Domenico Quaranta

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In 2006 he edited (with M. Bittanti) the book "GameScenes. Art in the Age of Videogames"; in 2010, he published the book "Media, New Media, Postmedia".
As a curator, he organized various shows, including "Holy Fire. Art of the Digital Age" (Bruxelles 2008, with Y. Bernard), "Playlist" (Gijon 2009 and Bruxelles 2010) and "Collect the WWWorld. The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age" (Brescia 2011; Basel and New York, 2012).
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«If all artists now, regardless of their preferred media, also routinely use digital computers to create, modify and produce works, do we need to have a special field of new media art? As digital and network media are rapidly became an omni-presence in our society, and as most artists came to routinely use it, new media field is facing a danger of becoming a ghetto whose participants would be united by their fetishism of latest computer technology, rather than by any deeper conceptual, ideological or aesthetic issues – a kind of local club for photo enthusiasts».
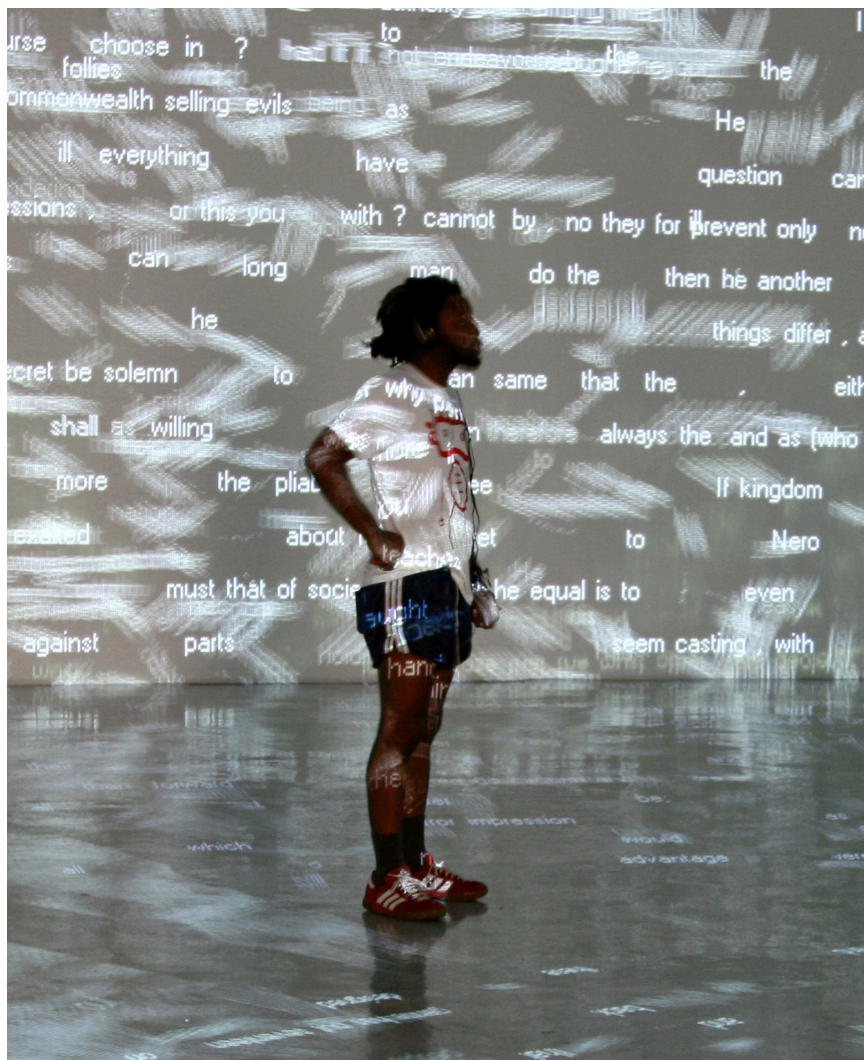
_ LEV MANOVICH

New Media as Grand Project has already been done, and arguing the transformative potential of technology should be superfluous in a world of smartphones.

_ MARIUS WATZ

New
Media
Art

Charles Sandison, *Utopia*, 2006. Installation. Copyright Charles Sandison, courtesy the artist.

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«Add the word 'art' and you instantly create a problem».
Geert Lovink [1]

16 October 2003. As part of the "Unilever Series", the Tate Modern in London presented *The Weather Project*, the latest spectacular work by the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson. In the immense Turbine Hall, converted from a former power station, Eliasson staged a spectacular environmental simulation. From the back wall, sun bathed the venue in yellow light, slowly clearing the fog that filled it. When the fog disappeared viewers realised that the space, already huge, was dizzyingly doubled by a mirror covering the entire ceiling. The mirror also created the impression of the sun, actually a semicircle of single frequency light bulbs. Both the light cycle and the fog production were controlled by a complex technological system hidden from view.

