Medium Specificity in Post-Media Practice

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MEDIUM SPECIFICITY IN POST-MEDIA PRACTICE
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ABSTRACT

In art theory, the artistic media have been in the center of the discussion between Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss, and functional to the definition of Modern and Post-Modern Art. This debate, together with the etymological ambiguity of the term 'medium', alimented a certain confusion about the relation between media and art. This issue influenced the criticism toward several artistic approaches, especially New Media Art. Essentially, it provoked a common rejection, from the contemporary art field, of the researches that aims to reflect about media, intended in general sense. This paper aims to highlight and clarify this issue, speculating about its possible origins, and taking into account the perspectives exposed by several theoreticians of art and media. In conclusion, acknowledging this condition, it has been proposed a theoretical framework that accommodates both Modern and Post-Modern perspectives: an enquiry of media with post-media practice.

Keywords: Medium specificity, post-medium, post-media, New Media Art, art practice

1 INTRODUCTION

In art theory, the discussion which opposed modernity with post-modernity focused on the role and definition of 'medium'. However, these two cultural paradigms are not necessarily in conflict, neither incompatible between them. The advent of post-modernity, or in better terms, the intellectual awareness of this cultural shift, drove art theory to assume new points of view. During this process, some theoretical speculations identified several limitations of Modern Art theory, especially about the centrality and conception of the 'artistic medium'. For this reason, in contemporary art context, any reference to media commonly connotes a Modernistic imprint. This is a widespread misconception which marginalized several art forms. However, it is important to underline that it is often forgot that Post-Modernism, even rejecting the idea of 'artistic medium', it never excluded a research on media. For this reason, it has been found necessary to rehabilitate some aspects of modern theories. This

attempt aims to create a fertile theoretical ground for re-evaluate the current radical modern practices in art and culture.

Rosalind Krauss, the most influential opponent to the modernist art theories, believes that artists must invent their own medium (Krauss, 2004, p.223). In other terms, if post-modernity rejects the centrality of the 'artistic medium' as meaning for art, it does not concern the researches that reflect on the role which media plays in our contemporary society. This problem is often based on a misunderstanding about the definition of 'media'. Artistic media can correspond to the media which are subject of artistic enquiry, but not necessarily, and mainly, this format must be not conceived as a prerogative of art. Art poses itself as self-referential discipline. Since the term 'art' is based in a completely abstract concept, its main challenge is finding its own definition. According to modernistic theories, this self-referentiality identified in medium specificity a way to define art, enquiring its privileged media. Nowadays this direction is lost. This was already demonstrated by the post-advanguardes, which played with media, in the same way that Post-Modernism suggests.

The discussion about modernity and post-modernity in art is active since long time. Post-Modern theories assume the end of modernity and its theoretical framework, but since this discussion provoked a series of misunderstandings which are still perpetuated, it has been found necessary to treat and clarify this issue. This paper aims to trace a trajectory where Modern and Post-Modern art converge, assuming the achievements of Post-Modern art, and rehabilitating the intentions of Modern art. Moreover, it is here believed that the discussion about modernity and post-modernity is at the base of the definition and conception of New Media Art. In fact, it is possible to assume that some of the motivations behind New Media Art come from a reminiscence of modernity. Under a certain perspective, New Media Art can be considered as the son of modernity, grown up in the Post-Modern uncertainty.

2 MODERNISM IN ART: GREENBERG'S MEDIUM SPECIFICITY

2.1 Medium Specificity as Unifying Means of Art

In the beginning of the 1940s, Clement Greenberg exposed his idea of 'medium specificity' as a characteristic which distinguished Modern Art from the previous art forms. These theories consist in the emancipation of art from its classical role of pure representation, toward a complete awareness of the artistic medium. In other terms, art becomes concerned about the specific qualities of the medium used for the artistic purpose. Its intent is avoid any romantic and illusory content in art, highlighting the importance of the medium and exploring its potentials. From this point of view, the medium is seen as the only objective element, and the only subject which can be used to understand the deep nature of art.

