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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?

References

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