From 16 October 2003 to 21 March 2004, this installation was visited by more than two million people, making Eliasson one of the world's best known living artists. Many people went more than once, lying on the floor of the Turbine Hall to savour this exceptional simulation of the solar cycle.

Olafur Eliasson loves working in close contact with specialists from a wide range of disciplines: architects, scientists, designers, meteorologists and computer scientists. His studio is a sort of ever-changing laboratory, and many of his projects use computers to control installations that can be viewed as complex perceptive mechanisms. Eliasson works with light and the mechanisms of perception, digging into the history of technology in search of instruments – from panoramas to kaleidoscopes – and phenomena – like light refraction – to create situations that are enveloping, magical, disorientating.

2006. Three years after the success of *The Weather Project*, the American critics Mark Tribe and Reena Jana wrote a book for the publisher Taschen entitled *New Media Art*. «[...] we use the term

New Media art to describe projects that make use of emerging media technologies and are concerned with the cultural, political and aesthetics possibilities of these tools», they write in the introduction. [2] This definition looks perfect for *The Weather Project*. Yet in the book neither the work nor the artist are even mentioned – and it is hard to believe this is an oversight. It is also hard to believe that well-known artists like Mariko Mori, Carsten Höller, Carsten Nicolai and Pierre Huyghe, who often use "emerging technologies", focusing on their "cultural, political and aesthetic function", have merely been overlooked. Even if they were not among the authors' favourites, they surely could have been included for strategic purposes – also due to the fact that this so-called New Media Art appears to enjoy a popularity inversely proportional to that achieved by Eliasson et al. Like its peers (Media Art, Digital Art), the term New Media Art is carefully avoided in all the main narrations on recent art: there is no trace of it, for example, in *Art Since 1900*, the book by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh that efficiently sums up the vision of twentieth century art offered by American academic criticism. [3] And it is all too easy to come across damning statements like that of a *Frankfurter Allgemeine* journalist in 2008: «Media Art was an episode. There's a lot of good art that uses the media. But there's no Media Art». [4]

Clearly there is something else that Tribe and Jana aren't telling us. Something that goes beyond the use and exploration of emerging technologies, and that functions, in their view, as a distinguishing factor, and for others as an element of discredit.

To identify that "something" we need to take the expression "New Media Art" seriously and tackle the literature that regards it in search of distinguishing characteristics. In the chapters that follow we will look at four key questions posed by this term. If New Media Art is an artistic category, does it define a "genre" or a "movement"? What historic limits apply to the term? What does

"New Media" mean? And lastly: what do we mean by "medium"?

Although these four questions are closely connected, for the sake of clarity we will try to keep them separate. But not before clearing up one preliminary question that would otherwise plague our endeavors: the terminology issue.

The Terminology Issue

The term "New Media Art" is the product of a fierce, almost Darwinian process of natural selection. This has not prevented a number of competing terms, like Digital Art and Media Art, from surviving, or the winning term from being abused by its users. The complicated background of the term New Media Art reflects both the uncertain definition of the arena it applies to, and the weakness of its affirmation strategies. For now, however, it is important to point out that while different terms will be used in this book, we are always talking about the same thing. Indeed this term-related confusion has led to a situation in which different terms are often used synonymously, even in the same text.

Yet it is not *always* the same thing. The expression Digital Art, for example, narrows the field to digital media, while the expression Media Art, particularly popular in German academic literature, extends the reach to all media: press, radio, fax, telephone, satellite communications, video and television, light, electricity, film, photography, *and also* computers, software, the web and video games. As underlined in the online encyclopedia *Medien Kunst Netz*, launched in 2004 and edited by the German scholars Rudolf Frieling and Dieter Daniels, the term Media Art forges a tradition that goes from Man Ray to Nam June Paik to the current use of computers and the web, while Digital Art covers at most a story that begins in the late sixties, the period of the first experiments that used computers to make art. Lastly, the term

Digital Art shifts the focus unduly "low", namely towards any kind of creative use of digital media: from digital illustration to concept design to Photoshop virtuosities and 3D modeling, on a professional or an amateur level. At least according to Google, digital art has more to do with deviantArt (an online community of wannabe artists) than with actual art. Both Media Art and New Media Art, on the other hand, are saved from these base associations by their "high" origins.

There are similar issues with other, now obsolete alternatives that rose to the fore for varying periods between the sixties and the nineties: Electronic Art, Computer Art, Multimedia Art, Interactive Art, Virtual Art, Cyberart, etc. Electronic Art, in particular, came into being in the sixties in the context of video, establishing itself in the subsequent decades for anything to do with electronics, as can be evinced from the names of the events that started up in that period: from Ars Electronica (an annual festival that has been held in the city of Linz since 1979) to ISEA (the International Symposium for Electronic Art, a touring festival launched in 1988) to the Dutch Electronic Art Festival (DEAF) in Rotterdam, established in 1994. The other terms tended to highlight the hottest feature of digital media of a given period, and usually didn't survive the downward curve of the hype cycle.