> 'Medium specificity' is a theory that can be applied to most of the artistic forms, but it was particularly oriented toward painting, sculpture, and adapted to literature and music. For instance, in painting the canvas flatness, the colours materiality, all its physical elements are the subjects that art must explore. Abstractism is seen as experimentation of the possibilities offered by the pictorial technique. However, Clement Greenberg specifies that: 'Modernist painting […] has not abandoned the representation of recognizable objects in principle. What it has abandoned in principle is the representation of the kind of space that recognizable objects can inhabit' (Greenberg, 1982, p.6).

2.2 The Origins of Medium Specificity

The roots of medium specificity date back to 1766, when Gotthold Ephraim Lessing wrote the essay 'Laocoön', that was retrieved by Clement Greenberg in the 1940s in his text 'Towards a newer Laocoön' (Greenberg, 1985). Lessing criticized the Roman poet Horace, which claims '*ut pictura poesis*' (as is painting, so is poetry), arguing that these two media are inherently different: poetry spreads with the time, and painting is confined by the space. These differences determine the diverse nature of arts, which should take into account the qualities of their specific medium. He also attacked the poet James Thomson: Lessing considered the descriptive verses of this poet like an invasion of landscape painting. At the same time, he found out that, in similar way, also the allegoric paintings invaded the domain of poetry.

In Lessing's theories there were the seeds of 'medium specificity', but back then this concept could not be exhaustively developed. In his work, he focused exclusively on the relation between painting and poetry, while Greenberg extended his target toward a research of purity in art, in contrast with any romantic storytelling. Across the history, Romanticism left a strong presence in the conception and idealization of art. According to the values promoted by this movement, the artist is a figure that became emancipated from the role of artisan or craftsman: he passes his feeling and sensibility to the audience through the manipulation of the medium. Romanticism sees the medium as instrument used to express the centrality of the artist. 'The medium was a regrettable if necessary physical obstacle between the artist and his audience, which in some ideal state would disappear entirely to leave the experience of the spectator or reader identical with that of the artist' (Greenberg, 1985, p.62).

2.3 Toward the Essential Purity of Art

According to Greenberg, 'medium specificity' is a distinct attribute of Modern Art, that allows art to pursue its 'purity', which he defines as: 'acceptance of the limitations of the medium of the specific art'. (Greenberg, 1985, p.66) Therefore, the purity in art circumscribes the competence area of each medium, and the uniqueness of its own nature. The limitations of the medium are meantime the valuable features which guarantee the personality and identity of a specific medium. Greenberg sees these limitations as a possibility to operate a self-critical reflection toward art, thus, toward modernity. In his opinion, self-criticism is a distinguishing purpose of Modern Art (Greenberg, 1982). In his oppositions to Post-Modern theories, he underlines that: as Modern Art meant to be self-critical, post-modernity tends to be 'incidental' (Greenberg, 1979). However, Greenberg demonstrates awareness that the art theories which he was promoting were strongly bound to a certain historical period, and that his vision on art was subject to obsolescence, as well it could not be applied to the whole art history (Greenberg, 1985).

3 POST-MODERNISM IN ART: KRAUSS'S POST-MEDIUM CONDITION

3.1 The Post-Medium Turn

In contemporary art, the most remarkable theories which engage the discussion about the so called 'post-media' are argued by the art critic Rosalind Krauss. Instead then post-media, she prefers to use the term 'post-medium', in order to concentrate the attention into the 'artistic medium', rather then 'media' of communication (Krauss, 2000, p.7). The core of the Krauss's argument is the criticism toward Greenberg and his concept of 'medium specificity'. In her opinion, the advent of

Structural Film movement during the 1960s proclaimed the end of 'medium specificity'. Because it revealed that video is a medium constituted by a great heterogeneity of parts which perform a large number of activities. For this reason, Rosalind Krauss sees the video as a medium in which heterogeneity cannot be found any 'essence' or 'unifying core' (Krauss, 2000, p.31). This peculiarity of video is reflected on the wider and influential success of television, which is seen as pivot point of the post-medium turn (Krauss, 2000).

