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NEW MEDIA, ART-SCIENCE AND CONTEMPORARY ART:
TOWARDS A HYBRID DISCOURSE?

Five Degrees of Separation between Art and New Media: Art and Technology Projects under the Critical Lens

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Abstract
Given the rise in participatory theories, it is surprising to note that early art and technology projects and new media have been generally excluded from the major art historical trajectories delineating the emergence of socially engaged forms of art spectatorship. They have been mainly associated with theories of interaction rather than with Nicolas Bourriaud's influential theory of relational aesthetics. This separation is a sign of a much larger historical divide between new media and contemporary art. By analyzing critical responses to exhibitions from the late 1960s and early 1970s, I aim to identify the main criteria employed in the evaluation of collaborations between artists, engineers, and art institutions. Some of these criteria highlighted the persistent separation between humanity and technology, contemplation and participation, perception and thought. I argue that the heated discords over the value of early art and technology projects foreshadowed current debates over the social implications of new media.

Keywords
art and technology, new media, participatory art practices, relational aesthetics, system aesthetics

Cinco grados de separación entre el arte y los nuevos medios: proyectos de arte y tecnología bajo el prisma crítico

Resumen

Dado el incremento de las teorías participativas, sorprende que los proyectos pioneros de arte y tecnología y de nuevos medios se hayan excluido generalmente de las principales trayectorias de la historia del arte que han descrito la emergencia de las formas de arte comprometidas socialmente con el espectador. Estos proyectos han tendido a asociarse con teorías de interacción más que con la influyente teoría de la estética relacional de Nicolas Bourriaud. Esta separación resulta indicativa de una brecha histórica mucho más profunda entre los nuevos medios y el arte contemporáneo. Al analizar las respuestas críticas a exposiciones de finales de la década de 1960 y principios de la de 1970, mi objetivo es identificar los principales criterios empleados para evaluar las colaboraciones entre artistas, ingenieros e instituciones artísticas. Algunos de estos criterios subrayaron la separación continua entre humanidad y tecnología, entre contemplación y participación, entre percepción y pensamiento. Argumento que los intensos desacuerdos respecto al valor de los primeros proyectos de arte y tecnología prefiguraron los debates actuales respecto a las implicaciones sociales de los nuevos medios.

Palabras clave

arte y tecnología, nuevos medios, prácticas artísticas participativas, estética relacional, estética de sistemas

New media practices continue to remain in a separate sphere of critical discourse on contemporary art. Although they often provide an interface not only for challenging exchanges between humans and responsive environments, but also for developing connections between multiple participants, they are labeled *interactive* rather than *participatory* and have been excluded from the cluster of contemporary art practices brought under the umbrellas of *participation* (Bishop, 2006) and *relational aesthetics* (Bourriaud, 2002). The misguided idea that only art projects of a non-technological nature can truly trigger interpersonal relations between viewers appears quite paradoxical in the contemporary context marked by an exponential increase in the technological mediation of social encounters. Starting from this diagnosis, I will outline the origins of discord over the value of art and technology projects by examining the critique of such works in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The critical reception of these earlier works anticipated current debates over the aesthetic and social value of new media. It reflected the deeply ingrained modern binaries between reason and the senses, form and content, humanity and technology.

Art and technology projects were developed in the US throughout the second half of the 1960s within three major frameworks: 1) group exhibitions that brought together artists who experimented with different materials (whether based on new technology or not) to create unexpected experiences or comment on changing relations between humans and technology;[1] 2) art and technology programs initiated by museums, which invited artists to collaborate with industrial corporations;[2] 3) groups of artists and engineers such as Experiments in Art and Technology who collaborated independently of a specific art institution and made their own choices concerning the type of support they received from industrial corporations.

For the art critics who doubted the value of art and technology projects these works failed to provide an adequate response to technological developments because they were a mere source of enchantment with the wonders of technology; for those who supported them, they were not to be taken at face value, but understood as precipitators of fresh perceptual experiences and changing sensibilities. In what follows, I will present five criteria that informed the critical judgments on art and technology projects during the 1960s and early 1970s. I will dwell at greater length on the criterion concerning the participatory modes elicited by these works in order to bring to the surface their marginalization in relation to Bourriaud's influential theory of relational aesthetics in spite of their significant contribution to shifts in art spectatorship.