Genre or Movement?

All of these terms, like New Media Art, stress the medium used for making the art, or the characteristic held to be decisive. Which should be enough to deem New Media Art a genre rather than an art movement. This view appears to be particularly congenial to Christiane Paul, Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum in New York:

«A lowest common denominator for defining new media art seems to be that it is computational and based on algorithms. […] New Media Art is often characterized as process-oriented, time-based, dynamic, and real-time; participatory, collaborative and performative; modular, variable, generative, and customizable». [5]

The definition proposed by Mark Tribe and Reena Jana also seems to allude to a genre with a precise technological basis. Yet in the follow-up to their book, Tribe and Jana link the term New Media Art to a specific period and a specific community. In one interview they were even more explicit:

«I do think that New Media art was one of the few historically significant art movements of the late 20th century. There were a lot of other historically significant practices, but none of them galvanized as movements per se. (Tribe) Our point is that during the 1990s, with the dawn of the Internet's popular rise as a mass-market communication medium coupled with the increasing presence of PCs among households, a specific art movement started to take shape that both used these tools as primary artistic media to comment on the effect of these media on society and culture. (Jana)». [6]

Chronological Limits

Tribe and Jana's statement also underlines how difficult it is to link New Media Art to a set period of time. The two writers circumscribe the phenomenon to the 1990s, merely acknowledging the existence of precedents that in their view belong in the categories of "art and technology" and "Media Art" (that in their view pertain to media – radio, video, TV etc. – that were no longer new in the 1990s). The inherent perspective of the term Digital Art takes us back at least to the 1960s, and the first experiments with Computer Art and cybernetic art exhibited in the historic

exhibition at the ICA in London, entitled *Cybernetic Serendipity* (1968). Terms like "art and technology" and "electronic art" take us even further back, to the age of the avant-garde movements.

This is the perspective adopted, among others, by Edward A. Shanken in his book *Art and Electronic Media* (2009), [7] itself a perfect exemplification of the contradictions we are discussing: the selection of artists includes avant-garde artists, such as Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and Naum Gabo; successful contemporary artists who made occasional use of electronic media, like Mario Merz and Bruce Nauman, or a regular use of well accepted electronic media, such as neon lights (Dan Flavin) or video (Bill Viola); and younger art stars such as Olafur Eliasson, Mariko Mori and Pierre Huyghe. Shanken carefully avoids the term New Media Art. He draws a timeline that goes back to the avant-gardes; and even if he doesn't explicitly talk about art and electronic media as a genre, which art movement can be so broad as to include, let's say, Mario Merz and Bill Viola? And in any case the main issue raised in the very short preface to the book is that of the under-recognition of electronic art in mainstream art discourses. But just what is under-recognized? Electronic art? The cultural perspective implicit in this very label? Or most of the artists he lists alongside these few well known names? What is Shanken really talking about? What lies beyond this apparent schizophrenia?

What Does "New Media" Mean?

In an essay of 2000, [8] Steve Dietz, then head of New Media Initiatives at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, ironically recalled how in the century of the media, each separate medium went from being "new", to irrevocably getting old. The rhetoric of novelty no doubt poses a number of problems, the first being that of taking for granted that every use of a new medium produces art

that is in turn "new", without entering into the merits of its aesthetic and cultural content. At the same time, it holds true that every new medium, when it bursts onto the scene, is revolutionary in its own way, heralding new, hitherto inexistent possibilities for communication and expression and often forcing the traditional disciplines to rethink their own nature and function. As Michael Rush writes, for example: «The final avant-garde, if one should call it that, of the twentieth century is that art which engages the most enduring revolution in a century of revolutions: the technological revolution». In his book *New Media in Late 20*th *Century Art*, Rush dwells on the period following the Second World War, but adopts a perspective that embraces the entire technological revolution of the twentieth century, from photography to virtual reality. But in this more generic sense the expression "new media" remains a rather weak category – undoubtedly functional in terms of a "technological" history of twentieth century art, but not when it comes to describing a specific phenomenon. It is no coincidence that Rush talks about the new media of art, but not New Media Art. [9]

Towards the mid nineties, the expression "New Media" started to be used by the big names in publishing to distinguish the newly opened divisions producing interactive CD-ROMs and websites from those working with relatively more traditional platforms like newspapers, radio and TV. It was then that the expression "New Media" went from being a generic one (any kind of new medium), to having a more specific meaning, closely connected to digital media.