Recognizing the modernist intent of Structural Film and its will of inquiring the nature of cinematic medium, Krauss explains the reason which this movement does not belong to the idea of 'medium specificity'. Her argumentation shows the core of the critiques to the Geenberg's theory: an analysis of art cannot be reduced to the single properties of an artistic medium without taking into account the aggregation of all these properties and the presence of an audience in relation with them. Krauss argues that Structural Film uses the whole technical apparatus and the contents of the film as a set of conventions which the artists used to define their own new medium, where the viewers are integrated (Krauss, 2000).

3.2 Reinventing the Medium: Conventions and Specific Objects

The way Clement Greenberg evaluates the works of Jackson Pollock, demonstrating his concept of 'medium specificity', is strongly discussed by Krauss. Where Greenberg sees the Pollock's works as a form of gained awareness of the specificities of painting, Krauss argues that the Pollock famous 'drippings' were not just the celebration of painting medium, but the reinvention of a new artistic medium and a new practice. Posing its painting in horizontal position and activating the series of operations for his 'drippings', Pollock created a series of conventions which allows his works to take form. Clarifying this prospective, Rosalind Krauss states that

> 'in order to sustain artistic practice, a medium must be a supporting structure, generative of a set of conventions, some of which, in assuming the medium itself as their subject, will be wholly 'specific' to it, thus producing an experience of their own necessity' (Krauss, 2000, p.26).

Referring to Donald Judd, Krauss suggests that our post-medium condition pretends the use of 'specific objects' for artistic production, instead of focusing on the specificity of the artistic medium (Krauss, 2004). The vision that Greenberg expresses about Modern Art is dependent on the formal essence of the classical artistic media. This approach shows an intrinsic and remarkable exclusion of many well established artistic practices of neo avantgardes. Krauss insists on the idea that the artist must reinvent his artistic medium, where the specificities of media he uses and the intents of his practice are unified in a series of conventions from where the artwork unfolds (Krauss, 2004). The ability of inventing a medium, specific to its artistic purpose, is seen as the most valuable aspect of art practice.

3.3 Art Practice and Social Practice

Since art gained its self-referential status, an instrumental exploration of an artistic medium cannot provide any real contribution in the art discussion. Krauss noticed that Joseph Kosuth was the first to criticize this aspect (Krauss, 2000, p.10). Accordingly:

'Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. If an artist accepts painting (or sculpture) he is accepting the tradition that goes with it. That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a kind of art. If you make paintings you are already accepting (not questioning) the nature of art' (Kosuth, 1969).

Medium specificity embrace an idea which is alienated by any cultural and social aspect. Focussing on the essence of the artistic medium, it forgets about everything that poses art in its context: in this sense, art is not able to talk about society and culture of its own contemporaneity. This aspect was discussed more appropriately by Raymond Williams, who discovers that Modernism separated artistic practice from social practice. According to his theories, the definition of cultural practice was incomplete before media studies and Modernism brought the idea that cultural practice is shaped by the specificities of media. However, he argues that the medium must be seen as social practice itself, which responds to the same problems of its contemporaneity (Williams, 2009, p.158-64).

4 THE AMBIGUOUS TERM: MEDIA OF COMMUNICATION AND ARTISTIC MEDIA

4.1 Specificity in Media of Communication

It is important to notice that the idea behind 'medium specificity' was embedded in a fertile cultural context, which maintained its development for some decades. During the 1960s, the Palo Alto Mental Research Institute contributed extensively to communication studies, especially with the remarkable 'axioms of communication'. One of its axioms pointed out to the relational properties that are embedded into the communication itself (Watzlawick, et al., 2014). From this assumption derives that media are not just carriers of contents, but active agents, which deeply shape the meanings and the reasons of any kind of communication. In this sense, it is possible to speculate about a correlation which bounds the theories which stress the importance of the medium in the act of communication, and the theories behind the idea of 'medium specificity' in art.

