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## Theory and History of Media Art II

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Contemporary Art and New Media. Outline for Developing a Hybrid Discourse

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## **Diggers and Dreamers of the 20th and 21st Century: Creative Commons, Open Source and Digital Folklore**

The Digital Britain Report (2009) and European regulations raise concerns about ownership of the net and the impact on its potential as a 'common land'. Are these new regulations 21st century enclosure acts? If accessible territory is carved up and owned by the few, why should we care?

In 1649 Gerrard Winstanley's Diggers utilising common land aimed to promote communal and collective production and laid the foundations for the concepts embedded within FLOSS/Creative Commons practices.

Winstanley's vision of an egalitarian society came to him in a dream yet despite this mystical associations his vision should not be considered less valid. I suspect Tim Berner's Lee and other early Internet and open source pioneers would have much in common with this 17th Century visionary's ideals.

Looking more closely at the concept of common land or 'the commons', those spaces or resources 'held in common' (Bollier 2003), it is apparent that in practice 'the commons' are actually shared or owned by a distinct, easily identifiable group of individuals. Whether grazing animals, enacting traditions or remixing audio or sharing code, users of common land will have shared interests and values.

Although there is often a proprietary or cost aspect somewhere even if not overtly so, it is the understanding of the commons as accessible that is necessary for an expressive culture. In fact the potential for expression thrives within an environment where it is understood, that unless forbidden, much is possible.

When I use the term digital folklore I am not referring to Theresa Heyd's definition of Digital Folklore i.e. 'relating to computer mediated communica-

tion e.g. hoax emails or urban legends traceable back to office lore' (Giltrow & Stein 2009, p239).

Nor, although related, is it what the editors of the Digital Folklore Reader, define as 'the customs, traditions and elements of visual, textual and audio culture that emerged from users' engagement with personal computer applications during the last decade of the 20th and the first decade of the 21st century (Lialina and Espenschied 2009, p9).

Folklore originally referred to the 'otherness' of 'Folk' – collections and practices of 'rural peasants' (Trubshaw 2003, p4) not regarded as gentrified culture and what 'others' do. These practices of 'others', while being populist, are accessible to the cultural elite who also participates.

Within folkloric practices there is an understanding that activities are accessible, experimental and collectively owned. This collective ownership enables the activities to be constantly re-invented and re-invigorated. Although local traditions may seem to have a collective ownership that can appear exclusive, in terms of copyright anyone can re-mix that tradition. In fact this constant re-invigoration and re-invention within the context of their time could be the reason they survive, through their ongoing relevance. These self-organised and emergent activities have an important function within society through the creation of spaces for expressive culture and as Sahlins states 'do not passively reflect a culture they shape it too' (Sahlins 1985, pxi).

If a culture shifts to an understanding of only sanctioned activities being permitted, or cost becomes a prohibiting factor this contributes to a two-tiered system. Although this does not in itself stifle imagination it instantly reduces the available space within which the imagination and its expression can be manifested. This then begins to shape the culture.

Currently Internet access supports open source activity providing a platform for a complex multi-tiered system. This emergent accessible culture, common in folkloric practices is celebrated and protected within Creative Commons/CopyLeft licenses. The sharing and production of Open Source software sees user and developer relationships mirroring the practices of populist folkloric practices.

Guattari acknowledges the value of accessible spaces, in particular the concept of the rift or rupture e.g. accessible space. Although he applies this idea to art practices, I would argue that it is the space created that is important whether this is as art, folkloric practice or the culture of Open Source and Creative Commons.

Such accessible spaces create 'new affirmation[s] of the world' (O'Sullivan 2006, p2) and the activities in these spaces are what Guattari calls 'fundamental encounters' (O'Sullivan 2006, p1). The web 'encourages people to adopt new habits and roles, as collaborators, distributors, editors and creators of content' (DBR 2009, p7). These activities enable us to create new affirmations and manifestations of our worlds, facilitated and protected by FLOSS and Creative Commons-licences. This emergent behaviour of de- and re-territorialisation can be seen as a continual process of becoming crucially important for an expressive culture.

In a world of faux public space, health and safety regulations and security it is necessary to preserve accessible spaces for expressive culture. Internet regulation and legislation could inhibit these practices just as the regulation of folk practices did during the Victorian era.

People want to do what we have always done – connect and interact. This paper acknowledges the continuity between the practices enacted in both digital and material cultures.