At the same time this interpretation of the term began to circulate in art circles and among media theorists. In 2001, Lev Manovich published *The Language of New Media* with the MIT Press, a book destined to become a cornerstone of studies on digital languages. [10] According to Manovich, "new media" became a conceptual category when computers first began to be

used not only to produce, but also to store and distribute contents. New Media is therefore the result of the encounter between two technologies which came into being in the same period: mass media and data processing. This encounter changed the identity of the media as much as that of the computer, transformed from simple calculator into a "media processor". [11]

The success of the term "New Media" went hand in hand with the rise of its related academic discipline: New Media Studies, and with the appearance of the first, temporary anthology, in the form of the weighty tome *The New Media Reader* (2003). [12] Manovich's introduction to this book [13] proves most instructive, in its deliberate refusal to make a distinction between "New Media" and "New Media Art", opting instead for the generic notion of the "new media field", which does not separate the technological and commercial aspects of the new media from those concerned purely with art. According to Manovich, art and media are the product of a single arena where artists and developers work in close contact. Manovich goes even further, asserting that the new media, and not art, are the true heirs of the revolution sparked by the avant-garde movements, and that the story of new media is the true story of contemporary art, because it is there that the hypotheses posited by the avant-garde movements come to fruition – not in Joyce's novels, Brecht's dramas, Pollock's paintings or Rauschenberg's art – but in the mouse, the graphic interface, the World Wide Web and Photoshop.

For the purposes of this book, however, the most interesting thing is the assertion that New Media Art and the culture of new media are an integral part of the story of new media, and that they can (or rather must) continue to exist as a sector, distinct from contemporary art in virtue of the fact that they genuinely do differ from it.

What Does "Medium" Mean?

Further complicating the notion of "New Media" is the substantial ambiguity that surrounds the very concept of medium in the contemporary debate. The two aspects of "New Media" – the generic and the specific – indeed overshadow another distinction: that between medium as "artistic medium" and medium as a generic means of communication. The first can be traced to Clement Greenberg and the tradition of art criticism. The second is linked to Marshall McLuhan and the tradition of Media Studies. These two concepts are radically different yet regularly get confused in art criticism, with terms like "Media Art", "New Media Art", "media specific" and "post media era".

In the sixties Clement Greenberg notably defined Modernism as the irreducible tension of every art form towards its "specific" nature, its unique and irreducible characteristics. In his view this «coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium». Every art form has to be rendered pure, «and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence». For example, in painting this means concentrating on the intrinsic characteristics of the painterly medium: flatness, the shape of the canvas, and the properties of the pigment. [14] Post-Greenberghian criticism tends to crystallize this definition and radicalise its reductive stance even beyond the intentions of Greenberg himself. As Rosalind Krauss notes, «from the '60s on, to utter the word "medium" meant invoking "Greenberg"». [15] But even when Rosalind Krauss, in the same text, attempted to move beyond the reductive stance of this conception (medium as mere material support), [16] to examine the complex relationships that arise between work and medium, and the set of conventions that determine the "medium specificity" of a work, she stayed firmly within Greenberg's interpretation of medium as "artistic medium".

From another angle, the concept of medium that the Canadian sociologist Marshall McLuhan introduced in the same period regarded "any extension of ourselves", albeit predominantly in regard to the electronic means of communication that rose to the fore in the previous decades, radio and TV in particular, turning the world into a sort of "global village". The impact of these media has been overwhelming, as can be seen in the explanation that McLuhan offers of his famous maxim, "the medium is the message": «the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs». [17]

It goes without saying that the confusion between these two notions gives rise to undue and unacceptable simplifications. The accusations of formalism often levelled at the art that uses new technologies is one example: neither the enthusiastic exploration of the medium's potential, or the critical testing of its limits, or the examination of its social and cultural consequences, can be attributed to Greenberg's formalism. When Nam June Paik distorts a TV signal, or Jodi remixes the code of a web page, they are not just working on the inherent characteristics of the medium (the flow of electrons in the cathode ray tube, or HTML): they are interfering with a means of communication in order to highlight its conventions and potential, and to explore "the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs".

This is a glaring misconception, yet one that fooled everyone.

A Medium-Based Definition?

At the end of this brief exploration, however, we have not yet pinpointed the meaning of the expression New Media Art. Critics do not seem to have come to any kind of agreement on the chronological, philosophical or practical boundaries of the

phenomenon: some focus on the last decade, others go back to the avant-garde movements; some restrict it to the visual arts, others extend it to all art forms and even the history of the technologies themselves. Even the precise nature of these "new media" is up for discussion. As things currently stand, New Media Art recalls the mythological Phoenix: "everyone knows it exists, no-one knows where it is". The term corresponds to an indistinct cloud of meanings that turn every debate on its true nature into a comic parody of itself.