Nevertheless, the most relevant approach toward the centrality of the medium in communication studies can be found in the work of Marshall McLuhan. With his book 'Understanding Media', published in the 1964, McLuhan led a revolution in the fields of communication and media studies. Even encountering a certain resistance, his nowadays famous statement 'The medium is the message' is considered as a sacred commandment. With this sentence, McLuhan supported the idea that in communication, the medium is the content itself because it is specific through its effects, and not through its contents (McLuhan, 1994). Thus, the specificity of the medium defines the conditions of communication, becoming content. This remind us the Greenberg's definition of 'medium specificity' as direction in which art can achieve its honest purity.

4.2 Medium Specificity and New Media Art

The definition of New Media Art seems to be particularly connoted by the modernist paradigm of 'medium specificity'. Unsurprisingly, it sees as pioneers the generation of artists that were active in the period which 'medium specificity' was one of the

most influential art theories. From the theoretical effort of Lev Manovich emerges a vision of art, in particular New Media Art, which is deeply rooted to the principles of medium specificity, that he reinvents in a different way. His studies concentrated on the languages of media, and their specific aesthetic qualities (Manovich, 2009). This brought him to encourage a new branch of studies which is concerned about the nature of software and its impact in the formalization of media contents (Manovich, 2013). Palmer sees an ineluctable connection between New Media Art and 'medium specificity', using his words: 'media art can't be properly understood without some critical sensitivity to the technical media involved. Obviously, this stance risks marginalizing New Media Art from 'post-medium' contemporary art by restating the modernist paradigm of 'medium specificity'' (Palmer, 2006). However, Palmer, as well as the art critic Domenico Quaranta, believes that relating New Media Art to the principle of 'medium specificity' is a widely spread misconception which limits its proper understanding as enquiry of contemporary culture (Palmer, 2006; Quaranta, 2013).

4.3 Post-Media Theories and New Media Art

Over the theories of Rosalind Krauss, it is necessary to account how the term 'post-media' was used by other theoreticians in order to explain different conceptions related to art, aesthetics, media, communication and culture (Broeckmann, 2015). The earliest definition of post-media comes from the psychiatrist and philosopher Félix Guattari, who was referring to mass-media. According to his idea, post-media identify the cultural shift from unidirectional mass media to an 'era of collective-individual reappropriation and an interactive use of machines of information, communication, intelligence, art and culture' (Guattari, 1990).

The term post-media was subsequently used by Lev Manovich and Peter Weibel in a more direct relation with art. Manovich is aware of a crisis on the conception of medium in art, manifested by the heterogeneity of media used in art, and by the interest of an art practice which focuses on social aspects instead of objects fetishism. However, demonstrating a sort of radical re-adaptation of modernist theories, in his essay on post-media aesthetics, he claims that art history and art practice should be revisited through the new paradigms brought by digital technologies. Manovich proposes the adoption of a new set of aesthetic criteria, based on information theory, which take into account, for instance: the combination of 'author, text, reader', seen as 'sender, message, receiver'. As he suggests, this must also consider the specificities of the software used by both the author and the reader (Manovich,19878).

Peter Weibel, similarly to Lev Manovich, states that nowadays there are no dominant media, since all of them are determining each other. Digital technology transformed and influenced both old and new media, becoming their natural substance. This digital essence of media is seen by Weibel as internal script which is at the base of any computational medium. For this reason Weibel argues that 'all of art practice keeps to the script of the media and the rules of the media' and that 'the secret code behind all these forms of art is the binary code of the computer and the secret aesthetics consist of algorithmic rules and programs' (Weibel, 2012). According to Weibel, the ubiquity of digital media determined the advent of our 'post-media condition': the fact that any medium is essentially indistinguishable, consequently 'all art is post-media art' (Weibel, 2012). Since digital technologies constitutes the core of any media, 'medium specificity', which interrogates the peculiarity of each artistic medium, is now ineffective.