The idea of common liberty is still held as a deep-rooted belief and I would argue for the moment at least, is alive both on and offline.

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## Flexibility after Destined Death

This paper developed out of my attraction to painting-digital hybrids and my frustration with antiquated structures inhospitable to media flexibility. I've organized the paper in that order – first, as a survey of best practices, followed by thoughts on structures that allow innovative experimentation with traditional and digital media to thrive.

Now that digital tools are ubiquitous, contemporary artists use them at all stages of development. Ideas might be researched on the internet, sketched with pencil, scanned into the computer, manipulated, transferred to canvas, painted, recaptured with a camera, manipulated again, projected again, revised and perhaps resolved. This is nothing new. Cave men incorporated new tools into the practice of painting. What's changed, gradually over time and now at a fevered pitch, is emerging technologies' effect on the speed of progress, both within a painter's practice and the medium's history. What's also changed is the influence of digital media on painting decisions.

Although some painters prefer distance between the computer and their studio, others use computers to impact paintings in subtle to profound ways. As these digitally-influenced paintings make their way into the market and influence painting's history, identifiable trends emerge. At a 2007 symposium called *Painting as a New Medium*, Barry Schwabsky described a mass of paintings being produced under a "new-image-regime" in which "images are not what need to be cleared away in order to see other things more clearly, but on the contrary, they are precisely what need to be seen more clearly." [1]. The symposium roundtable also emphasized the ease with which contemporary painters drift between figuration and abstraction. Digital tools help cultivate this tendency. Artists like Chris Finley, for example, find images online, manipulate them on the computer, and paint them on canvas. As the images move in and out of virtual space, meaning and forms distill and often dissolve.

Sometimes the manipulation stops one level down. Here we witness the proliferation of flat painting in artists like Sarah Morris, Kevin Appel, Ryan McGuinness, and Brian Alfred. This documentary shows part of Brian's process. Since his fellowship at Eyebeam, Brian makes animations and paintings. Just as many early video artists started as painters, many animators develop out of drawing and painting. Contrasted with the slick products of Hollywood, painters-turned-animators often incorporate traditional techniques and offer painterly approach to form and color. In 2007 at the San Diego Museum of Art, Betti-Sue Hertz curated a thorough survey of what some artists describe as motion paintings. Offering diverse approaches to the crossover, the exhibitions included artists who take "advantage of

animation concepts and technologies” while being “persistent in their use of pictorial codes associated with historically grounded painting and drawing traditions” [2]. Highlights include Barnstormers, Jeremy Blake, Kota Ezawa, William Kentridge and Robin Rhode.

Other digitally-savvy painters complicate forms with code, either through existing software or written from scratch. Think here of Matthew Ritchie and Julie Mehretu. Their imagery connects to artists working with code, people like Casey Reas, Joshua Davis, James Patterson, and Evan Roth. These artists harness the power of code to create increasingly complex forms. Books like *Flash Math Creativity* and open-source software like Processing made code suddenly seem accessible to more people [3]. In his 2004 book *Hackers & Painters*, programmer Paul Graham made convincing connections between programmers and painters. Programmers produce lines of broken code, revisit and revise; painters sketch ideas, revisit and revise. Programmers love the immediacy of code; painters praise the same of paint. Programmers see sublime beauty in the power of code; painters also seek the sublime [4].

My own artwork revels in the space between traditional and digital media. Last year, I created an animation for dancer Nora Chipaumire in which I scanned in painting palettes normally discarded and moved the viewer through holes in the palettes to eventually bring them to Zimbabwe, the psychological reference for Nora’s choreography. This year, I developed *The Sherwin Series*, a group of prints, paintings and animations that remixes Sherwin Williams 2007 color forecasts with the architectural structures of 2010 foreclosed homes. My process involved research on Google maps, image manipulation in Flash, and output to final forms.

Just as figure-abstraction hybrids offer refreshing results, so painting-digital hybrids break new ground. When working between traditional and digital media, the liminal space of that practice can be uncomfortably ambiguous and disorienting. Sometimes these moments of discomfort open normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior. This state often cultivates fresh insights manifested in memorable forms.

In a transitional age, when arts practices acclimate to flexible media categories that mimic the messiness of life, how can foundations and academic institutions offer programs that allow artists to specialize when they need to but also have flexibility when they are inspired? Only through debates among open-minded colleagues will we develop the supportive, semi-permeable structures that would foster another cultural renaissance.