The only fact that seems to garner pretty much unanimous accord is the point we started out from: New Media Art is defined in relation to the media it uses, and it sets out to draw forth the social, political and cultural implications of those media. It would be easy to infer from this that the concept of New Media Art is based on the aforementioned question of formalism. Indeed this is something that both its detractors and supporters for once appear to agree on. For the former it is patently obvious that we entered a post-media phase in the sixties, with art no longer focusing on the specific characteristics of a medium but taking an open, nomadic approach. For contemporary art criticism, this makes New Media Art's claim to focus on a medium absurd, naive and obsolete. We will examine the notion of post-mediality further on. For now, Francesco Bonami's derisive comment sums it up pretty well: "those who talk about computer art haven't a clue what they're talking about, and confuse the medium with the content, the idea, the result, mistaking the tool for the work of art. Art is not like Formula One, where the car counts more than the driver". [18]

This approach also influenced the fortunes of the expression "Video Art". It is telling that this expression is now rejected even by those who contributed to establishing it in the past. In 1971 David Ross was the first curator hired by a museum in the role of "Curator of Video Art" (at the Everson Museum of Art in Siracuse, New York). Thirty four years on, he writes:

«Simply put, as an art historical category, video art does not actually exist. It is provisional – a simple category of convenience […] To restate the problem, video is not a movement or the label for a shared aesthetic – it is simply a set of tools; tools capable of producing extraordinary works of art». [19]

On the other hand, among supporters of New Media Art, there is the idea that the new technologies have had a significant impact on artistic practice, and that art has the duty to explore this potential.

In a text regarding Ars Electronica in Linz in 2003, Lev Manovich once again lucidly summarises the state of play. Manovich explains that since the sixties, contemporary art has been a predominantly conceptual activity, and that the typical artist trained in the last two decades no longer works on paintings, photographs or videos, but "projects". He continues:

«when Ars Electronica program asks "In which direction is artists' work with the new instruments like algorithms and dynamic systems transforming the process of artistic creativity?" (festival program, p. 9), the very assumptions behind such a question put it outside of the paradigm of contemporary art». [20]

Taken out of context, this statement might appear to be in line with that of Bonami, and indeed it is, albeit from a diametrically opposed viewpoint. Both are saying that New Media Art has nothing to do with contemporary art. But for Manovich this is positive, and should be acknowledged by abandoning the term art altogether.

Yet if New Media Art was a category based purely on the use of a medium, putting it out of action would be easy, as Ross found with the expression Video Art. And its consistency would be ensured: in the period that Video Art enjoyed the consensus it subsequently lost, it was still all about video.

As we have seen, however, there are many works that use the new media that no-one would ever dream of calling New Media Art. Furthermore, despite the considerable efforts made by critics and artists to shrug off this perspective, it is still around: why so?

The answer lies implicitly in many of the protests against the idea that an artistic category can be based on the use of a medium. According to the English artist Charles Sandison, [21] an expression like Media Art

«can lead to an art ghetto, where artists, whose only common link is that they are faced with the same criticism. Their isolation is re-enforced when they are forced to create a universal defence. the fact that their defence is based on a misunderstood appreciation of an emergent medium inevitably leads 'full-circle' resulting in greater suspicion and rejection».

In one interview the American artist Brody Condon asserted:

«Every time you describe these artists by material, you are hurting, and not helping them [...] It's about ideas, not material. I don't give a shit about new media». [22]

Personalities like Steve Dietz and Andreas Broeckmann, who made a name for themselves as curators of New Media Art, have on various occasions taken their distance from that term and the approach that it implies. The former, for an exhibition curated in 2005 with the English curator Sarah Cook, coined the expression "the art formerly known as New Media" and has reiterated on various occasions that «while the technology may be enabling, to the extent that it's only about an instrumentalization of those capabilities, it's probably not very interesting»; but he has never stopped wondering why many "new media artists" with a solid pedigree receive little or no consideration in the art world. [23] The latter, in the catalogue of an exhibition he curated at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2008, called the underlying

assumption of the expression New Media Art a "grave misconception", going on to say: «Entire artistic careers were ruined by the stigma of doing 'art with a plug'. (Others were made by the exclusivity which that stigma offered in certain circles)». [24] Lastly, the critic Régine Debatty has said: «the "new media" label [...] fits the genre like a straitjacket and sends it to a ghetto without even a flicker of compassion. Forget the new, drop the media, enjoy art». [25]

All of these positions challenge not only the idea of finding a satisfactory definition, but also the existence of a socio-cultural context that can be identified with it, but which a growing number of artists feel imprisoned by and wish to break out of. That the existence of this "context" is the real Gordian knot here, when it comes to understanding what lies behind the term New Media Art, emerges clearly in the definition put forward by Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook in the recent book *Rethinking Curating* (2010). While – it goes without saying – the two writers are critical of the term, they continue to feel that it has a place in debate on curatorial practice, as long as the focus of attention is shifted from the "media" to the "behaviour". In line with this they define New Media Art as

«art that is made using electronic media technology and that displays any or all of the three behaviors of interactivity, connectivity, and computability in any combination».