The most common criterion for evaluating these works was their *ability to generate a critique of the potentially dehumanizing effects of*

1. An example of this would be the exhibitions curated by Ralph T. Coe at the Nelson Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City: Sound, Light, Silence (1966), Light (1967) and Magic Theater (1968).
2. Curator Maurice Tuchman coordinated such a program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) between 1967-1971.

technology. Critics believed that artists' exploration of the way art and technology projects affected perception and consciousness ought to take precedence over the desire to elicit fascination with the novelty of technological devices and effects. Expressing his admiration for Jean Tinguely's self-destructive machines, art historian Jonathan Benthall maintained that as compelling as the "romance of technology" might be, artists had to develop a critical attitude towards its indiscriminate use (Benthall, 1972, p. 106). Like many critics of his generation, he disapproved of works that merely catalyzed enthusiasm for the sublime aspects of technological innovation without enhancing one's awareness of its potential detrimental effects.

A second criterion was *the capacity of art and technology projects to elicit both sensorial engagement and mental reflection*. Noticing that the supremacy of humans over machines was coming under threat with the development of computer technology, critics hoped that art and technology projects would succeed in engaging viewers intellectually instead of providing a mere hedonistic escape from mundane sensorial experiences. In 1968, curator Ralph T. Coe selected the works for The Magic Theatre exhibition based on the way they enhanced viewers' awareness of mental processes. Despite his efforts to highlight psychic immersion, the exhibition created a carnivalesque atmosphere in which visitors gave in to performative impulses. Art historian George Ehrlich argued that the value of the exhibition became evident only if the viewer surpassed "the point where sensory experiences were allowed to override the intellectual appreciation of the project" (Ehrlich, 1969, p. 40). Thus, it was believed that the significance of these works would become apparent only after a viewer's encounter with them.

A third recurrent criterion in the evaluation of art and technology projects was represented by *their aesthetic qualities and their potential to deliver a meaningful message, which superseded the novelty of the medium*. In the eyes of art critics, many art and technology projects failed to qualify as art because they prioritized spectacular visual or acoustic effects over aesthetic coherence. Although the boundaries between art and life were increasingly contested in the 1960s, artists who conceived technology-based projects were often expected to develop a formal vocabulary characteristic of the new mediums they employed. Concomitantly, they needed to provide a meaningful critique of the subservience of human interests to technological innovation. Art critics such as Barbara Rose feared that some of these practices could downgrade art and turn it into a mere source of entertainment for the masses. In a review of exhibitions focused on the use of television as medium, she underscored "the unlikely union of art quality with mass culture" and voiced her concerns about the submissiveness of viewers to sensational spectacles that offered no ground for critical reflection (Rose, 1969, p. 36).

A fourth criterion was *the legitimacy of the collaborative terms established between artists, museum institutions, and sponsors*. In the early 1970s, it was frequently argued that the actual negotiations between artists and patrons over art and technology projects were in fact more important than the actual product of the collaborations. Disappointed with the outcomes of the Art and Technology program (A&T, 1967-1971) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), numerous art critics considered that art and corporations needed to part ways in order to avoid the corruption of aesthetic and social interests. Max Kozloff found it ironical that the availability of larger than usual funding and technological resources had not made the LACMA collaborative platform a success story: "There was a certain pleasure to be derived from the thought of the thousands of work hours and dollars expended on these fey and whimsical contraptions" (Kozloff, 1971, p. 76). It was widely argued that the tense collaborations between artists and corporations had compromised the success of the projects from the very beginning. Due to many factors, including the economic recession of the early 1970s, the enthusiasm for art and technology projects drastically dwindled.