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## Contemporary Art and New Media: Outline for Developing a Hybrid Discourse

Since the mid-1990s, new media art (NMA) has become an important force for economic and cultural development internationally, establishing its own institutions, such as the ZKM, Ars Electronica Center, ICC, Eyebeam, and Laboral. Collaborative, transdisciplinary research at the intersections of art, science, and technology also has gained esteem and institutional support, as demonstrated by the Artists in Labs program (Switzerland) and the proliferation of interdisciplinary Ph.D. programs around the world. During the same period, mainstream contemporary art (MCA) experienced dramatic growth in its market and popularity, propelled by economic prosperity and the propagation of international museums, art fairs and exhibitions from the Tate Modern to Art Basel Miami to the Shanghai Biennial. This dynamic environment has nurtured tremendous creativity and invention by artists, curators, theorists and pedagogues operating in both domains. Yet rarely does the mainstream artworld converge with the new media artworld. As a result, their discourses have become increasingly divergent.

MCA practice and writing are remarkably rich with ideas about the relationship between art and society. Indeed, they are frequently engaged with issues that pertain to global connectivity and sociability in digital, networked culture. Given the proliferation of computation and the Internet, perhaps it was inevitable that central discourses in MCA would employ, if not appropriate, key terms of digital culture, such as “interactivity,” “participation,” “programming,” and “networks.” But the use of these terms in MCA literature typically lacks a deep understanding of the scientific and technological mechanisms of new media, the critical discourses that theorize their implications, and the interdisciplinary artistic practices that are co-extensive with

them. Similarly, mainstream discourses typically dismiss NMA on the basis of its technological form or immateriality, without fully appreciating its theoretical richness, or the conceptual parallels it shares with MCA.

New media not only offers expanded possibilities for art but offers valuable insights into the aesthetic applications and social implications of science and technology. At its best, it does so in a meta-critical way. In other words, it deploys technological media in a manner that self-reflexively demonstrates how new media is deeply imbricated in modes of knowledge production, perception, and interaction, and is thus inextricable from corresponding epistemological and ontological transformations. To its detriment, NMA and its discourses often display an impoverished understanding of art history and recent aesthetic and theoretical developments in mainstream contemporary art. Due to the nature of new media art practice and theory, as a matter of principle, NMA often refuses to adopt the formal languages and material supports of MCA. This is one of many reasons why it frequently fails to resonate in those contexts.

The perennial debate about the relationship between art and technology and mainstream art has occupied artists, curators, and theorists for many decades. Central to these debates have been questions of legitimacy and self-ghettoization, the dynamics of which are often in tension with each other. In seeking legitimacy, NMA has not only tried to place its practices within the theoretical and exhibition contexts of MCA but has developed its own theoretical language and institutional contexts. The former attempts have been so fruitless and the latter so successful, that an autonomous and isolated NMA artworld emerged. It has expanded rapidly and internationally since the mid-1990s, and has all the amenities found in MCA, except, of course, its legitimacy. However, the growing international stature of NMA and the seemingly irrepressible momentum it has gathered, make MCA's ongoing denial of it increasingly untenable.

This scenario raises many questions that establish a fertile ground for discussion and debate. What are the central points of convergence and divergence between MCA and NMA? Is it possible to construct a hybrid discourse that offers nuanced insights into each, while laying a foundation for greater mixing between them? How have new means of production and dissemination altered the role of the artist, curator, and museum? What insights into larger questions of emerging art and cultural forms might be gleaned by such a rapprochement?

With these questions in mind, my research identifies parallels between the discourses of MCA and NMA, focusing in particular on the theories of Nicolas Bourriaud and Roy Ascott, and the practices of artists including Rirkrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, Raphael Lozano-Hemmer, and Graffiti Research Labs. I contend that these diverse actors share far more in common than is generally recognized and that a hybrid discourse that addresses the vital aspects of each can strengthen the discourses of contemporary art in general. Indeed, in a global digital culture in which millions of people around the world produce and share their own texts, images, sound recordings, and

videos, both new media and mainstream contemporary art must contend with the contested and shifting roles of the artist, curator, and critic. What do we have to offer that is special, that adds value and insight to this dynamic, collective, creative culture?

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