literature, dance, and physics. Views about video art were heterogeneous, but art critics emphasized its physical and perceptual qualities and radical posture -- its art world alienation. It was suggested that video might be a medium, but it was not an art medium, and some queried what video art's medium actually was: Bill Viola identified it as the electronic signal, Rosalind Krauss wondered if the medium of video was actually psychological processes like narcissism (because of the feedback potential of the technology), and David Antin said it was television, video's "frightful parent." Indeed, the first exhibition of video art in New York, at the small, technology-oriented Howard Wise Gallery in 1969, was called "TV as a Creative Medium." On the other hand, the Raindance video collective published a periodical, *Radical Software*, that labored to separate creative video from commercial media. Groups like TVTV even hoped to

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use video to revolutionize television and democratize art. The term most often used in the 1970s, besides video art, was "alternative media," a term that underscores video's oppositional character. In fact, video art only rarely appeared either in broadcast or in art museums until the late 1970s, with advances in digitization and projection techniques. By the end of the 1970s, the NEA began funding a new category, "media art," with the intention of supporting regional media arts centers nationwide. With the enhancement of color, light effects, and other formal qualities, video was welcomed by curators, stripped of its oppositional character, and, using Martha Rosler's term, "museumized." Now, popular exhibitions like the Bill Viola survey or Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* (which brings video together with performance and even conventional sculpture), demonstrate that video, once seen as radical or "new," has become academic. By the 1990s, most major museums boasted "new media" or "media art" departments that dealt with video, and anticipated the future acquisition of whatever oppositional materials and practices might come down the pike. Digital and computational media are well on the way.

## Forever New

New media has been hailed by art-and-technology enthusiasts as a cultural practice much larger than art, or any other existing discipline. Lev Manovich, in his influential book *The Language of New Media* (MIT 2001), helps isolate and particularize the qualities of these new, new media. Bypassing historical usages, he says that "New Media" is a term defined by popular usage. In journals and television, new media means

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mentation and art, where once oppositional and marginal practices lapse into organized, dominant ones. When better terms are devised by curators and specialists, the term new media may indeed be dropped; it might also reappear in reference to other unorganized, experimental practices just appearing on the art world's radar screen.

"the use of the computer for distribution and exhibition rather than production." He argues that new media is essentially unlike conventional media, either of the art or mass communication varieties. It is a new kind of thing, but we can define it: new media are not just digital; they are marked by the characteristics of numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding; and they are complex, containing both "computer" and "cultural" layers.

In fact, it is just in the past five years that this level of analysis and clarity is required for practices that have a rapidly broadening base of participation. In the same period, several dictionaries of new media have also appeared, one by James Monaco (*The Dictionary of New Media*, Harbor Electronic Publishing, 1999), and the Leonardo online project *The New Media Directory* (2001). Several new media journals have appeared, including *New Media and Society* (founded 1999, published by Sage).

Will the term "new media" stay in place, long after any aspect of it is new? Like the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Image painting? But the latter term was a pure curatorial invention in 1979, and ossified at its origin. "New media" is nothing like that. Some digital theorists, like Peter Lunenfeld, recognize the difficulties inherent in the term "new media": he proposes that the rubric is a "place holder" that will serve until more accurate terms are developed for specific forms. He is right, it is a place holder, but not because we lack better terms. Lunenfeld is not admitting the accuracy of "new media" to indicate a certain location between experi-

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And new terms for "new media" are already on the horizon. Multimedia is one that has been used frequently used, though it, too, has a complex etymology. The Berkeley Art Museum and the Pacific Film Archive's project "Archiving the Avant-Garde," part of the Variable Media Network, concerns itself with "variable media," encompassing "digital and Internet art, performance, installation, conceptual [art] . . . that represent the history of alternative artistic practice." "Variable media" historicizes the broad range of work that initially resisted objectification. The project seeks to collect, preserve, and categorize this work, rendering formerly "dematerialized" work as objects. Julian Stallabrass points out that today, "the materiality of the art object persists, even for video and media art [he defines the latter as "anything from online art to computer controlled sound environments"], which has generally been accepted as art only by paying the price of becoming partly material." But then again, that is exactly what the medium in art has always been: materialist.

Perhaps terms like new media or media art are diabolical. Or perhaps not. Commenting on video in 1996, Jacques Derrida said something with which I would like to close: "One never sees a new art, one thinks one sees it, but a 'new art,' as people say a little loosely, may be recognized by the fact that it is not recognized."