The fifth criterion – *the interactive modes triggered by art and technology projects* – is the primary focus of this paper. Art critics of the 1960s feared that some of these works might restrict the autonomy and creativity of art participants. They denounced the way these works prescribed exhibition visitors' behavior by encouraging them to move or act in specific ways to activate responsive environments. Despite being generally supportive of art and technology projects, A&T curator Jane Livingston was dismayed by the way some of them influenced the behavior of museum visitors. Commenting upon Howard Jones's *Sonic Game Room* (1968) where participants could superimpose their shadows over photoelectric cells in order to activate various sounds, she remarked that the work resembled "a distasteful pseudo-scientific laboratory presumptuously set forth in the name of art" (Livingston, 1968, p. 67). This type of critical judgment proliferated because critics tended to think about the art viewer in the singular and did not consider the way art and technology projects encouraged group creativity. Participants in Jones's environment at the Magic Theatre exhibition did not simply act in isolation from one another. The sounds they created intermingled and led to complex variations that diverged from what Livingston envisioned as a pre-established acoustic effect. David Antin employed the same criterion in his assessment of Rauschenberg's Mud-Muse (1968-1971). Created in collaboration with Teledyne Corporation as part of A&T, the work consisted of a basin in which bubbles spurted to the surface of a viscous mass of mud with more or less energy depending on the degree of noise made by participants. Antin suggested that responsive environments encouraged viewers to act in quasi-mechanical ways: "The idea of using a human being as a power source and/or switch, which is about all that Rauschenberg is doing, is if considered seriously quite possibly humiliating" (Antin, 1971, p. 26). The critic claimed that this project indicated the controlling potential of technology that could subdue all forms of interaction. Like Livingston, Antin thought about the interaction between the viewer and the environment in binary

terms. He overlooked the fact that Mud-Muse reacted to the sounds produced by multiple visitors interacting with one another, as well as to the noise produced by its very own acoustic system based on the bubbly eruptions and a set of sound recordings. Rauschenberg argued that he didn't want it "to have a one-to-one relationship to the spectator" (Rauschenberg in Tuchman, 1971, p. 287). Above all, the artist envisioned it as an interdependent network of humans, physical processes, and technological devices.

The idea that exhibitions might constitute laboratory-like environments for putting art viewers' sensorial responses to the test is less unfathomable in recent years, at least in the context of non-digital art practices. Indeed, Bourriaud has referred to the Palais de Tokyo, which he co-founded in Paris in 1999, as "more laboratory than museum" (Bourriaud in Simpson, 2001, p. 47). Carsten Höller, who has a professional scientific background, unabashedly titled his Turbine Hall installation Test Site (2006). Tate Modern visitors could navigate from one museum floor to another through gigantic slides that enhanced their awareness of movement through space and time. Since the role of the participant in such installations is conceptualized as that of a "player or performer" rather than that of a subject of a technological experiment, it is not presumed that such works diminish the agency of individuals (Morgan, 2006, p. 13) as critics had claimed of art and technology in the 1960s. Moreover, Test Site is not a new media environment; hence, it poses fewer challenges in terms of a contest between humans and technology. This is probably one of the reasons why Höller's works have more easily been associated with "relational aesthetics" even though they rely on scientific experimentation.

Bourriaud's exclusion of new media from relational art is most likely motivated by the presupposition that these practices can limit the dynamic character of social relations spontaneously formed between art participants. The curator suggests that the relational art practices from the 1990s were devised as a strategic counter-response to the proliferation of human interaction with technology: "[…] while interactive technologies developed at an exponential rate, artists were exploring the arcane mysteries of sociability and interaction. The theoretical and practical horizon of that decade's art was largely grounded in the realm of inter-human relations" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 70). Relational aesthetics is human-centered and does not allow for the merger of human networks with non-human networks (eg, ecosystems, information systems) as did Burnham's theories of systems aesthetics from the late 1960s (Burnham, 1967, 1969). In quite an antiquated manner, Bourriaud is intent on restricting the space of intersubjective relations to groups of people, situated in close proximity to one another. About thirty years earlier, Burnham announced that technology opened up new possibilities for creating encounters between participants. He suggested that gradually artists "will deal less and less with artifacts contrived for formal value, and increasingly with men enmeshed *with* and *within* responsive systems" (Burnham, 1968, 363). Thus, he implied that a system of information would engender the formation of a network of participants engaged in interdependent processes of perception and cognition.

Art and technology projects in the 1960s were thought to be complicit with the military-industrial complex and with the society of spectacle. Although they challenged the autonomy of the art object, as well as its materiality and ideal permanence, they do not figure in mainstream discourses as the progenitors of major transformations in contemporary art practices. The non-linear character of contemporary art historical trajectories, combined with the strong participatory tendencies across mediums and the consolidation of theories concerning the interdependence between human and technological networks, highlights the artificial separation of new media from mainstream art narratives. In the future, art participation and interaction with responsive environments will probably no longer be perceived as contrasting forms of art spectatorship, especially since the development of Web 2.0 technology has cast new light on the way new media stimulates human creativity, personal reflection, and interpersonal connections.

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