4.4 Art, Media, and the Etymological Issue

In any occasion the word 'art' relates to the word 'media', it is easy to incur in misleading connotations. This issue emerges from the etymological ambiguity about the definition of the term 'medium' in reference to art or in reference to communication. Accounting these two main meanings and applications, it is important to consider that this word assumed the significance of 'intermediate agency' or 'channel of communication' in 1600's. In 1853, in the same period in which Modern Art was conventionally beginning, it has being recorded the first use of the term 'medium' in reference to materials for artistic production[1]. For this reason, any usage of the word 'media', in art context, is often linked to the idea of 'artistic media', thus Modernism and 'medium specificity'. Moreover, this conception is perpetuated by the long tradition of the classical academic taxonomy of art, that separates disciplines as: painting, sculpture, photography, etc. These categories are no longer able to satisfy the developments of art since the advent of avantgardes, and especially the post-avantgardes, but they are still in use in many contexts, in order to identify specific traditions and approaches toward art.

5 MEDIUM SPECIFICITY IN POST-MEDIA PRACTICE: A POSSIBLE COEXISTENCE

5.1 Media Aesthetics and Artistic Practice

As recognized by Domenico Quaranta, in the 1990s, many approaches of New Media Art tended to describe themselves as 'research into new aesthetic possibilities of new media' (Quaranta, 2013, p.84). This aspect recalls the same expectations that lay behind the idea of 'medium specificity' and Modernism. However, we must acknowledge that in post modern era, an artistic research in media aesthetics cannot be exclusively labelled as obsolete artistic practice that relies in the Greenbergian formalism. According to Quaranta: 'With postmodernism, you have the right to be whatever you want, included modernist. Artists can wear modernism and explore 'medium specificity' in the same way in which a drag queen explores sexual identities' (Quaranta, 2016). Now the real question is: which is the proper artistic practice and method for a research on media aesthetics? Here became fundamental to distinguish two separate approaches which have a profoundly different nature. A research into the aesthetic possibilities of new media can be developed with both the use of the technical possibilities offered by the medium or with interventions which 'misuse' these same possibilities. This divergence can be reduced in the two following approaches: a method which follows the script given by the design of a medium, or a method which do not follows this script. The first case is about an exploration of the medium aesthetics, which is done 'exploiting' the technical potentials it offers, in this sense we will have a formalism. In the other hand, we find an opposite way to develop an exploration of medium aesthetics, made by 'enquiring' its technical potentials, and excavating under their smooth surface.

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[1] **Medium**. Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d. Available at:
<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=medium&allowed_in_frame=0> [Accessed 1 March 2016].

5.2 Recovering the Modernist Spirit

There is an aspect, intrinsic to Modernism, which seems to be forgotten and removed by most of the Post-Modern practices, with the exception of some contemporary directions of New Media Art. This aspect consists in the honesty of exposing coherently the truly nature of the objects or media, of cultural production, including art as well as design. With the purpose of questioning the media which inhabit our contemporaneity, it is also necessary to acknowledge the role played by design, and its intents. As found by Simon Penny: 'in the modernist period, there was a notion that the appearance of an artifact should betray the nature of its materials and methods of manufacture. Hence the Bauhaus dicta of 'form follows function' and 'truth to materials'. Computing, contrarily, hews to a postmodern aesthetic of surface and superficiality: the function of the interface is to obscure the true nature of the machine'. Penny continues saying that:
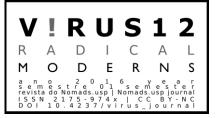
> 'Contrarily [to design/HCI[2]], that an artwork should contrive to obscure its own artifice is almost unconscionable in the modern and postmodern periods. Works often exist to bring to attention the artifice of the medium, the qualities of the technology or the way they perturb the situation or object of attention. Illusionism is constructed only to be broken, or intentionally problematised. In these terms, the relationship of (naïve) HCI and (critical) media art practice are entirely opposed. If HCI aspires to be 'ready to hand', media art aspires to be 'present at hand'' (Penny, 2008).