Yet the brief list of provisos that follows this definition is rather revealing, in so far as the authors feel it necessary to exclude «artworks that may have science and technology as a theme, but that do not use electronic media technology for their production and distribution» and vice versa, to include «artworks showing these behaviors, but that may be from the wider fields of contemporary art or from life in technological times». [26] These strange distinctions do not ring true because – in the light

of the definition that precedes them – they appear to be entirely superfluous. Yet they are included. Why is that? It would appear that Graham and Cook are attempting to combat a general idea that includes certain works in the category of New Media Art and excludes others, based on criteria not connected to the languages used and the behaviour manifested. A criteria that, according to what we have said so far, could be linked to the idea of "belonging".

But belonging to what, exactly? Terms like "niche" or "ghetto" are often bandied about, but a niche inside the contemporary art world surely implies a minimum of shared ideas, and common means of production and distribution. On the contrary, most New Media Art appears able to exist and persist completely outside of the art world, and do perfectly well without it.

New Media Art: a World Unto Itself

All of this, and everything we have not yet managed to account for, can be taken care of with a simple theorem: that the expression New Media Art identifies an "art world" that is entirely independent, both from the world of contemporary art and any other "art world". To be comprehensible, the definition of New Media Art must be based on sociology rather than technology.

In other words, the expression New Media Art – like those which preceded it and those which will sooner or later follow it – does not indicate the art that uses digital technology as an artistic medium; it is not an artistic genre or an aesthetic category; it does not describe a movement or an avant-garde. What the expression New Media Art really describes is the art that is produced, discussed, critiqued and viewed in a specific "art world", that we will call the "New Media Art world".

The idea that to define New Media Art we need to refer to a "context" rather than a movement or a given use of the medium is not new. In actual fact it appears to be implicit in almost all critical discourse on New Media Art, with all those references to the ghetto, scene or community of New Media Art.

The media critic Geert Lovink, for example, devotes a whole chapter of his book *Zero Comments* to the "crisis of New Media Art". The essay opens with a few unsettling questions:

«*Why is new media art perceived as an obscure and self-referential subculture that is in the process of disappearing? Why is it so hard for artists that experiment with the latest technologies to be part of pop culture or 'contemporary arts'? [...] New media art has positioned itself in between commercial demo design and museum strategies, and instead of being crushed, it has fallen into an abyss of misunderstanding*». [27]

A few pages in, Lovink explains that «New media arts can best be described as a transitional, hybrid art form, a multi-disciplinary 'cloud' of micro-practices». In another passage, New Media Art is described as a community that does not produce art, but tests and explores the artistic medium (of the future) for the benefit of (future) generations. Lastly, the view espoused by Jon Ippolito and Joline Blais in *At the Edge of Art*, published in 2006, [28] is particularly interesting: the duo asserts that some of the most significant "artistic" developments of recent years happened outside the art world, often involving figures who do not see themselves first and foremost as artists, but researchers, scientists, activists. In view of this, if we want the term "art" to continue to mean something, we need to reconsider what it actually means, and above all we need to set aside the Duchampian concept of art as being something that happens in the art world. Blais and Ippolito encourage us to look for art in the "wrong places", namely outside of the art world: on the net, in labs, in scientific and technological research facilities. What can be found there, and

what according to Blais and Ippolito forces us to redefine the very notion of art, coincides for the most part with what others class under the umbrella term of New Media Art.

Lev Manovich talks openly of two different socio-cultural contexts, and in 1997 he came up with two significant names for them: Duchamp Land and Turing Land (Marcel Duchamp being the father of contemporary art and Alan Turing one of the fathers of the computer).

Art Worlds

«New media, to its credit, has been one of the very few art forms that has taken the programmatic wish to blow up the walls of the white cube seriously. This was done in such a systematic manner that it moved itself outside of the art system altogether». Geert Lovink [29]

So can this ghetto, this "Turing land", this arena outside the world of contemporary art, be viewed as an "art world" in its own right? *Art Worlds* is the title of an essay published in 1982 by the American sociologist Howard S. Becker. [30] Becker starts out from the notion that any work of art, be it a painting, a novel, a play or a poem, is not the product of an individual (the artist) but that of a social system in which the artist is just one of the players. For a work to exist, it takes more than an individual with an idea who brings that to fruition: to produce a work artists need materials, tools, support. And for something to exist as a "work of art" there has to be someone to appreciate it and a philosophical system that justifies it as art. Each of these activities also requires special training, and therefore a system of education, and more broadly, there needs to be a social order that makes art possible. This set of players and factors is what makes up an "art world". Obviously, Becker notes, works of art can come about even

without one or more of these factors: what counts is that the resulting work will differ from what it might have been had all of these factors come into play. In other words, the "art world" radically influences the nature of the work of art.