'Ready to hand' and 'present at hand' are concepts that Penny borrowed from the philosopher Martin Heidegger. In few words, with his notorious example, he said that an hammer is 'ready to hand' in the moment it is used, when the function is directly associated to the object, taking over its objectuality, and without questioning it. Oppositely, the hammer is 'present at hand' when it is open to the intellect, when it becomes questionable. It is present as object and it is subject of analysis. This condition of contemplation requires no usage of the object (Heidegger, 2001). For this reason, as Penny figured out, an analytical perspective toward technologies, requires a distance from their instrumental use. In this sense, it is possible to conclude that the constitution of a set of conventions, which brings to invent a new medium (following the Krauss idea), is the proper approach for an art practice that uses a contemporary language to investigate the technologies of our time.

5.3 Enquiring the Nature of Media with Post-Media Language

It is here rejected the idea that questioning the nature of media and technologies should be the only necessity and prerogative of art. Nevertheless, a research which follows this purpose cannot be implicitly excluded from the realm of post-media art. Contemporary Art is plenty of examples of artistic practices which aims to reveal some aspects of the nature of our contemporary culture, from the fields of economics, to politics or anthropology, etc. *A priori* exclusion of media field can just be explained as misinterpretation and prejudice, conducted by a blind opposition to any reminiscence of Modernism. The nature of an artistic practice is not defined by its

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[2] HCI is the acronym of Human-Computer Interaction, a specific field between design and engineering, which focuses on the relations humans-machines.

subject. A research about a medium (or media) can be developed with post-media languages and its acknowledgements.

It is possible to create new artistic media (or mediums, according to Krauss) which focuses on the aesthetics and specificities of media, as subjects. It is possible to set the conventions that create an artistic medium, which give it the agency to process and unfold the subject of an art practice. Post-media conceptions and art that reflects on media, are not opposite perspective. As Quaranta stated:

> 'New Media Art […] can actually become one of the most effective incarnations of our postmedia world. A world in which it no longer makes sense to distinguish, as […] the paradigm implicit in the term New Media Art does, between art which uses computers and art which doesn't; a world in which on the other hand it increasingly makes sense to distinguish between art that acknowledges the advent of the information society and art that retreats to positions typical of the industrial era we are moving out of. It is according to this distinction that in a few decades' time we will be able to identify the academia and avant-garde of the present day' (Quaranta, 2013, p.212).

When Kosuth states that reflecting on the nature of a medium means to do not question the nature of art, and when Rosalind Krauss states that an artist should reinvent the medium of its practice, they intend the so called 'artistic medium': the vehicle which express an intention, but it is not the intention itself. The aim here, is to highlight the separation between art practice and its topic. They must be coherent to their purpose, but different between them, in order to say something that otherwise it cannot be expressed. As well as the 'ready to hand' and 'present at hand' discussed by Heidegger; practice and argument, or method and topic, need to be separated, but they should work together in order to be effective.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This paper proposes to rehabilitate the some of the intention behind Medium Specificity, recalling a new radical modern perspective. We acknowledged that an artistic research about media, must engage the discussion which opposed modernism and post-modernism, in particular, the 'misunderstanding' about the role that media have in art. This misunderstanding, comes from the conception of 'artistic media': the privileged instruments for modern art practice, which created the academic taxonomy of art, and that were considered as main subjects of art, in order to understand the art itself. The idea of post-media eradicated this tendency, assuming that in our contemporaneity become impossible and senseless to find the value of art in the specificity of its media, or better, post-media rejected the idea itself of 'artistic medium'. Indeed, post-modernism required that the artist should invent its own medium and its own language.

However, we saw that the conception behind post-media had never declined that an artistic research could focus on the specificity of media, it has just argued that it should not be constrained by the privileged media of classical art. In this sense, it was possible to state that a coexistence between 'medium specificity' and 'post-media practice' is possible and desirable in any form of art which aims is to reflects on media. Looking to this approach we can observe that 'medium specificity' can constitute the topic of an artistic research, and 'post-media practice', can be seen as a method and language in which the research can be formalized.

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