Each "art world", therefore, is based on a precise division of labour, within which the artist plays a very special role. The artist is the person with that special gift that enables him or her to create a work of art; but the artist's creative act takes place within a cooperative system, respecting certain *standards* that the system is able to manage and certain *conventions* that are shared by both the producers and consumers of a work of art. If these standards and conventions are not respected it does not mean that the work of art is not possible, just that everything is more difficult: the artist has to find non-conventional distribution channels, brave investors, an open-minded audience. As for the conventions, they facilitate the artist's work and interaction with the public, but often impose powerful limitations.

If the standards and conventions of a given art world are not respected the result is isolation: opting for freedom can cause problems and limit success, at least in the immediate timeframe. As Becker writes:

«Systems change and accomodate to artists as artists change and accomodate to systems. Furthermore, artists can secede from the contemporary system and create a new one, or attempt to, or do without the constraining benefits of distribution. Art worlds often have more than one distribution systems operating at the same time». [31]

This is what happened to Video Art, which often was not distributed, or was distributed using alternative channels, some created ad hoc by artists or curators. The same applies to the systems involved in producing works of art, and systems for criticism and training. If existing educational facilities do not offer

the right tools to develop a given artistic language, people can opt to be self-taught, or found new schools and faculties. If the existing production structures are not sufficient, new ones can be founded, or the artists can move from the academies and studios into specialised labs; if the media that host the critical debate do not suffice, alternative ways can be found.

If these structures of production, distribution, training and criticism take shape and come together, they can give rise to a new art world. According to Becker an art world is a network of relationships that attempts to stand out from other worlds, but at the same time forges relationships with them. What's more: sometimes

«[…] art worlds provoke some of their members to create innovations they then will not accept. Some of these innovations develop small worlds of their own; some remain dormant and then find acceptance from a larger art world years or generations later; some remain magnificent curiosities of little more than antiquarian interest». [32]

This short paragraph, in my view, unpacks the whole question, from the origins of New Media Art to current debate on its presence in the contemporary art world, and whether it belongs to the latter. In the sixties and seventies the advent of languages that challenged the standards and conventions of their respective "art worlds" drove visual artists, writers, set designers, musicians, choreographers and directors to seek a form of freedom that ended up relegating them to a niche. To support and develop their work, between the sixties and the nineties these creatives came up with new systems to create, distribute and criticise their output, and new educational programs. All of this gradually transformed that niche into an independent art world, the New Media Art world, which inevitably introduced its own conventions and standards. The next chapter looks at how this new world took shape.

Yet the linearity of this story was challenged in the mid nineties, when the digital media, which for thirty years has been confined to universities and research bodies, developed the means for mass distribution, influencing artistic production on all levels and giving rise to new art forms, like Net Art. This undermined the conditions which led to the creation of the New Media Art world: nowadays, works which make extensive use of digital media can also be created, distributed and appreciated in the contemporary art world, as the high profile examples of Olafur Eliasson, Mariko Mori and many others show. Furthermore, the digital medium no longer requires specific training, absolute dedication, access to tools and labs, etc.: more often than not, a home computer equipped with consumer software is more than enough to make art. And a home computer is just one of the many tools available in any artist's studio.

The consequences of this shift in art production and dissemination are enormous, and far from being completely understood. Right now, it may be enough to notice that art that deals with digital media is now being exhibited and appreciated in both the New Media Art world and the contemporary art world, because, as Becker says, it fulfils the concept of art held by both, and because it adapts to the distribution systems and discourse of both. At this point, a clash is inevitable. On one side, we have the New Media Art world, with its own tradition, its institutions, its jargon, its idea of art: an idea that's starting to be too narrow to provide a good understanding of what's going on, but that's still the only one available. On the other, we have the contemporary art world, which is genuinely interested in what's going on, but doesn't yet have the conceptual tools to understand it, and is slowly developing the practical tools required to deal with it; and that, at the same time, does not acknowledge the research undertaken in the New Media Art world. In between the two, there are the artists, with their different approaches to the medium and to

the ideas revolving around it. Some are happy with the New Media Art world; some aren't, and they also resist the economic structures of the contemporary art world. But most of them want to be free to use both traditional and new media; they are looking for a different understanding, a wider platform, a longer history, a new economic model. They want to be understood as art, not as New Media Art. And they are embarking on a difficult process of migration toward the contemporary art world.

While the third chapter explores this "war of the worlds" and the elements that underpin it, the two subsequent chapters look at the dynamics of this migration. To be seriously considered on the platform of contemporary art, New Media Art must rid itself of this term, the perspective it embodies and the associations that it implies. Going from one world to another poses not only problems of translation, but also obliges this art to give up its specific characteristics, and its history. As an independent category or sector, New Media Art is not conceivable inside the world of contemporary art. As we will see in the fourth chapter, the failure to acknowledge the need for this transition has doomed all attempts to promote the art known as New Media Art within the contemporary art world. A new perspective is needed, as we will discuss in the fifth chapter.

Notes

[1] Geert Lovink, "New Media Arts: In Search of the Cool Obscure. Explorations beyond the Official Discourse", in *Diagonal Thoughts*, 2007. Online at www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=204 (last visit March 2013).
[2] Mark Tribe, Reena Jana, *New Media Art*, Taschen, Köln 2006, p. 6.
[3] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art since 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Thames & Hudson, London 2004.
[4] Stefan Heidenreich, "Es gibt gar keine Medienkunst!", in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung,* January 27, 2008.
[5] Christiane Paul (ed.), *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2008, pp. 3 – 4.
[6] Domenico Quaranta, "The Last Avant-garde. Interview with Mark Tribe & Reena Jana", in *Nettime*, October 30, 2006.
[7] Edward A. Shanken, *Art and Electronic Media*, Phaidon Press, London – New York 2009.
[8] Steve Dietz, "Curating New Media", August 2000, in *Yproductions*, online at www.yproductions.com/writing/archives/curating_new_media.html (last visit March 2013).
[9] Michael Rush, *New Media in Late 20th-Century Art*, Thames & Hudson, London 1999 [2001], p. 8.
[10] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 2001.
[11] Ibid., p. 44.
[12] Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Nick Montfort (eds.), *The New Media Reader*, The MIT Press, Cambridge – Massachusetts, London – England 2003.
[13] Lev Manovich, "New Media from Borges to HTML", 2002. In Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Nick Montfort (eds.), *The New Media Reader*, cit., p. 14.
[14] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", in *Forum Lectures*, Voice of America, Washington, D. C. 1960. Also available in: Francis Frascina, Charles Harrison (eds.), *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, 1982.
[15] Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage in the North Sea. Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames & Hudson, London 1999, p. 6.
[16] In the recent *Under Blue Cup* (2011), Krauss actually considers some media theory – specifically the ideas of Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich

Kittler – with consequences that we will discuss in Chapter 5. Notably, she introduces this section writing: «*Medium* and *media* are what the French would call "false friends" – French look-alikes for English words that are strictly *not* synonymous». In Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, The MIT Press, Cambridge – London 2011, p. 33.

[17] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, 1964.

[18] Francesco Bonami, *Lo potevo fare anch'io. Perché l'arte contemporanea è davvero arte*, Mondadori, Milano 2007, p. 24.

[19] David A. Ross, "The History Remains Provisional", in Ida Gianelli, Marcella Beccaria (eds.), *Video Art. The Castello di Rivoli Collection*, Skira, Milano 2005, p. 4.

[20] Lev Manovich, "Don't Call it Art: Ars Electronica 2003", in *Nettime*, September 2003.

[21] Cf. "charles sandison on charles sandison!", in *Designboom*, 2002, online at www.designboom.com/portrait/sandison.html (last visit March 2013).

[22] Brody Condon, pers.comm., 2008. In Domenico Quaranta, Yves Bernard (eds.), *Holy Fire. Art of the Digital Age*, exhibition catalogue, iMAL, Bruxelles, April 2008. Brescia, FPEditions 2008, p. 91.

[23] Steve Dietz, "'Just Art': Contemporary Art After the Art Formerly Known As New Media", October 27, 2006. Online at www.yproductions.com/writing/archives/just_art_contemporary_art_afte.html (last visit March 2013).

[24] In AAVV, *Deep Screen. Art in Digital Culture*, exhibition catalogue, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, May 30 – September 30 2008, pp. 154 – 155.

[25] Pers. Comm., in Domenico Quaranta, Yves Bernard (eds.), *Holy Fire...*, cit., p. 94.

[26] Beryl Graham, Sarah Cook, *Rethinking Curating. Art after New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, England 2010, p. 10.

[27] Geert Lovink, *Zero Comments, Blogging and Critical Internet Culture,* Routledge, New York 2007.

[28] Joline Blais, Jon Ippolito, *At the Edge of Art*, Thames and Hudson, London 2006.

[29] Geert Lovink, "New Media Arts: In Search of the Cool Obscure. Explorations beyond the Official Discourse", cit.

[30] Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1982 [1984].

[31] Ibid., p. 95.

[32] Ibid., p. 36.